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Developing Story: Art on the Waterfront

by Ric Kasini Kadour



Since the early 1980's, Melinda Moulton and Lisa Steele have pioneered environmental and socially responsible redevelopment. Their company, Main Street Landing, has been incrementally developing Burlington's Waterfront, an endeavor that encompasses four buildings in one of the most important locales in the city.

What many people may not know is that Main Street Landing is home to one of the largest collections of art by Chittenden County artists and a hub of visual art activity. Union Station is home to the Art's Alive Gallery, Katharine Montstream Studio, Green Mountain Photography, and Sue Miller's Studio. The Wing Building hosts Artpath Gallery. Skinny Pancake in the Lake & College complex has rotating art exhibits. Scattered throughout the buildings is a remarkable collection of art, including some significant pieces of public art. In front of Union Station at One Main Street is Christopher Curtis's sculpture, *Venus*. Lars-Erik Fisk's *Train Ball* sits in the lower level and on the roof are Steve Larrabee's Winged Monkeys. On the second floor of Union Station is a permanent exhibition of Peter Miller's "Vermont Farm Women" photographs. In the lobby of the CornerStone Building at Three Main Street is Jack Chase's sculpture, *Mobile*, and as you walk in, visitors are greeted by a large work-on-paper. A mural by Ron Hernandez is on the wall of the Lake Lobby of the Lake and College Building at the corner of Lake and College Streets. Throughout all of the buildings, art collected over the years dots the walls.

This cacophony of art is a far cry from how Moulton and Steele first found Union Station,

their first building. “It was haunting to walk in here and walk into these empty cubicles and see the old dieffenbachia that had been there for two to three months while the building was going on the auction block, just lying on its side. It was all withered and dying and dead and then the phone lines coming out and the peeling paint and the chips and holes. And the green paint. I will never forget the green, institutional paint,” said Moulton.

When their initial plans for the building had to be shelved, Moulton and Steele began renting space to artists. One of their early tenants, Ed Owre, made a gallery out of the lobby of the building. By observing how people interacted with the art, the duo came to appreciate the power of art.

“I would see these young, impressionable, macho, strong guys stopping in the gallery and being very interested in Ed Owre’s work,” explained Moulton. “I knew the artists in the building were loving what Ed was doing, but if these guys, high school kids, young college boys, were psyched about this art, this is huge. That was when it kind of clicked in for Lisa and me, that we needed to do as much as we could.”

At every stage of the Waterfront’s development, Moulton and Steele included works of art. They are also active collectors, continuing to add new work. But unlike a lot of developers who commission a massive piece of public art that ends up sitting like a log on the lawn of the property or who hire a consultant to purchase a set of artwork, Moulton and Steele take a personalized approach. “The way it happens is so beautiful, because Lisa will call me and she’ll say, I saw this exhibit, I saw this piece of art... We have a lot of wall space. It’s a lifelong thing,” Moulton said. Art is a way of occupying the buildings.

“The art is the living, breathing thing of the building,” said Moulton. “The building is built, it’s solid, it’s structure, it’s hard, it’s unmovable, it evokes its own big feeling when you see it. The art is the actual living...it’s the beating heart of the building. It’s what brings the emotion to the building. It’s extremely organic how it all happens.”



The combination of rotating exhibitions, working artist studios, and permanent installations is paying off in a business sense as well. Main Street Landing boasts a 4% vacancy rate, well below the 10% vacancy for Chittenden County reported last November and even lower than the average vacancy rate of 6.3% per year over the last decade. Part of the reason for this success lies in the role art plays in making the buildings spaces for the community. Whether it’s tourists visiting to photograph Steve

Larrabee’s Monkeys or people breezing through during First Friday Art Walk, these commercial buildings are more than office spaces used only by the people who work in them. They are buildings for everyone to enjoy and art is one of the reasons to enjoy them.

In the office of Main Street Landing at Union Station hangs a watercolor of two red shoes by E. Bunsen. Moulton explains why Steele purchased the painting. “When we owned the Pease Grain Tower, I used to go in with my red high heels and shoot rats with water pistols to get the rats out of the way so I could check the building. The red shoes represented something to her. A lot of the art that’s in the building is something that represents something to one of us.” Take a tour of these buildings and one may find a piece of art that means something to you too.

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