

A Haven Grows in Hyattsville

An arts district pioneer helps revitalize Prince George's County's faded Route 1 corridor

By Darragh Johnson
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He sees the small white sign near the train tracks in Hyattsville. The letters are thin, dull and bureaucratic-sounding, but to Garth Rockcastle, they're a beacon: Gateway Arts & Entertainment Initiative.

He's found his new home.

"Perfect," the 54-year-old architect remembers telling himself. "The area is an arts district."

Thirty years ago, Rockcastle helped create one of the country's first experiments in using the arts to revamp downtrodden urban neighborhoods. The Minneapolis-based movement was a nonprofit called the Artspace Project, and its idea was simple: Create and foster arts districts by helping artists build studios and living spaces, while keeping the vibe -- and the prices -- sympathetic to artists and their typically less-than-deluxe paychecks. These days, this is classic urban-redevelopment theory: Artists and other "creatives" are often the first to discover The Next Great Place. Behind them follow the money, the yuppies and the coffee shops. But back in the 1970s and early '80s, the idea of devoting space exclusively for artists was seen as "crazy," says Rockcastle's old friend and Artspace Project colleague Chris Velasco.

Leap ahead to the fall of 2004. Rockcastle has just taken a job as dean of the University of Maryland's School of Architecture and wants to find a place to live near College Park. And Artspace has become one of the nation's leading developers of arts districts. It's working on projects in Buffalo, Houston, Miami, Chicago, Portland, Ore., and . . . Prince George's County.

Rockcastle hasn't been on the board of directors since the 1980s. But he gets on the phone with the Gateway initiative's executive director, Nick Francis, who is working to transform the rundown Route 1 corridor, from Mount Rainier to Hyattsville, into a thriving collection of studios and galleries. As they talk, Francis pulls an Artspace how-to resource book from his shelf called *Creating Space: A Guide to Real Estate Development for Artists*. He flips it open, and there, sure enough, is Rockcastle's name.

"I want to do something in the arts district," Francis remembers Rockcastle telling him, "and I want to make sure it fits into your scheme."

Not long after that first phone call, the two men drove around the City of Hyattsville, an often-overlooked historic town just a couple miles north of the D.C. line. It's an area of deep-porched bungalows, regal Victorians and old, large trees, though few passersby see that part. Most people, if they come through at all, travel along U.S. Route 1 -- a sad strip of used-car dealers, abandoned buildings and empty lots. Still, for one quick block in the heart of Hyattsville, Route 1 turns retro chic -- the hipster tone created by Franklins, an industrial-looking brew pub and general store. Its corrugated metal siding, neon diner signs and urbane merchandise have inspired a cult following and offered a glimpse of what Route 1 could become.

"I can tell," Rockcastle told himself, looking around, "it's about to change here pretty quick."

He'd seen this before: His home in Minneapolis was an old farm implement factory that he rehabbed in the city's decrepit-turned-fashionable Warehouse District. Now, he would do it again, in Hyattsville. He started looking at everything on the market -- and even at some properties that weren't, including the 85-year-old Machen building, a brick, two-story

commercial space with nine front windows, dentil moldings and a front yard of cement sidewalk. Over its eight decades, it had housed a print shop and duplicating center, and then become office space for Machen family members, including an attorney, an accountant, a congressman and a surveyor. Rockcastle wrote the owner a letter and wound up spending \$350,000 to buy the building's 5,000 square feet of space on one-third of an acre. The price included an old garage surrounded by knee-high weeds and a view of the old county courthouse, the train tracks along Route 1 and a billboard for Pantene shampoo.

Rockcastle has great visions for what the Machen building could become: a mini arts colony, complete with lofts, galleries, a European-style courtyard and French balconies. He envisions using furniture such as bookcases on wheels to create walls and transform rooms into long artist studios, and he hopes the old garage out back will become a myriad of art-studio configurations.

"I practice what I preach," Rockcastle says, standing at the building's front windows and watching the sun set. "A whole city will be influenced by what we do here."

