

Cover Story — The Business Of Art

By Patty Caya



Is the Gate City ignoring the Creative Class?

Art is one of those things, like “peace” or “education,” that most people profess to support, yet they rarely do anything to back up their words.

These folks would say art is a choice, not a necessity. However, the facts seem to suggest they are wrong.

According to a 2002 study by Americans for the Arts, America’s nonprofit arts industry generates \$134 billion in economic activity every year. That breaks down to \$53.2 billion in spending by arts organizations and \$80.8 billion in event-related spending by arts audiences.

And more important than actual dollars spent is the prevailing idea that art and culture contribute significantly to economic development. The economics of art is not an equation that begins and ends with people purchasing art or buying tickets to performances. Visitors may be attracted to a cultural scene, but once they arrive, they eat and shop and, as proved in Lowell, Mass., buy real estate.

Stephanie Jones McCarthy, executive director of the Cultural Organization of Lowell (C.O.O.L.), said this is proof that art is good for the economy.

“After an open-studios weekend I get so many inquiries about ‘how do I buy a loft in Lowell?’” she said.

C.O.O.L.’s motto, “Culture is cool,” can be felt throughout the downtown area. But beyond being cool, Lowell can boast that culture is lucrative.

“[Visitors] come here because they are curious about the art,” Jones McCarthy said, “Then they fall in love and want to explore Lowell more.”

With 1,000 new housing units in Lowell’s downtown center, the correlation between the city’s effort to create an artist-friendly community and its urban renewal is not just anecdotal.

For former industrial cities such as Nashua and Lowell, it’s imperative to attract the educated, affluent, entrepreneurial people that are driving the so-called new economy. Such people are commonly referred to as “the Creative Class,” a term coined by Carnegie-Mellon urban studies theorist Richard Florida in his 2002 book, *The Rise of the Creative Class*. The Creative Class demands a quality of life defined by the place they live, rather than where they work.

Members of the Creative Class have more flexibility about where they live because many of them have knowledge-based jobs that allow them to work flexibly — often from home or other locations. They gravitate toward places that have a strong sense of “place,” usually driven by the arts scene.

A tale of two cities

Lowell and Nashua are both medium-sized cities with a strong industrial past and a challenge for the future.

“Manufacturing is declining: in this state, this region, this country,” said Jay Minkarah, economic development director for the city of Nashua. “Nashua is not the type of place where you are going to relocate your distribution center — maybe, but not likely.

“This is not a community where we have the land to locate some new plant,” Minkarah added. “There is a class of people we are trying to attract. They have a high level of education, and high penchant toward entrepreneurship to continue to innovate and develop industries.”

Richard Florida writes that the Creative Class' living decisions are determined by what he refers to as "the quality of a place." This includes "the vibrancy of street life, café culture, arts, music and people engaging in outdoor activities..."

Downtown Lowell is poised to meet these criteria, catalyzed by the influx of the artist community. In 1998, Lowell established an Arts District, offering zoning variances to accommodate living/working spaces in order to cultivate an artist-friendly culture. The city added to its roster of world-class museums by courting and winning the Revolving Museum when it was displaced from its Boston home.

"The artists have an impact on the community," said Brian Connors, economic development director for the City of Lowell. "Any good city rebirth begins with artists."

That rebirth includes new businesses, whose presence is attributed to the city's art scene.

"Art is the reason I got excited by Lowell," said Heidi Feinstein, owner of Life Alive, an organic juice bar and café.

Feinstein was attracted by the presence of the artist community and she employed artists to build and design her store, which she calls an "urban oasis."

A bright, inviting mural by Castro Yves Arboite welcomes customers walking into the café. A local multi-media artist — using pieces salvaged from demolished buildings — created the tables and countertops. Their unique texture and striking design has been admired so much by café patrons that the artist has received commissions from people who have visited the café.

Lowell has recognized the power of this synthesis between art and the economy and is actively trying to cultivate more.

Nashua officials also talk about wanting to attract the Creative Class economy, but their attitude toward art seems lukewarm. When asked about upcoming arts initiatives or collaborations between the city and the art community, Sarah DiSano, director of Nashua's Great American Downtown said, "I've been talking to people about small partnerships, opportunities for bringing art into events; starting small."

