

# CENTER OF EXCELLENCE SITS WHERE DREAMS LIVED

**"T**he mother ship has landed."

With that pointed comment, Linda "Sparky" Mortimer, a very enthusiastic neighbor, welcomed the Syracuse Center of Excellence, which had its formal ribbon-cutting March 5. Linda owns Sparky Town restaurant on Burnet Avenue, just a block from the new workshop of clean and renewable energy that really does look like a space ship settled into what could be a new environment for Syracuse.

Linda thinks the center's a "beautiful piece of architecture" that will mean a lot to Syracuse. She's been in business two years at 324 Burnet.

I walked the center the other day with Dennis Connors, curator of history for the Onondaga Historical Association. Dennis wanted to show me his new show about the area's history and the building's connection. It's installed in the exhibit gallery on the second floor. Ashley McGraw of Syracuse supplied the supervising architects for the project, which was designed by Toshiko Mori.

Dennis' showcase draws together interesting examples of Syracuse technology of the past and puts them in the context of the present site, on East Washington Street. The building sits on a piece of Syracuse that's just a block from the original path of the Erie Canal (now Erie Boulevard), next to Lock 49 and the Almond Street lift bridge. A near neighbor is one of the few canal-era buildings still left along the old waterway, Hookway warehouse, built in 1895 by a prominent local family.

Another close neighbor is the former New York Central Railroad station (1936-1962), now Time Warner Cable's Your News Now headquarters. Dennis' exhibit has an interesting picture of the station when it was loaded for transportation. The tracks were replaced by Interstate 690.

We also see the interesting history



Onondaga Historical Association, 1850s

of the Center of Excellence lot, which once was along a residential street. The house on that block was the home of Austin Myers, a Syracusean who served in the state Assembly and owned canal boats. L.C. Smith and Brothers, the typewriter maker, tore down the house to build a new factory in 1903. The plant left Syracuse in 1962, replaced by an office building called "Midtown Plaza," which was the first home of Onondaga Community College in 1962. The college moved to Onondaga Hill in 1973 and Midtown Plaza had many dreams tied to it, including a motel, a SUNY science center, a cluster of insurance companies, even a jail.

In 1999, the building was brought down in a demolition implosion. The site sat empty — an environmentally contaminated property — for years until Syracuse University came along with its idea for a center for environmental studies. The landscaping will be ready by June. A new structure, housing a modular transportation center, is to be built on the 3-acre site, according to Ed Bogucz, executive director.

Dennis' exhibit includes a roller from a solar salt shed; artifacts connected to the Franklin car

(1902-1934), which ran on aluminum parts and an air-cooled engine; John Sweet's Straight Line engine, steam-operated to generate electricity; Willis Carrier's centrifugal chiller, first installed at Onondaga Pottery's printing plant in 1929; and the story of Emory Mills' Empire Wind Mill, which spun in Hanover Square in 1869, creating power to run a billiard-ball factory.

The wind mills were made in a vacant building (the Brennan Block) at Water and North Townsend streets.

**P.S.:** A fascinating new book by Dennis Connors, "Leaving a Legacy: A History of Syracuse's Near West Side," is on sale at the Onondaga Historical Association museum for \$5.

DICK CASE WRITES TUESDAY,  
THURSDAY AND SUNDAY.  
REACH HIM AT 470-0254 OR  
DCASE@SYRACUSE.COM

**THE AUSTIN MYERS house of the 1850s is on the site of the Syracuse Center of Excellence.**

