



May 17, 2007

Navigation

[Home Page](#)

News & Features

[News](#)

Columns & Opinions

[Publisher's Note](#)

[Boomers](#)

[Pinings](#)

[Longshots](#)

[Techie](#)

Pop Culture

[Film](#)

[TV](#)

[Books](#)

[Video Games](#)

[CD Reviews](#)

Living

[Food](#)

[Wine](#)

[Beer](#)

[Grazing Guide](#)

Music

[Articles](#)

[Music Roundup](#)

[Live Music/DJs](#)

[MP3 & Podcasts](#)

[Bandmates](#)

Arts

[Theater](#)

[Art](#)

Find A Hippo

[Manchester](#)

[Nashua](#)

Classifieds

[View Classified Ads](#)

[Place a Classified Ad](#)

Advertising

[Advertising](#)

Public works

5 ways art can bring style to southern New Hampshire cities

By Heidi Masek • hmasek@hippopress.com

"You need a lot of trust, you need people to have a common vision, you need people to be communicating something that inspires or motivates people towards action." Jaime Grady, Monastery Artists Collective member

At the May 12 grand opening celebration of ARTventures, a new public art series hosted by the Revolving Museum in Lowell, Mass., performance artists spun torches and breathed fire while Okaido Japanese drummers performed before a dragon made of CDs.

Behind it all, an industrial smokestack — a real part of Lowell's mill-town legacy — served as a giant screen for video projections. There were lion dancers and a powwow, and decorated lampshades were strung like Christmas lights across a courtyard. Robert Harmon's "Particle/Wave" light installations hung in pedestrian passages through the mills. Meanwhile the Brush Gallery was open with plenty of cool stuff to look at and buy. And the event was entirely free.

Jerry Beck, Revolving Museum's artistic director, wants ARTventures to become a nationwide blueprint to make "beautiful but neglected" cities come alive.

"Mill towns are trying to rebrand their downtowns," Beck said, and ARTventures uses local coalition-building to do that. About a thousand students, artists and others are involved, and they're so ambitious that they've already had to tone down their original proposals.

Up here in New Hampshire, many of our towns and cities also have old mill complexes, creative residents and momentum in urban revitalization. So how can we make use of art here?

1. Parks

"One of the things I really liked about [ARTventures] is it really sort of focused on spaces that are not being used to their potential," said Aaron Slater, a Monastery Artists Collective member. "Trying to take garbage and turn it into art is an idea that's close to my heart."



Rules, regulations and pleasing everyone

Mertinooke got involved in an underground scene a few years ago. He's moving away from traditional painting toward larger works that are "more public."

"But what I really enjoy doing are things that are very impermanent ... just [to] kind of break people free of their normal routine," Mertinooke said.

"Art should always be a little bit controversial and get people thinking," rather than be purely decorative, Grady said. That can be tough to balance when working with other organizations on a public project.

Slater said he often hears proposals thrown about in Monastery Wednesday meetings for public projects, and he thinks there are many artists who take note of the space around them for possible artistic uses.

Rather than bother with red tape and sponsorship, some artists will choose to spend their own money and put up something that may only last a short time. A blank billboard can foster an "intrinsic desire to go paint something on it" even if an artist knows it will be covered over, Slater said.

After "What do you see?" mural frustrations, it may be a while before Monastery jumps into another such project, Slater said.

"I have a lot of experience working with city government. I know that especially the way a young artist approaches things, you're going to

[Rates](#)[Contact Us](#)[Hippo Staff](#)[How to Reach The Hippo](#)[Past Issues](#)[Browse by Cover](#)

ARTventures organizers originally proposed to “transform Lucy Larcom Park into an experimental and interactive playground filled with art installations, theatrical elements, feats of science and fertile gardens.” One of their plans was to have high school and college students in their Artbotics program build floating fountains with sound, video and kinetic features. Another was to connect LED signs to float on the canal and scroll the words of Lucy Larcom, Jack Kerouac and other regional poets. Very cool ideas, but the organizers learned that the canal is privately owned by a company in Italy, and they couldn’t get permission to use it. The projects would have been expensive, too.

