

# GRAND RAPIDS, MICHIGAN

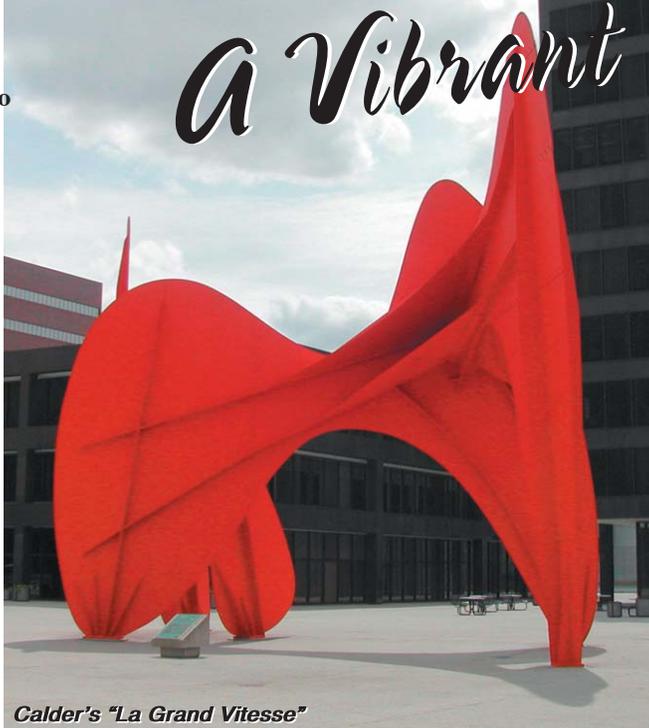
## *A Vibrant Renewal*

By Melissa Wolcott and Al Martino

Photos by Melissa or Al

Several centuries ago, the Ottawa Indians decided a certain spot located by the rapids of the Grand River would be a fine place to camp. Fur traders soon followed and a trading post grew into a village, which eventually became a city known as Grand Rapids. Although the rapids have been tamed by time and a dam, it is still a fine place to live and, for us, visit.

As with most cities, Grand Rapids has flourished as well as had its down times. Right now it's flourishing — due in a large part to the efforts of several entrepreneurs who were instrumental in bringing art and culture to the forefront in their hometown. Jay Van Andel and Richard DeVos started Amway in a garage in 1959, and built it into Alticor, Inc., a multi-billion-dollar international business today. Hendrik Meijer was a small Depression Era grocer who lowered his food prices and pledged good service to all of his customers. It wasn't long before business was booming, and the company now has over 150 Meijer general merchandise stores in the Midwest. The families of these men carried on their work and devotion to their community. When you tour Grand Rapids, you see their touch all around. The city enjoys a lot of corporate and community support for art and renovation, and any



Calder's "La Grand Vitesse"

buildings constructed now are also environmentally friendly.

The first real foray into having a modern art presence came with the unlikely installation of Alexander Calder's "La Grand Vitesse" stabile in front of City Hall in 1969. Initially met with some resistance, the bright red steel sculpture has since become the city's icon. A more recent addition to the city is Rosa Parks Circle, a fibre-optically lit stone and water park (which can be frozen over and used for ice skating) which also houses an amphitheatre that hosts festivals and concerts. The park was designed by Maya Lin, most recognized for designing the Viet Nam Veterans Memorial Wall in Washington. The Grand Rapids downtown area alone has 27 outdoor sculptures.

Galleries are also popping up. An interesting one we stopped in (located in what was once a depressed area and is now trendy) is called the LaFontsee Galleries Underground Studio, which features 70% high-quality regional artists. The Grand Rapids Art Museum also features some regional artists along with their

permanent collection which spans from Renaissance to Modern art. Their permanent collection includes paintings by such masters as Asher Durand, William Merritt Chase, John Singer Sargent, Van Ruysdael, and Fernand Léger.

