

Renaissance by the River

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John W. Wheeler for The New York Times

At the Van Brunt Gallery in Beacon, opened in September 2002 by Carl Van Brunt, the cellist David Eyges, playing an electric cello, entertains a group of listeners.

Renaissance by the River

New Galleries and Local Artists Are Poised to Welcome Visitors Drawn to Dia:Beacon

By D. DOMINICK LOMBARDI

TODAY, the Dia Arts Foundation is opening Dia:Beacon, its new 300,000-square-foot museum on 31 acres along the Hudson River in southern Dutchess County. And Beacon, until recently just another city on the river with a faded industrial past, is poised to become a prime destination for art connoisseurs.

Over the last couple of years, as the art world woke up to the fact that Dia, the preeminent nonprofit organization that supports contemporary art, was renovating a space in Beacon, a number of excellent galleries have popped up downtown that have become a boon to established and emerging artists living and working in the Hudson Valley. Restaurants and antique shops have also opened in anticipation of a hoped-for onslaught of visitors.

The Dia building is itself remarkable. Built in 1929 as a Nabisco packaging factory, with its edge-to-edge skylights and high ceilings, it is

perfectly suited for the work of artists who need cavernous space and natural light. The effect is of a temple where the spirit of the art on view can truly shine.

Dia:Beacon may be the newest attraction, but its setting is also remarkable, a draw in itself. Beacon's Main Street stretches east from the Hudson an easily walkable two miles lined mostly with newly restored two- and three-story brick buildings. Main Street is bounded by the Hudson River to the west; Mount Beacon, with its 1,500-foot peak, and its 32 miles of public trails, is to the east. To the north is Tallix, a world class foundry, most famous for its casting of Leonardo's "Cavallo," a 24-foot sculpture of a horse that was installed in Milan.

Bordering Main Street just to the south is the Madam Brett Homestead site, built in 1709, and visited by George Washington during the Revolutionary War, thought to be the oldest home in Dutchess County.

Chthonic Clash Coffeehouse

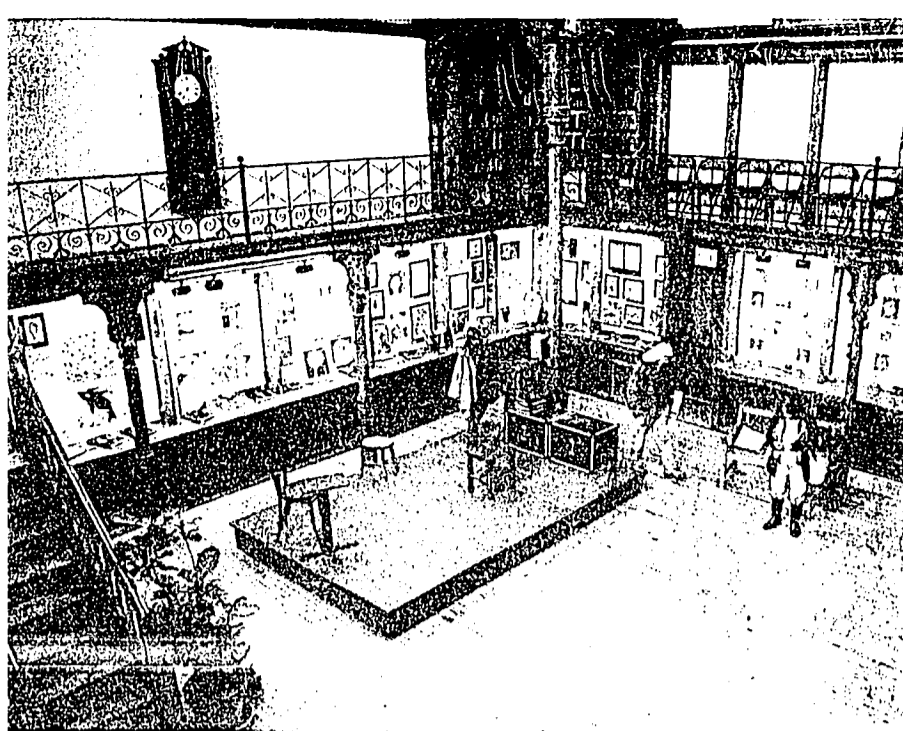
Most recently, Nell Ogorzalay, a gallery manager and art dealer

