

Bringing Artists Under One Roof

Written by Jeff Ignatius
Tuesday, 19 July 2005 18:00

At the beginning of the 20th Century, the eastern part of Davenport's downtown was called Bucktown and known for its vibrant nightlife – including more than three dozen brothels. It will soon be home to a different – and perfectly legal – sort of commerce: the work of roughly two dozen artists. This week, MidCoast Fine Arts' Bucktown Center for the Arts opens its two lower floors to the public. And more importantly, Bucktown will *keep* the doors open.

The mixed-use building is a bold initiative, both for purveyors and consumers of the arts. Never before in the Quad Cities have so many artists – 22 so far in 14 separate studios, plus a rotating gallery run by MidCoast – been brought together in one place to practice their craft and sell their work in a permanent venue. And never before has the work of so many creative types been available in a single place for the general public to peruse and buy.

The opening event on Friday, July 22, will run from 6 to 10 p.m. Bucktown is located at 225 East Second Street on the eastern edge of Davenport's downtown.

The project is remarkable for reasons beyond the number of artists gathered under one roof. This is the first major recent cultural attraction in Davenport's downtown that hasn't been spearheaded by city government, and in a part of the central city that has largely been ignored by Davenport leaders, who have focused their efforts west of Brady Street.

Bucktown now represents a bookend for what could soon be seen as Davenport's cultural corridor, also featuring the Figge Art Museum on the west and the River Music Experience in the middle. Furthermore, Bucktown might be the most diverse mixed-use project in the Quad Cities, with its emphasis on the *business* side of art along with its creative elements. Although artists will be working in their studios, many will also be selling their work, and the project presently has three jewelers. That retail component of Bucktown – which also hopes to add a restaurant in the near future – should drive people to the building.

And because the top two floors of Bucktown – for office and residential space – are meant to be purchased rather than leased, the project has a relatively short development period. If available spaces are sold or leased by the end of the year, the lease payments from tenants should be enough to cover the project's debt payments. "It will be self-sustaining," said Dean Schroeder, MidCoast's executive director.

MidCoast has long had an interest in urban renewal through its art-window programs, in which the organization used the storefronts of vacant buildings to display artwork. Bucktown extends that philosophy to real estate, which is a new endeavor for the not-for-profit arts organization. "Both the challenge and the opportunity is the ownership of real estate," Schroeder said. "We knew that real estate was a secure investment."

Long-Term Viability

The four-story Bucktown project features two floors of artist spaces, one floor of office and condo space, and one floor dedicated to condos. (The *River Cities' Reader's* publisher and editor have purchased one of the condo units.) The first floor also features a space for a deli/coffee shop, although no tenant has yet been secured.

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In addition to the artist spaces, the renovated building features seven display cases on its first and second floors, creating another space for MidCoast rotating exhibits similar to the window displays at the RiverCenter. The first floor will also feature a mural created by artist Terry Rathje and historian Karen Anderson.

So far, all but one of the 16 artist spaces has been leased. (See sidebars for more information about the artists.) Four of the six office spaces are still available – MidCoast and the Midwest Writing Center have purchased office units – and one of the three condos has yet to be sold. Artists lease their studio spaces, while the office and condo spaces are for sale.

That lease and purchase split has allowed MidCoast to craft a project that should quickly be self-sustaining. The organization has a capital campaign of \$285,000 for the \$2.4-million project – with roughly \$225,000 left to raise, according to Schroeder. The organization purchased the building – which had most recently housed Petersen Hagge Furniture – for \$210,000.

MidCoast's executive director said that once the building is full and the capital campaign is complete, leases from the first two floors will pay for the project's mortgage. He said he's hopeful that can be accomplished by late this year.

One of the attractions of Bucktown for artists is that the lease rates are reasonable. "It's all below market value," Schroeder said. Leases start at \$150 a month, with the largest space (roughly 2,000 square feet) going for \$500 a month.

Schroeder said that Bucktown is primarily catering to artists that have never before had a permanent public space in which to display and sell their work. "They're right on the edge," Schroeder said of the artists. "They're really looking to have a home."

Community support allowed MidCoast to offer relatively inexpensive prices for the space, both for artists and office/residential tenants.

Bucktown has received significant assistance from community organizations and the City of Davenport. The Riverboat Development Authority has contributed more than \$160,000 in grants, the City of Davenport has put up \$200,000 in forgivable and no-interest loans, the Scott County Regional Authority has given \$30,000, DavenportOne has made \$15,500 in forgivable loans, and the Community Foundation made a \$4,000 grant.

MidCoast also received a \$20,000 grant from the Iowa Department of Cultural Affairs, and the money is going to artists who maintain public hours for their studios. Artists who maintain the hours of 11 a.m. to 5:30 p.m. Wednesday through Saturday have received a share of the grant as a stipend; those with space on the first floor are required to maintain the hours, and two artist proprietors on the second floor have opted into the program.

Schroeder said that stipend will help make Bucktown even more affordable. "We look at that as long-term stability for the facility," he said.

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For more information on the Bucktown Center for the Arts, visit <http://www.bucktownarts.com>
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