“Nashua is a very pragmatic city. It has a rich industrial heritage. That’s the way it thinks of itself, so public art isn’t something that is normally thought of in Nashua as a high priority,” explained Nashua’s acting economic director, Katherine Hersh. On Main Street there’s a disgusting lot filled with piles of asphalt, litter, brush and graffiti across from the Shaw’s plaza.

“Our plan is to make it into a park that celebrates our history,” Hersh said. Rotary Common will be Nashua’s first park dedicated to local industrial heritage. The Vale Mill was located there from 1868 through 1901, and later the International Paper Box Machine Company from 1903 through 1973. The state bought the land as mitigation for highway expansion in 1998 and is giving it to the city. Because of state and federal money involved, archaeological assessments had to be done, Hersh said, so an extensive history is available about the site, and some foundations are visible. Hersh said there’s interest in incorporating machines from the International Paper Box Machining Company into the site.

According to Intown Manchester director Stephanie Lewry, public spaces need to be deliberately organized.

“If you have parks, and you have public places, they need to be programmed,” Lewry said. It doesn’t matter if it’s a beautiful space or natural environment; if it’s not programmed, people find other places to go, she said. The Sidewalk Art Festival in Manchester, run by the New Hampshire Institute of Art, makes use of a park.

2. Murals

Perhaps one of the best-known forms of urban public art is the mural. The reason you see so many in some cities is that they can deter graffiti. Kids don’t “tag” over others’ work, according to artists who have worked with the Boston Youth Fund Mural Crew. Starting in 1991, the City of Boston hired teens to work with artists to design and paint murals around the city.

Manchester muralist Rick Freed recently embarked on a series he will create with groups of at-risk kids. It could run indefinitely, but Freed says he will only start a project when he’s secured funding for it. Children at the Kids’ Café

hit your head because you want to do things in a creative way and it’s not acceptable,” Freed said.

“They thought aspects of the design were too — something, I’m not sure what — for Manchester. There’s a large amount of politics that goes into public art that I wasn’t really expecting that maybe caught me off guard but maybe shouldn’t have,” Grady said about the stalled United Way mural.

Freed recalled the 1996 request for public sculptures to mark the city’s sesquicentennial. It was decided that a sculpture of a pregnant naked woman couldn’t be shown in a public space.

If a corporation has commissioned a public work, the artist only has to please that company. However, if the work is funded by tax dollars, everyone feels they have a say in it, Freed said.

“I think that pattern probably is repeated in public art over and over,” Grady said.

Ceaser said he liked the idea of hanging a giant mill girl’s dress between mills, an ARTventures proposal that unfortunately turned out to be too expensive. But Ceaser thought it would have been cool in Nashua or Manchester. As for an ARTventures-style series, he thinks something like that could be years away in Nashua. It would take lots of sponsorship and he’s still trying to measure what kind of audience Nashua has for contemporary art.

Right now, City Arts Nashua, for which Ceaser works as part-time executive director, is primarily concerned with growing the ArtWalk and a Web site, which serves as a cultural calendar and arts portal. The April 21 ArtWalk, the first since City Arts Nashua took over the duty from Great American Downtown, offered 22 venues, and some studio owners said they counted about 230 new faces coming in. The event added two buses with nine stops, which was helpful for older visitors to get between the millyards and Main Street, Ceaser said. Ceaser is still trying to figure out how to involve young artists in the local scene.

As for ARTventures, Beck has said he’s hoping that the other organizations in town will want to take the reins if the series is to continue next summer or perhaps biannually. Although many of the projects are temporary, if the series continues, some of the works will be recycled for the next season, he said.

“The whole idea is to create a new legacy, a new mission [and] a new kind of acceptance of the city building an arts district,” Beck said.

at the Salvation Army have finished the final design with Freed for the first mural, which might be installed on a garage across from the Police Athletic League in Manchester.

Freed also expects to work with a group from the Youth Detention Center to create a mural using NH Charitable Foundation funding.

After 10 years of experience, Freed has developed a process for facilitating children's murals. First, kids make drawings relating to the mural's theme. For Kids' Café, it was their neighborhood. Freed pieces the drawings together, cleaning things up slightly. After getting stakeholders' approval of the design, Freed transfers it to signboard for the children to paint. Then it's bolted to a wall. During the creation process, kids work on manageable pieces indoors, which is safer and easier than having them outdoors on ladders.

