

# A Blanding Avenue Transformation

When Rhythmix Cultural Works opened on Blanding Avenue in 2007, the mixed-use community center was a lone artistic voice in an industrial wilderness of machine shops and sleepy neighborhood residences. Allied Engineering and Stone Boat Yard were neighbors, and a custom glass shop stood across the street. The Blanding businesses served as a quiet warehouse corridor feeding into busy Park Street.

That old neighborhood vibe is barely present these days as an eclectic mix of artists and innovators refurbish existing buildings and inject new energy in the neighborhood and surrounding community. “The changes in the neighborhood don’t surprise me,” said Janet Koike, founder and artistic director at Rhythmix. “When an artist collective moves into a space and starts making improvements, the surrounding area always seems to follow suit.”

Blanding Avenue has transitioned into a little hotbed of venues for seeing, sharing, and creating art. Some places offer professional services only, but others are open and eager for public visits and community engagement.

ConcreteWorks falls into the set of professional artisans making custom pieces for architects and designers. The crew started refurbishing the former Allied Engineering building in February, and production started in July. A sister company to ConcreteWorks Oakland, which has designed and produced stunning indoor and outdoor pieces for Penrose on Grand Avenue, Haven and Bocanova in Jack London Square, and resorts in Calistoga and beyond, ConcreteWorks Alameda will handle larger projects and specialize in the unique practice of three-dimensional cladding, which is creating the outside skin or façade of buildings.

“Making and manufacturing things is essential to our being a successful society,” said Mark Rogero, principal at ConcreteWorks. “We want to restore the glory of manufacturing in Alameda with new materials and high technology. Most companies with this capability are in Europe. Our modern, world-class facility in Alameda will be the only manufacturer of its kind in North America.”

The company has plans in the works to give the warehouse and the grounds a facelift. “As people come over Park Street Bridge from Oakland, they will see a restored façade that will be a beautiful gateway onto the island,” he said.

Next door, Rhythmix continues to attract a slew of artists, actors, dancers, and musicians, thanks to an expanding list of live events and artists’ galleries that push boundaries.

The Blanding Avenue vibe has meant a little artistic spillover outside the immediate area. One not-far-afield outlet is Lincoln Avenue’s Redux Studios & Gallery, which supports arts patrons and offers a twist on perspectives outside traditional galleries or museums. “We have an alternative space for people who may not think they like art,” said Chris Rummell, the “creative reuse manager” at Redux. “We use unconventional material that is humble and unexpected, and we want the art and the space to be open and accessible to a wide audience.”

The artwork at Redux is centered on creative reuse of reclaimed materials that come in from donations to St. Vincent de Paul of Alameda County, the owner and operator of Redux. Arts patrons,

meanwhile, can interact with art in ways beyond viewing, because Redux offers workshops on constructing tikis, creating sculpture from found objects, and making jewelry. “We want to help people not be intimidated about creating art,” Rummell said. “Art and creativity are part of our individual well-being. We are fostering a community where folks can explore artwork that is off the beaten path and gain a sense of empowerment.”

Rhythmix also adheres to a similar philosophy, offering classes and workshops in art dance, theater, improv, martial arts, and even sewing. “People constantly come to us with things they want to do, and we strive to create programming that serves all the different interests,” said Tina Blaine, Rhythmix executive director. “Since there are more than 50 different languages spoken in Alameda, our goal is to provide rich, diverse shows, events, workshops and classes that serve all ages and bring high-quality arts experiences to the community.”

Elsewhere on Blanding, Bridgehead Studio offers artists a workspace to create art and take photographs and a gallery to present them, and nearby Revival Tintype Studio specializes in creating vintage tintype portraits.

All these lively tenants just go to show that with such an influx of creativity in the neighborhood, Blanding Avenue is enlivened with energy and community, ensuring that Blanding and surroundings are anything but bland.