

# THE BUFFALO NEWS

## City&Region

[Front Page](#) > [City&Region](#) > [Darwin Martin House](#)

### The restoration was realized through dedication, work and money

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NEWS STAFF REPORTER  
10/1/2006



Derek Gee/Buffalo News  
Workers install the window frames on the east side of the conservatory at the Martin House Complex.

Preservationists labored for years to return Frank Lloyd Wright's deteriorating Darwin D. Martin House to its place of pre-eminence.

In the 1970s, individuals and organizations began writing legislators, raising funds for repairs and landscape improvements, meeting in small committees and giving tours of the house, all with the hope of someday seeing the historic landmark restored.

Jason Aronoff - whose long involvement began with the Western New York Chapter of Society of Architects and Historians, and a committee set up at the University at Buffalo, the structure's owner - said the reconstruction now under way at the Martin House Complex goes beyond what anyone in those early days dared to dream.

"When we first started talking about it, the idea that the whole complex could be reassembled was not even really thinkable. Our concern was with the Martin House itself," said Aronoff, a Kenmore-Town of Tonawanda school psychologist.

"What we're seeing now - well, the word 'breathtaking' is used too often, but when you see the whole thing it really is."

The late Sen. Daniel Patrick Moynihan credited a letter from Aronoff, then chairman of the Landmark Society of the Niagara Frontier's Martin House Task Force, for bringing the structure's deteriorating condition to his attention.

In March 1991, the senator wrote in *The Buffalo News* that he had found the Jewett Parkway house on a recent visit to be "a ruin and a disgrace." He urged people to get involved in its preservation and promised he would do the same.

Moynihan's reaction had a galvanizing effect, attracting people with considerable political and financial clout to the cause.

Later that year, Julia Stokes, deputy parks commissioner, and then-UB Provost William Greiner invited a small group of people to the Martin House to report on the building's condition.

This marked its introduction to Robert J. Kresse, an attorney and trustee for the Margaret L. Wendt Foundation who would become a central figure in the building's rebirth.

"The message was the state can't [save the house]; UB can't do it; and we have to turn to the people themselves," recalled Kresse, the Martin House Restoration Corp.'s first president and longtime chairman.

That meeting would be the catalyst for forming the nonprofit organization, to which UB would later lease the Martin House to guide the restoration.

The group had its work cut out. The conservatory, pergola and carriage house had been torn down and replaced by apartments, and the Barton House and gardeners cottage were in private hands.

But first and foremost, the Martin House itself needed extensive work.

"The house was in deplorable shape, seriously bad shape," recalled Stanford Lipsey, publisher of *The Buffalo News* and a founding board member of the Martin House Restoration Corp., who was instrumental behind the scenes in securing funds and promoting Wright's legacy.

Lending credence to the effort was a two-day Darwin D. Martin House Scholars' Conference in Buffalo. Underwritten by *The News*, it drew Wright experts from around the world to discuss the house's restoration and how the city could capitalize on cultural tourism.

Then, in short order, two opportunities presented themselves that opened up the possibility of reassembling Wright's original vision.

The private owner of the George Barton House, located on the grounds, was preparing to sell the building to Harvard University when Lipsey got wind of it.

"I called Bob Rich [of Rich Products] and Bob Wilmers [of M&T Bank] and said they want \$400,000 for the house; let's each of us put in \$133,000 to buy it while we can lay our hands on it, and they did," Lipsey said.

"If you want to talk about a turning point, that was it."

When the organization learned soon after that the owner of three apartment buildings built on the property in the 1960s was planning to convert them into condominiums, the Barton House mortgage was used to secure funds to buy the rest of the property.

With that acquisition, the group now had control of the entire original property, and planning began on how to restore the Martin House Complex to its original glory.

Under the guidance of Kresse and then of Charles W. Banta and Howard Zemsky, successive presidents of the organization, an ambitious capital fundraising campaign, plus local, state and federal funds, and foundation support assembled \$35 million for what is expected to be a \$50 million project.

In 2003, Wilmers provided a personal challenge grant of \$1 million providing that 500 first-time contributors agreed to give \$5,000 each.

"I would say this is the absolute best fundraising effort that's ever occurred in Buffalo," Lipsey said.

Mary Roberts, the Martin House Restoration Corp.'s chief operating officer and successor to John C. Courtin, who left in 2006, said the success in fundraising underscores the community's involvement.

"This project stands on the shoulders of many, many volunteers, from the board of directors to the tour guides," said Roberts.

"We have over 350 active volunteers, and there are countless others who have been involved historically in one way or another. So many people could stand up and take a bow. It would be a very crowded stage."

Kresse agreed. "It's said that Buffalo is a City of Good Neighbors, and in fact it is. This project could not have happened otherwise."

This year, Lipsey and his wife, Judith, paid \$500,000 for the Wright-designed gardener's cottage and about \$150,000 to construct a greenhouse that Wright did not design but that Martin had put in.

Still to come is the completion of the Martin House itself, including the return of the art glass windows and furnishings, and the new Garden Pavilion visitors center to be designed by Toshiko Mori. Still, with the buildings reconstructed, the day when the entire project is completed draws nearer.

"This is the largest restoration of any Frank Lloyd Wright building in the world. We're talking superlatives that nobody else can claim," said Lipsey, who was named in July to head a board overseeing the restoration of another great example of Buffalo architecture, the historic H.H. Richardson Complex.

Zemsky, who served as the Martin House organization's president from 2001 through 2005, said he was most proud that the restoration effort never cut corners.

"Throughout this project, we never wavered on the standards of quality we envisioned, so it's really gratifying to see it happen at the level we always imagined," Zemsky said.

Added Banta, president of the Albright-Knox Art Gallery, "It's a real badge of honor to have something of such international significance restored."

Gov. George E. Pataki, who put his support behind \$7 million for the Martin House restoration earlier this year, told The News that the completion of this project will pay big dividends for Buffalo.

"One of the great elements of Buffalo is its tremendous architectural history. When you combine the Darwin Martin with the Richardson Complex, combine it with the Olmsted parks, . . . you're going to see a lot of people just coming to visit Western New York because of the architecture and the arts," Pataki predicted.

Architect Eric Lloyd Wright, Frank Lloyd Wright's grandson and former apprentice who lives in Malibu, Calif., said he was grateful to the people of Buffalo.

"They've done a remarkable job in restoring and bringing it back, so the public can see what a great work it is," Wright said.

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