A Tour of the Future at the Regional History Center

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At a press conference November 29, 1989, the Society announced the selection of the former Chautauqua Ice Company building as the location for the new Pittsburgh Regional History Center. This long awaited news follows a number of years of careful planning by our institution and the Committee on Pittsburgh Archaeology and History to create a history museum and research center for the area which will serve as the Society’s headquarters. The selection of this building comes after a report by the Ehrenkrantz Group and Eckstut, which surveyed the buildings that had been considered adaptable to the Society’s needs based on our Preliminary Plan developed in 1987. This fall we obtained a two-year purchase option on the building we considered to be the best for our purpose.

This brief article will whet your appetite for this major addition to Pittsburgh’s cultural resources and tourist attractions. Although much more planning and refinement, community input, and data gathering will need to take place, a vision can be shared with you about what a walk through the Pittsburgh Regional History Center will be like.

The Chautauqua Ice Company began erecting the 160,000-square-foot building in the late 1870s. The builder was concerned primarily with function, so the building has a minimum of architectural details, thereby allowing for our reorganization of the space. What detail does remain conveys an evocative sense of the past. The History Center, in occupying this space, will span both the Golden Triangle with its central business area and Cultural District, and the Strip District, certainly one of Pittsburgh’s most exciting mixes of shops and culture.

Visitors will enter the History Center on Smallman Street between 12th and 13th streets, through giant doors originally designed for loading ice onto wagons, and will find themselves in a grand, two-story cavernous lobby lit by the multi-powered arched doorway transoms. Brick vaulted ceilings and exposed steel beams remind one of the building’s vintage, and the old rail spur sunk by the Ice Company has become the route of an 1890s streetcar in the lobby.

There will be areas for orientation and other visitor services, such as a comprehensive book and gift shop, restrooms and club room. Information will be provided for other area attractions, especially for other regional historical sites associated in various ways with the History Center. A 300-seat theater will be used for special programs, films, lectures, live theater and workshops. During regular hours visitors will stop to view a brief film introducing them to the history of Pittsburgh and the Western Pennsylvania region.

Exhibit galleries on the upper floors will feature a variety of permanent and changing exhibits. Here the visitor will enjoy a look at the social, industrial and ethnic history of the region. The central permanent exhibit will attempt to present and explore the “legends” of Pittsburgh — Iron City, City of Nations, and in so doing, distill for the visitor “What makes Pittsburgh so unique?”

These exhibits will present some of the historical treasures housed in the Center. The visitor will hear the sounds of industry or find himself face to face with an immigrant of the early 1890s. Dramatic live presentations will help to bring these distant experiences to life.

The Society will provide hands-on activities for children, and present locally made, beautifully crafted, decorative and fine arts of wide appeal. Guided tours, especially those geared to school groups and senior citizens, will present material tailored to the learning needs of each group.

An attractive, thoroughly modern library and archives will enable every visitor to be his own historian; computers and a helpful staff will guide the researcher, whether student, scholar or genealogist. In fact, family history will be well-served by the associated office of the Genealogical Society, located within the library and archives.

With classrooms for continuing education, special events rooms for reception and group meetings, and food services for a variety of needs, the Pittsburgh Regional History Center will be a multipurpose facility for expressing the collective memory of an area and understanding what we as a region have to offer.

I hope that this brief excursion has helped you to “see” a bit more clearly what the new Center is all about. I anticipate that the reality of the experience will be far more exciting than this description. ■
An artist’s rendering of the History Center on Smallman Street.

An artist’s rendering of the main lobby.