

## Arts and Crafts

by Scott Kearnan

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Now back for their fifth year, two popular events, SoWa Open Market and SoWa Art Walk, once again welcome visitors to the neighborhood this weekend. As always, local artists, farmers, artisans, and other vendors will show their wares to a crowd of thousands. The Art Walk happens on May 17 and 18, as does the inaugural Open Market, which is located at 540 Harrison Avenue. Thereafter, the market runs every Sunday, excluding holiday weekends, through October 26.

In New England, May typically marks the advent of consistently pleasant weather. But it was five years ago that two fledgling events came together to create the perfect summer storm.

"[The collaboration] was pure serendipity," recalled John Kiger, the leasing director at GTI Properties, which has been developing in the neighborhood for over 10 years with a firm focus on fostering and maintaining an artistic presence.

In 2004, Kiger's company was coordinating a plan for an annual weekend of extended artist gallery hours, a spring/summer complement to the existing South End Open Studios event in the fall and the monthly First Fridays hosted by individual galleries. "It was meant to be more of a good thing," Kiger explains.

At the same time, entrepreneur Chris Masci was developing his concept for an open air market inspired by one of his favorites: Chelsea Market in New York. "The Chelsea Market is primarily antiques and vintage," said Masci. "We expanded on that outdoor shopping concept by adding art, indie design, crafts and a farmer's market. My vision was to include all those elements into one open air market, and by doing so we successfully expanded our appeal to a wider audience."

It worked. By aligning the Open Market's debut weekend with the Art Walk's annual presence, a local tradition was born. The audience has grown exponentially over the last four years: Kiger and Masci estimate an average of 10,000 attendees for the May weekend. That number may climb this year, thanks to the expanded offerings Kiger and Masci have in store for art lovers and market shoppers.

This year, the vacant mill building that GTI is developing at 460 Harrison Ave. will host 150 artists in the Art Walk group space, an area designated for artists who do not have their own gallery. That's a sizable increase over the 100 that have received placement in the past years, and due entirely to the "increased demand," says Kiger.

And if you're looking for truly massive art, stop by 90 Wareham Street. "Parti Wall/Hanging Green," a five-story grass wall, will drape itself down the side of the converted loft building now known as The 1850. The project was developed by the Young Boston Architects Group, which created the experiment in environmentally conscious installation art. Pinkcomma gallery, located beside the installation at 81B Wareham, will host an exhibition that displays the collaborative process of creating the wall.

These new attractions are in addition to the dozens of participating fixed galleries and studios - representing over 400 artists - that will extend their hours from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. on both Saturday and Sunday. The spaces line Harrison Ave., Wareham and Plympton Streets, Laconia Lofts, ArtBlock and more. A complete list of participating locations is available at [www.sowaartwalk.com](http://www.sowaartwalk.com).

There's growth for the Open Market, too. Masci says the opening weekend has booked 143 vendors, up from 120 last year. They'll offer everything from homemade jewelry to handbags, locally grown produce to imported curios. "A lot of people hear 'open market' and think tube socks and sunglasses," said Masci. "Nothing could be further from the truth. Ninety percent of our vendors are artists, so it all makes sense to open every year with SoWa Art Walk."

Though the size of the Open Market has expanded this year, it follows a previous decision by Masci to narrow the scope of the Market's name: last year was its first as SoWa Open Market after a previous three years under the broader title South End Open Market. Masci says the name change was a response to the recognition of SoWa as a unique sector of the South End neighborhood, and the Open Market's role in helping the area flourish as a destination spot for the Boston arts scene.

"We felt it was important to identify our brand with this exciting new neighborhood," said Masci. "SoWa's a very special place, and I like to think we helped make it the way it is ... we wanted to be true to our roots."

Local gallery owners agree that both weekend events have become a vital part of the neighborhood's reputation and vitality.

"It's a wonderful community builder," says Arlette Kayafas, owner of Gallery Kayafas. Though she doesn't necessarily attribute the event to an increase in sales, Kayafas says the annual weekend promotes an increasing awareness of the local art scene.

"It gets people used to being comfortable coming into galleries and enjoying the art," she says.

And making people more open, of course, has always been the point.

For more information on SoWa Art Walk and SoWa Open Market, visit [www.sowaartwalk.com](http://www.sowaartwalk.com) and [www.southendopenmarket.com](http://www.southendopenmarket.com)