"For the most part people won't know what I did — it'll be completely the kids," Freed said.

Sometimes stakeholders ask for changes in the design. The Salvation Army wanted a picture of their building added, so Freed had a student create one to replace a piece from a particularly talented student, which looked too advanced to fit.

Freed uses high-quality acrylic and covers the signboard with UV-protective varnish, which costs \$80 per gallon. The mural is movable and will last forever — whereas, as Freed said, house paint only lasts about 10 years in an outdoor mural and eventually might have to be painted over. That's happened to the painting of mills and mill workers on Hanover Street in Manchester.

These projects don't always work out. An aging mural at Elm and Mechanic streets in Manchester that was meant to be redone as a community project of United Way, Monastery Artist Collective and others is still languishing several months after a call for ideas was put out. A Web site, whatcanyousee.org, was created so that area residents and visitors could submit their suggestions.

"Technically it's not dead, although I'm 90 percent sure it's dead," Jaime Grady of Monastery said.

"The reason is [that] United Way is not in the business of public art," Grady said, and, "They weren't prepared to really go all the way with it."

United Way is well-known, so it had a lot of concerns about subject matter. Artists developed 11 design elements to be included in the mural based on community input. The artists want to seek sponsors and get the building owner's permission to go ahead.

"I'm not interested in making any more revisions; it's a good design as far as I'm concerned,"



StubHub!
Where Fans Buy & Sell Tickets™

Buy Now

Get the Tickets You Want!

- Red Sox
- Patriots
- Bruins
- NASCAR
- Concerts
- Theater

www.StubHub.com

▶ **SEARCH HIPPO**

 HippoPress

Grady said. Grady wrote to United Way asking for a letter of reference so the artists could continue without them, but United Way replied that they are still interested in the project.

Rivier College art professor Cliff Davis has participated in mural projects for the past three years along the Rail Trail in the "tree streets" neighborhood of Nashua. Rivier students and young artists from the neighborhood have worked together on these projects, including a baseball-themed mural behind City Hall. "Livable, Walkable Communities of Nashua" painted a mural at West Hollis and Ash streets called "Living Tree and Growing Garden" during Artwalk Nashua in April, said Sid Ceaser of City Arts Nashua.

Peter Noonan is designing and painting a mural for the Merrimack Restaurant on Merrimack Street in Manchester that will highlight presidential candidates who have visited the eatery during the last 25 years. Grassroots and Granite, a nonpartisan blog, will hold a rally there on June 3 to show support for the first-in-the-nation primary. Noonan's work is featured in publications and collections throughout the country (and frequently on the cover of The Hippo, including this week's issue). Stephen Southerland of Rivier and UNH students Alexandra Ross-Raymond and Sonja Krygeris apprentice.

Walls aren't the only thing to paint. Great American Downtown in Nashua is currently talking about copying a Somerville, Mass., program in which artists are invited to paint signal boxes, Hersh said.

3. Teenage expression

ARTventures leans on teen artists for a good reason, Beck said. Its projects allow young people to participate in the revitalization of their city and see their ideas showcased to the larger community. For instance, involving students in efforts to revitalize Lucy Larcom Park, which is adjacent to Lowell's high school, is more positive than just criticizing them for littering, Beck said. Hopefully the teens will start to feel a sense of ownership and pride.

"Too often we forget how young people and their own talents and skills can really impact in a profound way a public space," he said.

And as part of the process, young people can learn about local history.

Nashua Area Artists Association President Lynne Guimond Findlay said she admires the Revolving Museum's programming for children and youth.

"We can't expect our public schools to provide our children with their only exposure to art," Findlay said.

In Manchester, the Currier Art Center (an arm of the Currier Museum of Art) focuses on instruction

but also offers a free teen program.

“Open Studio actually is the offspring of the Yo! Gallery,” a project between the Currier and Manchester Neighborhood Housing Services that lost funding about five years ago, said Currier Art Center director Bruce McColl. The Currier took on the mission and now funds it along with a corporate sponsor. In the new version, students from Greater Manchester compete for admission and are chosen without regard to socioeconomic circumstances. They must commit to about six hours of studio time weekly during spring and fall terms. Students work with a professional artist-in-residence and exhibit at the end of the term.

