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After sluggish decades, Lynn shows life

By **David Liscio**

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Former City Development Director Steve Harausz was fond of saying that briefcases must precede berets when it comes to the revitalization of downtown Lynn.

According to Harausz, it was more important to create commercial office space than artist lofts or storefront cafes.

But judging by the ongoing evolution of the city's Arts & Cultural District, or so-called Art Block, the berets are spearheading the urban renewal, supported by an influx of residents living in the hundreds of new loft condominiums.

The Art Block neighborhood is a key piece of the downtown master plan, which continues to unfold in the wake of massive real estate investments by The Mayo Group and other firms, and changes in the local zoning laws, according to city Development Director Hal McGaughey.

Recent amendments to city zoning ordinances make it easier to transform industrial buildings into condominiums without restrictive parking requirements, as well as create a high-rise strip along the waterfront.

Arts and cultural activities are focused near Central Square, which might be viewed as the nucleus of the Art Block. The city square is the address of organizations such as LynnArts, which houses three art galleries in a former bank building, and Raw Art Works, a studio that uses art as therapy to help at-risk youths. The LynnArts building at 25 Exchange St. is also home to the FNX alternative rock radio station. The Daily Item building at 38 Exchange St. also faces the square.

The district encompasses a cluster of city blocks roughly bordered by Exchange, Broad, Washington, Munroe and Central streets.

Central Square is also home to the fledgling Gulu Gulu Café, which fosters a laid-back coffee house atmosphere, offers an eclectic menu, extensive wine list, and hosts an array of evening entertainment that ranges from poetry readings and classic films to live music and art openings.

"More people are coming here in the evenings to sip wine, talk and watch a film," said Gulu Gulu owner Steven Feldmann. "We've had a tremendous amount of community support. New people who have moved into the lofts come in often. I know almost all of them, and even the old Lynners who never left the city come in regularly. They tell me this is how Lynn used to be years ago, with a downtown that was a fun destination, with cultural events and restaurants."

According to Feldmann, the proximity of quality restaurants like Tacos Lupita, Lynn Pho, and the Oxford Street, are helping to mold the downtown into a desirable destination.

Art shows, too, have helped lure visitors. Susan Halter, associate director of LynnArts, noted that since the start of the year, more than 30 art exhibits were held in the three galleries, and the member theater group presented four performances.

Rep. Steve Walsh, a Lynn Democrat and executive director of LynnArts, echoed Feldmann's assessment. "All the pieces seem to be falling into place," he said.

Within the past year, Central Square has also attracted the Big Scoops ice cream parlor, high-end jeweler Omar & Oscar, and a Russian bookstore. A Dunkin' Donuts is slated to open over the winter and plans are under way for a gourmet Italian restaurant next door to the doughnut and coffee shop.

An atomic clock perched on a traffic island near the overhead railroad bridge serves as a centerpiece for the square, a showpiece of 21st century technology with its internal mechanism linked by satellite.

A major step in the overall revitalization effort and the transformation of the neighborhood into an earnest arts and culture district is the relocation of the Lynn Museum & Historical Society from its longtime headquarters on Green Street to the Lynn Heritage State Park Visitor's Center, corner of Union and Washington streets.

The move, scheduled for early 2006, is expected to increase pedestrian traffic near Central Square and solidify the link between LynnArts and the Lynn Museum.

Connie Colom, executive director of the Lynn Museum, said a long-term lease agreement between the museum and the state is nearing completion. "At this point, we're hopeful it will be signed before the end of the year," said Colom, noting that the lease will be for 25 years with two 10-year options to renew once the original term expires. "We're very excited."

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As part of the museum relocation plan, the pocket park behind the visitors' center will be expanded so that it abuts the LynnArts building, and a walkway will be constructed that allows passage from Central Square, through the park and onto Washington Street.

"Ground-breaking for the pedestrian walkway that will connect the downtown with North Shore Community College and the waterfront is set to begin in February. That was the piece that was missing," said Walsh, referring to what urban planners call the Gateway Project. (See sidebar)

New restaurants and luxury condominiums are sprouting in Central Square, like those above the Gulu Gulu, and at least three quality restaurants have opened within a five-minute walk. For example, the Tacos Lupita restaurant on Munroe Street has a strong following and was recently the subject of a success story on the "Chronicle" TV magazine show. The Lynn Pho restaurant has been singled out for its authentic Vietnamese dishes.

The Oxford Street Grill on Oxford Street, opened by former Shore.Net owner Lowell Gray, is the latest addition to the city's downtown restaurant scene. The eatery is directly across the street from a freshly constructed park that abuts a residential condominium project on the site of the former Goldberg Furniture, completed by Oasis Development Enterprises.

On nearby Willow Street, condominium owners have filled the historic Boston Machine Lofts building, developed by RCG, Inc., while others are purchasing artist live/work space in a former industrial building on Mount Vernon Street, behind The Daily Item building.

According to McGaughey, the Mount Vernon Street artist loft project once spearheaded by local real estate developers Andrew Perkins and Kenneth Gass has been sold to The Mayo Group. Building permits for the project, which includes more than 30 units, were issued last week, he said.

The revitalization of Mount Vernon Street is boosted by recent negotiations between the Lynn Economic Development and Industrial Corp. (EDIC) and the Massachusetts Bay Transportation Authority (MBTA), which resulted in some archways beneath the elevated railroad tracks being returned to municipal ownership, as well as additional parking.

MBTA buses, which once used Mount Vernon Street as a staging area with lanes delineated by concrete Jersey barriers, now use the roadway in front of the central train station on Market Street, making that a transportation center for both bus and rail.

Plans call for removing the concrete barriers and creating several diagonal parking spaces along Mount Vernon Street, said McGaughey, adding, "The EDIC negotiated with the T to take over the space under the tracks. Basically, the T has already surrendered the street back to the city."

One urban improvement plan drafted before the MBTA began using Mount Vernon Street as a bus staging envisioned retail shops beneath the elevated tracks. Another showed a farmer's market, and a third supported using the archways for artists in need of a more industrial studio, such as welders making metal sculptures.

In keeping with Haraus's statement that briefcases must precede berets, most city officials and community business leaders acknowledge that the renovation of the former Hotel Edison on Exchange Street into first-class commercial office space provided the confidence and incentive to jumpstart the entire neighborhood's revival.

The art deco structure, now simply known as The Edison, is filled to capacity - mostly with business people carrying briefcases.

By all accounts, Central Square is reincarnating into its former identity as a vibrant community center of commerce and culture.

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