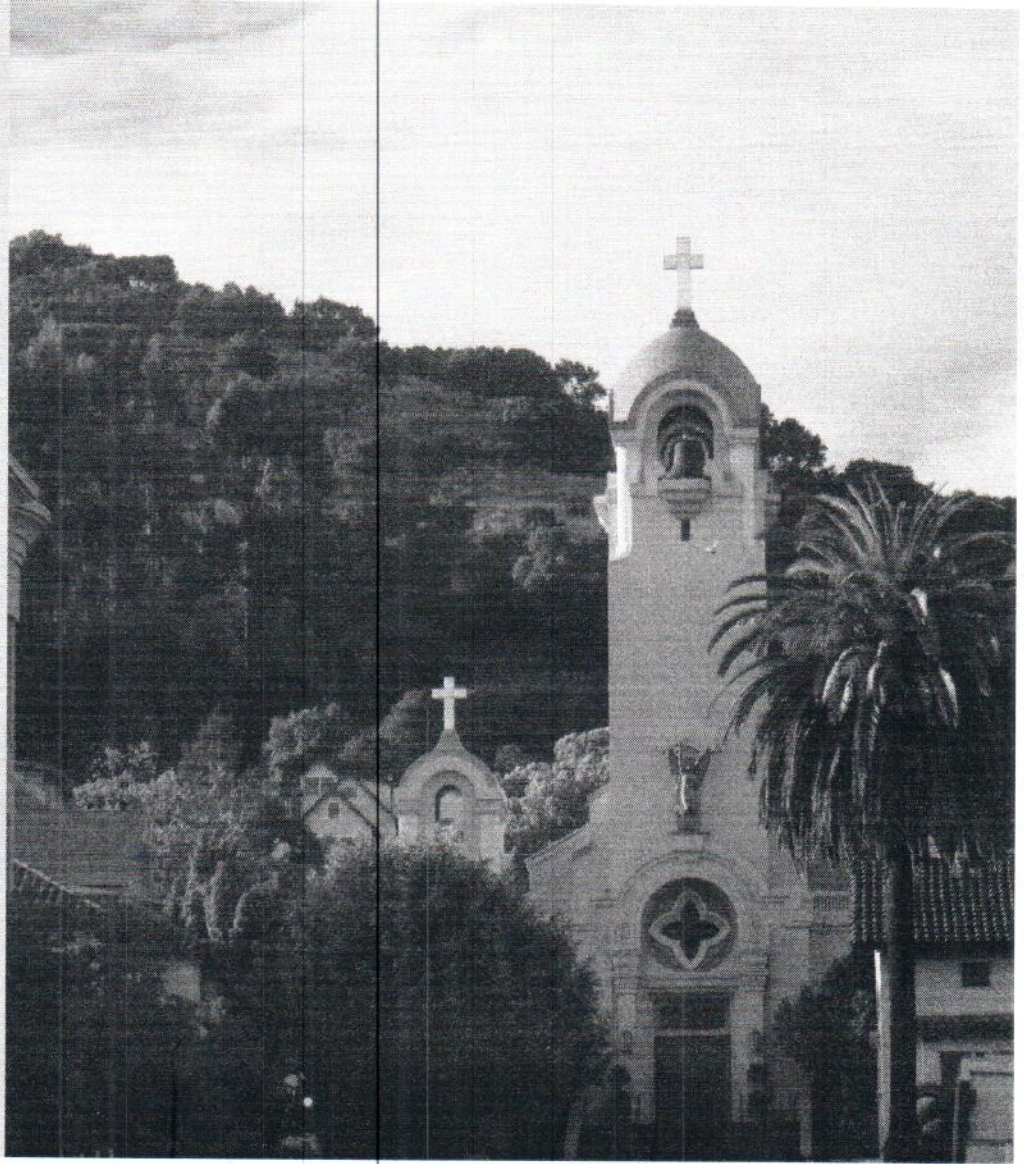


A Game Changer for San Rafael

by Bente Mirow



A game changer has come to town. San Rafael has been re-baptized.

No longer: San Rafael, Marin County town somewhere in between beautiful visitor-rich Sausalito and the Sonoma Wine country, but “San Rafael, a California Arts and Cultural District.”

The city reached its zenith in 2017 becoming one of 14 cities in California to receive the designation in a new pilot program initiated by the California Arts Council.

Criteria for the highly competitive competition required cities to meet “high standards of coherence, vision, and purpose.”

According to Elisabeth Setten, Executive Director at Art Works Downtown, the judges described San Rafael as “authentic, inclusive, and surprising.”

