Loyola investing in Cuneo grandeur
By Mick Zawislak
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Until she visited it herself, the bride-to-be had no idea the Cuneo Mansion in Vernon Hills was the same massive pink house she remembered seeing as a girl in a movie starring Julia Roberts.

A serene outdoor setting was a must for Arlington Heights native Shauna Martin, whose wedding is June 18. The search for an after ceremony venue ended when she set foot on the grounds of the Venetian-style estate. “It was the romantic fairy tale we were looking for,” said Martin, a 2009 Loyola University Law School graduate.

And so, she and her fiance, Robert Ritter, will become the first couple to host their reception at a pavilion being built by Loyola University Chicago, which officially took over as caretakers of the venerable estate last March.

And like Loyola, the couple will be starting their tomorrows with the grandeur of a bygone era occupied by the rich and famous as a backdrop.

“It starts when you go through the gates on Milwaukee (Avenue). You really are beginning to sense you’re in a different world and different time,” said Pam Ambrose, director of cultural affairs for Loyola.

It has been about a year since officials at the nation's largest Jesuit Catholic university were told they would be receiving the biggest donation in its 140-year history.

The $50 million gift from the Cuneo Foundation included the family home, its extensive collections, nearly 100 surrounding acres of property and cash.

Loyola has eventual plans to upgrade the mansion and grounds and possibly sell or develop a portion of the open acreage.

A source of revenue for future improvements will be a $4.8 million multipurpose, four-season pavilion to be used for weddings, conferences, music and theater performances, academic programs and other uses, scheduled to open next June.

As envisioned, the pavilion will become the cornerstone of Loyola's mission to diversify offerings at what is intended to become a self-sustaining campus.

“That's where our capital fund will come from,” said Steve Bergfeld, Loyola's assistant to the president and Cuneo project manager.

Given open access, teams of university officials immediately began assessing what they were getting and how it could or should be used not only as an extension of the Loyola campus but as a connection to the community.
“It’s not just a curiosity, this is a place where there is a tremendous amount of opportunity for programs and to get the public engaged,” said Ambrose, who ran the historic Samuel Cupples House on the campus of St. Louis University before coming to Loyola.

For the general public, the changes so far have been nearly invisible. Vernon Hills' 16th annual holiday light show through the Cuneo grounds just got underway with only a minor change in the road pattern to separate visitors from the construction site. As always, the mansion will be elaborately decorated for the season.

Tours are still given, though the frequency has been limited to three days a week. A summer concert series went on as usual as did plays, art shows and other events.

“That’s wonderful but one of the things that is absolutely necessary for us to do is to learn what type of programs the residents in that area would like to see,” said Ambrose, who is charged with developing the programming.

Art and theater camps and more serious fare such as classes in Renaissance Art are possibilities, she added.

Also on the to do list is extensive interior work, including modifying and reintroducing a huge skylight that acted as a natural ventilation system; replacing about 70 windows; and, upgrading the original electrical and plumbing systems.

“When anybody moves into an older home, there are going to be challenges. We calculated that into our plans,” Bergfeld explained.

The 31,000-square-foot country estate was completed in 1917 for business magnate Samuel Insull, an assistant to Thomas Edison and founder of Commonwealth Edison, among many other interests.

“He actually designed the electrical systems. I'm not surprised they've lasted as long as they did,” said Nevin Hedlund, head of Nevin Hedlund Architects Inc., which is overseeing the pavilion and other projects.

The pavilion will host up to 300 guests and have a 6,200-square-foot terrace overlooking the garden. As part of that addition, the former indoor pool house is being converted to a connecting commercial kitchen. A new handicapped accessible elevator and restroom facilities will be added.

With vaulted ceilings, cornice elements, salmon colored stucco, and arched window design, the new building was designed inside and out to blend into Insull's original Mediterranean-style vision.

“There's so much to give here it's a matter of tackling it all and executing it,” said Anne Hughes, a Loyola spokeswoman. “It’s more of an art piece you have to take care of.”

Both missions have a deep well of historical elements from which to draw.

John Cuneo, Sr., whose fortune was made in printing and real estate, bought the property in 1937 after Insull's vast holdings went into receivership. In 1991, John Cuneo, Jr., opened the estate and gardens to the public as a way to share his father's collections.
Among them are a hand-carved table of walnut and olive wood, a gift from publishing giant William Randolph Hearst, and hundreds of other pieces of fine art, paintings, sculpture and drawings.

Though time-consuming and expensive restoration work on some of the pieces is planned, little is expected to change inside, although public and student access is expected to increase.

“I feel it will be interpreted during the period the Cuneo family lived there,” Ambrose said. “You absolutely have to keep the character and flavor of the house.”

That also will include a new exhibition regarding the Hawthorn Mellody Farm, a popular destination in 1950s and 1960s.

Bigger picture stories of entrepreneurship, immigration, architecture, fashion and history are being considered for future fodder.

“With only one year under our belt, there's an awful lot to be done,” Ambrose said.