

PacificSun

Pacific Sun | Marin County, California

Feature: Cultural Treasure

California Arts Council names downtown San Rafael one of state's 14 cultural districts



Artist Naomi Alessandra is currently the Max Thelen Artist in Residence at San Rafael's Art Works Downtown, one of five primary partners in the area's designation as a cultural arts district. Painting courtesy of Naomi Alessandra.

By Mina Rios

Nov 29, 2017

Bravo, San Rafael. Mission accomplished. Downtown San Rafael, “the city with a mission,” has been branded. In July, the California Arts Council (CAC) launched its five-year, statewide pilot program designating downtown San Rafael, along with 13 other communities, California’s foremost cultural arts districts.

A cultural district, as outlined by the program, is “a well-defined geographic area with a high concentration of cultural resources and activities.” Benefits for designated districts include technical assistance, peer-to-peer learning and exchanges, access to resources, tax incentives, regulatory assistance, branding materials and promotional strategy, a \$5K annual stipend for five years and partnerships with Visit California and the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans).

“The City’s Economic Development team was tracking the development of the State’s California Arts District project/initiative process from the beginning, which started in earnest about a year and a half ago,” says Danielle O’Leary, director of economic development and innovation with the City of San Rafael. “We attended state outreach workshops and reached out to our local arts partners for possible collaboration on an application.”

Answering the Downtown San Rafael Business Improvement District’s call to collaborate was an eager coalition of arts organizations that included Art Works Downtown, Youth in Arts, the California Film Institute and the City of San Rafael’s Falkirk Cultural Center—with a common interest in increasing the vitality of the local cultural and artistic community.

Of the four partnering arts organizations, the city asked Art Works Downtown to spearhead the cultural arts district project, thus satisfying the CAC’s requirement that the application be prepared, submitted and managed by a qualifying nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization.

In addition to the five primary arts partners, there are numerous other arts-related organizations and nonprofits in the arts district, including the Marin Society of Artists, the Belrose Theater, Rileystreet Art Supply, Folk Art Gallery, Bananas at Large, Seawood Photo and Copperfield’s Books. “We are excited to partner with these organizations to bring awareness and leverage our Cultural Arts District designation,” says O’Leary, optimistic about the potential.

During what was a lengthy and competitive application process, the CAC received submissions from dozens of communities across the state. Applicants were considered by way of a multi-step process, starting with an open call for letters of intent, followed by site visits for semi-finalists, and an invited finalist application.

“There [is] a very high number of artists living in San Rafael, and there’s something very democratic about the district’s approach to identifying and achieving its goals,” says CAC Director of Public Affairs Caitlin Fitzwater, on what makes downtown San Rafael a standout arts district. “Through the programs site visit and application process, we observed a strong mentality to involve all members of the community, and of continued activation and engagement that is laudable.”

The CAC’s decision to include Downtown San Rafael as one of the designated arts districts was on the basis of its cultural and artistic resources and activities being available in a concentrated area; the community’s cultural allure among locals, visitors and entrepreneurs; how the region celebrates its unique cultural identity; its commitment to furthering local cultural development; and its preservation and restoration efforts with regard to historic buildings and culturally significant structures.

Other designated districts, located from San Diego to Eureka, include diverse places like Little Tokyo in Los Angeles, San Francisco’s Calle 24 Latino Cultural District and the BLVD Cultural District in California’s High Desert in Lancaster.

Considering the fact that arts district programs and initiatives have existed in other states for some time—Colorado, Texas, Louisiana, Maryland and Massachusetts among them, why hasn’t California, the country’s leading creative economy (per the May 2017 Otis Report) adopted an arts district program of its own until recently? According to a 41-page report by the CAC, reasons are vague, but research analysts affirm that the program model for California is particularly complex given the breadth, diversity and varied needs of the state.

“Districts have received the first of two support stipends of \$5,000 per district per year for the two-year pilot portion of the program,” says Fitzwater, regarding the strides made by the CAC since July. “Our professional staff is working collaboratively with district administrators to create custom marketing materials that work for their needs, in addition to general brochures and window clings provided to them. The California Cultural Districts website offers a closer look at each of the districts, and they have a strong presence on the California Arts Council site, too. We’re leveraging resources from our state tourism partners through online promotion and marketing at 11 Visit California welcome centers. Technical

assistance training has begun as well, having received needs assessments from the districts.”

Arts district partners say that they, too, are moving at a steady productive pace. “We are still in the very early stages of coming together and setting priorities,” O’Leary explains. “We are learning about the options and possibilities. The state is currently developing customized marketing materials. The city hosted a meeting with local arts organizations within the cultural district to brainstorm collaborative projects that we could work to accomplish in the short- and long-term.”

Elisabeth Setten, executive director of Art Works Downtown says that the North Bay fires threw everything off. “Partners suffered losses. There were delays in administration. All while that was simmering, the city was working on new graphic design elements, including map inserts identifying key cultural destinations.”

On November 15, Setten attended a Cultural District Summit held in Redding, Calif. to discuss San Rafael’s progress and program proceedings, and to hear how other arts districts were going about their programs. At the summit, Setten observed that each arts district, with the exception of San Rafael, had arts councils. The San Rafael arts district collaboration efforts have proven effective to date. At this time, Setten sees no reason to fix what’s not broken. If at some point a smaller council makes sense for the purpose of accomplishing more, change will be considered.

By no exaggeration, the San Rafael arts district partner organizations do indeed offer some highly distinctive and unique cultural experiences. Among the most notable is the California Film Institute’s acclaimed Mill Valley Film Festival (MVFF) held each October; this year, MVFF turned 40 and featured hundreds of films from around the world.

Art Works Downtown is truly a marvel in itself. The 40,000 square-foot building is equipped with four art galleries, 27 art studios, a frame shop, a ceramic center, a jewellers guild, a restaurant and 17 affordable apartments. The organization is also the curator of the popular 2nd Friday Art Walk along San Rafael’s Fourth Street.

Within the scope of the CAC’s arts district program criteria, there is a provision that suggests that arts districts become proactive in addressing artist displacement. Fortunately

for the San Rafael arts district, Art Works Downtown is already equipped to address that need. “Artworks is very active in affordable artist housing and residency programs,” O’Leary says. “We hope to build this strong local presence.”

Adding to the conversation, Setten says, “We offer below-market rates.”

Arts district partner Youth in Arts offers an artistic experience that’s virtually unprecedented. Primarily serving children with disabilities and children from low-income families, Youth in Arts offers culturally rich assembly presentations to schools throughout the Bay Area and provides a variety of in-depth workshops and artist residencies. Youth in Arts is also the founding organization of the annual and popular Italian Street Painting Marin event. Falkirk Cultural Center contains three art galleries with changing exhibitions, and hosts a variety of programs that include Marin Master Gardeners, Marin Poetry Center and Talk of the Town Toastmasters.

The arts district program strategy continues to roll out and thus spell out downtown San Rafael’s new arts district positioning. In January, when the local arts district partners reconvene, more progress will be made.

“San Rafael is dynamic and diverse and filled with surprisingly creative people in the downtown,” Setten says. “We want to give people a reason to get off the freeway before visiting Sonoma.”

To learn more, visit caculturaldistricts.org/san-rafael.