

## St. Petersburg ArtWalk now includes nearly 50 venues

Not too far in the past, so the local cliché goes, you could fire a cannonball almost anywhere at night in downtown St. Petersburg and not find a human target. Today, a melee would ensue, so busy have the thoroughfares near the waterfront become. But even as bustle becomes the norm with so many varied entertainment opportunities, ArtWalk, which began more than two decades ago in different form, remains the signature monthly event that prides itself on its cultural richness.

On any given month, 40 to 50 visual arts venues in five districts stay open until 8 p.m. (or later) on the second Saturday and welcome hundreds of visitors, an estimated 20,000 annually. The diversity is impressive with large and small galleries, artists' studios and converted, multitasking warehouses showcasing multiple media in a stylistic range that runs from traditional to avant-garde. Viewing art is usually a contemplative experience but ArtWalk has the feel of a party.

It wasn't always so.

"It wasn't considered entertainment. There were a lot of museum members, people active in the arts. They weren't the general public," said Michele Tuegel, who in the 1980s was the founding executive director of Florida Craftsmen Gallery, which showcases the work of members throughout the state. She now owns Michele Tuegel Contemporary, a fine craft gallery, and participates in ArtWalk. Back then, the event was annual and called ArtTour. Buses ferried people around to art galleries (three or four total), the Museum of Fine Arts, the Dalí Museum and other arts organizations such as American Stage, the St. Petersburg Museum of History and Great Explorations, the children's museum.

After the not-for-profit Florida Craftsmen and the Arts Center (now the Morean Arts Center), a teaching and exhibiting organization, moved to their current locations on Central Avenue between Fifth and Seventh streets in the mid 1990s, they became the anchors for a small but committed group of independent galleries.

In the late 1990s, Tuegel said, someone, she can't remember who, suggested that they have a monthly evening gallery walk. She estimates there were about seven stops.

"We were the early pioneers of Central Avenue," said Sue Shapiro, co-owner of Shapiro Galleries on Beach Drive NE, which was first located near Florida Craftsmen in 1998.

Artists are famously urban pioneers. They typically set up in a depressed area, make it cool and watch it gentrify. The arts scene had a big lift in 2009 when vacant, derelict

stores in the 600 block of Central Avenue were made available to artists at low rents in a deal with the owner brokered by then-City Council member Leslie Curran.

And through the ebb and flow (and currently the gusher) of St. Petersburg's downtown renewal during the last two decades, artists and galleries have persevered. Many have left and been replaced and been replaced again. Still they come and in larger numbers.

"I get a call or visit at least once a week from an artist who wants to move here," said John Collins, executive director of St. Petersburg Arts Alliance, a two-year-old organization that supports artists and not-for-profit arts organizations.

ArtWalk's growth in the last five years has been a result of St. Petersburg's reputation as an arts-friendly city. It has bragging rights as No. 1 out of 25 top arts destinations for midsize cities from *AmericanStyle* magazine, and organizations consistently are awarded prestigious grants from donors such as the National Endowment for the Arts. But Collins points out that the arts renaissance has happened mostly through efforts of local individuals and businesses. In the wake of the national economic meltdown, he said, more than \$1 million disappeared from county funding; city grants were drastically reduced.

He founded the Arts Alliance two years ago in part to promote the arts in the region and to tourists. ArtWalk is a marquee sell. It's free, something different and easily accessible by trolleys that make regular stops. And the ArtWalk route is also populated with small retail shops and restaurants.

He said one of the big game changers was the arrival of Duncan McClellan, the popular glass artist who moved from Tampa to establish a large studio and hot shop in the Warehouse District. McClellan hosts glass-blowing demonstrations at the hot shop in the cooler months, which often draw standing-room-only crowds.

Other artists have followed McClellan's lead, and with the already established St. Petersburg Clay Co. in a historic train station, the Warehouse District has become an important draw, pushing the boundaries of ArtWalk south.

But the growth has created challenges. Its size means that visitors can't experience every venue and spreads out the numbers so there sometimes isn't the sense of occasion a dense crowd creates. There have been tensions between individual venues and even districts about who pays how much for what. And it requires more oversight.

Collins and a group of representatives from the various districts in ArtWalk met recently for one of their regular planning meetings. His goal is to bring consistency to the event and to raise funds that would provide that consistency. They discussed common signage that would identify participating venues. He updated the group on grants that would pay for the trolleys that cover the Warehouse District. (The other trolleys are run by the city

on their regular routes.) They're considering asking participants, who have historically paid a monthly fee, to commit to a longer term so maps wouldn't have to be printed as often.

They also responded to questions about their own experiences with ArtWalk and how their expectations of it have evolved from strictly a sales event.

Mark Aeling, a sculptor with a studio in the Warehouse District, said, "It's a great way for first-time visitors to get a perspective of what we have."

"Some people are intimidated about collecting art," said Jeff Schorr, owner of Craftsman House Gallery. "They can start small with a \$20 mug. . . . they can have a progression, seeing different levels in the same medium such as pottery."

Most of them see it as an opportunity to build relationships with collectors and to put new ones at ease.

"It's also an opportunity to engage with people, to find out what they're looking for," said Leslie Curran, who owns ARTicles, a gallery and framing business, and has been a longtime arts advocate. "The best thing is to send them to someone else's gallery if you don't have what they're looking for."

Diane Shelley, executive director of Florida Craftsmen, agreed: "There is more a feeling of collaboration than in the past."

"ArtWalk has rebranded the area," Collins said. "It isn't just arts development. It's economic development."

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**>>if you go**

### **St. Petersburg ArtWalk**

It runs 5 to 8 p.m. the second Saturday of every month. The next one is May 10. Nearly 50 venues are open. A free red trolley and white coach bus cover the venues south of Central Avenue including the Warehouse District. The Central Avenue trolley (50 cents) and the Downtown Looper cover the other arts districts. The trolleys run to 9 p.m. Parking, some metered, is available in most locations. For a map and list of venues and trolley stops, go to [stpetartsalliance.org](http://stpetartsalliance.org).