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WEEKEND BREAK

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FROM DEAD SPACE TO ART EXHIBIT



Photos by Sondra Carr
Ray Merritt, a member of the Astoria Downtown Historic District Association board, and Michael Angiletta, a founder of Project Storefront Astoria, clean the defunct photo booth outside the old Arc Arcade on Commercial Street, preparing it to become a new work of art.

By KATHERINE LACAZE
For The Daily Astorian

The founders of Project Storefront Astoria have formed an uncommon union between the area’s creative minds and vacant downtown buildings — a pairing meant to ripple outward and boost economic revitalization.

“It was a really personal thing for me,” said Astoria resident Michael Angiletta, who helped launch the project. “I really love this town.”

After assessing the commercial landscape — and recognizing that empty, dead storefronts have as much of a halo effect as beautiful ones — Angiletta searched for a solution and came across a similar project in New Haven, Connecticut.

In bringing Project Storefront to Astoria, Angiletta and other founders hope to “prove the concept with low obstacles and low hurdles.” They want to make it easy for building owners to agree to have temporary window displays or other art exhibits installed to help energize downtown.

And the project doesn’t just involve window displays. Other structures and spaces — a defunct phone booth, say, or a chain-link fence around an empty lot — can also be potential canvasses.

Coming alive

With the support of the Astoria Downtown Historic District Association, Project Storefront launched a pilot program in fall 2018 that included participation from the Astoria Regatta, Astor Street Opry Company, Liberty Theatre and the old J.C. Penney building on Commercial Street, now owned by Sean Fitzpatrick and Chris Holen.

While Angiletta works with building owners — many of whom don’t live in Astoria — to access their vacant spaces, his counter-



Project Storefront Astoria’s immersive installation at the Norblad Hotel was a collaborative effort among seven local artists, including Sondra Carr, William Michael Brown, Kai Raden, Carol Edwards, Janet Nelson Hutchings, Missy Strain and Shannon Hendrick. The temporary exhibit, open for the December Art Walk, featured illuminated paper sea creatures, murals of marine landscapes and other lighting effects, along with an atmospheric soundscape created by Harper Carr.

part Sondra Carr, owner of Vignette Coastal Design, matches artists to the sites. She also uses her skills in visual merchandising to help generate ideas for eye-catching installations.

Unlike at a gallery or museum, where people purposefully go to spend time viewing art, “you’ve got two to seven seconds to capture someone’s attention” when they’re walking by a storefront display, she said.

Carr also established the Astoria Center for Collaborative Arts as a nonprofit to help area artists “envision working together collaboratively,” she said. Artists are currently coming to her with amazing ideas, she said.

“I think it’s going to be really exciting this coming year,” she added.

‘A museum without walls’

Project Storefront’s Facebook page is the



main entry point for building owners and artists to get involved.

Attracting artists hasn’t been a challenge. At this point, there are more potential exhibitors than spaces; getting access to the vacant storefronts is the difficult part. Yet the project moves along.

For the Astoria Art Walk in December, Paul Caruana’s Norblad Hotel at 1359 Duane St. was the site of an immersive installation, complete with paper sea creatures, murals of undersea landscapes and lighting effects. Seven artists — Carr, William Michael Brown, Kai Raden, Carol Edwards, Janet Nelson Hutchings, Missy Strain and Shannon Headrick — contributed. Harper Carr also created an atmospheric soundscape to play as visitors walked through.

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