



Atlanta's Westside Art District

Atlanta's Booming West Midtown Proves Fertile Ground for Art, Design and Culture

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Move over, Castleberry Hill. There's a new darling on the local arts scene and it's wooing Atlanta with its industrial-chic charm. It may not have the spontaneity of Le Flash or the deep pockets of Buckhead, but the city's West side is attracting galleries, shoppers and development at a pace that would make Streets of Buckhead developer Ben Carter green with envy.

Here, restaurants are helmed by national culinary front-runners such as Anne Quatrano and Richard Blais. Textile and design stalwarts such as Lewis & Sheron and Belvedere cater to A-list designers and do-it-yourselfers alike. And experimental artists from around the world plant Southern roots, thanks to the Atlanta Contemporary Art Center.

Add accessibility and competitive rent to the equation and it's easy to see how the area's creative concentration has become central to its gentrification. "Artists are typically drawn to areas that are in need of a little fairy dust," says Bobbe Gillis Gallery director Alejandro Wooten. "And their presence is vital to getting that area attention, getting it up and moving."

But in a strange twist, changes to this once rugged industrial area are ones that nearly everyone in the neighborhood can embrace. From the formulation of the Westside Arts District — an alliance of nine art spaces, including Saltworks, Kiang Gallery, Emily Amy and Get This! — to the Marietta Street Artery project and rejuvenated Provisions District, establishing an identity has become a team effort, one that's endorsed by landlords, business owners and residents alike.

Nowhere is that sense of camaraderie more visible than at the bimonthly meetings of the Atlanta Pecha Kucha. Japanese for "chit-chat," it's a rapid-fire forum that organizer Alfredo Aponte calls "show and tell" for Atlanta's creative class. From High curator Julian Cox, to Bookhouse Pub chef Julia Leroy and Art Papers editor Sylvie Fortin, presenters at the events command standing room only at Octane, the area's first coffee house. Frequented by students, architects and designers, its walls also serve as an exhibition space for artists who may not be privy to the local gallery scene, inspiring unconventional shows from patron-driven iPhone art shows to latte-pour "throwdowns" among aspiring baristas.

"There's a real sense of creativity over here," says Mark Leibert, one of 14 artists lucky enough to score subsidized studio space at the Atlanta Contemporary Arts Center. Leibert, who also shows at Sandler Hudson, admits that the best thing about the Westside is having "this critical mass of galleries that have organized into an arts district and formed a coordinated effort with the Saturday art walks."

[editorial]



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But beyond being a core district for art and design, the Westside is throwing around its weight as a can't-miss destination for a more youthful demographic, from CNN producers and tech students, to East Coast implants and young families.

Capturing the next generation of collectors and patrons of the arts is a primary interest for most gallery owners. So much that Anna Walker-Skillman, owner of Buckhead's venerated Jackson Fine Art, debuted Project Space at White Provision. An exhibition of classic and contemporary black-and-white photos featuring work from the likes of Elliott Erwitt and Steve Shapiro, she calls the space "a Barneys window of sorts." Open on Saturdays — when many of the galleries and retailers get prime foot traffic — the space is more like an advertisement for her Buckhead gallery.

Could a former meatpacking district be poised to become Atlanta's bona fide gallery district, a destination for the most buzzed-about names in contemporary art? The idea is gaining traction. "You can sense the energy over here," Leibert says. "And it's pretty catchy."