Grand Rapids' interest in outdoor sculpture is very much in evidence with a ten-minute drive from downtown to the amazing Frederick Meijer Gardens, with its 120 acres of gardens, walking trails, water falls, greenhouses and conservatory. There you will find magnificent sculptures placed in totally natural surroundings spread far apart to allow them their own space. While walking a trail, you

will serendipitously happen upon the pieces. Artists must be well pleased to have their sculpture displayed at Meijer Gardens, as they usually prefer natural settings to an urban background. The

de Suervo kinetic sculpture at Meijer Gardens



pieces, by artists such as Liberman, Fredericks, and di Suervo, set among the various plantings and grasses are acquiring their lovely patinas as time goes by. The piece de resistance of the gardens, however, is Leonardo DaVinci's Horse: The American Horse, which is a 24 feet tall, 15-ton bronze behemoth cast



DaVinci's Horse at Meijer Gardens



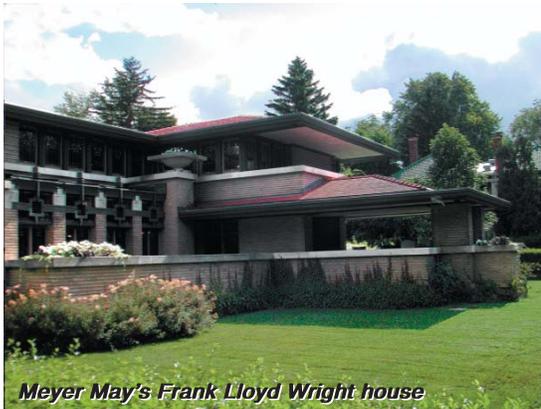
The Great Lakes pool at Meijer Gardens

from DaVinci's design. It is one of two in the world, the other resides in Milan, Italy. The horse was designed by DaVinci, but never completed. In 1999, inspired by the

drawings, sculptor Nina Akamu decided to bring them to life after 500 years. There is a small model of the horse indoors with a brail history so that blind people can enjoy the sculpture as well. Altogether, the gardens have more than 100 sculptures exhibited both indoors and out. In the evenings (in season) they have outdoor concerts in a bandshell overlooking DaVinci's Horse.

The large children's area of the gardens is just terrific. The clever layout provides a lot of fun things for the kids — and parents too. We enjoyed that part of the gardens as much as the kids did. In the Great Lakes Garden kids can sail a little boat, and in the Rock Quarry they can find buried "fossils". They can explore the Treehouse Village and find their way through the Butterfly Maze. And, of course, they can enjoy the many hands-on children oriented sculptures.

In the large conservatory, you can stroll through African plants, to the Orient Orchid Wall, Australia, Malasia, the South American continent, and Florida. The



*Meyer May's Frank Lloyd Wright house*

greenhouses are fascinating, especially the "Carnivore" room, which contains all meat-eating plants — kids love it! Interesting tidbit: Our guide informed us that you can tell temperature by listening to crickets. Count the number of chirps in 15 seconds, and add 37, which will give you an approximation of the outside temperature. We'll have to try it as soon as it warms up enough for the crickets to start chirping.

**B**ack "in the day", Grand Rapids was the furniture capital of the world. The heavily wooded pine forests and the river made it perfect for logging and saw mills, which gave rise to the reality of mass-produced furniture in the mid 1800s. This brought wealth to the area (furniture and department store owners, etc.) and the Heritage Hill area is where they settled. Between 1844 and 1920, it was a time for building large homes and mansions in var-

ied Victorian styles in the 40 block area. Then came the crash in 1929, and many lost their businesses. The area deteriorated, and people started moving out in the 1950s. The Heritage Hill Society (and a then-congressman named Gerald Ford) saved the area from the wrecking ball. Folks began moving back in and sprucing up the old homes. Nothing new has been built since the 1950s, and if anyone wants to change anything they must get approval.

The jewel of Heritage Hill, however, is not the least bit Victorian, even though it was built in 1908. This would be the Meyer May House, designed by Frank Lloyd Wright, and it must have looked positively alien at the time. It is an example of his Prairie style — a wide open horizontal space — and would have fit in perfectly with homes built 40 years later. He wanted a long look on a plane with the land, rather than an upward appearance. The mortar between the horizontal bricks is the same color as the brick to complete the illusion. He actually designed from the inside out, and there is no front door, just a side entrance. The home's stained glass windows are geometric rather than the Tiffany style that was popular at the time. This Wright house is one of the most fascinating in existence, as its interior is much the same as when he designed it. Wright did not just create a house, he created a total work of art, and wanted to make sure that whoever lived in it, lived his vision. He cleverly crafted his interiors so they couldn't be changed, with built in bookcases, rugs with designs so you couldn't move a chair around — right down to the size of pictures on the wall. According to our guide, he was a major control freak, and he designed everything in the house, including what the woman of the house would wear, the dishes she would serve her food on, and the chairs the family would sit on! The Mays, who commissioned him, were obviously ahead of their time as well, as the home was electrically wired right from the beginning, when everyone else was afraid of the "new fangled" electricity and still using gas. The house, including Wright's designed furnishings, cost the Mays \$33,000, which was still quite pricey at that time. The house stayed in the family until the 1980s, when it was purchased and restored by Steelcase, Inc., and opened as a museum.

