



352



In Pueblo's fight against obsolescence, colorful players emerge — and can't be ignored

Paint the town

By [Edie Adelstein](#) [@edieadelstein](#)

On the corner of Third and Main in Pueblo, you'll find the splintery wood-sided Cowboy Supply, which boasts a 109-year-family business history and just about everything a Western guy or gal could want — "shoe polish or shoe laces or a \$500 hat."

But should that same guy or gal want, say, to know more about photography, sculpture or painting, all they'd need to do is enter an inconspicuous doorway on the Main Street side of the building and take a narrow staircase up.

On the second floor is the Shoe Factory, an "atelier" with artist studios and a gallery. At first, it feels like an old movie set, with dark wood, heavy doors and acoustics that make footsteps echo loudly. It has that dank smell of a place that's been around for decades undisturbed. Because it is.

When the Factory got going last October, all that founder Gregory Howell wanted to do was make it "safe and secure." There would be no unnecessary updating, no cosmetic expunging of the floor's history, which dates back to when Pueblo was a leather-working mecca and the "Saddle-Making Capital of the World."

To Howell, that's the beauty of the place. But you'll really see its revitalized lineage behind those doors, where 10 artists work. Howell guides me through the old office that now serves as a spacious studio for three artists and overlooks Third and Main and Solar Roast Coffee, Pueblo's renowned sun-powered coffee roaster, through huge curved windows. The women have made the space up nicely with throw rugs, chic bookshelves and tidy workplaces. A drawing of a girl yawning out birds is taped to a window.

Farther down the hall, another photographer hangs his things in a corner outlined with the remnants of a deejay booth from Pueblo's first radio station. Next door, another two artists have lined one wall with stacks of cubbies for spray-paint bottles; another boasts a mural of a dreamy, graffiti-esque landscape of birds, insects and a yeti in a starlit forest.

Another monster lurks around here, though, and it's got multiple heads.

Pueblo's crime rates — both property and violent — are nearly double the state averages, and the same goes for its poverty rate. Unemployment hit 9.6 percent in February, compared with 6.1 percent statewide. As in Colorado Springs, there's worry that young professionals are leaving, and the population is aging itself out of competition for direct employers looking to open offices.

Also as in Colorado Springs, city leaders here have pinned their hopes on a big, mainstream tourism project to turn things around. In 2012, one year before the Springs took advantage of Colorado's Regional Tourism Act for its City for Champions project, Pueblo did something similar. Its Regional Tourism Plan aims to fund an aquatics center, Professional Bull Riders University, Historic Arkansas Riverwalk of Pueblo (HARP) expansions, additions to the convention center and a parking garage, all downtown.

But as people fight and bite their nails over the millions of dollars at stake there — and they are doing both — others believe a turnaround has already begun. They see it in places like the Shoe Factory. Or at the workshop of Mathias Valdez of LastLeaf Printing, who's now doing gig posters for bands like the Avett Brothers and the Alabama Shakes, à la Jermaine Rogers.

In recent years, Pueblo's arts community has drawn a substantial amount of money and recognition, and inspired people like Howell, a fast-talking, fast-walking 52-year-old who spent nine months annually for 17 years traveling around the world doing art programming for museums like the Met and MoMA.

He came from Los Angeles in 2011 — looking for a new chapter and given a temporary place to live by friends — believing this southern Colorado city of 108,000 people has all the ingredients. "One, its history," he says. "Its architecture, city planning and art."

The question is, how far can people like him take all that?



Totally certifiable

The Shoe Factory sits on the north side of a one-mile stretch called the Creative Corridor, a designated district that links three downtown neighborhoods filled with art galleries, restaurants, shops and other businesses. Blocks of historic buildings sit without a chain business in sight. Their merrily painted exteriors and frilly details are impressive for their craftsmanship (and for avoiding demolition). On an average day, teenagers wheel by on skateboards, hipsters loiter outside bars, families carouse by the Riverwalk, and Modest Mouse and Vampire Weekend blast from the nearby Bingo Burger patio.

The Main Street, Union Avenue and Mesa Junction districts are bookended by the Rawlings Library to the south and the Sangre de Cristo Arts Center to the north. In the summertime, street performers are stationed throughout, and brochure stands offer a map showing 38 stops along the way. It's a pleasant walk, but on First Fridays a free bus called the VanGO Art Shuttle also sweeps visitors up and down the avenue.

Only about two years old, the Corridor already sees 80,000 visitors per year. It's the handiwork of the Pueblo Arts Alliance (formerly the Pueblo Performing Arts Guild), which promotes the arts for economic development. The nonprofit partners with the Greater Pueblo Chamber of Commerce and the Pueblo Economic Development Corporation (PEDCO), as well as what PAA executive director Susan Fries calls "anchors" in the scene, like HARP, Sangre de Cristo, Pueblo Community College and Colorado State University-Pueblo.

