

DOWNTOWN CROSSING

The Boston Globe

## District hopes to do well by doing good for artists

By Kimberly Sanfeliz, Globe Correspondent | November 30, 2008

Amid the chain retailers hawking Christmas sweaters and mass-produced neckties, something new is sprouting this holiday season in Downtown Crossing.

Two local property owners, the Druker Co. and Northland Investment Corp., have donated four retail spaces along Washington and Bromfield streets to local artists, as part of the city's Downtown Crossing Economic Improvement Initiative. From the storefronts, the artists will sell their handmade wares - everything from sea-glass jewelry and children's clothing made from recycled men's shirts to hand-spun cotton figurine Christmas ornaments and photographs of Boston scenes - until Dec. 28.

Some 525 businesses call Downtown Crossing home, and about 230,000 pedestrians travel its streets per day, making it one of the largest shopping districts in the city. But the area is going through what Randi Lathrop, the Boston Redevelopment Authority's deputy director for community planning, calls a transition period.

"This was the only shopping district for years" in Boston, said Lathrop, the brains behind the donated storefront plan. "It was going downhill."

The economic improvement initiative, launched by the BRA in 2004, was designed to reverse that pattern.

Though the number of empty storefronts is relatively low for the district, according to Lathrop, many are in its heart, where Winter and Summer streets cross Washington. The temporary art spaces, three on Washington Street and one on Bromfield, are prime real estate, and their visibility gives artists a chance to sell their pieces in a highly trafficked area beyond the niche market of galleries and weekend art shows.

Jessica Burko, a Jamaica Plain-based photographer and mixed-media artist, said that when the BRA approached her early this month with the offer of a space at 505 Washington St., she jumped at the chance. Burko is the founder of Boston Handmade, an almost 2-year-old collective of Massachusetts artists and crafts people who meet occasionally to network and who are all registered sellers on [etsy.com](http://etsy.com), a crafts website.

Burko quickly moved to set up a bank account, get a postal box and credit-card machine, and put the word out to Boston Handmade members to staff the store during operating hours. The group spent the rest of the time renovating the space, which Burko described as "very raw."

"I was worried no one wanted to work, but I was wrong," she said.

The time crunch proved to be the main challenge for Jen Matson, who is responsible for the space at 34 Bromfield St. A board member of the United South End Artists, Matson said she was approached only about a week and a half ago. However, unlike the space Burko inherited, Matson's storefront once housed a Ritz Camera shop and was more retail ready, making it easier for the artists to move in. Matson is now focused on having the shop ready for the open house that each storefront is holding this Thursday.

Each of the four groups that received donated space - the other two are Alternate Currents at 604 Washington St., and JP Art Market at 439 Washington St. - is responsible for staffing its own store and being open, at a minimum, Thursdays through Saturdays, 11 a.m. to 7 p.m., and Sundays from noon to 5 p.m. Although the groups won't be charged rent, they must pay the electric bill and the cost of insurance. The artists keep 100 percent of the selling price.

"The expenses are going to be low, but it's a busy time of the year" for artists, Matson said. Many artists she works with spend December weekends at various art shows and are unable to leave their pieces in the store for long periods of time. "The main challenge is going to be coordinating everyone to staff and inventory the store."

Matson, a photographer, said despite the challenges, this project is a great opportunity for artists to reach out to a more diversified public and for shoppers to buy directly from the people who created a work they admire.

"Those of us who do art shows find that people really like meeting the artists," she said. "They love the story behind the art."

*Kimberly Sanfeliz can be reached at [ksanfeliz@globe.com](mailto:ksanfeliz@globe.com). ■*

© [Copyright](#) 2009 The New York Times Company