

Sandy Spring's Historic Oasis

Museum Designed to Preserve a Sense of Community Along With the Past

By Benjamin Forgey

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To the casual passerby, Sandy Spring does not appear to be the kind of place that could support its own museum. It looks, in fact, like a little village about to be overrun by the juggernaut of sprawl

that has all but obliterated nearby Olney in recent years.

And yet there it is, pretty as a picture, just around a bend on the town's main road—the brand new Sandy Spring Museum, designed by local architects, standing on ground donated by a local landowner and paid for almost entirely—

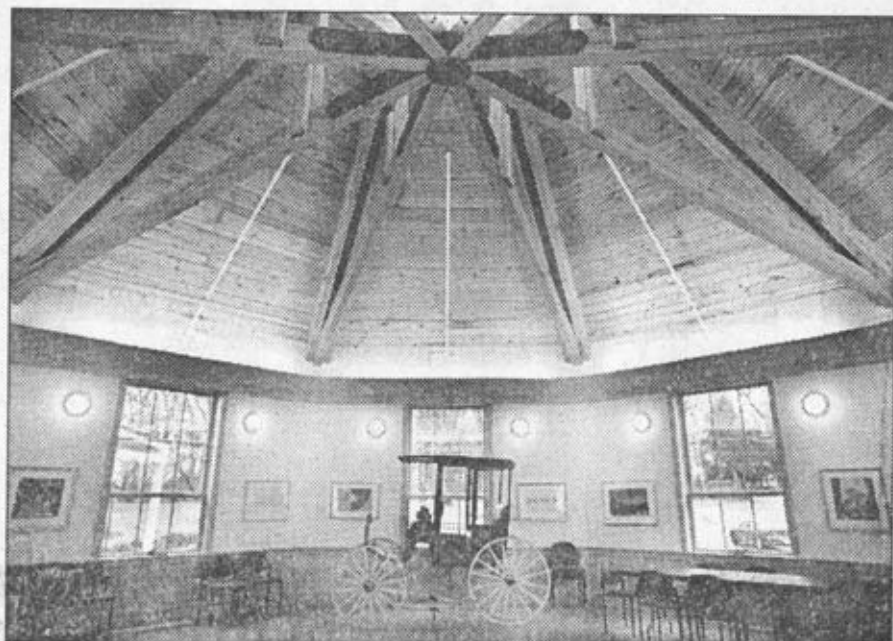
to the tune of \$1.3 million—by local folks.

Both literally and figuratively the museum is an antidote to the placelessness of sprawl. It got its start 17 years ago after a Sandy Spring auctioneer noted with alarm how much of the area's history was vanishing by neglect or passing across the auction block—furniture from grand old homes, farm implements dating back a century or more, photographs, paintings, what have you.

The museum was initially housed in the basement of the Sandy Spring National Bank, and then in a vacated four-story house close by. "We were outgrowing that house," says John Chirtea, museum president, "so we knew we had to do something. After we got the donation of land, it took us a while, but we decided to make the leap."

It was quite a leap. Putting stuff on view in an old house and calling it a museum is one thing; building a structure dedicated to the task of display is another order of business entirely. If its initial exhibits are any indication—an interesting hodgepodge, with old carriages, cars, looms, tools, photographs, toy trains—the new museum will need a bit of work to clarify and refine its mission. It wouldn't want to lose that

See CITYSCAPE, B7, Col. 1



PHOTOS BY LARRY MORRIS—THE WASHINGTON POST

Miche Booz and Thomas Bucci's design blends the old and the new into a museum that fits Sandy Spring perfectly.

Arts

Sandy Spring
Thinks Big

CITYSCAPE, From B1

hodgepodge quality altogether, but it presents a more cohesive organizing system.

Even so, thanks in no small measure to its architecture, the museum is off to a very good start. It is obvious at first glance that the architects—a two-man team made up of Miche Booz, who lives and works in nearby Brookeville, and Thomas Buccini of Washington—wanted above all to design something that looked as if it belonged in and to Sandy Spring. And it is immediately clear that they succeeded.