"We provide a backbone for the artists," says Fries, "and then we just encourage them to do their stuff."

The group's track record is downright amazing. The National Endowment for the Arts awarded PAA \$10,000 in both 2011 and 2012. The State Historical Trust awarded it \$10,000 in 2010; Colorado Creative Industries (CCI), a part of the Colorado Office of Economic Development and International Trade, awarded it \$4,000 each year from 2010 to 2012. In addition, CCI gave \$8,000 in 2012 for the Creative Corridor being designated a "prospective creative district," and \$15,000 last June for it becoming a "certified creative district."

(By contrast, Downtown Colorado Springs is currently a "candidate district," and Manitou Springs is applying to become a candidate for the first time. As of today, CCI has awarded Downtown \$12,000 and professional guidance to help it grow toward full-fledged district status. Lara Garritano of the Downtown Partnership adds that it has gotten support from various smaller entities, but has yet to apply for funding from larger agencies like the NEA.)

Most of PAA's grants — including another for 2014, \$7,500 from the Colorado Garden Foundation — goes toward operations or specific projects, which works because all of PAA's year-round events either pay for themselves or turn a profit. Ads and sponsorships in the free Art Walk guide pay for First Friday events. Street Beat, PAA's summer street performance program, is funded by the Pueblo Urban Renewal Authority and matched by sponsors.

This has meaning on the ground, too, according to Radeaux (who goes by the single moniker), owner of the over-30-year-old John Deaux Art Gallery in the Union Avenue part of the Corridor.

"We've had an art walk for 25, 30 years, but sometimes in the winter we were happy if we got two people," he says. "We'll get a couple hundred sometimes on a nice day, and on a winter day, maybe 50... that's a lot better. And a crowd is one thing, but if it translates into sales that's another thing — and it has."

Numbers gathered annually from members show PAA crowds grew from 270,000 in 2009 to 470,700 in 2011, and the economic impact of the performing arts audiences grew from \$5 million to \$11 million in the same amount of time. Stats from 2012 are still being calculated, but in that year the Creative Corridor generated \$7.97 million in revenues.

Like Aspen

Fries recalls when the Pueblo Chamber of Commerce "used to not mention the arts in any of their messaging. None. Arts were just off the page. And it took about three years before the chamber president started every once in a while including 'the arts' in a sentence." She even remembers the first moment it happened.

Today, though, "if you go to any meeting he's in, arts are the first thing he talks about, for economic development, and the first thing he talks about for tourism."

The Chamber president is Rod Slyhoff, who agrees with Fries' assessment. He says before PAA, the arts weren't organized and thus, harder to work with and promote. Of those who started the group, he says, "They really did pull it together and show us that it's good for our economy and for our community to support those types of efforts. They have done a lot for downtown. They have done a lot for Pueblo."

PAA helped the Chamber bring the state's Creative Industries Summit to Pueblo last April, pitching in by building a series of activities for guests following the conference, something CCI program manager Christy Costello says wowed the committee deciding who would host the conference.

"They were just kind of a shoo-in, because of that, really," she says.

And when the time came in April, Pueblo didn't disappoint. Over the course of the weekend, PAA organized dozens of performances and set up tours for conference-goers to easily navigate the downtown area on a special Second Thursday Art Crawl.

It was there, too, that Pueblo was given the Governor's Art Award, an even larger honor for "collective efforts to enhance their community and their economy through strategic use of the arts." Aspen won one as well, for the same reasons, but after decades of creative placemaking.

Enough news like this, and you move toward that magical phrase in economic development circles: quality of life.

"Frankly — and this is my personal opinion — I think [Pueblo's creative sector has] really jumped up in its recognition in the last couple of years, and it's been great," says Richard Werner, vice

president of PEDCO.

"When you are attracting companies to a community, or looking to expand companies to a community," he says, "they look at a whole host of factors, whether it be cost of living, workforce, quality of life, all of those things. And that's part of where the arts community comes in to play there, in creating those vibrant corridors."

Writing on the wall

Back at the Shoe Factory, Howell opens up a windowless room in the middle of the floor that functions as an ad hoc office. This space, too, is filled with artwork, this time from a woman named Marilyn June Barkhoefer, who died last year and whose life's work ended up in Howell's hands. He's already planning two shows of it, and hopes to develop a book and traveling show.

On the wall are a dozen sheets of butcher paper marked with projects and color-coordinated sticky notes, which attest to the fact that Howell basically never stops. He runs the Kadoya Gallery inside the Tutt Building, named after its original owners (the Colorado College Tutts) and included on the National Register of Historic Places. Six months after moving to Pueblo, Howell moved in to the abandoned space — he still lives there — and by the end of 2012, he'd launched Kadoya and planned two years of shows. Rodney Wood, a highly respected artist formerly of the Springs, is on the books for August.

