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Hotel makes room for art

The Heldrich offers new venue

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NEW BRUNSWICK — The Heldrich, a tony hotel and conference center that opened nearly a year ago on Livingston Avenue, is hard to miss: It features, among other things, a sleek bar and restaurant overlooking the city's theater row, a vast lobby that opens onto Monument Square, and more than 800 artworks scattered throughout the complex.

The bulk of the contemporary-art collection contains works by New Jersey artists, references to the area's history and urban landscape, or is the fruit of partnerships with local visual-arts institutions.

This evening, Mary Jo Codey, the wife of Senate President Richard J. Codey, is scheduled to host a reception to inaugurate The Public Gallery, an exhibit space on the second floor of The Heldrich. The reception runs from 6 to 8 tonight, and the display of works by artists with disabilities is open through March 31; both are open to the public.

Stocking The Heldrich with art is an attempt to make the space "more accessible," according to Jean Holtz, vice president of communications for the New Brunswick Development Corporation, or Devco, The Heldrich's developer and managing owner. "It stemmed from a desire to make the hotel a destination for more than the people who book rooms or attend conferences" and to avoid choosing "art out of a catalog." Holtz says the value of The Heldrich's art collection has been estimated at nearly \$2 million.

The Public Gallery is one of several areas in The Heldrich devoted to the visual arts: On the ground floor, The Brodsky Center Gallery features a rotating slate of exhibits focusing on works culled from the neighboring Judith K. and David J. Brodsky Center for Print and Paper. Recent exhibits featured work by Kiki Smith and June Wayne. The current show downstairs is devoted to feminist artists of Indian descent.

In addition, Holtz said, Rutgers University's Jane Voorhees Zimmerli Art Museum has donated 20 works on paper, on permanent view on the second floor.

Gallery spaces are not isolated rooms; they are integrated into the rest of the building. For instance, The Brodsky Center Gallery is set up outside a ballroom behind the main lobby; The Public Gallery is in a kiosk area in the conference center, overlooking George Street; other artworks surface in hallways and entrances. Meanwhile, the main lobby is dominated by J. Kenneth Leap's enameled glass installation and a bronze sculpture by Andrew Rogers, on loan from Grounds for Sculpture.

Gail Levinson is the executive director of Arts Unbound, an organization based in Orange whose mission is to provide opportunities for people with disabilities to develop artistic skills. Paintings, collages and digital works by artists with disabilities are on view — and for sale from \$100 to \$4,000 — in The Public Gallery.

Levinson said the opportunity to exhibit at The Heldrich is significant because "it communicates to the public that artists with disabilities have significant talents and expertise and work that can command attention on the retail market." That space will continue to focus on "outsider" art.

Judith Brodsky, founding director of the internationally recognized Brodsky Center, formerly the Rutgers Center for Innovative Print and Paper, said the partnership with The Heldrich allows the complex to "become integrated into the cultural community of New Brunswick."

And it allows the Brodsky Center to play an education role. Brodsky said the gallery has erected a pair of stands containing "explanatory material" to accompany each show. In addition, the hotel plans to place in guest rooms a publication highlighting the complex's art and history.

The publication is called "A Place in Time," Holtz explained, because "at this time in New Brunswick history, this is what works there." She said she expects the collection to change every few years.

"From the point of view of getting people accustomed to thinking about art, it can have an impact," Brodsky said of the hotel-and-conference center gallery space. ". . . It makes art accessible. People stop being scared of it and thinking they won't understand it."

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