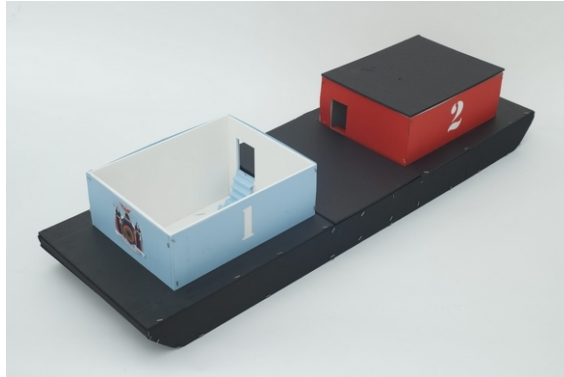


## Plan floated for art barge along the Erie Canal

Plan floated for art barge on Erie Canal, Vessel would travel to Brooklyn and back



*This artist's model shows the proposed art barge that planners hope can set sail along the Erie Canal by summer 2015.*

BY: Colin Dabkowski The Buffalo News

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An art project of biblical proportions will begin to take shape this summer in the Burchfield Penney Art Center as a group of artists and curators prepare to float a barge loaded with art and music along the Erie Canal from Buffalo to Brooklyn and back.

The multi-year project will begin its first public phase July 11 in the main gallery of the Burchfield Penney, when organizers start construction on a model of the vessel. If all goes as planned, according to Burchfield Penney curator Scott Propeack, the barge will be ready for its maiden voyage by summer 2015.

A public forum on the project is scheduled for 7 p.m. Jan. 30 in the Burchfield Penney.

Propeack said the barge concept will unfold organically over the summer and into the fall as participants essentially curate the vessel into existence. The funding, permissions and practical aspects of the project remain murky, though Propeack said he is currently negotiating with New York State over the potential donation of a state-owned barge.

Organizers have raised about \$20,000 for the project so far but are confident that they'll be able to entice local and national donors to bring the project to fruition. Its total cost is expected to exceed \$1 million.

"There's a lot of individual donors that are really interested in the project, and some local foundations have already provided support," Propeack said. "When you take on a project this large, with the types of foundations nationally that are interested in big projects, it opens up other funding possibilities."

Along with Propeack, the motley group of modern-day Noahs behind the vessel project includes artists D. Olivier Delrieu-Schulze, A.J. Fries, Scott Bye, Katherine Renee Gaudy, Julian Montague, Brian Larson Clark and Erika Abbondanzieri.

"We're operating as a collective, so each curator has their own perspective, and that's one of the conversations that will happen publicly," he said. "We want people to enter into an exhibition based on the historic conversation about what the canal meant for not just Buffalo but also for New York. The underlying principles for the exhibition are about conversations, communities and exchange."

Delrieu-Schulze, a graduate of the University at Buffalo's graduate visual studies program, hatched the idea as a low-budget and grass-roots affair inspired by a tour he took with a group of musicians and other artists in 2009.

"Art travels generally through institutions, in crates, and from museum to museum or gallery to gallery, whereas music organically moves itself and builds up a lot of alternative spaces," he said. "There's this great, beautiful network between musicians. They'll take care of each other when they're in another town or help set up a show. That might happen locally with art, but it doesn't seem to happen on a larger scale."

Delrieu-Schulze said that Fries encouraged him to build his idea into something more ambitious, and when Propeack and the Burchfield Penney signed on, he said, the project took on even more weight and complexity. The barge, according to organizers' plans, will include curated exhibitions, live performers and site-specific exhibitions and projects that will change depending on where the barge is docked.

It is designed to encourage new conversations and connections among the artists and performers who will share the space, as well as residents of the cities and towns along the route.

The canal has hosted floating cultural projects in the past, including a 550-mile canal tour by Frewsburg native and folk singer Christopher Bell, who took a one-man canoe trip from Buffalo to New York City in 2008. Bargemusic, a "floating concert hall" beneath the Brooklyn Bridge in New York City, has been hosting live concerts since 1977.

But never has the canal hosted a project as grand in scope or ambition as the still-untitled project being formulated here.

The barge's journey, Propeack said, won't end with its planned voyage to New York City and back.

"The idea would be that the barge, at the end of its trip back from Brooklyn, would reside somewhere in Buffalo and could be used as an off-site venue for multiple institutions and individual artists, too, for that matter," he said. "It could actually ultimately become an exhibition format that carries exhibitions between Buffalo and Detroit and Cleveland, and Toronto for that matter. If anything, the barge becomes a symbol, for me, of breaking down the geographic boundaries that we're falsely creating around cities and towns."

Propeack suggested mooring the barge at Silo City, the complex of industrial buildings and grain elevators along the Buffalo River that has become a playground and laboratory for art projects and grassroots cultural festivals in recent years.

The project is thick with implications about the art world and the broader economy, from the treatment of culture as a valuable modern commodity to the reactivation of a once-bustling waterway as a way to connect towns and villages that have few other reasons to interact.

"By being able to situate Buffalo artists in New York City, which has such a different art scene and economy, and being able to do the same by taking New York City artists to Buffalo, we can then directly and indirectly examine politics, history, economics, using art as the vehicle," Delrieu-Schulze said. "What struck me about Buffalo and why I'm totally committed to it as a city and a community to make art and music is that you can take risks here that would not be possible in New York City."

Delrieu-Schulze added that even if the project takes longer than expected or the physical barge never happens, the project will have been worthwhile. What's certain is that his idea, which has been in some form of development for years, is already garnering ecstatic responses from Buffalo's cultural community.

"People are incredibly excited about it," Propeack said. "They like the ideas about coming up with a contemporary way to recontextualize the Erie Canal and Western New York in relationship to the world."

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