Another home of note in Heritage Hill is the Voight House, built in 1895, and definitely Victorian. There are many

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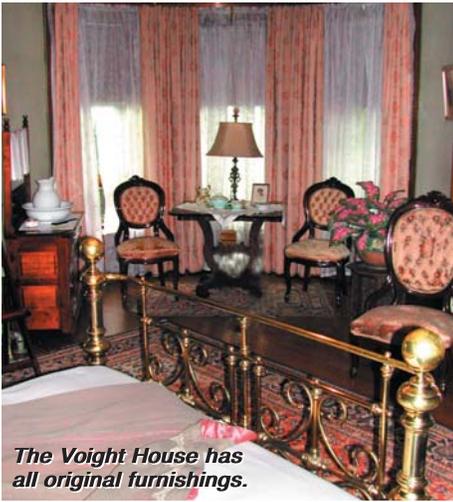
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*The Voight House has all original furnishings.*

Victorian homes still in existence, but what makes this one unique is that everything in the house is original to the family and the time — including all the furnishings, a carriage house and buggy. It stayed in the Voight family until 1976 when the city purchased it. They were thrilled to discover trunks in the attic full of early 20th century clothing. It's amazing (and fortunate) that the Voight's managed to resist change for all those years.

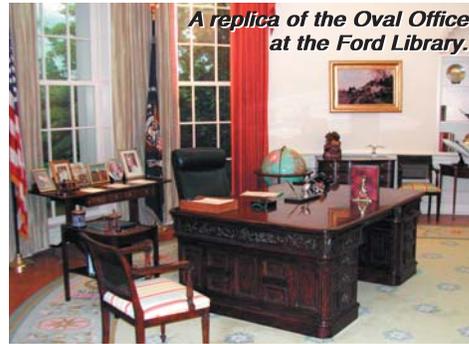
The Van Andel Museum Center, located in town, focuses on the rich history of Grand Rapids, and is beautifully laid out. A magnificently restored 1928 working Spillman carousel is a kid-magnet (OK, we rode it too), and an authentic horse-drawn streetcar leads to a recreated 1890s street with storefronts, and a few stores you can enter. We enjoyed chatting up the printer using set-type



*An original 1928 working carousel at Van Andel Museum*

with a hand-press, and walked out thankful that our publishing business is in the 21st century. The "Furniture City" area is very interesting as it takes you through the steps of furniture manufacturing (which began after the Civil War), and some beautiful finished pieces.

Earlier we mentioned Congressman Ford, who, of course, went on to be the 38th president of the U.S., and at 91, is the oldest living president. Although he now lives in Vail, CO, Grand Rapids claims him as their own, and the Ford Library is located there. It is a fascinating place, as Ford was President during a tumultuous time (1974-77). The well-structured exhibit takes you through his personal history as well as reflections of the time he served as president. Since he was appointed as vice president when Spiro Agnew resigned in 1973, and became president upon



*A replica of the Oval Office at the Ford Library.*

Richard Nixon's resignation, he is the only person to be vice president and president without having been elected to either position. Some incredible pieces of history are on display including a graffitied piece of the Berlin Wall, the last helicopter out of Viet Nam, an original Ben Franklin press, the curt resignation letters from both Nixon and Agnew, original Watergate tools, and a life-

size replica of his Oval Office.

We stayed at the Hilton Grand Rapids for its convenience to the airport (with complimentary shuttle) and downtown, and also the great breakfast in its Spinnaker Restaurant. They provide high speed internet in the rooms, which has become a must for us now.

