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# Oakland's Journey From Seedy to Sizzling

By CHLOE VELTMAN    MAY 2, 2010

Just a few years ago, the Uptown Oakland neighborhood was mostly a dead zone after business hours: an intimidating landscape of gaping doorways, barren sidewalks and abandoned storefronts. Then, in 2006, eight local gallery owners began Art Murmur, a monthly evening tour of their spaces, to showcase the work of clients and promote their businesses. Before long, the Friday tours were attracting so many people that the organizers decided to apply for permits to close off a stretch of 23rd Street so that visitors could wander freely without blocking traffic.

Today Art Murmur is a bazaar of cultural activity. The gallery tours have grown to accommodate some 20 art spaces and hundreds of people, and D.J.'s and V.J.'s perform as visitors view the works on display. On the street, musicians, dancers and performance artists entertain passersby while vendors sell hotdogs with sizzling onions. What began as a predominantly hipster local crowd now includes visitors from around the Bay and beyond. Serious art buyers from as far away as New York, Miami and Rio de Janeiro have also begun turning up.

Art Murmur is just one sign of the recent emergence of Oakland's cultural scene. In February 2009, the Fox Theater joined another grand old theater, the Paramount, in being restored to its former luster. The two auditoriums now attract audiences in the thousands to performances by local arts organizations like the Oakland East Bay Symphony and the Oakland Ballet, as well as by well-known pop music acts like Mary J. Blige, Green Day and Jeff Beck.

There are now 30 arts festivals that take place in Oakland, up from 2 in the mid-'80s, and about 50 art galleries where there were only a handful a decade ago. Industrial-arts organizations like the Crucible, founded in 1999, have been instrumental in supplying the Burning Man Festival with eye-popping installations.

This weekend's reopening of the Oakland Museum of California, dedicated to exploring the state's historical, artistic and natural heritage, will be another major step in the city's cultural renaissance. The event will feature 31 continuous hours of free public programming, including gallery tours, performances by local artists, yoga classes and an overnight pajama party.

Once regarded as a seedy, crime-ridden port city, Oakland is coming into its own as a cultural destination, and the arts are having a significant economic effect. According to research by the Oakland Cultural Trust, an arts advocacy group, for every dollar that Oakland invests in culture, it gets back four dollars in fees, licenses and taxes. Nonprofit arts in Oakland generate more than \$103 million in gross annual economic activity and provide around 5,000 jobs, the trust found.

Much of the current activity can be traced to Jerry Brown, who served as the city's mayor from 1999 to 2006. Like political leaders elsewhere, Mr. Brown viewed the arts as a way to boost the city's image. Samee Roberts, cultural arts and marketing manager for the City of Oakland, said that Mr. Brown spurred the Fox Theater's restoration and paved the way for the Art and Soul festival, the city's flagship annual community event, featuring art, music, dance, children's activities and food.

Real estate has also played a role in the development of Oakland's arts world, as it has in areas like Brooklyn. Faced with increasing rents in San Francisco, many artists and arts organizations have relocated across the Bay since the mid-1990s, finding less expensive quarters in Oakland's many abandoned warehouses and low-income neighborhoods. Ms. Roberts noted that there were around 3,000 artists living in Oakland today, up 30 percent from 10 years ago.

Private investment has played a role too. Mr. Brown helped bring in \$60 million in redevelopment funds to jump-start the construction of more than 600 residential units in Uptown Oakland. The \$75 million rehabilitation of the Fox Theater was largely made possible by the fund-raising efforts of the real estate

developer and philanthropist Philip Tagami. Such public and private investment, in turn, has catalyzed the growth of restaurants, clubs and galleries in the area.

As local government struggles with its finances during the economic downturn, the role of private investment has become even more central to Oakland's cultural development. The current \$42 million shortfall in the city's \$400 million budget has led to further proposed cuts in cultural funds. Recent plans by city officials to halve the arts budget, which currently stands at just under \$1 million, have recently been dropped because of stiff opposition from the community. Nevertheless, arts funds are expected to fall below \$950,000 in the next year.

Arts groups here have responded by taking more control over their finances. The Crucible covers most of its \$3 million budget by charging for classes, space rental and other programs, said Michael Sturtz, its founder and creative director. The Kinetic Arts Center, which opened in November and offers programs in circus skills, physical theater and fitness, operates mainly as a for-profit entity called a limited liability company.

"Being an LLC provides us with flexibility when it comes to funding," said Jennifer Wong, its administrative and marketing director. "For example, we can apply for small-business loans."

Despite the challenges of sustaining themselves financially, Oakland's arts groups are cautiously optimistic about the city's cultural prospects.

"Oakland is experiencing a wonderful artistic renaissance," Mr. Sturtz said. "But it needs the city to help seed it and grow it."

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