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Former Cincinnati school to be reborn as cultural arts center

Much fund-raising, renovation needed for transformation

Business Courier of Cincinnati - by [Lucy May](#) Senior Staff Reporter

Ruth Dickey stands in the entryway of the cavernous Clifton School building, literally surrounded by the enormity of the job she was hired to do.

As founding executive director of the **Clifton Cultural Arts Center**, Dickey must raise the hundreds of thousands of dollars needed to transform the 53,000-square-foot historic school into a bustling cultural center while at the same time filling the place with programs and activities for fall.

But even though she's the sole paid staffer for the massive project at this point, Dickey feels far from alone.

"One of the most exciting things about this project is that it began with four years of community participation, and I have a really involved board that brings that history with them," Dickey said. "It's exciting to be part of something that feels like it's been grown up from the community."

An idea is born

Planning for the center began four years ago when **Cincinnati Public Schools** announced it would close the old Clifton School as part of its massive facilities plan. Community residents came together to discuss the plan and possible uses for the property, and the idea of the cultural arts center was born, said Cindy Herrick, president of the CCAC board of directors and a proponent of the center from the start.

Talks began at the same time plans were being made for the Madisonville Arts Center on the east side of town. The smaller MAC, as it's called, held its grand opening in May and also aims to house theater productions, classes, rehearsals and lectures. Another facility, the **Kennedy Heights Arts Center**, is housed in a 132-year-old mansion and features exhibits, classes and summer camps.

"Community theater is huge in the Greater Cincinnati area. Last count, there were 44 different community theater groups," said Dan Dermody, a residential real estate developer and president of the **Community Arts Institute**, which manages MAC. "And most of them are doing (their performances) in basements of churches and high school auditoriums. Acoustics are bad, lighting is bad, parking is bad. There is quite a bit of demand for a good theater, a good venue for performing arts."

That demand has resulted in strong support for both centers.



Mark Bowen | Courier

As executive director of the Clifton Cultural Arts Center, Ruth Dickey is responsible for raising hundreds of thousands of dollars to transform the 53,000-square-foot former school.

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The MAC has raised more than \$600,000 so far with more money to raise to complete renovations of its third floor. The CCAC has raised nearly \$800,000 in funds to renovate the building and to hire Dickey, a poet who was executive director of New Futures, a nonprofit organization near Seattle, before moving to Cincinnati to lead the CCAC. Dickey and her board still are determining just how much the renovations will cost in all.

The CCAC board believes the sheer size of its facility will help distinguish it from other community venues.

It is slightly larger than the **Fitton Center for Creative Art** in Hamilton and includes two historic buildings - the old Clifton School and the nearby Carriage House, which backers also want to renovate and use for classes and meeting space.

Cultural hot spot

Once completed, the vision is for the CCAC to be a cultural hot spot for the Clifton community, a goal supported by such heavy-hitter partners as the **Art Academy of Cincinnati**, which will hold classes there again this summer, the **University of Cincinnati** College-Conservatory of Music Preparatory Department and the **Osher Lifelong Learning Institute of the University of Cincinnati**.

Once renovated, CCAC's space will offer 13 classrooms for arts instruction ranging in size from 850 to 1,450 square feet, two large lobbies for exhibits, office space for smaller arts organizations, an auditorium seating 175 to 200 people for community theater and choral, strings and dance performances, and a 2,400-square-foot Great Hall for conferences, banquets, dances and black-box theater, Herrick said. "We hope this will become the civic hub of Clifton."

Once the renovations are complete, Herrick said the board expects as many as 100,000 people to use the space each year.

"It will take us five to 10 years to ramp up to that," she said. "But that's the potential of the building."

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