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Making a Place for Art in Anacostia



Honfleur Gallery staffers Amy Cavanaugh, above left, and Briony Evans outside Honfleur's Anacostia location, being readied for a Jan. 20 opening of tattoo artists' work. (By Carol Guzy -- The Washington Post)

A new gallery is set to open next week in the heart of Anacostia. Raised ceilings, surround-sound system, two flat-screen TVs and a swank name: the Honfleur Gallery, after the French port town so crucial to the impressionist movement.

The gallery is in between a pizza takeout joint and the nonprofit group that owns Honfleur. Down the block? The wreckage of a building that burned down years ago and recently collapsed onto the adjacent parking lot.

So this gallery, in a former pawnshop, seems a good thing, looking around at the site where Good Hope Road meets Martin Luther King Jr. Avenue SE. It's progress, a bright spot in the neighborhood. Or is it? Does Anacostia need to be saved by art? That depends on whom you're talking to.

Gallery organizers believe it can revitalize the neighborhood, as the Torpedo Factory Art Center did for Old Town Alexandria. Says Honfleur's Duane Gautier: "The big thing is, can we get a Starbucks or a Caribou. Then we'll know we've made it."

Rozina Knight, eating lunch next door at Younis Pizzeria, feels differently about the gallery. "I don't think that's something good for Southeast," says Knight, who lives in the neighborhood. "We need jobs and schools for our children. We don't need an art gallery."

The Honfleur Gallery is a project of the development corporation ARCH, which stands for Action to Rehabilitate Community Housing. Gautier founded the organization in 1987 and it provides affordable housing and operates a job training center in Ward 8. The D.C. Commission on the Arts and Humanities gave ARCH a \$50,000 grant for the

Honfleur Gallery
Rachel Beckman, The Washington Post
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gallery.

Honfleur opens its doors Jan. 20 with a show of local tattoo artists' work. The grand opening will be on Feb. 24 with a group show of east-of-the-river artists. "Arts and culture can be an economic generator of a neighborhood, like over on Seventh Street [NW]," says Gautier. "This can be used as a small catalyst."

Next door is pizzeria owner Mustafa Younis. Asked about the gallery, he launches into a tirade, temporarily ignoring customers waiting to order. "He wants everyone out," Younis says. "He's running around like Moses like he's saving everyone." Younis wanted to buy the space at 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE to fulfill his dream of having a sit-down pizza parlor. He filed a civil suit with D.C. Superior Court in 2003, saying that Gautier promised to sell him the property but then pulled out of the deal. Gautier won't comment; the matter is still pending, according to Younis's lawyer.

The neighborhood's other established art gallery is a mile and a half from Honfleur, just up the hill from the Anacostia Community Museum. Anacostia Art Gallery & Boutique owner Juanita Britton used to live in the house at 2806 Bruce Pl. SE before converting it about a year and a half ago. Business is excellent, she says.

Britton says if she had it her way, art galleries would dot every block on MLK all the way to South Capitol Street. It brings good energy and that's what Anacostia needs, she says.

"They hit the nail on the head with opening with a show that highlights the residents," Britton says. "There's no other way to do it, especially if the person isn't from the neighborhood. . . . People don't want a gallery that's so stuffy it doesn't welcome people."

Amy Cavanaugh, Honfleur's director, wants to support the community's work but also expose it to art from different cultures; the 2007 schedule features artists from Northern Ireland and France.

Britton's biggest challenge is her location, she says. People think it's too far from downtown, and some of her visitors tell her that taxis won't drive them to Anacostia. Cavanaugh wishes that Honfleur was across the street from the Anacostia Metro station; it's about a 10-minute walk.

The location didn't discourage Chi Nguyen, a Fairfax-based textile artist who plans to

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rent one of the four studio spaces on the second floor of Honfleur for about \$150 a month, after looking at more expensive studios in Georgetown and downtown Washington. Plus, the spaces are new and equipped with skylights.

"The lady that I spoke to said the neighborhood is in transition," Nguyen says. "Within a year or two the transition will get better and the gallery might get more recognition. That's what I'm hoping."

Artist Imani Brown curated Honfleur's soft-opening show of tattoo artists' work, "No Scratchers." She says a lot of artists were wary about showing their work there, though that might be partly because of the tattoo artists being uncomfortable with a formal art gallery.

"People are skeptical that people are going to take from the neighborhood and not give back," Brown says. "They have a lot of work ahead of them as far as proving themselves."

No Scratchers opens Jan. 20 at 7 p.m. at Honfleur Gallery, 1241 Good Hope Rd. SE, and is on view through Feb. 17. 202-889-5000.