Grand Rapids has a very good transit system, so you don't really need to drive in town. They also have some mighty fine restaurants, and we enjoyed several of them. After visiting Heritage Hill, we were still in a Victorian mood, so we decided to have dinner at Gibson's, a 1874

Italianate mansion. With the exception of the kitchen and bar areas, all of the original structure and woodwork has been preserved. The nostalgic atmosphere created the perfect background for our dinner of Crepe Gateau (crepes, vegetables and

cheese wrapped in a French pastry), and roasted free-range chicken with morel-rosemary crust.

The San Chez Restaurant downtown is considered one of the top five Hispanic bistros in the U.S. Housed in an 1886 building, the Spanish tapas restaurant itself is 12 years old. The decor is eclectic, with wonderful columns studded in mosaics. They have a full entree menu, and our dessert of chocolate empanadas was especially memorable. The restaurant also has a new section — Mezze Cafe & Cabaret — for lunch or dinner, which transforms into a cabaret in the evening. It is definitely one of the trendiest places in town.

Tre Cugini is right in the heart of the art district, and serves Italian fare. The simple white tablecloth atmosphere compliments their authentic cuisine. We enjoyed their grilled swordfish topped with capers, and black olives in an onion tomato sauce.

A very cool and popular place is Bar Divani (Hindi for being "crazy in love"), where they serve beers from around the world, over 50 wines by the glass, as well



*San Chez Tapas.*

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as single malt scotch, tequila, etc. The bar (which also serves delicious food) is decorated in dark tones with plush sofas, and has light jazz piped in for a very relaxing atmosphere. They also feature wine from a highly respected local winery, Wyncroft.

Grand Rapids is located in Kent County, which is known for being a huge apple producing area (as well as peaches, corn, wheat and Christmas trees). One of our stops had to be Robinette's Restaurant, an apple and peach farm since 1870. The Robinette family bought the 240 acre farm in 1911, and in 1971, they built cider mills and added a restaurant in 1973. It's a bare bones rustic restaurant, but tasty food, nonetheless. We had a nice vegetable quiche for lunch, followed by fresh homemade apple pie. But the food is not the only reason to visit Robinette's, they also have horse-drawn hayrides, a mountain bike trail, and a kitchy-fun gift shop.

Heading west from Grand Rapids are the cities of Grand Haven and Muskegon. Both are located on Lake Michigan, and well worth the hour's drive. It was a beautiful morning with a good head-wind, so we went sailing on the Wind Dancer, a 61-foot rigged schooner, moored at Grand Haven. They offer wind jamming sails, supper cruises, and sunset sails. You can either sit back and relax, or help hoist the sails — we chose the sit back and relax option, and it was wonderful. All that hard work made us hungry for lunch, so after sailing we ducked into Snug Harbor, which is located right at the marina. Dining on blackened yellow fin tuna outside on their deck provided a nice breeze, a view of the water and a full stomach.

Since we were there during the day, we weren't able to see Grand Haven's famous Waterfront Musical Fountain — the largest in the world. It has a 35,000-watt sound system with spray shooting 125 feet above the basin, across the Grand River Channel. There are 3,500 changes in water level and lighting synchronized to music during the free performances that start at dusk (from Memorial Weekend through Labor Day).

We drove north from Grand Haven to Muskegon for the afternoon, and stopped

first at the Hackley & Hume homes, which were built by lumber barons in the late 1800s. They are both Queen Anne style houses, side by side, with Hackley's being the grander of the two. One might say too grand, as it is really over-the-top Victorian inside and out, with Moorish architecture and lots of wood carving. Hume's house was more modest in comparison, but still a fine example of the period. Our delightful docent, Helen Sherman, is the great-granddaughter of Hume, so her recollections and insights were fascinating. We learned that napkin rings were not used to be fancy, but rather to identify who's napkin was who's. Since laundry was only done once a week, you would roll your napkin up after each meal and put it in your own monogrammed ring ..... and yet another reason not to pine for the "good ol' days."

Muskegon has a small, but fine Museum of Art. Apparently, the first director (1915) bought a Whistler painting instead of war bonds, which resulted in the loss of his job, but now 90 years later, it turns out to have been a super investment! We enjoyed viewing the infamous work, "A Study In Rose and Brown", as well as a few more of our favorite artists' work, Severin Roesen's "Tabletop Still Life", and Edward Hopper's "New York Restaurant".