Based on local vernacular prototypes—barns and 200-year-old houses—the museum consists of a collection of buildings that possess a

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timeless quality. Their scale and the unusual combination of architectural motifs tell you that they are contemporary buildings, yet they share certain qualities with the best of the older buildings in upper Montgomery County.

The excellence of the finished product is founded on just a few crucial, early decisions. One was to adapt—but not to copy—traditional architectural forms. More important, perhaps, was the very notion of building several smaller units rather than one large structure. This enabled the architects to relate the buildings to the site and to each other in a most satisfying way—they are set back from the road and clustered with the appealing, off-

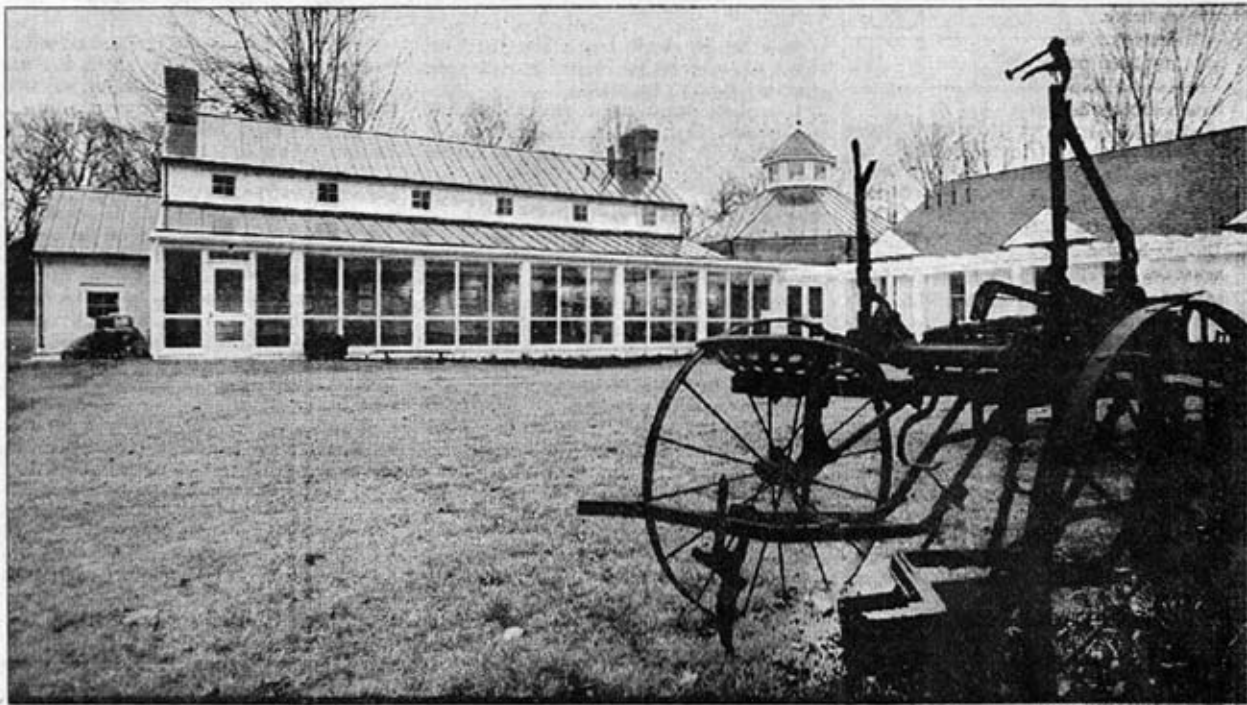
hand efficiency of a first-rate farmstead.

It also allowed the designers to visibly express the different purposes of the individual buildings. The more public pieces—a main exhibition hall and a multipurpose room for civic meetings, weddings and so on—face the road and are clad in brick with standing-seam metal roofs. The support facilities—offices, canteen, library, storage—stretch toward the rear of the site and have board-and-batten siding with green shingle roofs.