One afternoon, Rockcastle drives into Hyattsville in his green Volvo. In addition to being an academic, he's a practicing architect and has produced blueprints for about 90 buildings across the country. But he's also, says his friend Velasco, "an innovator -- someone who's always been way ahead of the curve and likes it out there."

Rockcastle parks behind the Machen building, gets out of the Volvo and shakes hands with his contractor, a 40-year-old local guy named William Potts Jr.

"The ceiling tiles upstairs," Potts begins, "you want those removed?" He has learned to ask about everything. Rockcastle has unpredictable ideas about what's worth saving.

"Yes," Rockcastle nods, following Potts. They pass a three-foot-tall pile of mahogany paneling Potts has peeled from the walls. Keep these, Rockcastle says and points at the paneling, grinning mischievously. To anyone else, the wood scraps would be a "Brady Bunch" bygone, a relic of 1960s rec rooms better left to old photo albums. But to Rockcastle, they're raw materials: He plans to turn them into furniture.

"I'm gonna use that paneling in a strange way," he begins, and Potts's eyes widen skeptically, "that you'll be entertained by."

It's their joke. Rockcastle often concocts avant-garde ideas rarely seen in small-scale renovations near Hyattsville's old business corridor. He talks about "vertical archaeology" and "movable walls." He says he "understands the voice" of building materials and proclaims, "I don't like machine-made things. They look like they came from nowhere."

Minutes later, Potts is asking about the ceiling's fluorescent lights, a group of '60s-era oddities shaped like seven-foot daisy petals: "What about them?"

Rockcastle muses, "Oh, that's all coming off. I've been dying to think of a way to use them. Maybe on the wall."

The architect calls the space he owns a "flexible building." He grabs a notebook and begins to sketch. The two storefronts on the ground floor he will keep as office space: They will become the East Coast branch of his Minneapolis architecture firm, Meyer, Scherer & Rockcastle, and the outer walls of the office will be gallery space. Upstairs, he is gutting the old apartments and creating a row of bedrooms across the back. The front will become one great space, with kitchens, that can be divided into two rooms with the movable walls.

"The more you specialize," he says, dismissing rigid floor plans that allow only one configuration, "the more vulnerable it is."

And as he moves toward renovating -- revolutionizing, really -- his Hyattsville space into something brand-new, he becomes entranced by hints of its previous tenants. He will keep old patches of wallpaper, complete with water damage, and frame them behind a glass-shelved dining cabinet. He will put in flooring that leaves exposed the marks, or "ghosts," of the walls that he removed.

"I don't think it's appropriate to erase all the time. No botox. No electroshock therapy," he says. It is important to leave behind "enough evidence that a place has experienced a life."

Hyattsville was experiencing a renaissance even before the city held a reception to welcome Rockcastle to town. Longtime residents tend to resent descriptions like redevelopment. They prefer to describe what's going on as a belated discovery. The town, as Mike Franklin, owner of the eponymous Franklins, puts it, is finally "coming into its own." Regardless of what it's called, there's some serious revitalization underway.

Three blocks north of Rockcastle's place, and two blocks north of Franklins, developers are transforming 21 rundown acres along Route 1. This spring, developer EYA plans to begin selling "Arts District Hyattsville." It is building 300 rowhouses of brick and sheet metal, plus about 200 condos. The new three- and four-story buildings will offer, all total, as much as 30,000 square feet of restaurants, shops and doctors offices.

The plan is to return downtown Hyattsville to its splendor of the early to mid-1900s. Some have compared the project to the urbanized small-town feel of Alexandria, though people in Hyattsville cringe at that analogy: Alexandria to them is too well-scrubbed and cute, while Hyattsville is more eclectic and gritty. It's a concern that the developers understand and have embraced. "We're not trying to do Alexandria," says EYA executive Aakash Thakkar, in a reassuring voice. "We're trying to do something cool and funky and Hyattsville."

And in pursuit of that authentic Hyattsville spirit, the developers even plan to rehab the city's old, glass-fronted Lustine Chevrolet showroom, where sharp-finned Bel Airs and gleaming Corvettes, were once displayed. When EYA finishes, the former automobile showroom will be a community center with lounge, fitness center and art gallery, Thakkar says, and EYA hopes to find local artists to create sculpture for a courtyard and paint a mural on one of the showroom walls.