Open Studio tries to invite artists who work in a different mode or medium than kids would be exposed to in school. The list includes alternative process photographer Susan Haas, documentary filmmaker Hilary Weisman Graham and muralist Roberto Chao.

Last year Chao and Open Studio coordinated with the Boys & Girls Club of Manchester to create a mural that now hangs on Union Street. Four Club members helped paint it, and two continued in Open Studio.

Monastery Artists member Aaron Slater noted that large paintings have been made with a system of assistants and masters since the days of frescos.

“It’s a good system, and it can incorporate kids from the community who aren’t necessarily painters,” he said.

And painting a mural can boost a kid’s self-image.

“It helps kids that need a positive reinforcement,” Freed said. Just offering a designated graffiti wall can fail as a deterrent.

“This is different because the whole project happens under adult supervision, and it doesn’t go public until the day it gets bolted to wall,” he said about his new series.

Freed still needs help finding grants and sponsors because he doesn’t want to use tax dollars, which have too many strings attached. Freed also teaches, does freelance graphic design work, and runs his company, Muralworkz.

4. Festivals

Planning an outdoor art installation in conjunction with an existing festival is a way to ensure attention. That’s a tool that ARTventures is using, by putting a scroll of poetry “On the Road,” as in unrolled down a street, during the Jack Kerouac festival. And ARTventures is creating floating lanterns for the Southeast Asian Water Festival and showing video on a quilted video screen during the Quilt Festival.

“What I kept hearing is a lot of festivals felt very ethnocentric,” Beck said. Some ARTventures projects are meant to expand or diversify the audience for existing events.

In Manchester, the Monastery Artists Collective has participated in the Jazz and Blues Festival, which happens June 15 and 16 outside the Palace Theatre in Manchester, and had some involvement last fall in Bel Esprit, the new umbrella for the Mill City Festival. Because Monastery is a loose group of artists, its participation in a festival “is about the whim of the group,” Slater said. Other festival opportunities abound in the city; Elm Street is packed for the Taste of Manchester, and so is the riverfront during fireworks, artist Andrew Mertinooke pointed out. Summer sees the Latino Festival and the African-Caribbean Celebration in Veterans Park.

In Nashua, Amethyst Wyldfyre helped start ArtWalk and then wanted to create something more visible than that studio-and-gallery event, to highlight restaurants and “bring some attention to the fact that East Pearl Street exists in Nashua.” She created Firefest last October with support from city government.

“When things fall together the way they did for Firefest you know they are divinely guided,” she said — in her case, she was doing dreamwork when Archangel Michael inspired her to create a street festival last May, she said.

About 2,500 people attended. There were two stages, 17 live performances and about 40 vendor booths with artists, craftspeople, healing artists, and food. Wyldfyre and Darla Pina did the organizing legwork, but city departments from police to economic development made it possible, she said. Weather was “outstanding” and they marketed the event to the hundreds of families in town for a youth World Cup soccer tournament. Most of the artists came from outside Nashua, perhaps because the event was untested and there were several art shows that weekend, she said. Since October is Fire Prevention Month, Wyldfyre partnered with Nashua Fire, which brought a fire truck to the event. They frowned on bringing in a fire juggler.

Since then Wyldfyre has closed her East Pearl Street gallery.

“I’m kind of on the fence about whether I want to do the event again,” she said, but “basically all the work is done besides collecting sponsors.” Firefest benefited from in-kind gifts, but needs an infusion of about \$5,000 to cover things like stage and toilet rental.

“Firefest is kind of a seed,” Wyldfyre said. “I just think that it would be so wonderful to use the river here in Nashua to do something.” She envisions performances on rafts in the river and “floating” bonfires, a nod to WaterFire Providence in Rhode Island. Barnaby Evans

created that site-specific sculpture in 1993, and since then volunteers have helped place almost 100 braziers in the city's rivers, where bonfires are tended by boat. WaterFire evenings feature music, street performers, beer gardens and fried dough stands. Last year 17 WaterFire nights were sponsored, but no schedule has been posted yet for 2007 as the nonprofit is still seeking donations.

Wyldfyre said she has a million ideas but finding the money is the hard part.

"Big projects require big investment, and that's a full-time job," she said. She and Pina run an event production company now called Violent Flame.

