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Artists bring life to empty storefronts

A Seattle-based program called Storefronts is offering property owners a chance to let low-budget creative types temporarily take over their empty space. That may not revitalize the neighborhood in one fell swoop, but it's bound to help.

By Rami Grunbaum, deputy business editor

Nature abhors a vacuum, and so do landlords.

In several Seattle commercial districts with excess vacant shops, and now on a struggling strip next to Auburn's City Hall, one answer is art.

A Seattle-based program called Storefronts is making property owners an offer that goes like this: Let low-budget creative types temporarily take over your empty space and fill it with color and life, sprinkling their artsy hipster pixie dust all over it. They may not revitalize the neighborhood in one fell swoop, but it's bound to help.

"A building that galleries are constantly rotating through is a more valuable building than one where the crack dealers are hanging out in front," says Matthew Richter, manager of the Storefronts program.

He's talking about an especially troubled Pioneer Square building — "I got an email out of the blue: 'Can you come and help me?' " — but the principle applies to less drastic situations as well.

The latest neighborhood to try it is Auburn's Main Street, where a half-dozen empty spaces mar a two-block stretch of the historic town center. The nearby City Hall faces vacancies on two sides — an aged, one-story former Liquidation Outlet and a newer multistory brick building, One Main, with a prominent unoccupied space.

"We hope the Storefronts program can be a steppingstone to filling those vacancies," says Kevin Snyder, the city's planning and development director. "We hope that it will bring more vitality and more people into our downtown."

He says "the situation is not dire" in downtown Auburn, and several other initiatives to improve the central district are also making their mark. Still, he's excited about the opportunity to "marry art and economic development."

The program has an immediate practical effect, too, says Snyder. "They'll paint walls, they'll clean. Sometimes they'll improve the lighting in there. And that stays... So they are also improving the asset."

This month Storefronts enabled the Auburn Valley Creative Arts group to open a short-term gallery showcasing local work in a Main Street space. (The arts collective is now looking for another location.) Storefronts also filled another nearby window with glistening paper cutouts by Seattle artist Celeste Cooning, who has decorated other, more elaborate storefront projects in Seattle and Tacoma.

Soon Storefronts expects to have a much more visible canvas — "a huge, beautiful space with a curved window" in the One Main building across from City Hall, says Maija McKnight, the city's arts coordinator.

As economic-development initiatives go, this one seems cheap. The city financed the Storefront effort in Auburn with \$10,000.

Richter says the plan is to occupy three spaces at a time, each filled with various artistic endeavors for up to three months.

Unless, that is, a space gets leased. "That's sort of a Catch-22 of our program," he says. "We want empty spaces for our projects but we also want them to lease."

Yuan Zhang, who owns the building where Storefronts is beginning its Auburn effort, says the Creative Arts gallery had to move out sooner than anticipated because the space has been leased beginning in April to a comedy club.

She's enthusiastic about the concept. "When you have so many empty units it looks depressed. But artists going in make the units look occupied, and the whole neighborhood has energy," she says. "I definitely would recommend this to anyone who has empty space."

In Seattle, Storefronts started last year and is operating in five neighborhoods — the International District, Pioneer Square, South Lake Union, Capitol Hill and Rainier Beach.

Richter says the temporary space filler has turned into a small business incubator as well. Five creative enterprises that started out as rent-free Storefronts efforts have "graduated" into continuing businesses.

"There's three in the program that are now paying rent in the ID," says Don Blakeney, executive director of the Chinatown International District Business Improvement Area. Those are the Seattle Pinball Museum, retail shop Tuesday Scarves and IDEA Odessey, a collective arts gallery.

For Seattle, Storefronts in coming months promises 80 projects, including art installations such as "a robot that gets excited when it reads poetry" and pop-up stores such as Steamtropolis, a retail venture by a Pioneer Square boot and clothing designer who

calls herself Zeon Kitty.

The Storefronts program runs under the auspices of Shunpike, a 10-year-old Seattle nonprofit that provides accounting and other back-office services for about 100 small local arts organizations. Funding for Storefronts comes from neighborhood business groups as well as government grants.

Shunpike runs a parallel program, called Spaceworks, in Tacoma.

Richter says not every property owner he encounters is interested. "Some of them still believe that a giant empty box with no lights turned on, and a giant 'For lease' sign in the window, is the best way to pick up tenants," he says.

Yet Storefronts has signed some well-known participants, including Seattle property owners Vulcan, Martin Smith Inc. and Samis Land Co.

The recession has undoubtedly increased the inventory of empty shops where an arts tenant, however fleeting and rent-free, might be a welcome improvement. "I've joked that in a full recovery, I'm out of a job," Richter says.

But he doesn't really believe that.

In many less successful commercial districts, he says, the goals of property owners and civic or business groups are pretty much the same — find ways to gain increased attention while improving security, cleanliness and walkability.

"You can spend that money on the arts and get everything else with it," he says.

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