

Rewriting History

Gregg Tripoli has grand plans for a revitalized Montgomery Street-Columbus Circle corridor

By Avantika Sharma

Through the heart of downtown Syracuse runs Montgomery Street. One block of it stretches north-south from East Fayette to East Jefferson streets and is home to the YMCA of Greater Syracuse, St. Paul's Cathedral and the Onondaga Historical Association (OHA).

Despite its crucial location and its designation as part of the Montgomery Street-Columbus Circle Historic District, this portion of Montgomery wears a forlorn look and remains deserted for most of the day. Instead of providing vibrancy to the street, the institutions on Montgomery have retreated into their shells—the YMCA with its dark front steps, the church with its doors always closed, and the OHA with its unwelcoming, bricked-in windows. The few passers-by on the sidewalk seem in a desperate hurry to leave the street as fast as possible.

Given the sorry state of Montgomery, the OHA in 2008 was deciding to leave its ancient building and move to a suburban location. The board of directors thought it would be cheaper and easier to maintain the OHA in a smaller facility, and that more county residents might visit its collection if it moved to suburbia. While this move was being debated, Gregg Tripoli, 50, took charge as executive director of the OHA.

"I saw that we had a beautiful building at a great location in the heart of the city," says Tripoli, and he decided not to move. Rather he has bet the future of the OHA on a revitalized Montgomery.

A native of Liverpool, Tripoli is a graduate of Hamilton College with bachelor's degrees in English and history and a master's of business administration from the University of Pittsburgh. For the past 20 years, he had advised and represented multinational corporations in Kuwait. "I had been living on an airplane for the last two decades. I wanted to return home and do something different. So I decided to look for a job here and found the OHA," says Tripoli.

The decision to remain on Montgomery does not mean that Tripoli did not want to change the OHA, however. Having worked in the corporate world for his entire career, Tripoli has brought an aggressive style and a fresh perspective to the non-profit entity. "Our current location is accessible to all kinds of people," says Dennis Connors, curator of history at the OHA who has worked there since 1992. "We have three other major museums within walking distance. This is the ideal location to attract those interested in history. Mr. Tripoli decided the OHA would stay put."

The first major change Tripoli has engineered is revamping the facade of the OHA building, at 321 Montgomery St. "The building we are in was not designed to be a museum," explains Connors. Built in 1895, it originally housed a telephone company—Central New York Telephone and Telegraph. The OHA purchased the facility back in 1905.

Currently, the face of the OHA is a door and three bricked-in windows covered with

fading banners. Tripoli is determined to change that. "The new facade will have tall glass windows, so that people walking by can see what's going on inside and hopefully be attracted by it. We want to make it more welcoming." Construction will begin in early fall and should be completed by the end of the year, says Tripoli.

The OHA also plans to expand its gift shop into a history-themed retail store, positioned so that passers-by will be able to see it through the windows. "If people come in the building to check out the store, they will notice the other things going on here, such as current and upcoming exhibitions and other programs we have through the year," says Tripoli.

The OHA is going to develop more of the second floor for exhibit space so that more of its large collection can be exhibited. With ancient maps, manuscripts, postcards and books, the association can function as a research facility for the community. Tripoli wants to make students and scholars aware of this and help them conduct research on the history of Onondaga County.

For the first time in its history, the OHA is actively collaborating with other organizations around the city and making use of their exhibition spaces to reach new audiences. Some of these are the Syracuse Symphony Orchestra, the Everson Museum of Art, St. Paul's Cathedral and the Cathedral of the Immaculate Conception. For example, when Syracuse Stage presented *Little Women* in November 2009, the OHA set up an exhibit in Stage's lobby, at 820 E. Genesee St. It revealed that as a child Louisa May Alcott and her sisters visited their uncle in Syracuse. "This informed people about something they would never have known otherwise and gave the OHA more visibility," relates Connors.

HISTORICAL MOVES

Another development that would help make Montgomery Street livelier is the opening of a new restaurant in the space that once housed the Brick Alley Grille House. John Tiplitz, who owned the seafood restaurant Little Fish in Philadelphia for 20 years, decided to rent the vacant space because of its proximity to Columbus Circle and to the many people who work in the area. He has spruced it up with apple-green walls and dark wood paneling, giving it the feel of a warm cafe. It will seat about 30.

Tiplitz, who has been a chef for 40 years, will serve salads, sandwiches, burgers and other casual fare. He is also planning to put some international recipes on the menu. "I know there have been other restaurants in this space before mine and they closed down. But I know mine will work because I have been doing it for 40 years and if I provide good service and take care of the little details, people will come," he says.

If Tiplitz's cafe works, it can act as another element in revitalizing Montgomery.

The OHA has plans to hold office parties and meetings at the restaurant. It is expected to open soon.

To make sure his initiatives move forward, Tripoli needs money. "We have managed to raise funds for our endeavors by making our donors realize they are getting very good returns by investing in us," he says. "It is a symbiotic relationship. The OHA is a not-for-profit organization, but while marketing it, I need to think in terms of a for-profit organization."

Assemblyman Bill Magnarelli (D-120th), who helped the OHA secure a state grant of \$125,000 for revamping the facade, says he likes what the organization is doing under Tripoli. "He is a great director. The biggest difference between him and previous directors is that he is pushing the OHA outside and putting up exhibitions in different places. He is making people aware that the OHA exists," says Magnarelli.

Tripoli plans to reach a wider audience by making documentaries for television and radio. "I want to tell the stories of Syracuse to the country and to the world. People are amazed when they hear stories about our local heroes. They have an international appeal," he says. "My main aim is to make the OHA a catalyst for economic development in the downtown area in a way that would help local businesses and residents."

Working along a similar path with the OHA is the Cathedral Square Neighborhood Association. Operatives say they hope to make the Montgomery Street-Columbus Circle-Fayette Park area the city's "newest oldest" district, offering apartments for young professionals and new restaurants, along with

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the existing cultural institutions and churches. This fall the association is planning a public forum to seek ideas on how to reawaken this section of the city.

If Tripoli manages to transform the OHA, if Tiplitz manages to operate a restaurant of some quality, and if the Cathedral Square

Neighborhood Association gains momentum, Montgomery Street could come back to life. The area has the potential to become a major arts and residential hub of Syracuse and a counterweight to Armory Square, but all the constituent parts must work together. □

Avantika Sharma is a native of India with a degree from the University of Delhi. She is interested in fashion and fine arts, and she has worked for the Indian Express newspaper.



"The building we are in was not designed to be a museum:" Onondaga Historical Association executive director plans to open up the streetscape windows and let passers-by see the treasures hidden inside.