

ARTS/ CULTURE NEWS

Lowell visibility: Young artists craft new image for city

By Mary Jo Palumbo
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The city is bustling: Raw new arts and music spaces are opening in old brick warehouses. Artists are moving in. Indie rockers are playing. Young people are hanging out.

But, we're not talking about Boston, Cambridge or Somerville. We're talking about Lowell. That's right, Lowell.

After years of stagnation, Lowell has become bright and active and very hip.

"I remember Lowell in the '70s when the downtown was dark, and the city was basically closed," said city manager John Cox, a Lowell native. "There was nothing here."

But, city officials in this northern industrial mill city say the opening of two new contemporary art spaces - and their efforts to lure artists from Boston - have helped jump-start a burgeoning arts scene that has been growing by leaps and bounds.

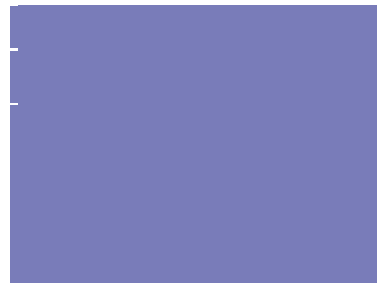
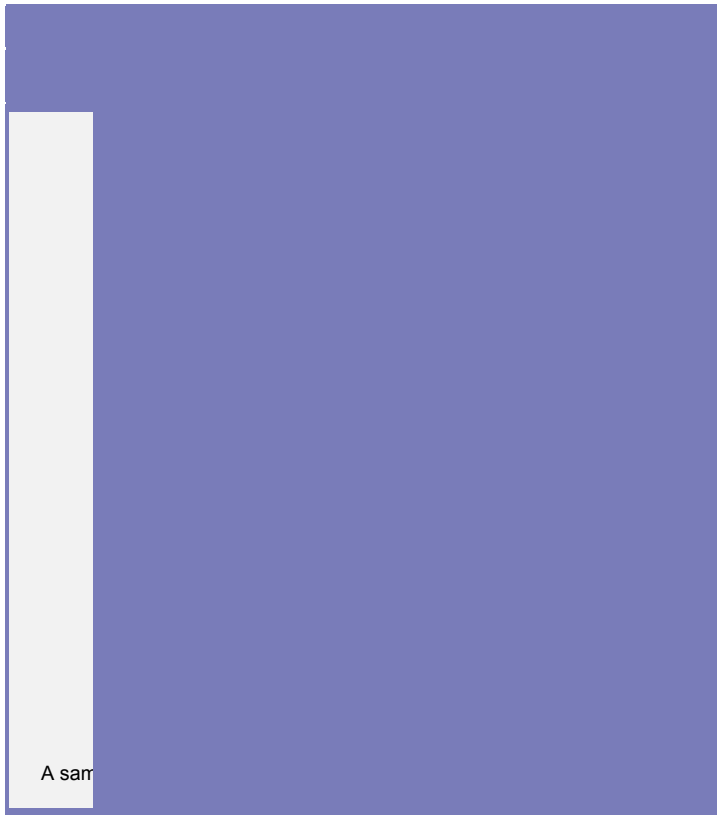
"What's happening now is just incredible," Cox said. "We have museums and artists and people moving downtown. It's very gratifying for someone who has seen the not-so-good times."

A year after the Revolving Museum abandoned its Boston roots for Lowell, the maverick arts space opens its biggest show yet this week with dozens of works scattered throughout the city. Another large-scale arts space, Evos Arts, which opened last year in two old factory buildings, also has been creating a buzz.

Evos Arts, run by two young artists, is livening up the cultural scene with music, exhibits and independent film screenings.

"These places have been bringing a much younger crowd into the city," said Cox. "We're seeing younger people, and people with an interest in the arts. There really wasn't any of that before."

"LocalMotive: Public Art off the Beaten Path," an ambitious contemporary art show featuring works by more than 300 artists, kicks off with an opening bash Thursday night at the Revolving Museum and runs through December. A 10-foot patchwork textile wheel with a quilted surface highlighting the city's industrial past is just one of the show's dozen public artworks lining the city canals.



"Lowell is going to be blown away by this," Jerry Beck, the founding director, said from the Revolving Museum's century-old red brick building that once housed the Lowell Gas and Light Co.

A few blocks down Middle Street, Evos Arts, a four-story, 30,000-square-foot complex, is developing its fall season with independent video projects, art classes, exhibits and plans to create recording and film production capabilities. Folk and rock music are featured nightly in a club downstairs. A collective studio space for artists is expected to open Oct. 1 and a 160-seat theater under construction is expected to be ready by Nov. 1.

"This is becoming a gathering place for (both) indie rockers and fine arts aficionados," said Keith Wasserman, 28, program director at Evos Arts. "We have different worlds coming together and mingling here. It's a big vision."

Composer Evren Celimli, 32, whose father Suley owns the space, plans to develop a recording studio in the huge former cigar factory.

"We're on the brink of something," said Stephanie Jones McCarthy, executive director of Cultural Organizations of Lowell (COOL).

The two-year-old COOL is responsible for dozens of "Culture is Cool" banners that line downtown Merrimack Street. And COOL is working with city officials to develop more cultural spaces in the city's century-old industrial buildings.

Officials are exploring the possibility of turning the city-owned Smith Baker Center, a 19th century former church, into a theater and concert hall. And officials plan to convert 10,000 square feet of space into artist studios in the Cambodian Mutual Assistance Association building, an old brick mill complex.

One of the biggest problems Lowell has had, according to both artists and city officials, is getting people to make the trek from Boston to check it out.

"I keep telling them to get up here," Beck said. "This is a great working mill town with a lot of cultural activities."

Arts along the Merrimack

Here's what's hot this fall in Lowell:

"LocalMotive: Public Art off the Beaten Path," The Revolving Museum, 22 Shattuck St., through December. Opening benefit party from 6-11 p.m. Thursday. Call 978-937-2787.

"Let it Shine: Improvisation in African-American Star Quilts," The New England Quilt Museum, 18 Shattuck St., through Nov. 9. Call 978-452-4207.

"Runway Madness," the fashion photography of Lucian Perkins, through Jan. 4 at the American Textile History Museum, 491 Dutton St. Call 978-441-0400 or go to www.athm.org.

Lowell Open Studios. More than 50 artists show their work from noon-5 p.m. Oct 25-26 at sites throughout the city. Call 978-970-7244.

"Three Songs" by William Mesnik at the Merrimack Repertory Theatre through Oct. 12. Call 978-454-3926.