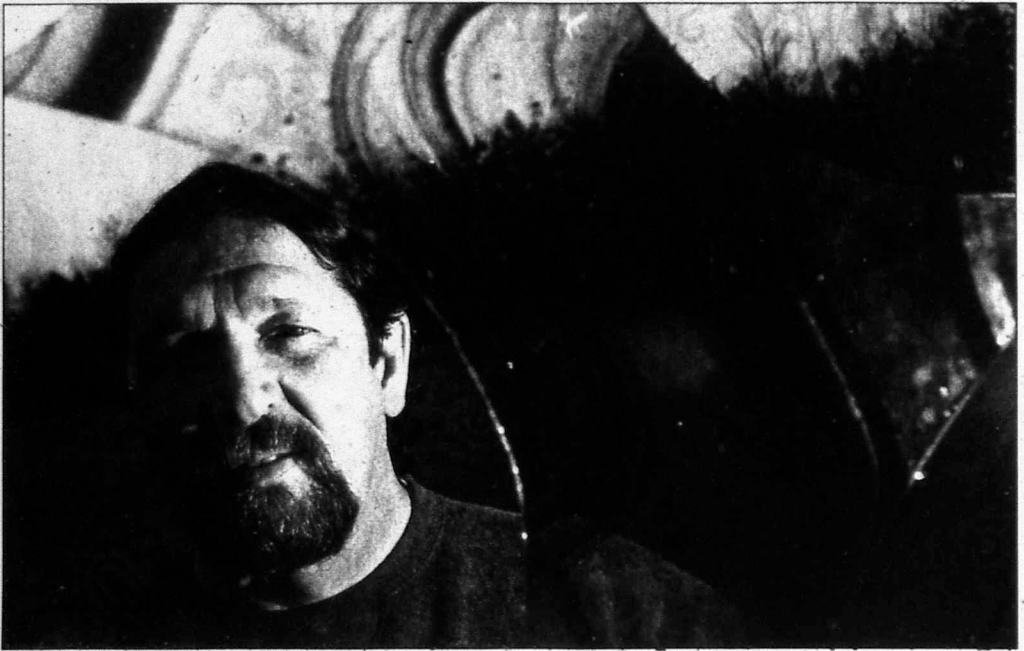


Bangor Daily

FINAL EDITION

bangornews.com

SATURDAY/SUNDAY, NOVEMBER 8-9, 2003



BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTOS BY GABOR DEGRE

Artist Mark Wren of Robbinston examines a piece of glass he will use in a pair of 9-foot stained-glass windows he is making for the new Downeast Heritage Center in Calais.



Maine's
Creative
Economy

Heritage & Hope

In Calais, cultural destination could have regional impact

BY KRISTEN ANDRESEN
OF THE NEWS STAFF

On the surface, Calais doesn't seem like the ideal place to promote the arts as an economic stimulus. "For rent" signs dot vacant storefronts along Main Street, and, in a controversial move last winter, part of the downtown district was declared a slum and blight zone for grant-writing purposes.

On the waterfront, however, the Downeast Heritage Center has risen like a brick-and-glass phoenix from a dilapidated train station. When it opens next spring, the center's cultural and natural exhibits are expected to draw 90,000 people a year to the city. But the locals aren't holding their breath.

"They're skeptical," Gail Wahl, a Community Development Block Grant administrator for the city, said in a phone interview last week. "I don't think they've ever seen it work anywhere."

But if it does work, the city could become a portrait of the creative economy in action. And its impact could reach far beyond Calais.

"While the Downeast Heritage Center is being built in Calais, and it will really enhance the downtown community, it really is a regional entity," center director Marc Edwards said during a tour of the facility, which is still under construction.

When it opens, the center will exhibit the natural and cultural assets of the region. Its gift shop will focus on work by local artists and craftspeople. And it already has created an opportunity for one Washington County artisan.

