



Rebirth of Artists Row: Downtown hub receives a makeover

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SALEM -

Colored street banners, cheerful flowerpots and white lights glimmering in the trees proclaim to the city a renaissance on Artists Row. On Monday artists and community members gathered to watch Mayor Kim Driscoll christen the block of galleries and shops located between New Derby and Front streets, which has been recently refurbished by the city's Beautification Committee.

After five years in Salem's bustling downtown, artists say the area was badly in need of a "facelift." There were flower beds that needed attention, bulletin boards that needed fixing and streetlights that had long burned out, leaving long shadows between the shops. The public bathrooms had previously been without signage, a fact the artists and shopkeepers had come to grudgingly accept.

"It was a running joke this summer," admits Sara Ashodian, an artist at the Experimental Art Gallery and Studio. "The most asked question down here was "where's the bathroom?"

Another, more serious problem, was the walkway between the shops, which was broken in some places and in need of repair. Earlier in the season, according to one of the artists, a woman walking past the shops took a spill in front of Baobab, an African studio run by artist and musician Mamadou Diop.

Though Diop is hesitant to discuss the fall, preferring to focus on the positive changes in Artists Row, he admits the sidewalk was in rough shape.

"I helped [the woman] up when she fell," he says. "She hurt her hand. She came back two weeks ago to thank me."

Now the walkway in Artists Row has been patched by the city. New signage marks the public restroom and orange and yellow chrysanthemums brighten up brick lined flowerbeds between the shops. At night, new bulbs in the streetlights chase away the shadows.

The mayor formed the city's Beautification Committee, made up of 11 volunteers, 11 months ago with to revitalize neglected areas of the city. In June Sharon Shea, an artist exhibiting at Baobab, approached the committee and asked if they could focus their attention on Artists Row. The area was assessed, and RCG - a real estate firm that owns a number of downtown properties - agreed to sponsor the project.

Soon after a group of 12 volunteers had descended on the area, armed with rakes, shovels and wheelbarrows. After three weeks of planting, watering, mulching and decorating the place was transformed.

"It happened so quickly, it was amazing," says Shea. "All these people coming together to support the project. In a cartoon it would work like that, but not in reality."

Shirley Walker, a Beautification Committee member who led the Artists Row project, says the revitalization should bring more foot traffic to the area in time for Haunted Happenings. The exhibits and events planned for the month are dubbed Artoberfest, a name that's emblazoned on a large Artists Row banner hanging among the studio shops.

"The artists do such great work," she says. "Business hasn't boomed because the space hasn't looked great. The hopes are this will create tourists coming through Artists Row."

Already, since the changes were made, many artists have noticed a difference.

"It changed within a couple days," says Shea, who led the gardening work. "Suddenly people come up the street instead of taking a turn. This little alleyway has become a boulevard."