Other sticky notes reference a permanent exhibit space he'll co-curate at the Steelworks Museum and Colorado Fuel and Iron Company (CF&I) Archives (where he's also a board member); a nine-week art program he and the Factory artists are doing for the first-grade classes at Morton Elementary School; and a business program he's planning to teach artists how to market themselves, or set up an LLC.

He's putting a library and yoga studio in the Factory, for which he's also seeking 501(c)3 designation. And then there's an initiative called the ARTery that he's spearheading.

The ARTery, which has already gotten funding from the American Heart Association, is a 2/3-mile loop through the Main Street District that follows the original layout of the downtown area. Visitors will walk a path marked by signs (and soon an app) from Bingo Burger to Fifth Street, then back to Kadoya and the Central Plaza through streets and an alleyway that used to be a thoroughfare. Howell is coordinating muralists who will paint all the backs and sides of the buildings; one has already been finished.

"I find that Pueblo has a really fine convergence of street art and fine art," he says.

Murals are ubiquitous in Pueblo. Mike Strescino, a paint-splattered Shoe Factory artist, says residents have always been open to letting artists like him paint their garages, and the Bessemer neighborhood is a great place to see those. Then there's the levee wall that started in the '70s and is the largest mural in the world, running for almost two miles at 58 feet tall.

But Strescino is actually more impressed by Pueblo's subculture of street art. "I think it's interesting that in Pueblo, out of all of Colorado, the best graffiti artists in the state live here," he says, adding that if Pueblo played up its murals and held a street art/graffiti/mural festival like the dozens that have been popping up around the world, it could be big.

After all, it doesn't get more accessible than street art. Strescino and studio mate Mathew Taylor learned as much when they painted the Colorado Bluesky Enterprises building's west wall in 2013, a block from the Shoe Factory. Their subject on the three-story structure was Lucky the horse mannequin, which was swept away in the 1921 Pueblo flood but later recovered in a tree in Avondale. Each day, Strescino estimates, he and Taylor told the story a dozen times to passersby.

(Howell says Lucky later survived a fire as well. He now resides peacefully in Pueblo's Southeastern Colorado Heritage Museum.)

"To me, when you talk about connecting art to the community, having people realize it's important to have it around, murals are kind of the number one way to do that," he says, "because it's huge, it's out in public, it's not tucked away in a museum or even a gallery... Even when we have gallery openings, the people who are interested are going to come, but we don't get a lot of passersby. But with stuff like that, people can't miss it, and if there's a ton of them around, then I think people will start to take on a different appreciation of it."

The flip side

When asked if Pueblo could go so far as becoming an arts destination, the sunniest answers start with, "It already is." But there are also naysayers.

John Rodriguez, publisher of the monthly PULP, which has offices right in the middle of the Corridor on Union Avenue, says Pueblo is still "a small pond, and there's not enough food to go around." In that kind of environment, he says, people tend to get unnecessarily competitive.

"The Arts Alliance could be more collaborative with other entities in Pueblo," he adds. "I think Susan Fries is very focused on getting grant money and getting everything lined up to be allowed to get grant money, and that's not negative in itself, but you can't forget the mission of what the arts is supposed to be."

In a January editorial, headlined "Watching them leave," Rodriguez lamented Pueblo's overall situation.

"Maybe I'm just angry but, I don't think there's enough anger over the level of dysfunction and mediocrity that has set in," he wrote. "I don't think those who are making decisions really understand the pain of seeing their child leave for another place knowing they'll be back for the holidays — maybe. They don't see their favorite shop close because the owners grew too old and the business wasn't lucrative enough for their children to take over."

Jane Rawlings, assistant publisher at the Pueblo Chieftain, says the arts, specifically, are healthy. But Pueblo's progress seems to be two-steps-forward-one-step-back.

"In Pueblo, we don't tend to do drastic lows and highs, but when we fall back, we just can't get back up again," she says. "And housing is definitely a big problem right now. There's nothing being built, there's no development in Pueblo right now."

The city's RTA project could add a commercial injection, but it's complicated. Only some of the projects can be funded by state sales-tax money, which is promised to Pueblo at \$43 million over the next 50 years. And in order to get that money, Pueblo needs to make some first.

The state won't loan or advance RTA money, so the applicants — the city's Urban Renewal Authority, Chamber of Commerce, and Economic Development Corp., among others — have to get \$14 million on their own. By 2013's end, they hadn't gotten private investors, so they approached Pueblo City Council.

On Jan. 27, Council unanimously approved \$14.4 million in earmarked funds from the city's half-cent sales tax coffers — but only if the EDC can bag a major employer within 120 days. The May 30 deadline can be extended, and PEDCO is said to have an undisclosed prospect, the Chieftain reported April 26, but now it says it may need more money.

