Syracuse History

Displaying old photos downtown would spur respect, inspiration

To the Editor:

I am responding to Charlie Gowing’s May 19 letter, in which he recommends using artifacts from the Onondaga Historical Association Museum to decorate windows of vacant buildings in downtown Syracuse. I certainly applaud Gowing’s desire to highlight our community’s “long and proud history” and I agree that historic perspective can definitely add value to our downtown area. In fact, OHA is currently undergoing a major construction project on our Montgomery Street museum building, which will restore our street-level windows to provide compelling displays of the kind Gowing is recommending.

However, I must point out that vacant buildings and empty storefronts are not the ideal locations for the placement of priceless, irreplaceable museum artifacts. Security issues, insurance costs and transport logistics are just a few of the concerns that would make such a project prohibitive. Luckily, the OHA museum, which is the only comprehensive general history museum in Onondaga County, is a free community service museum and regularly displays over 200 years of our great history through permanent and changing exhibits Wednesday through Friday, from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on weekends, from 11 a.m. to 4 p.m. every week. (Because of construction, the museum is closed until July 14, except for special evening programs June 8, 9 and 10.)

I don’t want to discount Gowing’s suggestion altogether, though. Judging from the success of our recent book, “Historic Photos of Syracuse,” some of the things people love most about our rich history are the wonderful images that help depict our glorious heritage. With relatively minimal sponsorship, and perhaps some in-kind support, we could cover many of those empty windows with beautiful photographs from OHA’s collections. They would enhance the pedestrian experience by, as Gowing states, giving visitors and residents “something of interest to look at when they walk around Syracuse instead of empty, often dirty storefronts.”

The photographs, with accompanying educational captions, would also encourage a knowledge of, and respect for, our tremendous history and would provide inspiration for everyone as they help remind us of what our city can, and will once again, become.

Gregg A. Tripoli, Executive director
Onondaga Historical Association Museum
and Research Center
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