Mark Wren, a stained-glass designer from Robbinston, has plenty of reasons to be cynical about the regional economy. He has seen the Down East "renaissance" — five times. He has seen "dozens and dozens and dozens" of artisans move to the area, and he has seen most of them leave. He has sold a lot of

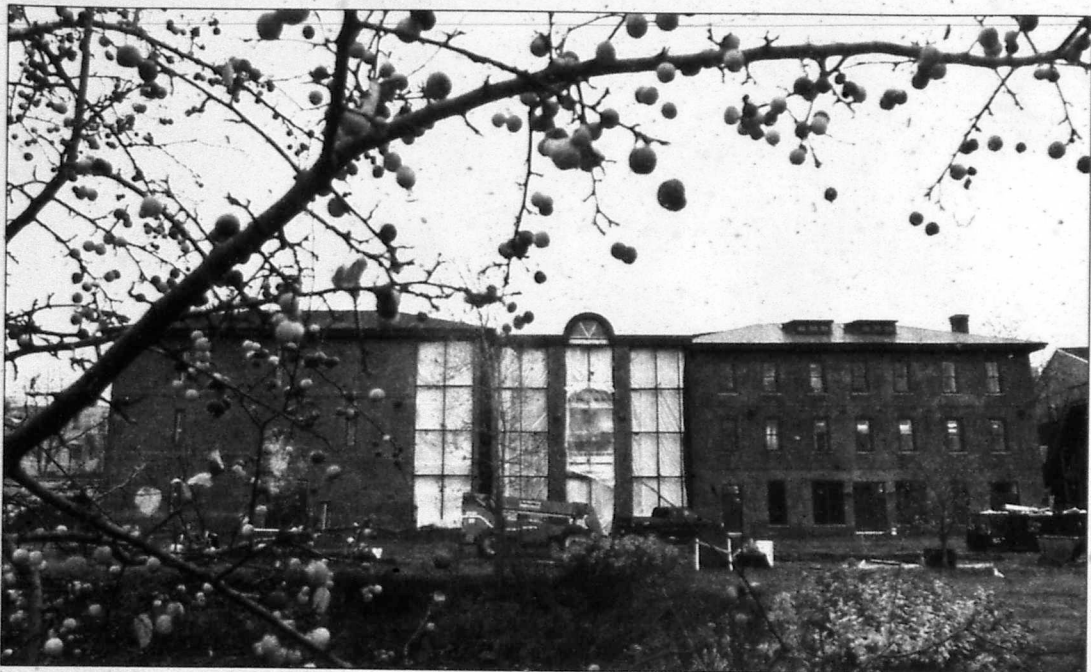


Main Street in Calais is reflected in a window of one of many vacant stores. Local officials are hoping that the new heritage center will attract tourists and give a boost to the local economy.

glasswork to locals, but a large portion of his customers are summer people who have plenty of money to have windows and lampshades shipped to their winter homes. Wren has considered opening a retail shop in one of the county's towns, but he says it wouldn't survive the local economy.

"There's a big difference between artists in Washington County and artists in the rest of the state," Wren said by telephone from his studio on Thursday. "In southern Maine, there are more people with available money to buy high-end artwork."

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BANGOR DAILY NEWS PHOTO BY GABOR DEGRE
 The Downeast Heritage Center is seen from the bank of the St. Croix River in Calais. The center will have four permanent exhibits and a theater space, and there are hopes it will feature the work of local artists as well.

Calais

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But if you ask him about the Downeast Heritage Center, which recently commissioned him to design large stained-glass panels depicting a sunburst, he sounds hopeful.

"It is the best thing that could've ever happened in Calais," Wren said. "Build it and they will come. I think that's what they're hoping and that's what we hope."

And if they do come, he may just set up shop in one of the city's vacant storefronts.

Research has shown that the arts, creative industries and cultural tourism have the power to transform the economy of a city. The evidence was strong enough to cause Gov. John Baldacci to establish the Blaine House Conference on the Creative Economy, which will take place next May in Lewiston.

A series of regional forums, the most recent of which took place Friday at the heritage center, has introduced municipal officials, economic developers, businesspeople and members of the arts community to the concept and allowed conference organizers to hear comments that will shape the conference.

"The creative economy is a catalyst for the creation of new jobs in Maine communities," Baldacci has said. "People who create jobs want to live in places that have a diverse cultural mix and an inventive and educated work force. Maine will be competitive economically if we continue to capitalize on the synergies between entrepreneurship, education, the arts and quality of life."