from New York City, opened one of Beacon's most compelling hybrid spaces, which promises to be a hot spot. It's called Chthonic Clash Coffeehouse (pronounced Thonic) from the Greek word meaning "of the earth" or "of the underworld." In addition to changing art exhibitions, the coffeehouse will hold poetry readings, musical performances and chess tournaments. Ms. Ogorzalay's hope is to create a contemporary version of the Cedar Tavern, a storied Greenwich Village meeting place in the 40's and 50's where artists, philosophers, poets, musicians and the like can meet to discuss all things important, which is why it looks more like a living room than a cafe.

"I want to create a feeling of openness and collaboration here," she said. "One of my favorite concepts, when one looks at designing and starting a business, is that people need three places to go: home, work and someplace else. I hope this place is that some place else."

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Associated Press

Photographs by John W. Wheeler for The New York Times

The Dia Effect: Renaissance by the River in Beacon

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Minetta Brook

Minetta Brook, a public art organization that commissions artists to create work related to sites in New York City and the Hudson Valley, also has a number of projects going on in Beacon.

Diane Shamash, Minetta Brook's founding director, said Dia had enticed her to come up in the summer of 1999 to look at the ways the building they had just purchased could be connected to the river through environmentally sensitive art. "We also looked at the ways other artists could be involved in that process, which began the Beacon connection for Minetta Brook," Ms. Shamash said. "We met with about 40 people, including, and especially a representative of Scenic Hudson. It was decided that Mount Beacon, Madame Brett Park, Beacon Land-

Cultural Foundation, which was developed as part of the Beacon Cultural Project headed by the team of David A. Ross, past director of the San Francisco Museum of Art; and the Whitney Museum of American Art; and the real estate developer Bill Ehrlich. The Beacon Cultural Project comprises both commercial and not-for-profit cultural projects. Ms. Pasti oversees the Beacon Project Space and the Record Shop, a year-long project by the artist Carrie Mae Weems that chronicles her experiences with the changing local culture and people of Beacon. In addition to changing exhibits, the Beacon Project Space sponsors cultural events including open slide nights, where the first 10 artists to arrive with their slides are given 10 minutes to show and discuss their work.

"It was successful not just because artists were able to show and talk about their work, but they also met other artists," said Ms. Pasti. "I often hear 'Gee, I saw this work around, but did not know who had done it,' or 'I see so and so on the street all the time, and never knew they were an artist.'"

Performing arts are not neglected. Beacon Project space holds movement workshops in which professional dancers work with the local high school students.

So why Beacon? The story is familiar; the confluence of affordable space, convenience and setting that has beckoned to artists in places like Soho and Chelsea in New York City, South Beach in Miami, the Loop in Chicago and San Antonio. "A few years ago, there were a lot of empty buildings here," said Ms. Pasti. "With the potential of the setting, and Dia moving up here, the train line from Manhattan, Interstate 84 close by, Stewart International Airport, the potential of artist's lofts in the industrial buildings — all these things combined to make Beacon a great location for artists and creative businesses."

"Beacon also has one of the friendliest populations I have seen anywhere," she added. "The people are very supportive. For me, it's important to be a part of a community, and Beacon is a great community."

Hudson Beach Glass

Hudson Beach Glass converted a three-story firehouse into a commercial gallery complete with its own glassblowing studio for its four owners: Michael Benzer, Jennifer Smith, John Gilvey and Wendy Gilvey. The four were in Beacon long before the promise of Dia ever materialized. "Beacon was dumb luck," said Mr. Benzer. "We came to Beacon in 1984, because space was affordable, the business climate for our work was still good, and it's just a train ride away from the city."

Mr. Benzer and Mr. Gilvey design glass and sell it wholesale to department stores, galleries and museum stores all over the world. In their new space they will be selling their work retail.



