

Volume 4, No. 22
April 1, 2005

Search Chronicle Archives

GO

THE CHRONICLE

Home | Accolades | What's the Buzz | Art and About | The Reel Deal | Book Marks | **On the Safe Side** | SCAD Sports | Classifieds | Archives | Calendar



Photo by Freddie Bennett

William Swearingen (center) of S.D.H. Investment Corp. Inc. points out features of the historic Peters House in midtown Atlanta to SCAD President Paula S. Wallace (left) and SCAD-Atlanta Director of Operations John Paul Rowan March 24. Swearingen, along with William Dunaway and Harry Hill, is the most recent owner of the property.

SCAD plans to rehabilitate Atlanta's historic Peters House

Facility to serve as cultural arts center

By Sunny Nelson

Savannah College of Art and Design President Paula S. Wallace announced that the college has signed an agreement to receive the donation of the Edward C. Peters House, formerly known as The Mansion restaurant, located in midtown Atlanta at 179 Ponce de Leon Ave. N.E., from S.D.H. Investment Corp. Inc.

The college plans to rehabilitate the Peters House, one of the first homes in Georgia thought to fully embody the Victorian Queen Anne architectural style, and surrounding acreage for use as a cultural arts center. The rehabilitation, pending zoning approval and the sale of additional property near the house by S.D.H. Investment Corp. Inc., will begin in the next 12 months and is expected to take 12-15 months to complete.

"I envision a cultural arts center where the community can gather to enjoy world-class art, design and literature," said Wallace. "When the opportunity to acquire the Peters House presented itself, I knew we had to step in to save this beautiful and historic home, not only for the college but for the people of Atlanta as well."

The Peters House, called Ivy Hall by the Peters family, was designed by noted architect Gottfried L. Norrman in 1883 and is Atlanta's oldest, most complete and single most important residence from the city's "New South," post-Civil War period, according to Boyd Coons, executive director of the Atlanta Preservation Center.

The Peters House was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1972 and was designated an Atlanta Landmark Building by the Atlanta Urban Design Commission in 1989. In 2001 and 2003, the Atlanta Preservation Center listed the house among the most endangered buildings in Atlanta.

"Atlanta will have the benefit of the preservation of one of its major historic resources and the Savannah College of Art and Design will have a wonderful new presence in the city," said Coons about the agreement. "The involvement of SCAD is exciting, and we are looking forward to working with them toward a solution in solving this preservation issue."

The Peters family was responsible not only for the shaping of midtown Atlanta but also for the creation of the Peters Park area, a 200-acre tract that Edward Peters eventually donated for the campus of the Georgia Institute of Technology. Peters served on the city council for decades, and also served as a county commissioner and alderman. He supported the extension of Atlanta's city limits in 1904 from Sixth to 15th streets and was instrumental in the city's purchase of Piedmont Park.

Upon Peters's death in 1937, the house became the property of his only son, Wimberly. Wimberly's wife Lucille inherited the home upon her husband's death in 1948, and she continued to live in the house until her death in 1970. The house was nearly demolished in 1971 but was saved through its designation on the National Register of Historic Places. Ponce de Leon Investors Ltd. bought the property in 1971 and converted it into The Mansion restaurant. The owners remodeled the building in 1973 and commissioned Alan Saltzman to create an addition, which won the Atlanta Urban Design Commission Award. Fire damaged the upper floor in November 2000, and the house was abandoned shortly thereafter.

William Swearingen of S.D.H. Investment Corp. Inc., who, along with William Dunaway and Harry Hill, is the most recent owner of the property, signed an agreement to donate the facility and surrounding acreage to the college pending the sale of additional property in the area in the next year.

"I am thrilled that SCAD has agreed to rehabilitate this beautiful and historic building," said Swearingen. "As the Atlanta community knows, my partners and I have been trying diligently for more than five years to find an organization that could devote the time and attention necessary to bring the Peters House back to its former glory. Knowing the success SCAD has had in Savannah and Lacoste, France, in restoring dozens of

The Muse

It's never too late
to be who
you might have been.

- George Eliot



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INSIDE

- Accolades
- Advancing the Cause
- Around Town
- ARTicle
- Contact Us
- Enter Net
- Extras
- In Your Corner
- Master Works
- On Display
- Personal Space
- SCAD hosts Tom Wolfe for reading, book signing
- SCAD Job Listings
- Student spends break volunteering on reservation
- Trivial Pursuits

Hot Links

historically significant buildings, I believe SCAD is the right organization to rehabilitate the Peters House.”

SCAD has rehabilitated four other Norrman-designed buildings in Savannah for college instruction and administrative space, including the 1892 Henry Street School, the 1896 Anderson Street School, the 1906 Barnard Street School and the 1895 Citizens Bank.

The college has been internationally recognized by organizations such as the Georgia Trust for Historic Preservation, the Art Deco Societies of America, the American Institute of Architects, the National Trust for Historic Preservation and the International Downtown Association for its rehabilitation efforts throughout the southeastern United States.

Undergraduate and graduate students from the SCAD historic preservation program, one of the college's first programs to be offered as a major, will have the opportunity to assist with the Peters House rehabilitation. The college has provided many similar “living labs” for historic preservation students to gain hands-on experience.

One example is the restoration of the historic First African Baptist Church at Raccoon Bluff, built on Sapelo Island in 1900. Working alongside residents and congregation members, SCAD students and faculty completed a restoration of the building in less than one year.

Plans for the cultural arts center are still in development but will include a focus on art, design, architecture and historic preservation. SCAD is also planning to continue to promote writing, literature and poetry at the center. Many authors have visited the college's Savannah location, including Maya Angelou, Edward Albee and Roger Ebert. Tom Wolfe will visit the college's Trustees Theater in Savannah for a reading and book signing March 31.

The college's commitment to literature also includes the creation of Design Press, a book packaging division. Created in 1998, Design Press focuses on illustrated and photographic books that reflect and reinforce the award-winning talents of the college's faculty, alumni, students and visiting artists. Working with the college's liberal arts department, the press has published Convergence I and II, issues of a literary arts journal dedicated to presenting the spectrum of visual and written work created at SCAD.

Nelson is director of media relations and advertising.

