



Fourth Street slopes gently downhill to where the busy train depot once stood.

## Positively Fourth Street

by Molly Schiessl

Fourth Street was buzzing. In both directions, identical local plumbing vans were parked with doors flung open. Nearby, a painter on a hi-lift repainted a facade, while another building was being power-washed. Further complicating traffic flow, a furniture delivery truck was double-parked.

While news outlets blanket us in discouraging financial reports, my neighborhood is a hive of capital investment, extensive renovations and loving inside-and-out overhauls. Long-time tenants leap feet-first into expansion; newcomers busily renovate their storefronts.

Notably, none of these is a soulless, formulaic or recession-proof business. These are hard-working people, passionate about sharing something they love. Along the way, they're creating a genuinely irresistible neighborhood. But why Fourth Street?

Although comparatively lightly-trafficked today, Fourth Street stands out as



The 1894 Peerless building retains Fourth Street's once predominant exposed brickwork style.

unusually grand and wide, broad enough for angled on-street parking up one side and parallel slots down the other. In the

Railroad's heyday, between the 1880's and the 1920's, this avenue was a commercial hub and a thoroughfare. The busy railroad station at Fourth and A poured forth a steady flow of new arrivals. With each passenger train, Fourth Street funneled newcomers uphill towards downtown.

I asked local historian and life-long Ashland resident Terry Skibby what the Railroad District was like when he was growing up in the 1950's and '60s. His grew wistful, reflecting that until the 1970's the waning district was largely ignored. "We weren't really aware of things," he admitted, recalling regretfully that Fourth Street lost some of its historic buildings in that period. Those original buildings shared the exposed brick and boxy two-story profile of the beloved 1894 Peerless Rooms Boarding House and 1899 Charles Nininger Building.

What remains of Fourth Street original buildings is a crucial component of its appeal today. Along this section of A and



Gallery Etienne is one of Fourth Street's crop of new businesses slated to open in 2009. Artist: Suzanne Etienne

Fourth Streets, you also find a bench in front of literally every second storefront, suggesting a common striving for a slower, more reflective pace and an openness to chance interactions. But the neighborhood offers other intangibles, too.

Davis and Cline Gallery, Gallerie Karon and Illahe Studios and Gallery have long anchored A Street's intersection with Fourth. Not only do the owners decline to be anywhere else, they've all voted with their square feet, folding in more space in expansion projects.

John Davis, proprietor of Davis and Cline optioned his corner location before

construction on the two-story building was even complete. Since then, the stillness of many a winter season has been broken by interior demolition and expansion work. Repeated reconfigurations have absorbed adjoining units and the gallery has grown from 900 square-feet to nearly twice that.

Early on, Davis had given an additional Main Street outlet a whirl. A single season convinced him that "being a destination was key for us." Davis came to appreciate the value of both clients' joy of discovery and that "certain cachet of being a little off the beaten track."

Gallerie Karon and Illahe had shared



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here was her opportunity to expand. An arched entryway now links the two spaces and Wasser is busy arranging more unique tableaux of plush animals, scheduling poetry readings and regularly inquiring of her neighbors whether they can spare folding chairs for her next event.

Chatting with Fourth Street's entrepreneurs, common threads emerge. They're setting the scene, arranging seating, coordinating colors, finalizing floor plans, contemplating amenities. But it's neither surface appearances nor the bottom line that most energize them. Creating an atmosphere, imparting a passion, fostering learning and discovery: these are the missions.

passionate, informed coffee-consuming public begins to feel like an imminent inevitability.

Across from Noble, painter Suzanne Etienne prepares to open Gallery Etienne. She's overseeing a fresh paint job for the stucco, has settled on a buoyantly yellow-striped awning and a weathered fruit-crate inspired sign. She'll train vines across the white arbor and station a potted topiary alongside the front entrance. When I stopped by recently, the topic she was mulling over in the midst of all this activity was. . . .black-board paint. Should she make the inside surface of the back door a chalkboard? Would people enjoy it? Will they stop to scribble a note? Here

adjacent storefronts since 2004. This summer, owner Sue Springer eagerly moved Illahe into the newly renovated Ninger Building. The one-block relocation meant increased visibility, the chance to present more artists and best of all: a way, finally, to combine showroom with workshop. Her workbenches, glaze studio and kilns are no longer isolated in a distant industrial space, but under one roof with finished artwork.



