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Bob Shallit: Neon 'Art' sign finds home at MARRS building

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Chalk up another splashy piece of public art to Mike Heller.

The developer, who's planning a 50-foot-high Wayne Thiebaud mural on a midtown office building, recently placed a scrawling, multicolored piece of neon art on his MARRS retail center at 20th and J streets.

The sign – which spells out the word "Art" – once hung outdoors on a wing of the Crocker Art Museum. When that part of the Crocker was torn down last year, Heller's staff salvaged the artwork.

"We were lucky to save it from the claws of demolition," says Andy Ekstrom, a project manager with Heller's firm, Heller Pacific.

The 20-by-16-foot sign had been in storage for the past year. After some neon tune-ups were completed, it went up late last month on the building's backside, facing the railroad tracks. It's lit up nightly from 5 p.m. to 1 a.m. (Or most of it, at least; until recent repairs, part of the "A" was dark.)

Ekstrom says it's appropriate that an "art" sign – created by Sacramento designer Michael Dunlavey – is visible at MARRs, home to the Solomon Dubnick Gallery and a hub of the Second Saturday crawl.

"It sort of says, 'Hey, you're entering an arts district,'" Ekstrom says.

No vacancy sign

Speaking of MARRS, the midtown center has signed up two more tenants, bringing it to full occupancy.

Opening early next year will be Top Culture, a yogurt and dessert shop, and Asha Yoga, which is, well, a yoga studio.

Both are "mom and pop" operations, in keeping with the MARRS preference for leasing to "noncorporate" tenants, Ekstrom says.

He says the center's 100 percent occupancy defies skeptics who doubted a retail center could succeed in a bunker-like former office building facing a side street.

The two new tenants have some folks confused.

"I tell people we've just added a yoga business and they say, 'But you've already signed a yogurt business.' " Ekstrom says he's working on getting his pronunciation more precise.

Mixed tidings

It's a case of good news-bad news for local developer Jeff Kraft.

First the bad: He recently walked away from three of the four innovative office condo buildings he developed on Reserve Drive in Roseville.

"The equity went away and we gave it back," Kraft says, referring to a "deed in lieu of foreclosure" action that gave the buildings to lender Owens Mortgage Investment Fund of Walnut Creek.

The deal includes two unusual loft-condo buildings with 22-foot ceilings and an edgy, alternative vibe. (He's holding onto one of the two more conventional-looking buildings.)

Now for the good news: Leasing is going well at his 42-unit midtown Sacramento residential project, which was originally built as condos but converted to rentals two months ago.

Nineteen units have been leased, at rates ranging from \$1,050 to \$2,850 per month. Kraft predicts the complex – at 16th and H streets – will be nearly fully leased by year's end.

In this case, the economy is working for him, says Kraft, owner of Habitat Construction. Potential buyers of homes and condos are "on the fence," he says, and eager to lease – rather than buy – until the housing market stabilizes.

One of his new tenants took two of his priciest penthouse units and combined them into a single 2,400-square-foot apartment.

"He wanted to have the largest loft in town," Kraft says of the unidentified renter. "I said, 'I can do that.' "

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The sign that once hung outside the Crocker Art Museum now adorns the MARRS building at 20th and J. Developer Mike Heller saved it from demolition during the museum's renovation project.

