

A Gritty Midwest City Is Reinventing Itself As a Colony for Artists

By ROBERT SHAROFF, Published: July 24, 2005



Bill Zbaren for The New York Times, Mark Denman, an artist, at work in his loft apartment.

IF Racine, Wis., is not yet the Hamptons of the Midwest, it's not for lack of effort.

This formerly gritty industrial city roughly 70 miles north of Chicago and 30 miles south of Milwaukee on the shores of Lake Michigan has been trying for much of the last decade to reinvent itself as an artist's colony and tourist destination.

The efforts have included the opening of the \$11 million Racine Art Museum on Main Street in 2003 and the creation of a gallery district centering on nearby Sixth Street, currently home to about a dozen galleries.

"Our mission isn't just cultural," said Bruce Pepich, executive director and curator of collections at the museum. "It's also about

economic development. We're here to anchor Main Street."

The new museum is attracting about 5,000 visitors a month, mainly from Chicago and Milwaukee, according to Devin Sutherland, executive director of the nonprofit Downtown Racine Corporation. "People are starting to recognize us as a place to see quality art," he said.

Gary Becker, the city's mayor, said Racine is trying to attract Chicago people on summer weekends. "We're getting more outside influences today," Mayor Becker said. "Things are changing, but not enough. We're still somewhat parochial." He added that part of his job is "talking to service clubs about the need to be open and accepting and not worry about the kid with 18 piercings and a blue Mohawk."

Until now, Racine - a city of about 80,000 residents that was founded in the 1830's - has largely imported its art. This spring, however, Gorman & Company, a developer based in Madison, Wis., finished the Mitchell Wagon Factory Lofts, a 100-unit project carved out of a historic factory building and designed to lure artists to the city. The architect is McFadden & Company, also of Madison.

In addition to fairly large units, 1,000 square feet to just over 2,500, the \$15 million complex also includes gallery spaces, a woodworking shop, a photography darkroom and a ceramics kiln.

Rents in the building range from \$575 to \$1,210 a month and all but 20 of the units fall into the category of "affordable" housing, meaning the tenants can earn no more than 60 percent of the area's median income, or no more than \$27,300 for an individual. More than half the project's cost was provided by tax credits for affordable housing and historic renovation.

"We're in the business of solving problems for communities," said Thomas Capp, executive vice president of Gorman & Company. "In addition to providing affordable housing, we're usually accomplishing some larger purpose, such as redeveloping a problem building or revitalizing a neighborhood."

Both goals came into play in Racine. The Mitchell Wagon project occupies an imposing five-story brick building on the edge of downtown that dates from 1912 and was formerly part of one of the largest industrial complexes in the city.

The complex was the headquarters of the Mitchell & Lewis Company, which started manufacturing farm wagons in the 1800's and later switched to automobiles before selling out to the Nash Motors Company in 1922. The building was sold during the Depression and has been largely empty for decades.

Tenants began moving into the spaces late last year and there is a waiting list.

Two recent arrivals from Chicago are Molly Carter and David Menard, who are married and expecting their first child. Ms. Carter is a fiber artist and also works as coordinator of studio programs at the Milwaukee Art Museum. Mr. Menard is a print maker and painter.

"We love this building," Mr. Menard said. "The fact that it's so new and efficient is really appealing."

Ms. Carter added: "There's some interesting things in Racine - the history, the architecture, the lakefront. Being close to the lake is very important for us."

Another tenant, Sherri Myers-Wray, an illustrator and woodworker from the nearby town of Kenosha, said the diversity of the tenants was important to her.

"I like the fact that it's an artists' community," she said. "Last night I had a conversation in the hall with a woman who is a dot-com advice columnist and a man who is struggling to set up a music booking business. We ranged in age from 20's to 50's."

Ms. Myers-Wray was also the guiding force behind the building's first open house last April for the purpose of introducing Racine to its new artist community. "We were hoping for 100 people and 600 showed up," she said.

The project is part of a gradual makeover of the downtown area that began in the mid-1990's with a major planning effort led by the late Samuel Johnson. Mr. Johnson, who died in 2004, was chairman emeritus of SC Johnson, manufacturer of household products like Windex and Pledge, and the city's largest private employer. Mr. Johnson was also a lifelong resident of Racine.

"Sam took a look at the greater Racine community and said this is a great place to live but it could use a boost from a quality of life standpoint," said Jane Hutterly, executive vice president of worldwide corporate and environmental affairs for SC Johnson.

Indeed, in the early 1990's, "downtown was pretty grim," Mayor Becker said. The city's manufacturing base had declined, taking with it much of the economic vitality of the downtown area.

The plan identified focal points for downtown redevelopment and also stressed the importance of new retail and residential projects.

Since then, about \$200 million in public and private money has been invested downtown. The projects have ranged from a \$12 million infrastructure upgrade along Main Street executed by the city to "catalyst projects" financed entirely or partly by the Johnson family.

They include the new art museum and a \$25 million office building for several of the company's divisions. (SC Johnson is based in a Frank Lloyd Wright-designed complex west of downtown.)

"The whole thing is about creating an experience," Mr. Pepich said. "There are probably two generations of people in this area who never come downtown unless they have to pay a parking ticket or get a marriage license at City Hall. What we're doing is retraining that audience to come down here and discover what's going on."