

Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP), Bellows Falls, VT Art Challenges Rural Communities

Speaker: Robert McBride (Founding Director)

www.ramp-vt.org

The Exner Block:

The Exner Block just celebrated its 10th Anniversary. This project was key to the renaissance of downtown Bellows Falls. The investment was effectively leveraged by the subsequent Howard Block, Waypoint Center and The Bellows Falls Opera House projects and in addition set the stage for private development in the JJ Newbury Bldg, The Old Firehouse and the Hotel Windham.

Partners:

The collaboration between Housing Vermont, The Rockingham Area Community Land Trust, The Town of Rockingham and RAMP .

The Challenges/Myths:

That it is subsidized housing and for “those kind of people”.

Affordable housing and its stigma, has the recent economic downturn changed the perception?

Raising the money.

That the building as a not-for-profit entity will not pay taxes.

Managing the Building

How to keep full occupancy.

Federal affordable housing applications take time to process and are only “good” for 90 days

Developing a waiting list.

How to effectively market the building in rural areas to attract tenants.

Who can we actively market to? In-state, out-of-state?

Are the needs of urban artists different than rural artists?

Leveraging the investment of the Exner Block: The Waypoint Center, The Howard Blk, The JJ Newbury Bldg, The Old Firehouse Bldg, The Bellows Falls Opera House, The Hotel Windham.

Checklist

- What is your organization’s vision? What goals (short & long-term) are you trying to establish?
- What other partners (including not-for-profits, for-profits and individuals) exist in your community, region and state?
- What do you bring to the table? How can you share resources?
- What other organizations/communities in your region or state are facing the same challenges? How can you learn from them? A visit to them is always very helpful because it let’s people know in your own organization/community that other places face the same challenges and have developed ways to resolve those challenges.
- Develop credibility by being a team player and completing assignments that you agree to take on.
- Keep the public informed of your vision and progress via press releases, social media and making use of local radio and cable access stations.

The Rockingham Arts and Museum Project (RAMP), founded in 1995 in southeastern Vermont, develops awareness of the arts, creates vitality in the community through the arts, and demonstrates the favorable impact that the arts have on the cultural and economic sustainability of the community. Over the years RAMP has developed a strategy for community revitalization involving public art initiatives, bricks and mortar projects and advocacy. A constant focus in this strategy is to provide a comfortable context within the community for artists to live and create their work and to provide opportunities for artist to develop a constituency and feel.

RAMP's 3 pronged approach:

Bricks and Mortar

Public Art

Advocacy

RAMP (www.ramp-vt.org) successfully serves artists and the community through a series of ongoing collaborations that include:

The Exner Block, developed by Housing Vermont, Rockingham Area Community Land Trust, the Town of Rockingham and RAMP, restored a derelict building in the center of downtown Bellows Falls in order to provide ten affordable artist live/work spaces, a community gallery, and six retail spaces. The over \$2M project raised state and federal grant sources and leveraged over \$900,000 in tax credits.

Quarterly Artists Town Meetings, which bring together local artists and artisans to share concerns, opportunities, ideas and resources with each other and RAMP, and together create community arts projects. Partners include Bellows Falls Downtown Development Alliance, Great Falls Region Chamber of Commerce, Mains Street Arts, Walpole Artisans, Woolfm radio and FactTV cable access.

Public Art Initiatives: i.e. Music for Trains, Roots on the River by collaborating with Flying Under Radar, VT Performance Lab and VT Festivals RAMP brings quality arts events to Bellows Falls and engages additional not-for-profit and for-profit enterprises as event sponsors. Community residents of all ages benefit from the collaborations including: VT Symphony Orchestra concerts, Open Studio weekends, exhibitions at the Project Space 9 gallery, programming hosted at the Rockingham Free Public Library and broadcasts on Fact TV and Woolfm radio.

Support for “creative economy” initiatives, based on the concept that creative people naturally stimulate local economic growth RAMP works with the Vermont Council on Rural Development and the Vermont Arts Council, Bellows Falls, Preservation Trust of VT and New England Foundation for the Arts to promote the creative economy in VT and throughout the northeast.

Participation on a variety of board to share with other board members the key role that artists play sustaining economic, social and cultural health of the community and to create effective policies that integrate the arts in long-terms community sustainability strategies.