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Gallery under glass

By **Clint Cooper**, Staff Writer

The Chattanooga Times Free Press

Chattanooga, TN - The Hunter Museum of American Art will celebrate its \$19.5 million reinvention with a grand reopening Saturday.

In only 13 months, the museum has completed a contemporary west addition, renovated its 1974 east building and spruced up its 1906 central mansion.

Hunter Board Chairman L.H. "Hacker" Caldwell said the museum itself is now on exhibit.

"It's just like the progression of painting in American art," Mr. Caldwell said.

The museum changes -- including its new connection to downtown by way of a glass pedestrian bridge and incline elevator -- are part of the city's \$120 million 21st Century Waterfront project. The new pieces of the waterfront will be unveiled along the banks of the Tennessee River over the next four weeks.

The Waterfront Project was financed without any money from the city's general fund, according to city officials.

"It's a testimony to the generosity, vision and can-do spirit of Chattanoogaans," said Todd Womack, communications director for outgoing Mayor Bob Corker.



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As important as the physical changes are to the museum, its improved visibility and accessibility are equally significant, said Randall Stout, architect of the Hunter addition.

Visitors can move between the waterfront and the bluff where the museum is located on a newly created First Street corridor, incline elevator and the pedestrian bridge.

"Now, you feel a sense of connectedness that didn't exist before," Mr. Stout said. "There are space and functionality on the museum grounds that the city will feel welcome to and be a part of. I believe Chattanooga will take ownership of it."

Now the museum is accessible as well as a visual magnet, Mr. Caldwell said.

"People used to say, 'You can't get there from here,'" he said.

Activities celebrating the museum's reopening will be from 9:30 a.m. to 5 p.m. Saturday. "Visions of the Sublime," the works of Georgia O'Keeffe, will be featured in the new temporary exhibits gallery.

MASTER PLAN

Following on the heels of the city's announcement of the 21st Century Waterfront project in May 2002, Hunter officials sought input for and created their own master plan for the future.

The search for an architect began in November 2002. Just more than two months later, Mr. Stout was selected and instructed to develop construction documents. Groundbreaking was in March 2004, and the museum closed to visitors about three months later.

"In the best of worlds, this is a five- or six-year process," Hunter Director Rob Kret said. "The scope of doing it all in one fell swoop, of rolling all of our needs into one effort, is incredible."

He praised contractor EMJ for completing the majority of the work in just 13 months. He said the Chattanooga company was pressured by time and hampered by being able to work from only one side of the building.

"It was really a challenge," Mr. Kret said. "If EMJ weren't here, I don't know if we'd be as far along as we are."

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A week and a half before the opening, Mr. Kret said there was still a lot of work to do. But he said that on opening Saturday, only the staff would know the odds and ends that are not completed.

Some signage and some larger works of art won't be up, he said. And the sculpture garden expected to become the museum's welcome mat will not be completed until May, he said.

VISITOR FRIENDLY

Even before the development of the 2002 master plan, Hunter officials began work on changing the museum's image.

"The experience for the visitor is where our focus will be," Mr. Kret said.

As such, visitors will find new and more interactive activities and exhibits, such as individually designed tours, reading and relaxation rooms, better and more thorough labeling of artwork and "drawers of discovery" for additional information, officials said.

The museum's programming also has been expanded, now including a variety of art forms. Movies, music, flower arranging and cooking exhibitions will be offered within the first few months after the reopening.

Art class offerings, too, have been expanded, and visitors will be able to drop in and out for a taste of their favorite art form.

During the closing, more than 40 museum guides were trained in 28 weekly sessions on the museum's collection, art history and tips for working with different kinds of people.

Sue Cohn, 70, of Chattanooga, a longtime community volunteer, has been a museum member for many years, but with the reopening she decided to be a museum guide and lecturer.

"It's a new way for me to identify with the community, to learn for myself," she said. "I need to keep on with opportunities but volunteer in a new way. I'm very excited."

Inside the museum, colorful walls, soothing wood finishes and soaring views will be part of the visitor experience, officials said.

In addition, Mr. Kret said, most of the museum's permanent

collection is on one level, allowing easier access for elderly or handicapped visitors.

PLACE TO BE

The west addition's curved, zinc-look stainless steel roof already has drawn attention from Chattanoogaans and visitors who may not have noticed the museum before.

Hunter member George Buckner, 53, of Flat Rock, Ala., said the three styles of the building's architecture piqued his imagination.

"I like the centuries thing," he said. "It seemed like the newer piece made it like 19th, 20th and 21st centuries."

But Hunter officials hope its two-story lobby, gift shop and cafe may appeal to the casual visitor, as well. Each may be accessed without paying the normal entrance fee.

"It opens up a brand new market for us," said Mr. Caldwell. "We did not do a good job of penetrating the tourist market before."

Prior to the addition of the First Street corridor and the pedestrian bridge, the museum's location on the bluff above the Tennessee River was both its greatest asset and its great challenge, said Mr. Kret.

"Now, it's more of an asset than ever," he said.

Mr. Stout, a Los Angeles architect and graduate of the University of Tennessee School of Architecture, said the museum previously was surrounded by a parking lot and felt isolated.

Mr. Caldwell agreed.

"Hunter's ability to connect is so key to our new role as one of the city's cultural icons," he said.

Behind the scenes, Hunter officials said they will appreciate the 23 percent more gallery space, 69 percent more exhibits preparation space and 52 percent more storage area. In addition, they say they have kept busy booking wedding receptions, dinner parties and other community gatherings for the new facilities.

"It's a remarkable change from the way we did business two years

ago," said Mr. Caldwell.

Mrs. Cohn, who got her first look inside the new building last week, said the museum will be even more of a boon for the city.

"It's not just that place on the hill anymore," she said.

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