The application process was initiated and led by the City’s Economic Development Director, Danielle O’Leary, and the then Economic Development Coordinator, Tom Adams, along with 5 anchor partners: Art Works Downtown, the California Film Institute, Youth in Arts, City of San Rafael’s Falkirk Cultural Center, and the Downtown San Rafael Business Improvement District (BID). Gabriella Calicchio, the Director of the Marin County Cultural and Visitor Services for the county of

Marin, and the chief advocate for the arts in the whole county, participated in the outreach sessions with the State.

Numerous other arts-related businesses, non-profits, and organizations headquartered in San Rafael include the Belrose Theater, Marin Society of Artists, the Folkart Gallery, RileyStreet Art Supply, Seawood Photo, Copperfield’s and Rebound Books, Bananas at Large, Marin Shakespeare on 4th Street, Ali Akbar College of Music, Marin Ballet, Enriching Lives through Music (ELM), Drawbridge, and Dominican University.

But before we get ahead of

ourselves, let's stop for a moment and look a little further back. Not that long ago, San Rafael was a shadow of what once was and could have been with empty storefronts and a closed movie theater suggesting better days now long in the past.

We can't revel in this moment of artistic glory and opportunity arriving in San Rafael without honoring those who laid the foundation for it all.

Thanks to a small group of enthusiastic citizens, who truly cared about their city, initiatives were taken, risks run, committees and boards formed, and most importantly – endless actions taken. One person stands out as the driving force in San Rafael growing up and into a vibrant art city: Phyllis Thelen. Phyllis was the visionary and pioneer, a compelling force according to all who knew her then. Her relentless commitment to bring art to the forefront of San Rafael is a true inspiration. Phyllis was the founding force of Art Works Downtown, Youth in Arts, Marin Ballet, and the Marin Arts Council. She didn't do it alone, of course, but her tenacity made the growth happen.

I spoke with Phyllis, who is now a grand dame up in age, but still as vibrant as the results of all her accomplishments.

Phyllis tells me of the humble beginnings of Art Works Downtown: this small group of 5 people: Phyllis and her husband, Max, Joanne Dunn, Joanne Green and Barbara Stuart, and how they discovered a building in 1995/96 that they envisioned housing art and artists. It was a sleep store, full of mattresses downstairs. The price was reasonable, as the whole downstairs was not even counted. They had to come up with

\$200,000 in 2 weeks. With the help of her husband, Max Thelen, an attorney, they secured the building. The small Macy's store on 4th Street gave Phyllis a key, and they furnished the space with leftover carpets, pieces of dressing rooms, and other scraps they were allowed to pick up from the Macy's store.

Phyllis muses: "We were so innocent. We didn't even know you could just go talk to the City Council members."

At the same time as Phyllis and her group were at it, Ann Brebner and Mark Fishkin set out to restore the old defunct movie theater and turn it into the now magnificent and internationally known Christopher B. Smith Rafael Film Center.

So what's next?

Beau Blanchard, Corporate Development Director of the California Film Institute and Mill Valley Film Festival, explains that the next step is to figure out how to combine the efforts of the City, the arts organizations, the Chamber of Commerce, and others since no one organization is in charge. The strategic plan is expected to be in place by mid-February.

O'Leary says: "Going forward we want to focus on convening our Arts District partners to build a shared vision."

By now you must be dying to know what is brewing. So was I.

Talia Smith from San Rafael's Public Works is finalizing the City's new painted utility box art program.

O'Leary is working with the City Manager's office to get murals in downtown and to partner with property owners of buildings that have large blank walls.

Setten shared projects under consideration:

- Art kiosks at the Smart Train/City of San Rafael Plaza, a mobile app with a map of the district, transit center public art, a community Latin American arts calendar for October 2018, a designated social media/executive coordinator,
- increased outreach for the 2nd Friday Art Walk events, and interactive art installations throughout the downtown corridor.

Blanchard tells me that California Film Institute is planning an Oscar celebration, a 2nd annual Documentary Film Festival in May, but also a 3 day Environmental Youth Forum, where 2000 local students will be invited and bussed in to participate in themed events such as climate change, conservation, etc.

Non-anchor partners are also building new momentum. Riley Street Art Supply is starting a lecture series, and again partnering with Bruce Burch on the 2nd annual Youth Poster Contest, now a non-profit and endorsed by the Marin County Office of Education.

So imagine soon, driving north or south on Highway 101, a Cultural Arts District sign will greet and invite people to take the exit into San Rafael, a destination for theater, independent films, art exhibits, upscale and ethnic restaurants, and live performances. As San Rafael will be listed on brochures at visitors' centers around California, San Rafael's citizens will finally get to share their artistically and culturally rich town with many other art lovers.