The concept encompasses people such as Wren, who already are working in the arts; as well as jobs that have yet to be created. But, as regional forums in Saco, Farmington, Bangor and Calais have shown, the creative econo-

my is already alive in Maine.

In Farmington, a chair maker who moved to Temple after coming to Maine as a tourist years earlier told his success story. After the Saco forum, a Portland-based developer announced his plan to turn a former shoe factory into joint studio-living space for artists. In Bangor, economic developers wanted to know how they could attract artists and artisans to their cities.

At the Calais meeting, members of Eastport's thriving arts community dismissed the perception that the town is at the "end of the world." Instead, they stressed the importance of collaborating with their neighbors in Canada. An artist and gallery owner even shared her concern that gentrification could drive rents too high in Eastport, and she's not alone. At a previous forum, one of the audience members was reluctant to brand Maine as a "creative economy" state for fear that it would draw too many people here.

"This has been going on, but we haven't given it the focus and asked ourselves what we can do to nurture this," said Jeffrey Sosnaud, deputy commissioner of the state Department of Economic and Community Development. "We didn't have a name for it. It took Richard Florida and his book [The Rise of the Creative Class] to cause us to take a step back and say, 'This is happening in Maine.' What we need to ask now is why has it been happening in Maine. What are the elements driving it?"

According to John Rohman, a Bangor architect and member of the conference steering committee, a driving factor is quality of life: It's part of what causes talented young people to choose his firm over another. They want to kayak. They want the outdoors. They move here for good schools and safe communities. But they also want theater, live music, good restaurants, art museums and boutiques.

Those amenities in turn attract people in noncreative industries, as well, such as doctors and lawyers, CEOs and managers.

"Think of it as a true economic engine by itself," Rohman said before the Bangor forum on Thursday. "These kinds of people literally can be anywhere they want."

And while the current body of research, including Florida's book and a 2000 study by the Boston-based New England Council, focuses on urban areas, the creative economy is flourishing in rural areas as well.

Richard Barringer and Charles Colgan of the Muskie School of Public Policy at the University of Southern Maine have embarked on a landmark study of the creative economy in Maine. Though this research is the first of its kind conducted in a rural state, the regional findings are encouraging.

Artists, designers and the spinoff they cause won't take the place of a paper mill that employs hundreds of people. But the New England Council study shows that their impact is significant. The research grouped for-profit businesses and nonprofit organizations together, and included artists and artisans, people employed in creative industries, such as boat building, architecture or design, and people who work in creative jobs at traditional businesses, such as a designer at an accounting firm.

The study found that, regionally, 235,000 people make up the creative cluster. Of those, 14,000 people, or 2.2 percent of the state's work force, live in Maine, and that figure is predicted to grow at a rate of 18 percent over the next 10 years. In addition, cultural tourism endeavors such as the Downeast Heritage Center pump \$6.6 billion annually into the New England economy.

The impact is even more profound when the tourists decide to stay here.

"Many people who are part of this creative economy are drawn to the state because of its outdoor heritage and its natural resources, and these are throughout the state," Sosnaud said. "These are people who are looking for a clean environment, a safe environment. And here they find economic opportunities that they can't find in urban areas because they are more expensive."

When the people who create jobs move here, they also create opportunities for the state's youth, many of whom leave Maine to pursue higher-paying professional positions elsewhere. That potential is already taking root Down East.

Edwards, the director of the Downeast Heritage Center, recently spoke with a group of students at Washington County Community College about the center's role in promoting cultural ecotourism. When he asked the students why they were enrolled in the tourism program, many said they wanted to open their own guiding business, but one response stood out.

A young man said he was a Calais native who knew the town's history, and now that the heritage center was under construction, he has a reason to stay. "Sometimes, that's what keeps me going," Edwards said.

And that's what will keep the creative economy going — one job at a time. It won't turn the Maine economy around overnight, just as the heritage center won't stem the exodus of Washington County's youth in a few months. But it's a start, and conference organizers say slow growth is good for sustainability.

"It's not the silver bullet," Edwards said. "It's not the one-shot deal. It's not the panacea that overnight things are going to change, but it will have an effect. The heritage center in and of itself is not the end-all. It's what it can do for the region — the opportunities it can provide."