5. Sculpture

Permanent sculptures are probably the most recognizable form of public art. Both Nashua and Manchester are planning to use sculptures to attract people to their riverwalks.

Jay Minkarah, recently hired as Manchester's economic development director after serving as Nashua's, said he wasn't yet intimate enough with Manchester to determine how much of the ARTventures temporary outdoor projects could be of use in Manchester.

"I do believe that public art has a role to play in economic development," Minkarah said, noting that the work should have artistic merit in its own right and should be meaningful in its context — socially, culturally or historically relevant. "I also think it needs to contribute to the physical environment and help create a sense of place," or serve to direct movement, beckoning people into an area. Minkarah said. As an example he cited the Mill Girl statue, which he said makes historical reference and strengthens the physical link between the Millyard and downtown.

"I would suggest that public art helps visitors to interpret the community and the residents to feel a connection with it. These are very worthwhile goals, to which, with a good project to fund, the private sector will probably willingly contribute," Lewry of Intown Manchester wrote in an e-mail.

Jac Pac has commissioned a sculpture to represent Manchester's entrepreneurial spirit, "as exemplified by the founders and employees of Jac Pac Foods." It will be placed on the east side of the Merrimack at the Hands Across the Merrimack bridge project. Art 3 Gallery is coordinating for the piece, which is meant to be an abstracted, powerful, formidable monument that is user-friendly, made of metal, stone or bronze, and possibly visible from the highway.

Jonathan and Evelyn Clowes won the bid to create a public sculpture that will go in front of the Verizon Wireless Arena in Manchester.

A section of Nashua's new Riverwalk just opened at the Main Street bridge next to Peddler's

Daughter. The city has put out a request for proposals for a kinetic sculpture to draw people from Main Street toward the Riverwalk. It needs to move by wind or water or have the appearance of movement. The RFP was distributed through the NH Arts Council, and sets a size range between 18 and 21.5 feet and a cost limit of \$10,000. Bids are due May 30. Wyldfyre said incorporating public art installations into the development processes for condo conversions would enhance the area too, especially if those are meant to be upscale.

Hersh and her staff are trying to find public places for some of Nashua's industrial historical artifacts. There's a Rollins steam engine that is 10 feet tall and 19 feet long in pieces stored at the waste water treatment plant. The city has just finished cataloging artifacts like that in the hopes that some might be adopted as installations in redevelopment projects. Among the artifacts are some of Nashua's distinctive triangular sewer caps, invented in 1919 at Nashua's foundry. There are also pieces of the Spring Street School facade, the Nashua City Bell from 1863, a Flather Engine Lathe and the Globe Star Plaza sign.

Some cities require a percent of the bottom-line cost of a redevelopment project to be donated to the city's public art fund, Lewry said. When Manchester begins to think about the Riverwalk and redevelopment, Lewry said, there will likely be opportunities to connect public art with local institutions.

The gentrification mill: Why have other post-industrial towns gotten more out of art?

Remember "Lynn, Lynn, the city of sin?" Or news reports that blamed youth from Lowell when fights happened at the Bahama Beach Club in Nashua? Twenty or so years ago, Lowell, Lawrence and Lynn were known as places you parked your car if you wanted someone to steal it. But after a decade of trying to turn empty downtowns into destinations, gentrification has taken hold. Artists seeking cheap studio and living space led the way and urban professionals followed, said Currier Art Center director Bruce McColl.

Manchester and Nashua have come a long way, too. So how come Lowell's arts and cultural scenes seem to be just a little cooler, a little edgier? Could Manchester and Nashua lean on public art more for its economic development?

Stephanie Lewry from Intown Manchester explained that Manchester was in competition with Lowell for designation as a National Heritage Park to commemorate the American Industrial Revolution in 1978.

"For Manchester, the fact that we weren't selected as a National Heritage Park turned out to be a blessing in disguise," Lewry said. Lowell's mills are now museums and galleries. There are

also ruins. Manchester no longer has empty historic buildings. Its Millyard has become a contributor to the local economy, creating jobs and opportunities for residents, Lewry said.

"Many times people come to me and say 'Why don't we do such and such like Lowell,'" Lewry said. But National Historic Park designation means more funding sources are available to Lowell for cultural initiatives. Lowell's popular festivals, which now draw huge crowds, started small.