DiSano has been on the job for two months, so a little vagueness might be expected. However, Minkarah had a similar non-committal response when asked to describe what place the arts have in the economic future of the city.

"Formally, there is no particular initiative currently to encourage the arts," he said. "We see [art] as a critical component in the city's quality of life."

When pressed to show how the city supports this "critical component," Minkarah indicated the rotating art exhibit in the library's lower level and the SummerFest concerts in Greeley Park as evidence that the city is committed to arts and culture. The library, he points out for emphasis, is city-funded.

A brochure put out by the city's Economic Development office boasts a "cultural renaissance" in Nashua. According to the flyer, that "renaissance" includes: The Symphony, The Northern Ballet Theater, which recently canceled its professional season, and two community theater groups — the Actorsingers and the Nashua Theater Guild.

Also mentioned by Minkarah is an ongoing "discussion" among city leaders about the need for a performing-arts facility. That discussion, with a timeline that can be measured in decades rather than years, has recently come to an end, according to Nashua Mayor Bernie Streeter.

"My original plan was to assist in the development of a performing-arts center, but with the advent of the Grace Fellowship initiative, a city-subsidized performing-arts center is not necessary," Streeter said.

Amazing Grace

The Grace Fellowship's initiative is a 2,100-seat worship space being planned by a fundamentalist Christian church on a riverfront property along Main Street. According to the plans for the new space, the facility would serve as a place of worship first and foremost, but could also be used by area arts groups — when available.

Meanwhile, the city's Downtown Master Plan recommends renovating the city-owned theater at 14 Court St. to accommodate the city's smaller performing arts groups.

"14 Court Street should be redeveloped as the proposed performing arts center," the report states, "there are no high-quality facilities for performing arts in Nashua."

Mayor Streeter was quick to clarify that project's future: "There are no present plans to do any more work on that space. We have spent money on electrical, heat and other utilities. It is in fairly good shape now."

Suzanne Delle is the artistic director of Yellow Taxi Productions, a professional theater company that uses the Court Street theater for productions. She allows that the city has fixed up the building but says it isn't enough.

"They did update the electrical system," she said, "but that's the tip of the iceberg. They fixed it so the Fire Marshal doesn't close you down, but they didn't make it a beautiful, convenient, modern performance space." The facility has outdated lighting, sound and mechanical stage systems.

"Every time we went there, we had mechanical problems," Delle said.

The condition of the facility contrasts sharply to venues Yellow Taxi uses in neighboring communities. These facilities cost about the same to rent, but have vastly better facilities and professional personnel to administer them, Delle said.

The sign outside the Court Street theater still boasts the name of its most prominent (former) tenant, The American Stage Festival. ASF ceased operations there in 2002 yet the sign still bears its name. The sign, which is usually out of date, advertising some long-gone production, is indicative of how the space is managed by the city.

"You have to get a ladder and change the sign yourself [when you rent the space]," Delle said. "Everything in that building is do-it-yourself."

"Bernie [Mayor Streeter] is a great supporter of the arts," Delle said, "but the people who are running the building are city administrators, not arts administrators. There is a disconnect between what they know how to do and what we need."

Despite the Court Street theater's popularity — it is booked many months in advance — there is no on-site manager to oversee the facility or assist the groups.

"They basically just give you the keys," Delle said.

Delle, who would prefer to base her company in Nashua, has found venues in Derry better equipped and managed, for the same price. So her company performs there more often, and hopes the Nashua audience will follow.

Nashua's professional dance company, Northern Ballet Theatre, recently cancelled its professional season after a disastrous turnout for their annual Nutcracker.

"We can compare our quality of dancers and choreography [to the Boston Ballet]," said founder and artistic director Doreen Cafarella, "but we don't have the performing arts center."

Without a permanent home, Cafarella said she can't build the kind of big productions people expect.

"We tour to so many theaters, our sets have to be done accordingly," she said. "We have to cut back because the theaters are inadequate."

Though she has received offers from other cities, Cafarella, like Delle, wants to keep her company in Nashua.

"Nashua is our home and this is where our company started," she said. "I believe that some day it will turn around. We'll keep forging ahead. We like Nashua."

Parking lots and box stores

While Nashua struggles to understand how to exploit the economic potential of art, it seems to be doing just fine with the development of chain retail and restaurants.

