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Downtown's new vibe

By ANNA FIORENTINO, Staff Writer

Portland Press Herald / Maine Sunday Telegram

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Monday, October 16, 2006

When Bianca Pastrana moved back to Portland from New York City a few months ago, she looked at her old city in a new way.

Post-Its and Styrofoam cups become art, when on exhibit in a gallery window. Down the block, seated at a table on the patio of The White Heart, a patron snaps photographs of a girl peering back at him through a pint glass. They look at the digital shot; how it appears the lime from her drink is covering her eye like a pirate's patch. They laugh.

Pastrana, 28, sees a Portland that invites and embraces creative minds lurking within the walls of new Congress Street businesses like The White Heart, a bar that opened in March with all-artist, of all genres, staff.

"Being out at night here is more like being at a bar in New York City. The White Heart has brought it up a notch as far as nightlife," she said. "Instead of a bunch of college students in the Old Port getting drunk, there are sophisticated conversations going on. It's urban."

She sees a downtown arts district that has finally come to fruition after almost two decades of efforts.

Since the 1980s, the area spanning Monument Square to Longfellow Square has been artistically anchored by the Portland Museum of Art. In 1991, when the Maine College of Art replaced the Porteous building on Congress Street, the city launched an Arts "Downtown Vision," which beckoned a plethora of eclectic independent businesses. A year later those business owners created a downtown arts district association, and encouraged the restoration of a porno theater into what is now the State Theater as we know it despite being temporarily closed.

It underwent a district wide cleanup to better the "cityscape." Today, the seasoned downtown district, festively boasting its name on flags along lamp posts up and down Congress Street, calls on a more diverse and vibrant crowd than ever before.

"Genos, The White Heart, The Skinny; it's not a vibe that is in the Old Port. The Old Port is much more mainstream," said Andres Verzosa, former president of Portland Arts and Cultural Alliance and owner of Auocisco Gallery, which opened on Congress Street just a few months ago. "The arts district appeals to a whole different crowd: the kind of people who are going to seek things out. It has started a creative energy that has made things happen here."

The area now attracts more customers and businesses: Jump-started by the Space Gallery's opening in 2002, there's Five Fifty-Five 555 and its new lounge, The Dogfish Bar and Grille, which was once the Free Street Taverna, The Susan Maasch Fine Art Gallery on Oak Street, and of course Verzosa's gallery.

"The business owners have camaraderie, a good rapport and respect for each other. Everyone knows everyone," said Verzosa, who's also a candidate for Portland City Council.

It's a movement Johnny Lomba has backed for years.

In 2000 Lomba, a now known quantity in Portland's arts' scene, started the First Friday Art Walk, an endeavor that helped fuel the district's movement. Now more popular than ever, the Art Walk celebrated its sixth anniversary earlier this month.

At that same time he co-founded The Skinny as it was: a driving force that nourished local music, theater and art. When it was replaced by Genos in 2003, Lomba promised to someday re-open The Skinny.

Now is the right time, said Lomba.

"This town is full of creative people. The area is more vibrant than it was before," Lomba said. "My goal in opening The Skinny is to fortify the area to further establish it."

Perched on an old-fashioned barber's chair situated next to a table that holds a typewriter, Lomba spoke of a vision by artists for artists, in the neighborhood concentrated with artists. Inside the loft nestled on the corner of Forest Avenue and Congress Street, in the exact spot he plans to put a stage, the sun streamed through the window hitting particles of dust, a sloping floor board and Lomba.

Motioning to a corner of the stark room in mid demolition, Lomba shared his vision of custom-made leather stools and curtains and reupholstering that old barber chair. He imagined antique couches and a heart made of nails he will sculpt himself.

It's all part of his plan to re-open The Skinny in its new location before the year is out. "It's the obvious next step," said the writer/musician/sculptor, who if given the chance, would do away with titles altogether.

This time around, in addition to all the original Skinny offerings, Lomba will provide a scholarship program for young artists. He says the money for the program will come from selling everything that exists within The Skinny, from those custom-made bar stools to that barber's chair.

"Everything will be made by local artists," he says. "Everything will be for sale."

He and fellow artists plan to regularly replenish the supply.

Fifteen percent of the profit will support an annual scholarship, grant and apprenticeship program Lomba plans to start for aspiring artists. Once again, his contribution would surpass merely filling a vacancy in the district.

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Reader comments

Mark of Scarborough, ME

Oct 18, 2006 7:44 PM

"Downtown's New Vibe" I agree with the author, ANNA FIORENTINO that Congress Street and the Portland Art District is the new, exciting place to meet and socialize. I was disheartened that she did not have enough energy to walk a few more blocks and include the bastions of the Congress street night life "NORMS and "The Downtown Lounge. Both establishments laid a stake in the the district years ago as the newly formed area was starting. They consistently offer warm ambience, great drinks and fine food. More importantly they attract patrons from all walks of life (lobstermen to bankers to medical professionals) who all comingle and have a great time.

While the new establishments are certainly welcome and enjoyable you do a disservice not to include the established stars of the district.

Mark

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