

NEIGHBORHOOD NEWS



March 2010 exhibition of Brad Ulreich inside The Gallery at Vivid Solutions. Photo courtesy of ARCH Development Corp

Anacostia's Arts District

New Opportunities and Old Challenges

BY JOHN MULLER

“We already have an arts district in Anacostia,” says well-known local poet Fred Joiner. “What makes an art district is not a government designation; it is individual artists and arts organizations working together to add life to a community and making it a destination.”

Beginning with the February 2007 opening of the Honfleur Gallery at 1241 Good Hope Road, Historic Anacostia has slowly evolved into an emerging arts corridor. The organic growth of arts’ venues along Anacostia’s two main commercial thoroughfares has included local artists, city government, non-profits, and development firms.

Joiner says “every discipline and genre is represented” with “fine artists, painters, photographers, dancers, choreographers, and literary artists” laying claim to Anacostia.

“We have both ends of Historic Anacostia covered with Honfleur Gallery on Good Hope and Vivid Solutions on Martin Luther King,” observes Joiner, who says the galleries coordinate their openings so art lovers can walk from one to the other and enjoy both.

In 2007 Joiner began leading a monthly poetry and reading workshop at Honfleur Gallery that generated buzz within the neighborhood and attracted attention from artists in other areas of the city.

“The arts presence makes the neighborhood unique. As an investor, it makes the area more interesting and compelling,” says Stan Voudrie with Four Points LLC, a development company with a large portfolio in Anacostia.

“We have a lot of room to grow and improve,” contends Voudrie, who says it is a time tested axiom that where art happens commerce follows.

Last month the Smithsonian Anacostia Community Museum on Morris Road hosted a discussion about the arts’ impact and future in communities east of the Anacostia River. “Everyone is trying to carve out their role,” says Camille Akeju, director of the museum since late 2005.

“There is a division between the grassroots activists who have been entrenched in the community versus the ‘Johnny Come Lately’s’ that have recently discovered the community,” says Akeju with diplomacy. “I don’t

think anyone should come into the discussion thinking they have less of a role than someone else.”

Akeju says the well-attended event was an opportunity to “air things out” and “all for the benefit of the community” that continues to dialogue about how best to work together for the betterment of itself.

DCCAHA Support

“The arts movement is developing in Anacostia and the influx of new investment is raising the neighborhood’s profile,” says Ayris Scales, the Interim Director of the DC Commission on Arts and Humanities, a city agency that awards grants to individual artists and arts organizations. Scales, a Ward 7 resident, previously a project manager for the Office of the Deputy Mayor for Planning and Economic Development before moving to DCCAHA, says the development of an arts district in Anacostia “has everything to do with economic and community development.”

Over the past five fiscal years, 2007-2011, DCCAHA awarded approximately 224 grants totaling \$3.8 million to arts organizations and individual artists in wards 7 and 8. DCCAHA operates 16 competitive grant programs; one of which is the East of the River grant program. Of the 224 grants awarded, 131 were designated EOR grants which are specifically for artists and organiza-

tions located in or providing direct arts services to communities and residents east of the river.

Tendani Mpulubusi, appointed in 2008 by Mayor Fenty as a Ward 8 DCCAHA Commissioner, started a directory and social network, www.eastoftheriverarts.com, in the fall of 2009 to promote area artists. Although he has served on DCCAHA grant panels for the EOR and Public Arts grants, Mpulubusi says there is a disengagement point between individual artists and the arts institutions that operate east of the river.

“Individual artists can’t compete with the institutions and the opportunities often go to the institutions that are not run through the grassroots and facilitated by people from the community,” says Mpulubusi. “Residents shouldn’t wait for the government to build an arts corridor; they should build it for themselves.”

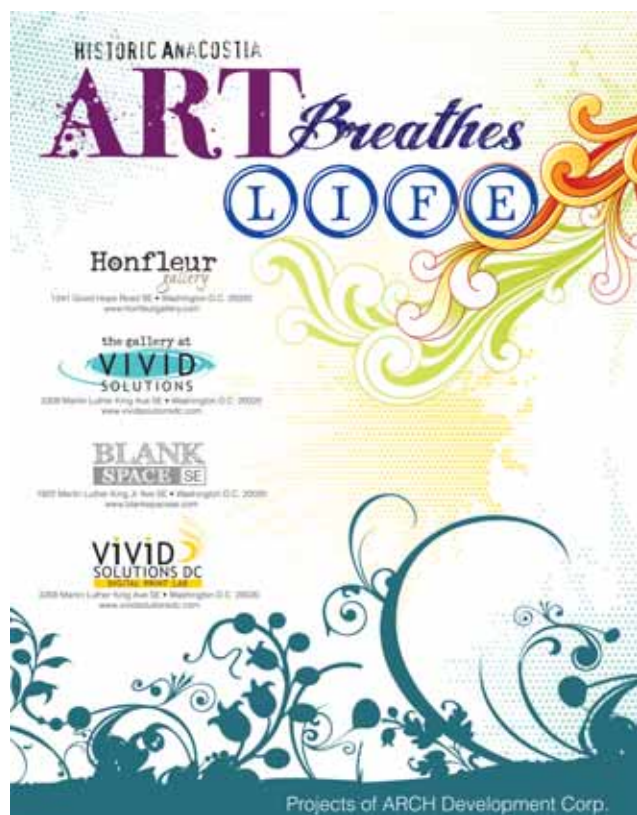
However, he warns the “community has been disenfranchised for years” and needs to “build confidence and reinvest its grassroots energy to repair the disconnect between the new artistic opportunities and area residents being able to take advantage.”

ARCH

An established member of the neighborhood for nearly three decades, the ARCH Development



East of the River exhibit 2009 at Honfleur Gallery. Photo courtesy of ARCH Development Corp



Art Breathes Life branding campaign.
Photo courtesy of ARCH Development Corp

Corporation has been a catalyst for “cultural development and revitalization” in Anacostia.

Led by Duane Guatier, ARCH has been a stakeholder in the development of Anacostia’s arts district before there was one. Working with the Office of Planning in 2004 on a strategic plan for Anacostia, the first signs of the arts appeared in 2006 when the Honfleur Gallery broke ground. In a little under five years, ARCH has opened two separate arts spaces, ‘Blank Space’ Gallery at 1922 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue as an affordable option for individuals and groups looking to secure their own gallery for two to seven weeks and The Gallery at Vivid Solutions which focuses on photography and digital arts. They have also kick-started an Artist Residency program and with support from the DC Department of Housing and Community Development helped to engineer neighborhood development through small business assistance and a program that helps small business owner design new or upgrade their existing storefront.

Earlier this year ARCH opened “The HIVE” at 2027 Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue, an affordable resource center for emerging small businesses. The location in a federally and DC government enterprise community allow preferential consideration when applying for government contracts.

In the upcoming year ARCH will partner with Gate Post, a faith-based organization, to rehabilitate the 2800 square foot building at 1306-1308 Good Hope Road into a café and performance space on the first floor and office space on the second floor which Guatier says will be a “business incubator for artists.”

Guatier says the use of arts and culture to spur economic development in Anacostia is “very strategic” and “does not interfere with other developments.”

With low rents and an established community of grassroots artists the deliberative organizing, planning, funding and programming will continue to keep cultural development at the forefront of Anacostia’s measured commercial growth. ●

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