Muskegon is also home to the Great Lake Naval Memorial and Museum, where you can tour a WWII submarine (The USS Silversides SS-236) and a 1920s Coast Guard Cutter.

A new high-speed ferry — The Lake Express — was recently placed into service that transports folks and their autos (or motorcycles and bikes) from Muskegon straight across Lake Michigan to Milwaukee. This cuts a 7-hour drive around the lake to 2 hours spent in total comfort. We didn't take the trip, but toured the spanking new and bright ferry. You can choose their regular comfortable seating (much like airline seats) or opt for premium seating which is even cushier. They also offer food aboard — so who wants to drive?!

*The Hackley House in Muskegon*



*Hoisting sails on the Wind Dancer.*



On our last night in Grand Rapids we dined at the artsy-eclectic downtown spot, the Sierra Room. This award-winning restaurant serves elegant cuisine with a French-influence. Executive chef Todd Veenstra has brought his special touch to the menu offerings, and the service is friendly and efficient. The grilled pork tenderloin with sweet corn-ricotta crepes and smoked tomato coulis was divine.

Grand Rapids is a fine example of how great a city can become when forward thinking corporate bodies and community folks unite in a common goal to create an enviable environment for their future.

## *If You Go...*

**Bar Divani** - 616-774-9463; [www.bardivani.com](http://www.bardivani.com)  
**Grand Rapids Art Museum** - 616-831-1001; [www.gramonline.org](http://www.gramonline.org)  
**Grand Rapids CVB** - 800-678-9859; [www.visit-grandrapids.org](http://www.visit-grandrapids.org)  
**Frederick Meijer Gardens & Sculpture Park** - 888-957-1580; [www.meijergardens.org](http://www.meijergardens.org)  
**Gerald R. Ford Library & Museum** - 616-254-0400; [www.ford.utexas.edu](http://www.ford.utexas.edu)  
**Gibson's Restaurant** - 616-774-8535; [www.gibsonrestaurant.com](http://www.gibsonrestaurant.com)  
**Grand Haven CVB** - 800-303-4096; [www.grandhavenchamber.org](http://www.grandhavenchamber.org)  
**Grand Haven Waterfront Musical Fountain** - [www.grandhaven.com/fountain.shtml](http://www.grandhaven.com/fountain.shtml)  
**Great Lake Naval Memorial and Museum** - 231-755-1230; [www.silversides.org](http://www.silversides.org)  
**Hackley & Hume Historic Site** - 231-722-0278; [www.muskegonmuseum.org](http://www.muskegonmuseum.org)  
**Hilton Grand Rapids Airport** - 877-944-5866; [www.hilton.com](http://www.hilton.com)  
**Heritage Hill Historic District Driving Tour** - 616-459-8950; [www.Heritagehill.org](http://www.Heritagehill.org)  
**La Fontsee Galleries** - 616-451-3850; [www.lafontsee.us](http://www.lafontsee.us)  
**Lake Express Ferry** - 231-755-2428; [www.lake-express.com](http://www.lake-express.com)  
**Meyer May House** - 616-246-4821; [www.steelcase.com](http://www.steelcase.com)  
**Muskegon CVB** - 800-250-9283; [www.visitmuskegon.org](http://www.visitmuskegon.org)  
**Muskegon Museum Of Art** - 231-720-2570; [www.muskegonartmuseum.org](http://www.muskegonartmuseum.org)  
**Robinettes Restaurant** - 800-400-8100; [www.robinettes.com](http://www.robinettes.com)  
**San Chez Restaurant** - 616-774-8272; [www.sanchezbistro.com](http://www.sanchezbistro.com)  
**Sierra Room Restaurant** - 616-459-1764; [www.sierraroom.com](http://www.sierraroom.com)  
**Snug Harbor** - 616-846-8400  
**Tre Cugini** - 616-235-9339; [www.trecugini.com](http://www.trecugini.com)  
**Van Andel Museum Center** - 616-456-3977; [www.grmuseum.org](http://www.grmuseum.org)  
**Voight House Victorian Museum** - 616-456-4600; [www.grmuseum.org/voight.htm](http://www.grmuseum.org/voight.htm)  
**Wind Dancer Schooner Charter** - 616-822-4210