

Is Abingdon on the Brink of a New Renaissance?

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ABINGDON, Va. – This little town might be the next Asheville, at least according to the buzz downtown.

It's been a sudden, subtle change, but seemingly overnight, the same sort of art galleries and crafty, eclectic shops that define that North Carolina tourist center are popping up in Abingdon, Va. – another artsy mountain town that some say is on the verge of discovering its creative economy.

As a regional artisan center prepares to break ground and Abingdon's existing arts center prepares for a major overhaul, the downtown area is seeing a wave of creative entrepreneurs setting up shop.

"I believe we're at the beginning of a new art renaissance," said John Buckland, owner of the newly opened Blue Windmill Galleries and one of the men behind the Arts Association of Abingdon, which seeks to bring all of Abingdon's art venues under one marketing umbrella.

"The more we've got, the more we'll get. That's the whole point," Buckland said. "Everybody's always talks about competition, but I wish there were a dozen art galleries on Main Street in Abingdon because it helps make it an arts destination for tourists."

Among the new businesses that have taken off downtown are Babycakes Cupcakery, specializing in unique-flavored cupcakes, and A Likely Yarn, specializing in yarns made from a far-flung list of places and materials.

Both shops have come through Zazzy'z, a coffee shop that itself was a venture out on a limb two and a half years ago but has become an unofficial small-business incubator for the arts. The coffee shop shares a little enclave on East Main Street with Blue Windmill and several artist studios, a growing hotspot for "the artsy community who enjoy a good cup of coffee," said Zazzy'z owner Ramsey White.

"Art sells in communities and art sells communities if people want to come and see it, even if they're not buying it," White said. "I think it upgrades the town."

Artistic magnets

Betsy White, Ramsey White's wife and the retired director of the William King Museum, is heading up the museum's new cultural heritage project. She said she hopes that 20 years of work at the arts center have made an impact – but it's excitement over a regional artisan center that has sparked the sudden burst of artistic energy.

Heartwood, as the long-discussed project is called, is planned for groundbreaking next month on the campus of Virginia Highlands Community College.

Designed in the form of a huge, deconstructed barn, the center is expected to bring hundreds of thousands of people off Interstate 81 to browse local crafts. The center would then serve as a starting point for folks to set out into the region to visit local artisans and music venues, as well as other arts-related attractions throughout Southwest Virginia.

The center's location recognizes Abingdon as the region's cultural center – and Diana Blackburn, executive director of Round the Mountain, a regional artisan network closely connected with Heartwood, said its anticipated opening has spurred arts-related growth in town.

“The message that we've been trying to spread out in the community is that art can build communities,” Blackburn said. “The arts-and-crafts is a viable industry.”

She said the price range of art and crafts here is varied and broad – and an opportunity not only for people at all income levels to buy art, but also for artists and craftsmen of different skill levels to show and sell their work.

“We have some mighty creative people here, and this place, Southwest Virginia and Abingdon, have always had a lot of them. Its beauty and its natural resources have always attracted creative people,” Betsy White said.

“I really think the artisan center ... really created a centralized energy in everybody, bringing about the potential Southwest Virginia has to transform our economy by focusing on our cultural resources as real capital, creative capital. Our elected officials are starting to feel this way, and that made a difference, so it all really came together.”

Buckland said the town has given \$15,000 to the arts association – and Town Councilman Jason Berry is among its proponents, along with Lemont Dobson, director at the William King Museum.

Renovations planned at the museum will open its campus to Main Street and add an artisan courtyard with working studios. To hear Dobson talk about the plans, it sounds like he wants art to be cool. Way cool. He said the project will turn the museum grounds into a public art space connected to downtown by foot traffic – a place that could blend a Sunday picnic spot with the study of sculpture.

At-home finds

The draw of an arts-centered community is already apparent in the new shops downtown.

“This is my kind of place,” said Elaine O'Doherty, an art teacher from Baltimore, Md., who stopped on her way to Asheville and shopped at A Likely Yarn. “I came to ride on the Virginia Creeper [Trail] ... and I discovered this wonderful town.”

The shop sells silk yarn, cashmere and alpaca. It sells yarn made from corn, from sugar cane, and from the New Zealand broad-tailed possum. And it's doing well, said Janet Woolwine, who runs A Likely Yarn.

When the economy is down, Woolwine said, the craft business always picks up.

"It's sad to say you can't find yarn shops anymore like you used to be able to find," said Mary Eckert, a customer from Gainesville, Fla., "but more and more people are learning how to do the knitting and the crocheting and they're coming back to it."

At Babycakes Cupcakery, owner Natalie Shortridge has been similarly amazed by the speed at which business has taken off.

"It is way beyond what I could have expected," said Shortridge, whose cupcake shop has been open for about a month inside Zazzy'z. "I think people may not be splurging on vacations and fancy cars and things like that right now, but they can splurge on a \$2 cupcake."

She said that, in a way, the recession is turning out to be a good thing on Main Street, even spurring some of the small business growth here, because people are staying and shopping closer to home.

More people are looking to re-create here the types of shops they've seen on vacation in other places, she said – and these small businesses are thriving.
Customer service

Shortridge said there's also an ethic here that says big-box stores have gone too far and become too impersonal – and more support is due to local business owners.

"If you want to have a bunch of boutiques, you have to shop there," said Kris Beasey, of Bristol, Va., who brought her children for cupcakes Friday. "If you don't frequent these places they don't survive."

Beasey said a small town that can offer "these different, amazing little places that are popping up," it has the best of both worlds – the shopping advantages of a big city with the community feel and relatively un-clogged roads of a small town.

"I think we most certainly will see lots more of those [small businesses] because folks are going to see new people in their towns and new visitors," Blackburn said. "They're going to capitalize on all those new tourists and new visitors and new customers coming to town, so I certainly think that more and more will pop up as Heartwood is developed."

Buckland, whose gallery sells what he calls "fine Appalachian art" – work that is different from the quilts and woven baskets that sometimes define the region – said in three years' time, downtown Abingdon will look and feel a lot more like downtown Asheville – and perhaps 100 jobs will be created in the process.

“I go to Asheville a lot, and I’m tired of seeing the same old art over and over and over again,” Buckland said.

“We’re not going to be an Asheville overnight, but we’re working towards that. ... I just see it all starting to happen, very slowly. It’s a long, slow process, but like I keep saying, I’m optimistic about it and I really do think it’s happening now.”

Not only will the process bring about development downtown and in the arts, but it will have a compounding side-effect, Buckland said: A hip, thriving arts community will be more likely to attract large employers to the region through traditional economic development means.

Abingdon is on its way to becoming the next big art town – the next Asheville, he said.

“It’s kind of an ‘If you build it they will come’ type thing,” Buckland said. “You can go on the Internet and read about towns where cultural economy is now driving their whole economy. ... It’s working.”

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