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THE WILD

The Urban Culture Project's support for local artists turns vacated buildings into highly accessible art displays.

WRITTEN BY **KEVIN KUZMA**
PHOTOGRAPHS PROVIDED BY
URBAN CULTURE PROJECT

At night, when the tract lights are left on inside the Paragraph Gallery on 12th Street, any passerby can pause on the sloping sidewalk and be treated to the city's most high concept art. Storefronts along this block and the businesses behind them have switched out constantly through the years, but the pieces that stand or hang illuminated on the walls are distinctly wild—unlike any other occupant on the street or the restaurant next door where stools standing atop checked table cloths seem strikingly common by comparison. The windows open up to a room 50ft. deep with walls 10ft. high that have been covered from floor to ceiling with drawings etched between the patterns on twill wallpaper. Just beyond the doorway, a stuffed animal has been ripped down the middle and dangles from a flat board, suspended by chain link.

The art may stand out as being especially contemporary or abstract, but the large, floor-to-ceiling gallery windows are the perfect place for these displays. Everything modern has a place here among the smoked glass on the sides of skyscrapers and the concrete-slab parking labyrinths.

The Paragraph Gallery is one of four free art galleries throughout the core where the work of artists supported by the Urban Culture Project (UCP) are available to view. Meant to infuse what was a lifeless downtown with energy and creativity, the UCP is a highbrow concept developed by David Hughes and his arts organization, called the Charlotte Street Foundation.

Hughes, an arts enthusiast, began the foundation in 1997 as a way to offer support to a local art community that was losing artists to other cities. The local art scene did manage to thrive, but it still faced challenges that prevented it from being all it could—namely, Kansas City’s sluggish urban core.

“We were having art openings among all of these tall buildings and nothing else was going on around us,” Hughes says. “There were no other activities going on. It was like a ghost town. I felt strongly that these buildings and spaces should not be torn down, but that new uses could be found for them. We wanted to serve as a small example of reusing old buildings.”

In 2003, the Charlotte Street Foundation set up spaces on 11th and 12th streets and Petticoat Lane to display work from its Urban Culture



Project initiative. What began as art placements in one window gallery evolved into four galleries and 15 artist studios. Those spaces that once provided a view into the city’s most innovative visual art today has expanded in concept. Now the UCP also hosts dance and theater performances, including the recent live presentation of Pink Floyd *The Wall*.

“As the Crossroads and its First Fridays events were really taking off, our orientation was to bring some of that energy further downtown, as well as to be a complement to it,” says Kate Hackman, associate director for the Charlotte Street Foundation. “As the Crossroads has become somewhat more commercially driven, we wanted to create a platform for artists of all media and disciplines to really take risks, collaborate, and work in new ways.”

Hackman heads the curatorial committee for the Urban Culture Project. The committee, composed of 10 visual, music, and theater artists, accepts applications for exhibitions, performances, and one-year studio residencies. Committee members

search for work by artists who are noticeably taking risks—either pushing their own creative bounds or those of the art community in general.

Naturally, an emphasis on experimental work sometimes yields original creations, but it also has generated enthusiasm and submissions from artists and organizations outside Kansas City.

Recognition of the Charlotte Street Foundation has grown among the art world’s most esteemed organizations. From 2006-2008, the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Visual Arts has funded Charlotte Street Foundation and its work. Visitors to Kansas City frequent the larger, more established museums such as the Kemper Museum of Contemporary Art and the Nelson-Atkins Museum of Art, along with the artist-driven galleries of the UCP.

Word about the support experimental artists are given in Kansas City has helped grow the base of avant-garde artists, says local painter and drawer Michael Converse.

“People are sticking around here after going to the [Kansas City] Art Institute or move here from other big cities where they can’t get ahead,” Converse says. “Everything seems more available and doable here. There are so many galleries and exhibition spaces here. You need something to get you started. You don’t just leave art school and jump right into a gallery. You need seed money, recognition, and a chance to show your work.”

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Kansas City’s urban core has changed monumentally since the inception of the Charlotte Street Foundation and the UCP. The irony, though, is that the city’s recent rebirth has been sparked around the art crowd, a collective that some cities fail to embrace—and occasionally take measures to discourage. In Kansas City, even the most abstract artists have venues that stop people on the streets, bring life to places that are otherwise less than ordinary, and broaden an audience behind glass where they might have only seen their reflections. www.urbancultureproject.org

For more information, visit www.urbancultureproject.org.

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