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Where art is a priority

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New Jersey artists could have a new space to display their work when a public gallery at the Hel drich Hotel opens this week.

The hotel and conference center, located on Livingston Avenue in the heart of the city's downtown, already boasts about 800 pieces of original artwork created by New Jersey-based artists, said Jean Holtz, vice president of the city's development corporation.

But a 750-square-foot space with floor-to-ceiling windows on the hotel's second floor still had empty walls until the decision was made to open it up to the public as a gallery, she said.

"It's near the area surrounding the food kiosk, in a space that de fines the Heldrich as a conference center," Holtz said. "The art will be a perfect conversation starter dur ing meeting breaks."

The New Brunswick Development Corp., or Devco, has made fine art a priority for the \$125-million structure that opened last year. Devco commissioned three site-specific pieces for the hotel's public spaces and purchased hundreds of other paintings, prints and photographs -- the majority by New Jersey artists -- for the Hel drich. The 11-story hotel and conference center features 250 rooms, retail stores, Rutgers University academic space, and luxury condominiums.

First to exhibit in the public gallery are works by people with physical or mental disabilities through an Orange-based organization called Arts Unbound. An opening reception, with food subsidized by the Heldrich, will be held tonight from 6 to 8 p.m.

Arts Unbound, an 8-year-old nonprofit, provides art education and training for people with mental, physical and developmental disabilities. Their Heldrich exhibit will include about 40 works, mostly acrylic or pastel on canvas, created by eight artists and various stu dents from two group classes, said Gail Levinson, executive director of the organization.

"We're proud to be the first community agency featured there," Levinson said. "It helps us to promote the enormous talent and skill of artists with disabilities."

Levinson said the facility feels more like a museum than a hotel-- a distinguished place that will draw new audiences.

Public art is an essential component of a city's revitalization, said Bob Belvin, director of the city's public library.

"New Brunswick's revitalization in part came from the strength of the cultural institutions we have here," Belvin said. "Gallery art is one aspect of that revitalization that was not equal to the strength of the performing arts."

Belvin said the new gallery's opening is indication that the city is moving forward.

"It'll add to the cultural strength of New Brunswick and make it more attractive," Belvin said.

Pamela Stefanek, executive director of New Brunswick City Market, which promotes the city's special improvement district, said the creation of a public space in a private building could push other local businesses to display art.

"It just provides an asset and I think it'll inspire others to promote art in their spaces as well," Stefanek said.

The public gallery will be open during normal business hours, evenings and weekends. Exhibits are slated to rotate every three months, though Holtz said details are yet to be determined.

"Going forward, we don't know what's going to go up there," Holtz said. "We hope ideas will come from the opening."

Tracy Reinhardt, one of the artists being featured in the first exhibit, said pushing atypical art in a public venue provides a public purpose. Art expresses the person who created it but people with disabilities often don't have words for what they're feeling, Reinhardt said.

"A lot of people don't have a chance to see that kind of art," said Reinhardt, 49, who is bipolar. "It touches people and sometimes they don't know it until they see it."

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