

## Sad cafés

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### A Lynn neighborhood mourns Gulu-Gulu

By Steven Rosenberg, Globe Staff | December 14, 2008

With its cappuccino and wine bar, panini grill and Czech beer menu, the little coffee shop with an improbable name seemed almost too good to be true. There, patrons could listen to jazz, grab a WiFi signal, sip espresso, and see work by local artists.

Now, nearly four years after Steve Feldmann and Marie Feldmannova opened Gulu-Gulu - the name a nod to the Prague bistro where the couple met - the Central Square coffee shop is no longer. "We just ran out of time and money," explained Steve Feldmann, who opened a second Gulu-Gulu in Salem in 2007. That café, said Feldmann, is making money and will stay open. The Lynn site is up for sale.

Many say the café became the face of the new downtown Lynn, which underwent a rapid change in 2003 after the city rezoned the area to allow condos to be built in former factories. Feldmann and his wife were drawn to the architecture in Central Square, where thousands of people once worked and shopped during Lynn's heyday in the mid 20th century. After buying a downtown loft, the couple decided the area needed a place where young people could get a good cup of coffee or a glass of wine and not feel rushed to leave. They found an empty storefront across from their loft, and under the city's Economic Development and Industrial Corporation program, received a \$50,000 loan to open the café.

"Marie and I built a place that we would like to go to. It wasn't basically built for anybody but ourselves," said Feldmann.

But even before the café opened, the couple realized how great a need there was for a place that loft residents could call their own.

"It was a real community effort to get it opened," said Sean Lobdell, who moved from Cambridge to Lynn in 2005, and bought a loft next door to the couple.

"Neighbors helped carry in refrigerators, freezers, and painted walls and chairs, and I remember at one point counting 15 people all hanging out. Nobody was getting paid; the place wasn't open. Everybody was just trying to help them get off the ground."

Almost overnight, the Gulu became the central gathering spot for loft owners and renters. With exposed brick walls and mismatched furniture and couches, the spot drew people who became fast friends at "Meet Your Neighbor" nights. Also, open mike nights and poetry slams were the norm, along with art openings.

"All of us were in our 20s and 30s, we were brand-new to a new scene, and there was excitement. We were coming to a dead area and making it ours," Feldmann said. "And then economics got in the way."

Over the last five years, more than 200 lofts have been built downtown - drawing young professionals from Greater Boston who couldn't afford real estate in the South End, Cambridge, or Jamaica Plain. Until the real estate market took a nosedive about two years ago, some of the Lynn condos fetched more than \$400,000. These days, it's possible to buy a 1,000-square-foot loft for less than \$200,000.

Feldmann said the economic downturn had a multi-pronged negative impact on Lynn's downtown. Not only did real estate prices drop, but plans by developers to expand to 500 units downtown - hitting what urban planners call "critical mass" - were put on hold. "We lost a group of people that we thought would be our day-to-day clientele," he said.

Still, the Gulu hung on. For many, like Ashley and John Nicholls, the Gulu represented much more than just a café. Nicholls, a guitarist billed as John the Bartender during open mike nights at the Gulu, said the café had an ineffable appeal. "The Gulu was like the centerpiece, the cornerstone of social activity. It would be a Saturday night and you'd see half of your neighbors there and it was everyone and it was every week," said Nicholls.

"It was a place where you'd sit and be artistic or be creative," added Ashley Nicholls. "It felt like a home. It was really genuine and gritty and it wasn't always perfect. But it was hopeful."

While the Gulu drew loft residents, many of its customers came from neighboring Swampscott and Marblehead. Some, like David Shear, a lawyer and artist who lives in Swampscott and Oklahoma City, wanted to support a business located on the same blocks where his family had once owned a business.

"It was a refuge. It had soul," said Shear, who often would make the Gulu one of his first stops after returning from Oklahoma.

Mark "Whisky" Wolinski, whose family also had a downtown Lynn business in the 1960s, was also a regular at the Gulu - frequently performing as the drummer in the Gulu's house band, the Jazz Navigators. The band played in exchange for free beer, playing everything from Thelonious Monk and Miles Davis to the "Barney Miller" TV show theme song.

"You saw the kind of comeback Lowell made and Salem made, and you hoped that someday this would happen in Lynn," said Wolinski.

Jamie Marsh, Lynn's community development director, called Feldmann a pioneer for his efforts to help reenergize a neighborhood. "It's the right concept in a tough time," said Marsh, who expects the Gulu to be rented or sold in the coming months.

Feldmann also is upbeat about downtown Lynn's future, and said the second wave of people who have bought or rented lofts are younger than their predecessors and committed to staying in the city longer. He said the Gulu showed that the need for a neighborhood coffee shop in an urban area is as strong as ever.

"It's good for the community, it brings people out, it gives people a place to gather and share ideas," said Feldmann. "I think it's important for any neighborhood to have that."

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