

Artistic Revival

by Swanee Hunt, Scripps Howard News Service, January 5, 2005

You've heard this story before: artists move into a neighborhood of old derelict warehouses where they can find large, affordable spaces. Not only can they nest and stretch out their canvases, but they can also throw their clay. They sometimes even occupy those spaces illegally, because these areas are zoned for light industrial use and not for living. But the artists clean up the neighborhood; they make it safer, more attractive, "hip." Ironically, as property values rise, artists may find themselves priced out of their own neighborhood. It's the story of SoHo, now the fashionable boutique district of Manhattan. It's also the story in San Francisco, Chicago, Milwaukee, Baltimore—communities across the country.

In 2002, it happened in Boston. The old warehouses just off Boston's seaport district suddenly caught the attention of developers. That real estate boom left hundreds of working artists homeless and spelled doom for the Revolving Museum, a 20-year-old community arts organization.

Luckily, the story of the Revolving Museum took a happy turn. Jerry Beck, founder and artistic director, acted quickly. Within three months, he purchased an historic building in Lowell, a former mill town 30 miles outside Boston that was once the nation's largest textile center. Lowell was a smart choice. The city is integrating arts into the fabric of its planning, from housing development to school curriculum. Part of the strategy includes the Lowell Artist District, created in 1998. "Since I've been here," Beck says, "I've already seen many artists moving into new spaces in Lowell. They've been priced out of Boston."

The twist here is that Lowell is revitalizing its community and growing its population of artists at the same time. According to Richard Florida, author of *The Rise of the Creative Class*, this makes sense. Florida believes that the creative class—the segment of society that is designing new products and coming up with new ideas—is the driving force behind our new economy, and that "creativity has come to be the most highly prized commodity." Artists, therefore, are just as important to a community's health as scientists and hi-tech professionals, who are more traditionally wooed by city planners.

"There's just so much underground energy in the artist community that I don't think was ever tapped," City Manager John Cox says. "Historically you wouldn't think of Lowell as an artists community. That's changed. There are phenomenally talented people, and we want to expose them all."

The creative class is attracted to a good people climate—places rich in amenities, like parkland and cultural facilities, where people of different backgrounds come together. Incentives like tax cuts to lure businesses to a city don't matter as much, Florida asserts.

Austin, Texas has caught on to Florida's notion of fostering a creative class. Not only has the city grown as a high-technology center, but it also has a flourishing arts district, with a concentration of galleries and artist lofts in a former warehouse district of downtown. Every year, Austin hosts South by Southwest, one of the nation's largest independent music festivals. In addition, Austin is continually cited as one of America's most livable cities. Coincidence? Not likely.

In an upward spiral, artists in turn play a central role in creating the right people climate. A study by the New England Foundation for the Arts found that business leaders recognize that arts organizations and creative workers are important to sustaining a high-quality workforce. That's why more and more cities are integrating arts into their planning. John D. Ong, Chairman Emeritus of the B.F. Goodrich Company, explains: "People who create in our companies—whether they are scientists, marketing experts or business strategists—benefit from exposure to the arts. People cannot create when they work and live in a culturally sterile environment."

Florida asserts that investments in arts and culture can have a greater impact than dollars put into sports stadiums, conventions centers, and other tourism-building projects. Clearly the city planners in Austin and Lowell agree. But the economic development toolbox of many governors and mayors doesn't include a paintbrush or chisel or potter's wheel. State and city arts agencies continue to face an uphill battle.

For Austin workers listening to live jazz during their lunch break, for Lowell children walking by a whimsical 15-foot head overlooking a "Garden of Big Ideas," life has a little more zip. As a new year dawns, adding more eyebrow-raising, foot-tapping, smile-inducing moments to our lives is sound public policy and healthy personal resolve.