"Ten years ago we considered that our mission was to be a catalyst for revitalization," Lewry said. But now Intown Manchester's leaders prefer to say Intown wants to "keep the vibrancy" in downtown. Intown used art at the beginning of its revitalization efforts, to fill empty store windows. The current site of Margarita's restaurant was a burned-out building.

"I've found that Manchester's been incredibly receptive to public art work," said artist Andrew Mertinooke of Manchester. He worked on the "Lollipops and Hand Grenades" project, in which artists placed life-size paper dolls made of newspaper around the city. None were destroyed. "People respected the setups," Mertinooke said.

"There's definitely a need and a want," but there isn't much wider awareness of visual arts, Mertinooke said. Hundreds come to Monastery Artist Collective shows, but that's a core group that will seek them out.

City money has gone to support sports at the Verizon Wireless Arena and the Fisher Cats stadium as economic development anchors, Mertinooke said, but places such as Hot Couch, an art studio for teens, closed. There seems to be little funding for arts initiatives since Mayor Baines left office, he said.

Mertinooke said he's been to shows in Lawrence and Lowell and they are completely different places than they were 10 years ago. He echoed McColl's point that artists "are the traditional method of the gentrification of an urban setting." They draw new residents who are looking for art and culture. Later, the artists are often priced out.

Minkarah responds that Verizon Wireless Arena is also used for cultural events such as concerts and community events such as commencement ceremonies.

"I think what Manchester has to its advantage are two very important institutions in downtown," McColl said. A university and a museum are key anchors for using arts for revitalization, which Manchester has in the expanded NHIA and expanding Currier, he said.

NHIA graduates artists of increasingly high caliber, Monastery Artists' member Slater said. The college opens its commencement exhibit

Sunday, May 20. With these students living and working on their art in Manchester for four years, there needs to be a community to embrace them and keep them here, Slater said. To do that, the city needs affordable combination living and work spaces for artists. Rent for a studio and a separate apartment is tough for a new artist, he said. Other venues to show their work are needed, too. Some of the students "are not going to be making the kind of art you can put up in any of the galleries or stores in Manchester," Slater said. Of course, art needs an audience, too, he said. But when art work is installed in more public places, even if people don't like it at least they are exposed to it and are thinking about what they do and don't like visually.

Pawtucket, R.I., started to reserve space for artists, which is what Jan Langer has done independently with Langer Place, Lewry said. The South Commercial Street building houses a number of studios, galleries and creative workspaces.

Sid Ceaser said right now the Picker Building in Nashua offers artists fair prices for studio space. The owner is dividing a floor to provide painters a cheap space to put up an easel and chair. There aren't many empty mills left in Nashua, he said, but the idea of having one dedicated to artists' lofts where they could live and work, and where rent would be based on income as some such buildings are, would be "fantastic," Ceaser said.

"If you believe the stereotype about the affluence and spending habits of people who are interested in the arts, it's easy to see how local restaurants and stores would want to attract the demographic.... We've already got the interest and infrastructure in place to succeed. What will ultimately make this a reality are a few "champions" to spearhead activities. And of course, the support of the public is vital, by attending area art events and respecting the integrity of art installations," Nashua Area Artists Association president Findlay said.

Findlay responded to ARTventures by writing, "The idea of art as outwardly-focused — going 'out' into the community, rather than just trying to draw people 'into' galleries and museums — is something that can and should be adopted on a local level here in New Hampshire. ...Those ventures that are most likely to succeed are those that combine creativity with sound business sense."

Findlay pointed out that the Revolving Museum actually opened in Boston, and had momentum by the time it moved to Lowell.

"I always said that if I won the lottery I'd buy the old firehouse that was the former home of the Nashua Arts and Science Center and establish an art gallery/coffeehouse/dance center. There is definitely a need for additional art-related destinations in the area," Findlay said.

Minkarah said that in Manchester an additional performing arts venue has been recommended for Manchester (in addition to the Palace Theatre) in plans for the city's future.

Artist Jaime Grady thinks commitment to public art is possible but "you need a lot of trust, you need people to have a common vision, you need people to be communicating something that inspires or motivates people towards action."