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Must-see stops for January's First Thursday, plus a list of gallery events

The Artist in Residence fellows add to the city's cultural life and are good for business.

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The Artist in Residence fellows add to the city's cultural life and are good for business.

Jess Sanden spent hours this week transforming a vacant office in the 8th Street Marketplace into an ad hoc gallery, preparing to meet First Thursday visitors who will come to see and talk about his work.

"It's great to interact with people and other artists on First Thursday," he said.

The spaces are a hybrid: part gallery, part artist's studio, part cultural experiment.

Sanden is one of the Artist in Residence fellows who work and show their art in empty office spaces. The innovative public-private program is changing Boise's cultural landscape by giving opportunities to artists and creating a new venue through which to experience art.

The program wraps up its first year this month, when it also will issue a call for 2010 fellows.

When Sanden graduated from the University of Idaho, the only reason he moved to Boise was this fellowship.

On any given First Thursday, packs of people trail through the once-empty commercial spaces in BoDo and the Alaska Building seeking a different experience than visiting a gallery.

"It's a great gift to the artists and the entire community," said Sue Latta, a mixed media artist who is a current Artist in Residence - or AiR - fellow working in the Alaska Building. "It raises the level of Boise as an art community."

It has been a tonic to the sluggish retail scene at the 8th Street Marketplace, said developer Ephraim Greenwall, who is an owner of the two 8th Street Marketplace buildings in BoDo.

He opened three large offices to artists on the third floor of the Mercantile building a year ago. He hired Courtney Robinson Feider of Adrian+Sabine Creative Services to run his side of the program with the Department of Arts and History. This partnership is the first of its kind in Boise.

In September, AiR expanded to two more locations, one in the Renewal Basement, 517 S. 8th St., the other at the Alaska Building, 1022 Main St. That let in four more artists.

It has been hugely popular with artists. More than 50 artists and groups have applied.

"Artists need a place to work, and people want to meet them in their spaces," said Karen Bubb, the City's public arts manager.

The program provides an optimistic outlook, she said: "It's forward thinking and feels like something positive is happening, instead of things closing."

From the quality of the artists who win the fellowship to the turnout for First Thursday to the praise from the surrounding businesses, it has been a success on all accounts, Greenwall said.

"We are dedicated to making this change last. (The program) has built gradually and continues to do so in a positive way, and I believe this will survive our whole tenure with the project and beyond," he said.

Each residency lasts three months. When it's done, artists must give a piece of art to the building. They can use the space as they like as long as they don't cause damage. The goal is still to lease the space to a commercial client.

It's worked. Tsuvo, a first-year media company, moved into one of the AiR spaces to get in on the vibe the artists

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were creating, said the company's co-founder Derik Ellis.

"It reflected the culture we are trying to achieve for our business," Ellis said. "We want a fun, creative environment, and when we saw what they are doing here, we wanted to be a part of it."

Tsuvo has its own party on First Thursday, and Ellis and co-owner Dave Romero have commissioned artist Benjamin Love to create artwork for the office. They hung out when Love was a fellow in September.

For the artists, AiR is a boon to their careers - even if it's only for three months.

"I worked in my garage for a long time, and I've outgrown it," Latta said. She has been able to develop a new body of work because she has this space, she said.

For the community, it is a chance to discover art in a nontraditional environment and experience something new.

The artists have ranged from theater companies to dancers, painters to poets, sound sculptors to performance artists.

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