

'Epic Cat Fort' planned for former St. Clement church in Tarentum

January 21, 2017 12:00 AM



(<http://www.post-gazette.com/image/2017/01/21/ca0,324,3291,2518/Catfort0121.jpg>)

An artistic rendering of the planned Epic Cat Fort, to be built in the former St. Clement Church in Tarentum.



By Courtney Linder / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Inside the previously vacant former St. Clement Church in Tarentum, a labyrinth is in the works. But instead of a menacing Minotaur at the center of the maze, a cluster of kitties may soon be scaling a giant multitextured "Epic Cat Fort." (<http://epiccatfort.com/>)

Application developer Phillip Rhodes, 48, of Highland Park is inviting artists and non-artists to help design sections of the massive fort, which he is hoping will be completed by March 15 to help open his new event space, the Clement.

The idea for the cat fort spontaneously popped into his head, he said. "I don't know where it came from," he said. "I thought, 'Wouldn't this be crazy?'"

In December 2015, when Mr. Rhodes purchased the 43,000-square-foot church at an auction for \$55,000, he began envisioning the space as a hub for community engagement. It had been vacant for more than 20 years.

Tarentum, a borough of Allegheny County just 22 miles outside Downtown, was once a hub of manufacturing for plate glass, bottles, bricks, lumber and steel. Today, the epicenter of the town is depressed, said Mr. Rhodes, who noted that the region has suffered greatly from blight.

"There's broken windows and plywood over the doors," he said about the borough's main corridor. "But at the same time, I think there are a lot of people who care very much."

Mr. Rhodes envisions the Epic Cat Fort to tower 40 feet into the church's high-ceiling sanctuary room, an area with 2,760 square feet of space.

He plans to install a base of 2-by-4-foot boards with connecting tubes. Each level will feature varying textures, including carpeting. "Tactiles are important for the kitties," he said.

Mr. Rhodes has always been a cat lover. He recalls fond memories of his late cat Huckle who lived for 23 years. For that reason, he's conscious of cats' array of temperaments.

Since each cardboard and papier-mache section will be assembled separately in 4-foot-by-4 foot pieces, not only will each portion have a different artistic approach, but Mr. Rhodes will have the ability to close off some sections to create a quiet space for more shy cats. "There's also going to be a time-out section," he joked. He said his organization would provide materials and helpers to assist people in designing their sections.

The cats and kittens, to be provided by Animal Rescue League Shelter & Wildlife Center, will be available for adoption.

Although he's spent nearly \$100,000 into the church in renovations, Mr. Rhodes said he doesn't seek an eventual profit from the church project.

In a struggling post-industrial neighborhood, he simply wants to bring positive changes to the community. "I just need to make this building sustainable. All I want is for it to be used," he said.

He questioned whether he would ever finish refurbishing the former church. "I'm a software engineer. I'm sort of out of my element," Mr. Rhodes laughed. "I don't even talk to people at work."

Mr. Rhodes and the Epic Cat Fort crew are seeking volunteers and artists. Access the volunteer page at www.epiccatfort.com (<http://www.epiccatfort.com>) or email info@epiccatfort.com (<mailto:info@epiccatfort.com>) for more information. Interested sponsors should visit the site's sponsor page.

Courtney Linder: clinder@post-gazette.com (<mailto:clinder@post-gazette.com>) or 412-263-1707. Twitter: [LinderPG](#).

Related Media:



Pet Tales: Feel-good movie is collared by controversy over dog's treatment (</pets/2017/01/21/Pet-Tales-Feel-good-movie-is-collared-by-controversy-over-German-shepherd-s-treatment/stories/201701210006>)



Allegheny County Council honors service dogs with proclamation (</pets/2017/01/21/Allegheny-County-Council-honors-service-dogs-with-proclamation/stories/201701210009>)



Pet events: An animal parade, video horse racing (</pets/2017/01/21/Pet-events-An-animal-parade-video-horse-racing/stories/201701210003>)



Pets Q&A: Elderly cat turns fussy, eating only baby food (</pets/2017/01/21/Pets-Q-A-Elderly-cat-turns-fussy-eating-only-baby-food/stories/201701210004>)

Sign up for free newsletters and get more of the Post-Gazette delivered to your inbox (https://my.post-gazette.com/newsletters/?utm_source=pg.com&utm_medium=link&utm_campaign=newsletter-subscribe&utm_content=article-page)

ADVERTISEMENT



Most Read: Pets



1. The little brown dogs stealing Asia's heart (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pets/pet-reports/2016/09/07/The-little-brown-dogs-stealing-Asia-s-heart/stories/201609070220>)
2. Good boy! Dogs know what you're saying, study suggests (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pets/pet-reports/2016/08/30/Good-boy-Dogs-know-what-you-re-saying-study-suggests-1/stories/201608300189>)
3. Here's how scientists got dogs to lie still in a brain scanner for eight minutes (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pets/pet-reports/2016/08/31/Here-s-how-scientists-got-dogs-to-lie-still-in-a-brain-scanner-for-eight-minutes/stories/201608310359>)
4. Don't call it a cage. It's a catio. (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pets/pet-reports/2016/08/31/Don-t-call-it-a-cage-It-s-a-catio/stories/201608310358>)
5. Cats are bird killers. These animal experts let theirs outside anyway. (<http://www.post-gazette.com/pets/pet-reports/2016/09/02/Cats-are-bird-killers-These-animal-experts-let-theirs-outside-anyway-1/stories/201609020243>)

ADVERTISEMENT



Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

HOME (<http://www.post-gazette.com>)
NEWS (<http://www.post-gazette.com/news/>)
LOCAL (<http://www.post-gazette.com/local/>)
SPORTS (<http://www.post-gazette.com/sports/>)
OPINION (<http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/>)
A & E (<http://www.post-gazette.com/ae/>)
LIFE (<http://www.post-gazette.com/life/>)
BUSINESS (<http://www.post-gazette.com/business/>)
VIDEO (<http://www.post-gazette.com/video/>)
PHOTO (<http://www.post-gazette.com/photo/>)
CLASSIFIEDS (<http://classified.post-gazette.com>)
JOBS (<http://www.post-gazette.com/jobs/>)
CIRCULARS (<http://www.post-gazette.com/circulars>)
CARS (<http://www.carsoup.com>)