Hyattsville is ripe for this kind of redevelopment. It boasts two Metro stations, an urban mood and a diverse population of (for now) 15,000 residents. Mayor Bill Gardiner counts among his neighbors Jamaicans of Indian ancestry, political refugees from Sri Lanka, a white Jewish family and a World War II vet who's lived there for 50 years. Rockcastle calls Hyattsville a town of immigrants and former hippies, and Gardiner doesn't disagree. "A lot of people ended up in Hyattsville because they couldn't afford Takoma Park," the mayor says.

Housing prices have only recently begun catching up to the housing boom, but they're catching up fast. Rockcastle estimates that his investment has already doubled. He bought the building for \$350,000 and has put another \$150,000 into the renovations, he says. If he decided to sell now, he thinks he could get more than \$1 million.

In keeping with its ambitions to become an artists' mecca, Hyattsville has awarded a contract for Renaissance Square, a 44-unit artists' housing project on Jefferson Street. Artists who move in will get subsidized housing and, in return, are expected to volunteer 10 hours a week to teach kids about art.

And there are other signs of new life. The city is working on a deal with the YMCA for a full-service, \$6.2 million building, complete with indoor pool. At University Town Center, about a mile from College Park and near Hyattsville's Prince George's Plaza Metro station, the city is

getting a 16-story, 910-bed student housing building with a rooftop swimming pool. Construction crews also are about to break ground on a 14-screen movie theater, an eight-story condo building whose first floor will be retail space, and a 21-unit loft-type condo building. The Town Center just signed a lease with Safeway for a "lifestyle" store meant to compete with Whole Foods, says Tim Taylor, the center's vice president of leasing.

The Gateway Arts District has run into some roadblocks. A few months ago, the county's effort to rid the Route 1 corridor of small used-car dealerships was blocked by the Maryland Court of Special Appeals. The small car dealerships, the court ruled, could not be pushed out without compensation when they'd been operating there for years.

Francis isn't worried. "Our strategy from the beginning has been let's do three or four anchor projects to set the tone . . . and the market will follow." In fact, he points out, the Gateway vision has aimed, from the beginning, to take advantage of the area's burgeoning identity-- that of a destination for artists priced out of the District.

So in Mount Rainier, for example, Brooke Kidd has seen her Joe's Movement Emporium, a community performing arts center, flourish. In addition to myriad educational and production services, Joe's also provides space to two African dance companies, the Balinese Gamelan Orchestra, a modern dance troupe and a classical Thai dance company. Nearby, the research-oriented Latin American Folk Institute has also been offering workshops in Peruvian percussion, salsa flamenco and Afro-Cuban jazz. Several nationally acclaimed artists live and work next door in the town of Brentwood, including Ray Kaskey, who did the 24 bronze, bas-relief panels for the National World War II Memorial; Steve Weitzman, whose public art includes a sculpture in front of the National Zoo; and Martha Jackson-Jarvis, who created the glass mosaic at the Anacostia Metro station.

And now, Francis points out, "we've got projects like EYA and others following our model."

The momentum is swinging their way.

Though he just moved into the Machen building recently, Rockcastle's experience is closer to camping out than cutting-edge urban living. Renovations, even for architects, can take longer than planned. "I stumbled through a few confidence artists and less-than-reliable contractors before finding trustworthy and engaging crafts-oriented folks interested in what I am trying to do," he says.

Still, the mahogany paneling he saved is about to be laminated into stiff boards for built-in bookshelves and window seats. And in his dining room, the patch of leftover wallpaper -- an old ivy pattern that whispers of button-up boots and potbellied stoves -- remains, complete with the water-damaged tear down the middle. Rockcastle plans to paint a distant landscape inside the tear, emphasizing each fragment of the wall, allowing each to tell its individual story.

And he's already thinking about the rowhouses he wants to build next door. They would line up alongside the Machen building, but they would be three stories tall -- the better to configure space that's much more flexible, and thus much more appropriate, for the artists he has spent the last 30 years working to help.

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