Mayor Streeter, in his 2004 State of the City address, noted Nashua had successfully attracted new retail businesses, specifically in the Amherst Street area, and was looking forward to the new Wal-Mart Superstore.

While the influx of large national chains is a sign of economic vitality, most folks say it does not contribute to a city's sense of place.

"Most of what you see in suburban America is franchise culture," Minkarah said. "The franchises play a role in our economy, but when it's all you have, there is nothing about that that gives you any sense of place. That's why it's important to provide these alternatives [the arts]."

"The arts enhance quality of life," Minkarah added, "and make this a destination for people who want something a little more than suburban culture. [The arts] are things that people are actually creating — not something rolling off an assembly line in China. That is very important."

Despite the perception that art is important, Nashua seems willing to prove it doesn't need the arts to have economic growth.

Alan S. Manoian, former Nashua downtown development specialist and assistant director of economic development, is now working with the consulting firm New Urban Downtown Strategies. In nine years working on economic development initiatives in downtown Nashua, he has studied the city and its growth history.

He said the city's population exploded in the 1970s and 1980s.

"The whole city was built out — all the land off the highways," he said. "It was like a boom town in the Old West. It was being demonstrated that we didn't need the arts to have economic growth."

"Was it the right kind of growth?" he said, musing. "Shopping malls and plazas and sprawling housing development ... Looking back, maybe it could have happened in a different way. It changed the social cohesion of the city."

Galleries, micro art-economics

Nashua is home to four art galleries, including the soon-to-open Gallery One, a cooperative gallery being built by the Nashua Area Artists Association with a real estate incentive from Peter Bonnette of PM MacKay.

Not long ago there were five galleries. Five looks pretty good, at least on the surface, but, with the exception of the now defunct Eclectic Gallery, galleries that operate here all do so with mixed efforts and apparently mixed missions.

The Chimera Gallery, owned by Marcus and Kym Scott, has been closed since the end of 2004 for soul searching, or more aptly put, some market searching.

"My market is no longer Nashua," said gallery owner Marcus Scott.

After testing out the buyers here for two years and extensive collaboration with his advisory board, Scott has decided to focus Chimera's efforts entirely on collectors, not area residents.

The Eclectic Gallery, which graced a storefront on Main Street, recently closed. It was one of the more active galleries, with an aggressive four-week exhibit schedule and elegant artists' receptions. The gallery added a stylish presence to the Main Street landscape but that didn't help it survive.

"Maybe there just isn't education to appreciate the arts," said Sarah Roche, president of the Nashua Area Artists' Association. "Even people who have a lot of money — they buy their art at Home Goods."

There are art supporters in the area. They are few in number, but great in enthusiasm.

Garry Henkel, president of the Nashua Symphony, is an uber art patron. Nearly three dozen pieces of original art, a selection of prints and photographs and a few sculptures decorate his Hollis home. Henkel sees his collection's value in terms of the pleasure it brings him.

"To put it simply," he said, "I like it. Sometimes I go out of my way to walk through my living room to look at the art."

Beyond personal appreciation, Henkel also sees the bigger impact art can have on the life of a city.

"With a more active art scene, it will attract higher-paying companies, which in turn will bring a greater number of professionals and will impact the economy in a favorable light."

"There's a lot more of both performing and visual art [here] than people are aware of," Henkel said. "There are extremely talented artists in this area — Nashua, Lowell and surrounding communities. There are some truly outstanding artist galleries and values. You don't have to pay a lot for quality."

The gallery owners in Nashua know this to be true. They have recently joined forces to form a gallery owners' association. The group wants a voice at City Hall, a voice the association's members don't believe they have as individual businesses or as artists. They will also pursue marketing and advertising initiatives to promote Nashua as an art destination, something the city has not done, but Lowell is actively pursuing.

Talk to area artists, gallery owners or performing arts groups and the general complaint is that the city doesn't support the arts and that people here don't really care about art. Combine that with the city's lack of a movie theater, independent or otherwise, or even an evening coffee house, and there feels like a void where there should be a vibe.

Mayor Streeter, in his recent 2004 State of the City address said, "Think back a few years and ask yourself where would we be economically if we were not a retail Mecca."

An appropriate question that might be posed for Nashua's future is: think ahead a few years and ask yourself, where will we be economically if we fail to support an arts and cultural community in the city."