

Downtown's 'creative alley' attracts more activity

Pacific Avenue coming alive with business relocations, projects

Katie Ross

December 5th, 2013



--Staff photo by Katie Ross

Frank Swoboda, president of Corner Booth Media, says the West Pacific area is becoming a collaborative neighborhood

Tucked amongst exposed brick, scant graffiti, and "No Loitering" signs, a quiet revival is taking place on west Pacific Avenue in downtown Spokane.

The west 100 block of the street, in particular, has become known as "creative alley," to its resident businesses, says Frank Swoboda, president of Corner Booth Media, located in the Wetzel Building at 114 W. Pacific.

"There is an energy here that is vital to the work we do," he says. "There's a real creative sensibility. It's fun here."

The contrast of finished and unfinished abounds on the 100 and 200 blocks; beautifully restored buildings brush elbows with shuttered, crumbling facades.

However, for a creative company, the juxtaposition is priceless, Swoboda says. He says his company often uses the character of the neighborhood as a backdrop for videos and photography.

C.K. Anderson, principal and creative director at downtown design agency helveticka, says the revitalized feel of the neighborhood was one of the factors in the decision to move helveticka to the neighborhood later this month.

"I think the vibe there is a little bit of industrial chic. The patina is really real, real raw. Like a larger city but without all of the people," he says. "It's got that color, that excitement."

Anderson also says that the abundance of creative businesses on the street was a factor in the decision to move.

"It's becoming home to quite a few creative businesses," Anderson says. "I think that's an attraction for all involved."

The firm will move into the building at 121 W. Pacific by the end of December, he says. Anderson says helveticka has been in its current space at 202 E. Spokane Falls Blvd. for almost 18 years, but decided to take the opportunity to relocate to the custom-renovated space inside the former Johnston Printing warehouse, which is being redeveloped by Steve Schmautz of 121 Development Inc. The space also is slated to become home to The Union, a yoga studio owned by Tyler Lafferty and Nick Murto, and to Copeland Architecture & Construction Inc.

The renovation of that building is just one of several construction projects happening in the area.

Corner Booth Media moved into the neighborhood in October, Swoboda says, from its former site at 122 S. Monroe. Other tenants in the Wetzel Building include photographers, a makeup artist, an event planner, and an interior designer. The tenants all share common space, Swoboda says, including a conference room and kitchen/lounge area.

"We love the synergy of sharing space with other businesses," Swoboda says.

Debra Howard, an interior designer, has been a tenant in the Wetzel Building for 10 years, she says. Howard runs her design firm, Gestalt Studio, and small home decor and furnishings retail shop, called 1900, on the ground floor space in the building.

"It's just been wonderful to see this area come alive," she says. "There are great, creative people here."

The low-traffic volume, ongoing construction, and boarded-up buildings belie the surge of creativity and teamwork that's happening behind the neighborhood's historic brick walls. Swoboda says that businesses in the area collaborate on projects, such as one of the photographers doing work for the ballet studio across the street. This is one of the unique aspects of the neighborhood, he says.

Meredith Banka, a freelance marketing consultant who works with Corner Booth and other businesses in the district, says she believes the concept of multitenant business buildings is beneficial for all.

"I think it makes more sense for small businesses to collaborate and gain efficiencies in the space they use," she says. "It's about defining what enough is, and then businesses are able to deploy capital to other things."

Banka says that space there may get scarce soon.

"This part of town is going through a significant rejuvenation," she says. "Space is going to be a commodity here soon."

Other businesses on 200 block of Pacific include the design firm Klundt IHosmer and Thomas Hammer Coffee Roasters. On the 100 block, Robert Karl Cellars and The Ballet Arts Academy keep company with the businesses in the Wetzel Building. Just one short block south of that stretch of Pacific is the Spokane Public Market, and one block east is Emvy Cellars.

The process of old becoming new again is not without its potential hazards.

There aren't any businesses there yet that stay open late, Swoboda says; Anderson says the street could use more lights. However, many there say the feeling of community in the area makes them feel safe.

Banka also says the multitenant building contributes to the safety of the workers there by consistently have people around.

"There's always someone here," she says.

There is some transient presence in the area, partially because the House of Charity, run by Catholic Charities of Spokane, sits across Browne at 32 W. Pacific. However, Banka and Swoboda both say that House of Charity is an opportunity, not a worry.

"It's fantastic that House of Charity is in a part of town that's become vibrant, because what they do there is important," Banka says. "It brings awareness."

Anderson says that while there is a safety element involved in doing business in the neighborhood, he is also not worried about it.

"I think safety concerns, from an employer perspective, are always there," he says. "But I think it's manageable."

Anderson says the firm's parking area will be well lit and gated.

Overall, Swoboda says, the area adds to the vibrancy of the downtown area and Spokane itself.

"I think it extends the downtown area and adds safety to it," he says. "It also lets other businesses thrive around this area. I love the mix of different businesses."

For the future, Swoboda, Banka and Anderson all say they would like to see the area continue to grow and become home

to even more businesses.

Anderson also says he expects the revitalization of the area to continue. There are areas of Pacific farther west, he says, that could benefit from more development. He also says he hopes the renovation projects going on currently will act as a catalyst for the neighborhood.

"It just takes a little momentum," he says.

- Downtown



- **Katie Ross**

-  e-mail

-

Reporter Katie Ross covers manufacturing, hospitality, and government at the Journal of Business. An outdoor enthusiast and snowboard fanatic, Katie is a recent graduate of Gonzaga University.

[Read More](#)