

ARTworks: Culture Comes to Town Center

Written by Mark Shaffer
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MARK SHAFFER explores the “alternate reality” of Beaufort's innovative arts center
“Every artist was first an amateur.”

- Ralph Waldo Emerson



It happens a lot. Passersby lured by the life-sized cow and mermaid sentinels, push open the doors of ARTworks and pass Alice-like into an alternate reality. Outside, Beaufort Town Center sprawls across an inland sea of parking, retail stores, grocers, restaurants, bars, and accommodations of every sort, but through the glass lies another world – a world where tone, color, texture and light meet whimsy and passion to eventually form a business plan. ARTworks. The name implies much, but what it means most is the advent of a new and innovative approach – a template, if you will – for the future of the arts in Beaufort County. And in that future, art is a going concern.

Fact: A 2008 economic impact study commissioned by the ACBC and the Beaufort Regional Chamber of Commerce indicated that the total economic impact of the arts in Beaufort County totaled \$213,200,000 that year. The study was conducted by Georgia Southern University. A year ago I had my first look at the new home of the Arts Council of Beaufort County. ACBC Executive Director, J.W. Rone's baritone echoed off the bare walls of the vast, empty retail space in Beaufort Town Center, just a couple of doors down from BiLo. Grand plans were taking shape, massive fundraising and renovation projects loomed ahead, but Rone's excitement was infectious and his optimism was properly cautious in a “been there, done that” kind of way. The old 2400 square foot facility near Pigeon Point was bursting at the seams and the ACBC was in dire need of new digs. A report that the Council was considering a move to Port Royal prompted a new offer from developer Dick Stewart of 303 Associates, who also happened to be the Council's landlord.



“He made us an offer we couldn't refuse,” says Rone. But unlike that famous line from The Godfather, no guns were held to heads. In fact, according to Rone, Stewart had challenged the ACBC to expand its presence in every conceivable way, to “build to capacity.” Twelve thousand square feet is a lot of capacity.

“We were also being challenged by the State Arts Commission,” says Rone, “to look at the arts as an entrepreneurial activity and how to work with real estate, government and developers to make the arts an important part of ‘quality of life’ in the community.” In other words, the very concept of the role the arts play in the Lowcountry was about to radically change. Buzz phrases like “quality of life” began to mingle with “fiscal responsibility,” not something with which any art community has ever been synonymous.

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