Some citizens, meanwhile, say leaders' attention should go to more immediate concerns, like police or jobs, and Council is divided there, too. Chieftain stories on the RTA attract comments like, "Nope, nope and nope. Jobs first, loan later." And "How do you revitalize a corpse? No matter how much money you dump in, the poor old corpse just won't move ..."

Though some would argue it doesn't make a difference, Pueblo's got what pretty much every town has in some form or another: An inferiority complex. Small southern Colorado towns look up to Pueblo, Pueblo looks up to Colorado Springs, the Springs looks up to Denver, Denver looks up to Austin ... and everybody can find a way to be dissatisfied with themselves.

Says Strescino, "I think a lot of people just spend their time hating Pueblo, and it makes everybody hate Pueblo amongst people who live here. It makes people think hating Pueblo's the thing to do. You never want to admit you love it here."

Strescino admits he was once a hater himself. But today, he says that some of the clouds over Pueblo actually protect people like him. For one thing, Pueblo's relative lack of drawing power makes it a cheap place to live — according to Werner, one of the cheapest in the nation — and that's good news for artists. Though many who live in Pueblo then travel to New Mexico to sell their work, Werner believes it may provide a foothold in working to further establish and promote the arts in Pueblo.

"My life is great here right now," Strescino says. "I live in a nice little house, have this studio, I can pretty much do what I want for really cheap. It's so cheap here. So cheap. Me and my girlfriend have a house, it's a pretty decent size, wood floors, brick house, for like, \$700 a month, and my half of the studio rent is \$125. So I have here what I couldn't have ... in Denver. Or not as easily, anyway."

'It's all just here'

On this particular day of my visit, Howell is busy going between the Shoe Factory and Kadoya preparing for the opening reception of 24-year-old Raúl Sosa's three-part solo show A Retrospective ... So Far.

Howell is deeply impressed with Sosa's work, here a series of iPhone photography, another of self-portraits in which he obscures his face, and a "Crossed the Line" series of manipulated photos that shows shockingly graphic mutilated bodies. Meant to make one think about our revulsion from violence and our interest in gore, Sosa's decapitated subjects seem to reach their goal. Howell has been urging Sosa to try a performance piece for opening night, in which he'd re-create a self-portrait in one of the large window displays of the gallery.

When I return to Kadoya for the opening that evening, people are already filling the little space; Sosa's friends, the girls dressed up in heels, headbands and makeup; a professor; parents; art lovers. They munch on pistachio panna cotta, Bibb lettuce boats drizzled with a balsamic reduction, and citrus-flavored cannoli cream on ice-cream-cone chips.

This decidedly non-store-bought cheese-platter spread is the work of chef Ernie Duncan of the now-defunct Restaurant 1521, who says he loves creating menus with Howell and the exhibiting artist for these things. It gives him a chance to be creative.

One older couple has come this night from Boone, 20 miles east of Pueblo. The husband, clad in a Nebraska Cornhuskers hat, is shooting the event with his DSLR. Howell knows them, of course, and greets them as he does almost everyone else.

"Gregory's really a catalyst," the husband says.

"It's all just here," Howell insists. He tells me later that many of his projects get legs because he's pitching not just an idea, but a response to a need.

Recalling the start of Kadoya, he says, "It was just like, 'Wow!' There really is not only a need for this, but there's also just great, great support. People just felt they needed a place that didn't have any rules, any regulations. I have kind of an open-door policy: You just have a passion for your art, and you want to tell your story, and I'll support you. I'll be there, side by side."

As the sun goes down, the wind picks up, and the space in front of Kadoya looks a lot less friendly than before. But Howell is working on fixing that, too, through the Central Plaza Revival project. By June, with the help of the city, plans are to have a triangular space with a built-in amphitheater, landscaping, sculptures, planters, and cog designs stained into the concrete. Based on Howell's CPR meeting minutes, which he posts on Kadoya's Facebook page, everything is coming together on schedule.

For now, though, everyone's watching Sosa, who has climbed into the window display and has situated himself in the rocking chair where he was lulled as an infant, looking at a table with a picture of himself. He's dressed in somber black-and-white attire and has donned a surgical mask that covers his entire face. He sits there for half an hour without moving.

The crowd looks on timidly but approvingly. Howell, taking video of Sosa, smiles to himself.

In five to 10 years, Howell says he hopes to start up a "world-class" contemporary art museum in Pueblo. Some days, it doesn't sound like that much of a stretch. So much has changed already, and from the ground level on up. On Pueblo's terms.

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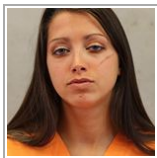
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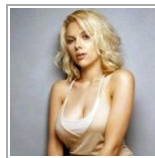
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