Jennifer Smith, who designs, and works in the glass casting area, also does a lot of the photography and designing, and feels at home with both the creative and business aspects of the business. Michael Benzer is the operations manager, keeping all the machines going. He is the main glass caster and designer. He creates molds, as well as his own 12-color palette from scratch. John Gilvey is the main glassblower, and is assisted by his wife, Wendy.

The four also plan to hold workshops and seminars "We want to show people that you can make a living as an artist," said Ms. Smith. "We've been doing it for years, and it can work. We're not just a town of galleries. There are many artists here."

Other Galleries

Kate Rogovin opened Concentric, a commercial gallery space, about two and a half years ago. The front room showcases her art, a mixture of found object assemblages, resurfaced found objects, metalwork, fabrics and jewelry, while the back room is her studio where three looms, a large work bench and a seemingly endless supply of metalsmithing tools that she inherited from her father, fill shelves and benches.

"My goal is to create a more complete environment with furniture, art, objects and the rest," Ms. Rogovin explained. "People seem to feel more comfortable in an environment that is more complete and warm." Collaborative Concepts gallery opened in March 2001. The space was donated for one year, free of rent, by their landlord, giving the fledgling, not-for-profit space a chance to bloom. Now they rely on grants, individual donations, art sales and fundraisers.

Success is not a given, said Mary Madden,

president of Collaborative Concepts.

"It's a tough road; you're always watching the finances. There's heat, air conditioning, rent, exhibition costs, everything, yet so far, we've made it work. With the current state of the market and the economy, foundations have less to give and there are just as many people and institutions asking for help. That's why we are, more and more, involved with fundraisers."

The gallery is also involved with the community in other ways. The director, Richard Bruce, emphasizes shows that include the best available art from the Hudson Valley as well as from New York City. The gallery has an artist in residency program where two artists are given free studio space for six months to a year. The gallery operates programs with the local high schools, and hires interns.

In September of 2002, Carl Van Brunt opened the Van Brunt Gallery. He is most interested in abstract art with a high energy level that is as he says, "edgy or provocative in some way."

He moved to the area two years ago. "I was in advertising, but I knew I did not want to be in advertising," he said. "It became obvious, very quickly, that there was an ingrained art community in the area, so it seemed right to open a gallery." I do represent artists, however I do not limit them in any way from exhibiting elsewhere."

Van Brunt Gallery also has an important cyber presence. "When I started my gallery, I invested as much in my Web site as I did in the physical space," Mr. Van Brunt said. "I continue to invest in the Web site — every artist who has a one person show here has a short video produced. It helps people understand the art and the artist. Not everyone can come to the opening, so the Web site

In Beacon, top from left, the shops along Main Street; the interior of the Howland Cultural Center on Main Street; the Dia:Beacon, opening today, offering 300,000 square feet of museum space on 31 acres along the Hudson; Jennifer Smith and Michael Benzer at work in their studio at Hudson Beach Glass. Left: A bit of relaxation at Chthonic Clash Coffeehouse.

gives a sense of who these artists are."

The Howland Center

The Howland Cultural Center is one of Beacon's most prominent buildings. Commissioned as a library in 1872 by the Civil War General Joseph Howland, the Howland Library was an instant success. It was designed by Howland's brother-in-law, the architect Richard Morris Hunt, who created a stirring structure with six gables, and an dome interior dressed in rich Georgia pine. The library itself moved to larger quarters in 1976. Over the last 25 years the Howland Cultural Center has been home to various cultural events such as concerts, poetry readings, lectures, dance performances and art exhibitions. This summer, they will feature the work of artisans from the area's three foundries: Beacon's own Tallix, Argos and Polich Art Works (PAW).

The Howland Cultural Center was placed on the National Historic Register in 1972. Since the early 1980's, the center has experienced its own little renaissance, attracting those interested in art, culture and concerts. In fact, Main Street's gentrification began because of the presence of the Howland Center, long before there were any thoughts of Dia:Beacon.

Although many visitors will now enter the city on the west side, where Dia:Beacon is, when you drive in to the city from the southeast, with Mount Beacon on the right, the Howland Center is the first building that stands out, a majestic vertical statement. Main Street takes a graceful bend, and it's clear that the businesses there, galleries, restaurants and shops, are well established, beneficiaries of an earlier — and still thriving — influx of art.