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## Kansas City Star, The (MO)

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### Empty + art = success The Urban Culture Project puts the artists in charge, adding life to downtown process

ALICE THORSON

The Urban Culture Project is a Kansas City success story.

With four exhibition spaces up and running as of last month, UCP is fulfilling its goal of supporting artists helping revitalize the urban core by putting artworks and exhibits in vacant storefronts downtown.

"I think this is the hottest project in the country, providing amazing opportunities for local curators and especially meaningful for artists, in school or out, young and emerging or otherwise," says Philip Ye former director of education at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. "It is so rare to have such interesting appropriate venues both to see and to make art."

Yenawine, now co-director of the New York-based educational research organization, Visual Understanding Education, has been tracking the Urban Culture Project since he toured it in May 2003.

Inspired by other cities' success with the storefront art idea, Kansas City art collector David Hughes, a vice president at American Century, launched the UCP after a series of meetings with local artists and :

That was almost two years ago. Today the area bounded by 11th and 13th streets, Baltimore Avenue and Street, attracts upwards of 400 people when new shows open - usually on the third Friday of each month.

Accompanied by performances and live music, these Third Fridays events represent a kind of downtown doppelganger to the Crossroads First Fridays gallery crawl, although with UCP, artists - not art dealers - charge of the shows.

With showing rather than selling as the focus, the art is edgier.

It is also more youthful, by virtue of the numerous recent Kansas City Art Institute and KU graduates who are organizing and participating in UCP exhibits.

"It's created all kinds of energy downtown," says Stacy Switzer, artistic director of the nonprofit Grand Contemporary art space in the Crossroads Art District. "Very young artists are beginning to feel that the support system when they get out of school and that they have a voice in how it takes shape."

UCP productions have included performances and anti-war art, light works and video installations, noise and ambitious sculptural expressions incorporating colored coat hangers, plastic storage containers, crumpled newspapers, even a roaring stuffed bat.

Kansas City artist Oz McGuire, a 2001 graduate of the University of Kansas known for his video critique of American militarism, is a regular participant in UCP shows and events.

"The UCP happened at the perfect time, as the Crossroads became increasingly commercial and the downtown was ripe for takeover," McGuire said in a recent e-mail.

"It certainly took a leap of faith on the part of the city, the landlords and David Hughes and company to put these spaces into the hands of young art kids, but I think it has paid off.

"The city is better for it, because now you have young artists who don't leave Kansas City the minute they

graduate. They stick around and bring in young artists and musicians from other thriving scenes to do shows at UCP venues."

In February, McGuire and Heather Lustfeldt, assistant curator at the H&R Block Artspace, will present a series of sound artworks by local artists at the newly opened Boley Building space at 12th and Walnut streets.

The Boley Building and the UCP space called "The Bank," which opened in spring 2003 in the old Mark Taper Bank building at 11th and Baltimore, will cease to be art venues as soon as permanent tenants are found. Part of the UCP gig with developers, and one could argue that this very air of contingency contributes to the venue's freshness.

"The people and activity in the space and outside the space makes it more attractive to potential tenants," said McGuire. "It provides a reason for more people to come downtown and something of interest to the burgeoning residential population within the loop."

"I think it's a fine arrangement for all sides," said Jon Copaken, principal at Copaken White & Blitt, which designs and manages the Town Pavilion, the Boley Building and the Jenkins Building.

"We have vacant space, and that affords the UCP people an ability to get into space at low cost, help renovate a given area and move on to the next area."

Representing a somewhat less temporary arrangement, the UCP's tenancy of the ground floor of Charmer at 12th and Walnut, site of the Paragraph gallery, is secure with a five-year lease.

Paragraph, founded in Lawrence by recent KU alums **Hesse McGraw**, 25, and Cobi Newton, 26, moved to Kansas City to join the Urban Culture Project in May 2003.

McGraw, an artist, writer and curator, is Paragraph's director, focusing on what he calls "hybrid activities that don't acknowledge the boundaries between disciplines." Drawing on his KU contacts, he has been a key proponent of injecting architecture and design into the UCP mix.

### Making space

Each of the Urban Culture Project gallery spaces bears the stamp of a different artist/architect team. With a tight budget, they perform minimal renovations and maximum cleaning to transform dusty and dilapidated office and retail quarters into suitable, albeit highly idiosyncratic, showcases for contemporary art.

Brad Satterwhite of BNIM Architects, in consultation with McGraw, designed and renovated the Paragraph gallery. With its pristine white walls and professional lighting, it is the slickest of the UCP's galleries and recently won an award from the American Institute of Architects, one of two received by UCP this year. Another beneficial renovation was Kansas City's monthly art magazine, *Review*, which leases the western half of the Paragraph space from the Charlotte Street Foundation.

Artist Tom Gregg worked with Jay Tomlinson of Helix Architecture + Design on the Bank. Architects Rogier Grotenhuis and Laura Pastine teamed with artist-curators Rebecca Dolan, Daven Gee and Barry Anderson to turn the 9,000-square-foot Boley Building space into an exhibition venue that some have compared to the celebrated Dia Foundation space in Chelsea, according to Hughes.

The latest addition to the UCP's corpus of spaces is a set of windows in the historic Jenkins Music Co. at 1217 Walnut St. Barry Kyle, a professor in the department of theater at the University of Missouri-Kansas, and artist Russell Ferguson and Kathy Achaepol of BNIM Architects have turned the window area into a stage.

In mid-October Kyle, who has directed plays around the world, launched his UMKC-based "Retail Theater" in the Jenkins space, with a politically edgy performance titled "Fifteen Minute Window." (See accompanying story.)

