

# Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

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## Around Town: Paintings of its Past Help To Enliven Braddock's Future

By Brian O'Neill

"I believe in Braddock," Evelyn Benzo tells me when I ask why she's moving just a couple of blocks from her home of 58 years. "It won't be like it used to be, but it can be better."

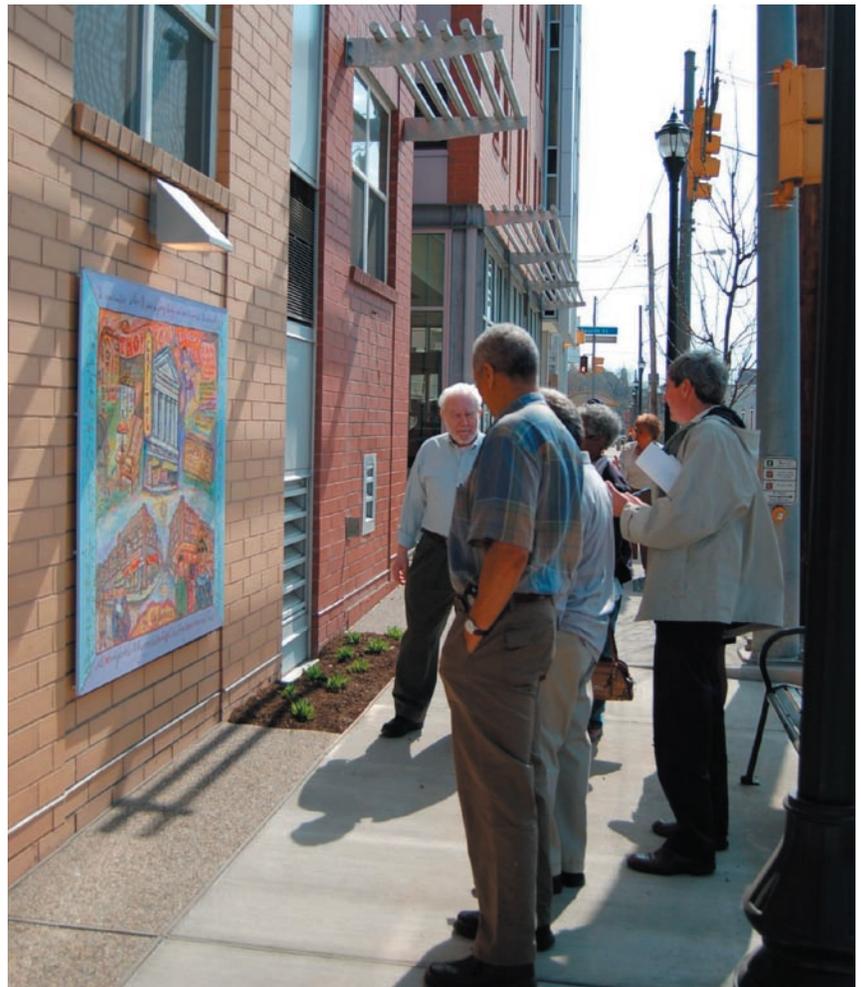
"I'm here for the long haul."

Like in so many Mon Valley communities, old-timers in Braddock find too many reasons to use phrases like "this used to be" and "there once was." The new 53-room senior citizens apartment building on Braddock Avenue – known simply as "The Avenue" to locals – is dipping into the past to brighten a prominent new piece of its future.

Nine paintings will hang, eye level with the sidewalk, from the \$13 million, four-story building beside the abandoned Braddock Hospital that was unceremoniously shut down by UPMC earlier this year. That only makes the moral behind the mural – Braddock was really something in its heyday and we ought to show pride in that – all the more timely.

Daniel Rothschild, the architect, wasn't just interested in the buildings surrounding his creation, he wanted to know about the community. A few years ago, when his firm, Rothschild Doyne Collaborative, designed The Legacy apartments in the Hill District, he infused that building with photos, sculptures and etched names highlighting the neighborhood's rich jazz history.

So in Braddock, the architect



convened residents last year to talk about their hometown. At first, the plan was straightforward pictorial history from the French and Indian War through the industrial and post-industrial periods. But as stories flowed, the project shifted.

The results are audaciously bright, optimistic paintings from the hand of Squirrel Hill artists Robert

Qualters. Bright reds and yellows depict buildings and events from the time when Braddock was packed with workers, shoppers and smiles.

There's a devotional nod to the Braddock High football team that had a 56-game unbeaten streak from 1953 to 1960 under coach Chuck Klausing. Another painting

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makes the claim that the five-and-a-half-mile parade was four miles long, and when I wondered aloud if that was exaggerated, longtime resident Jim Kidd set me straight: "It would go on for two or three hours, man."

Also depicted is the annual May Day procession of young women in white from Sacred Heart Church. That was the Polish church among the seven Catholic churches that were once in Braddock, and Tony Buba, the borough's celebrated filmmaker, remembered going to kindergarten there for a short time.

"I came home singing Polish folk songs," said Mr. Buba, whose roots are Italian. "My mother took me out."

Mr. Kidd, Mr. Buba, and Braddock Councilman Matthew

Thomas joined Ms. Benzo and Kathy Handza, proprietor of Al's Market down the street, on the committee that gathered ideas and shared them with Mr. Qualters, an old friend of Mr. Buba's. They all joined me one day last week to admire the paintings and the building as Mr. Rothschild and developer Vanessa Murphy-Zur, of Falbo-Penrose, showed us around.

The first-floor community room has floor-to-ceiling windows facing the intersection of The Avenue and Fourth Street because "we're selling the charm and beauty of the community," Mr. Rothschild said. "We want to activate the street."

We rode up the elevator to what will be Ms. Benzo's spacious fourth-floor apartment, flooded with natural light on an atypically

sunny day. (Mr. Buba could see his mom's house and we all could see the famed Edgar Thomson Steel Works.) Thin floor-to-ceiling slit windows in the corners added light and also accentuated the corner tower.

The corner tower's there to "get heroic," Mr. Rothschild said, because the scale of the steel mill down the road is "beyond comprehension."

Three of the nine paintings should be ready in time for the building's grand opening this Friday, three others are due in July and three more in October. Mr. Qualters says deadlines don't worry him. He thrives on them.

"I'm a worker," he said. "What can I say? I'm a Pittsburgh kid."