A parade of benches dot the Fourth Street corridor, suggesting a slower, Old World pace of life.

Springer's is not a passing enthusiasm for Fourth Street. She's envisioned a presence in the Railroad District for the past 20 years, even making serious offers on neighborhood properties. Among her favorite aspects of workdays spent in the district are the on-going conversation of an artist dusting off her hands and emerging from the workshop to discuss the art with visitors. The artist gathers direct feedback while community members get that intimate connection with contemporary art's creation. Springer hopes this accessibility will help erode perceptions of art as always elitist, remote or inscrutable.

Meanwhile, with Illahe's former digs up for grabs, Karen Wasser of Gallerie Karon didn't hesitate either:

Jared Rennie, whose Noble Café and Roastery will open on Fourth Street in the spring of 2009, is quick to underline the distinction between a coffee shop, where you might duck in to grab a to-go coffee and a coffee house, that centuries-old institution with a reputation for incubating new ideas, artistic movements, even revolutions. Opening this coffee house caps years of dreaming, training, study, hard work and perseverance.

Although superior product has taken Noble Roasting from a weekly output of around 15 pounds of beans to nearly 500 in just two years, Rennie's desire to add a storefront has never lessened. A roasting operation on-site with an inviting coffee house, makes a more

was that solicitousness about the smallest details of a customer's experience, that attention to putting guests at ease and creating a meaningful interaction.

Ashley Jensen is the whirlwind behind the Ninger Building's renovation. Her pride in setting a fresh stage for Illahe is evident, but upstairs you discover her own pet project: much of the upper story is devoted to an elegant dance studio. Lost in concentration, tango



dancers inch across luxurious dark-wood floors. Exposed original brick walls give way to views out over the district and its mountain backdrop.

Jensen's two-decade vocation has been real estate, but her passion for tango sparked the project to rehabilitate this building. Like so many of her new neighbors, a focus on learning and outreach is at the heart of Jensen's undertaking; an upstairs apartment stands ready to house out-of-town dance

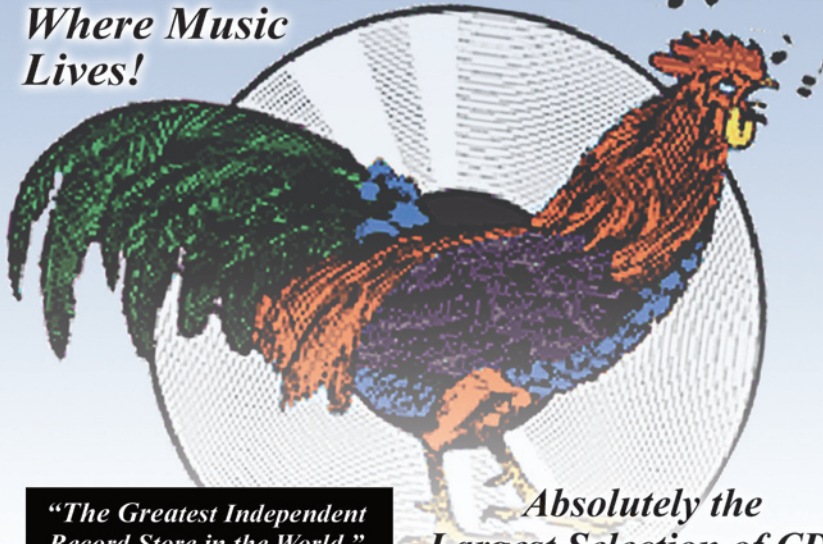


instructors. The location allows Jensen to host seminar teachers on-site, offering easy walking access to everything they'll need.

Getting the building to this point has been a long, consuming project, but as Jensen pauses to reflect on what she has just created, it's clear she's fallen for Fourth Street in the process; if offered the chance to relocate her building today, she's positive that nothing could tempt her to move it from this perfect location at Fourth and B. ■

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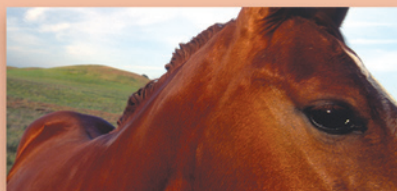


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