The Jenkins space is the second storefront window space developed by the Urban Culture Project. In 2003, UCP presented its inaugural exhibit at "Downtown," a space designed by architect Cary Goodman Evans Goodman in the Town Pavilion windows at Petticoat Lane and Main. Well-known Kansas City artist Fors curated two group shows at Downtown, before it closed in summer 2003 because the space was

## Projects and projections

Hughes founded the Urban Culture Project after the successful launch of the Charlotte Street Foundation program, which annually recognizes a half dozen Kansas City artists with significant monetary awards.

The UCP started small, awarding grants of \$2,500 each to the four inaugural recipients in 1997. By 2000, the amount had grown to \$5,500, and Hughes began looking around for additional ways to support Kansas City artists.

"Grant Burcham, CEO of Missouri Bank & Trust, had the idea for empty storefronts," Hughes said. "We were talking about it, and then Charlotte Street decided to take it on as a project."

A primary concern, Hughes said, was to not cannibalize funding for the awards, which are drawn from a pool of corporations, foundations and individuals. (In the last eight years the Charlotte Street Foundation disbursed grants totaling \$225,000 to 46 artists.)

In winter 2003 Hughes left American Century to devote his full-time energies to the Charlotte Street Foundation, including a search for new sources of funding for the Urban Culture Project. He found them, he said, in foundations and corporations interested in a more vibrant downtown.

"We were going forward on multiple tracks," he said, "talking to artist-curators to see who might be interested in this concept from an artistic standpoint, and at the same time talking to downtown leaders and funders."

Poised to begin its third year of programming, the Urban Culture Project has a budget of \$100,000 - all coming from "new money" - out of a total Charlotte Street Foundation budget of \$175,000. And the foundation has an endowment, generated in part by setting aside 20 percent of UCP funding to support the Charlotte Street awards.

In December 2003 Hughes brought in Kate Hackman, a freelance critic and curator and former editor of the *Missouri Post-Dispatch*, to be assistant director of the Charlotte Street Foundation.

Hackman, who was the artistic director of the alternative Exit Art space in New York in the late 1990s, was attracted to the Urban Culture Project because of its "disposition toward interdisciplinary activities."

"A lot of the most interesting things are pushing the boundaries," she said, "and inviting collaborations between different kinds of artists." Hackman's hiring coincided with the UCP's realization of a prime component of its overall project: providing studio space for young artists.

She coordinated a call for artists and convened a selection panel to choose the artists who would receive studio space in the empty offices on the first floor of the Mark Twain Bank building. Currently 14 young artists, including recent Kansas City Art Institute graduates Aaron Wrinkle, Peter Demos, Jill Noone and Lynus Young, are working in free studio spaces that range from 250 to 750 square feet.

"It's been really good," said Young, who spent the last two years making art in random locations, including his grandmother's apartment in Springfield.

Having downtown studio space has changed his approach, Young said, from "Oh, I'll just make some poster and paint a little picture over here," to "I'm here to work."

Young and the other artists who work at the Bank hold open studios in conjunction with the UCP's Third Annual Art Openings. Visitors can peruse a vibrant mix of expressions, from Demos' elegant pendulous abstractor

Wrinkle's scruffy commentaries invoking contemporary events.

Now that the Third Fridays event is well-established, Hughes and Hackman want to expand daytime ga and develop lunchtime talks and other programs geared to downtown residents and workers. Despite it success, the UCP won't go on forever.

"The UCP is not a 20-year project," Hughes said. "It's a temporary project that serves a function in the environment."

Experience the Urban Culture Project from 5 to 10 p.m. Friday at Third Friday Art Downtown, a free eve featuring three multimedia art exhibitions (to join the e-mail list, send a message to info@charlotte street

Cross-Stitch: Craft Mediums Redefined

A group show curated by artists Hadley Johnson and Lauren McEntire, featuring more than 20 local anc artists using craft mediums to make contemporary statements

WHERE: The Bank, northwest corner of 11th and Baltimore

RECEPTION: 5 to 10 p.m. Friday

HOURS: noon to 3 p.m. Thursday and Saturday. The exhibit continues through Jan. 8.

CALL: (816) 221-5115

Shepard Fairey: Supply & Demand

An exhibit of works by the creator of the "Obey Giant" campaign

WHERE: Paragraph, 23 E. 12th St.

RECEPTION: 5 to 10 p.m. Friday

HOURS: noon to 6 p.m. Thursday, Friday and Saturday. The exhibit continues through Dec. 4.

CALL: (816) 695-7734

Time:base:inside

An exhibit of films, video and video installations by eight artists, curated by Daven Gee, Rebecca Dolan Anderson

WHERE: Boley Building, northwest corner of 12th and Walnut streets.

RECEPTION: 5 to 10 p.m. Friday

HOURS: noon to 3 p.m. Thursday and Saturday. The exhibit continues through Saturday.

CALL: (816) 221-5115

Photos (3, color)

NORMAN NG/The Kansas City Star

Urban Culture Project assistant director Kate Hackman (left) and director David Hughes head efforts to

empty storefronts in downtown Kansas City into contemporary art spaces, much to the benefit of artists Callyann Casteel (right).

JILL TOYOSHIBA/The Kansas City Star

Daven Gee (from left), Rebecca Dolan and Barry Anderson are curators of the video exhibit, "time:base the Boley Building, 12th and Walnut.

SUSAN PFANNMULLER/Special to The Star

Crowds explored the art in Paragraph, a gallery at 23 E. 12th St. Paragraph is part of the Urban Culture



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