Furthermore, the architects were able to push the idea of differentiation by giving each element a distinctive form. Most prominent is the octagonal corner piece—for the meeting room—with its large, mulioned windows and a finely scaled cupola. Adjacent is the exhibition hall. A long, pitched-roof building with a navelike central section and chimneys at either end, it is a curious but pleasing combination of barn, church and manor house. With their simpler lines and detailing, the support buildings in back have the happy directness of barns and sheds.

A site plan focusing on a central courtyard is another key feature of the design. Booz exaggerates hardly at all when he calls the grassy court the “best room in the museum.” Open at one end and framed on the other three sides by these interesting buildings, it is indeed a unique, welcoming place.

Of equal importance is the long, trellised pathway running from the main entrance through the courtyard to the back door of the support buildings. A straightforward yet brilliant design device, it is the tie that binds the whole complex together. Cut from the project for cost reasons was a 90-foot extension of this simple wooden arcade from the front door to the roadside. This extension ought to be built as soon as possible, for in both actual and symbolic terms it would link the museum more directly and memorably to the outside world.



The Sandy Spring Museum, as seen from the courtyard, is based on vernacular prototypes such as barns and 200-year-old houses.

BY LARRY MOHRIS, THE WASHINGTON POST

The museum's functional spaces fall naturally into place on either side of this outdoor-indoor corridor. One of the most pleasant rooms is a long, low-key gallery with an all-glass wall facing the courtyard; on the opposite wall is a display of paintings donated by artists of the Sandy Spring area. This sociable space emphasizes the integration of the courtyard in the museum's floor plan. Directly across the grassy court is a small, barnlike building that makes a fitting display space for an array of old farm implements.

But the architectural show stoppers are those high-ceilinged front rooms, each with its own dramatically exposed structural system. In the octagon, this is a ring of thick timbers coming together at the center with compelling force. In the rectangular exhibit hall, it is a parade of massive wood scissor trusses resting on oak posts and beams. Very appropriate, highly satisfying.

These are adjectives one can use to describe the architecture as a

whole. This is the first major civic project for both Booz and Buccini—who met in the late '80s while pursuing master's degrees at the University of Maryland's architecture school and who worked for six years in the office of outstanding Bethesda architect Mark McInturff before going their separate ways. But when the opportunity came up to compete for the museum commission, Booz recalls, “I knew it was too big a job for me alone, so I talked to Tom, and he was enthusiastic.”

Despite this relative lack of experience, the two young architects—both also landscape painters—operated like a couple of self-assured veterans in total command of their technical and philosophical resources. They experimented with different designs—as can be seen in a small exhibit of their drawings in a corner of the museum—but never altered their fundamental approach. The quite notable result is a complex that works in ways both practical and poetic.

There is room to expand—the buildings and graveled parking lot occupy only a small portion of the seven acres donated by Helen Bentley, widow of a famous Sandy Springer—major league baseball player Jack Bentley, who among other accomplishments won a game pitching against the great Walter Johnson in the 1924 World Series. The architects' pleasing vision is that additions in the same relaxed, vernacular spirit would be arranged in back of the existing buildings, along an extension of that same trellised pathway.

So, there remains work to be done. Chirtea envisions a “living museum,” with weavers, blacksmiths and the like working in studios behind the main museum. But already, the little unincorporated town, founded by Quakers more than two centuries ago, has done something quite remarkable: Largely on its own initiative (with grants totaling \$190,000 from the state and county), it has built a place where its own history can be honored.

In some ways, the museum seems like an outpost in a strange new world. It is worth noting that the local paintings displayed inside are mostly landscapes, and that the painters focus on Sandy Spring the way it used to be, cropping out all evidence of suburbanization. The room is like a dream world or a little magic kingdom. The shock is quite severe when you leave the museum and reenter the world of today.

On the other hand, the museum stands as poignant witness to a community that prefers to face an uncertain future with manifest pride in its past. “We like to say,” Chirtea says, “that Sandy Spring is a state of mind.”

The Sandy Spring Museum is at the corner of Route 108 and Bentley Road in Montgomery County. It is open on Monday, Wednesday and Thursday from 9 a.m. to 4 p.m. and on Sunday from noon to 4 p.m. Closed Tuesdays, Fridays and Saturdays. Admission is free. For more information, call 301-774-0022.