

Art Dealers

Delaware's Greater Wilmington region is a mecca for performance and creativity

BY MARLENE GOLDMAN

A long-time magnet for financial institutions and credit card companies, Wilmington carries the moniker Corporate Capital of the World. But Delaware's largest city, set on the confluence of the Christina and Brandywine rivers, is also a mecca for arts and culture, boasting a vast array of museums, galleries, performing arts spaces and other cultural venues.

One of the current initiatives is focusing on public art in the burgeoning Creative District encompassing the downtown area bounded by Fourth, Ninth, Market and Washington streets, according to Matt Sullivan, a local arts expert with a background as managing director of Delaware Shakespeare.

The initiative is partly the product of the Wilmington Renaissance Corporation (WRC), which in the past helped rejuvenate the downtown LOMA (Lower Market Street) neighborhood, and also helped establish the innovative Delaware College

of Art and Design and create a four-year public art program. One of the projects in the Creative District is to focus on the maker culture, including the opening of NextFab—a network of membership-based makerspaces that provide access to tools, technology, education, events and services for makers.

According to Sullivan, other Creative District projects open to the public include events in The Rock Lot, which opened last year, transforming a former vacant lot to a performance space. The Rock Lot hosts jazz concerts and OutSpoken!, spoken word



CARLOS ALEJANDRO
ANDREW WYETH STUDIO, BRANDYWINE RIVER MUSEUM OF ART, CHADDS FORD, PA.



THE QUEEN

presentations produced by Sweet Jams!, which normally hosts its spoken word nights at U Dairy Creamery Market at the Market Street location.

Sullivan also noted the city's burgeoning music scene, including the downtown Ladybug Music Festival.

"The local music scene revitalized a lot of what is happening downtown," he said.

Arts on the Water

While the Creative District is still in its early stages, the Riverfront Wilmington district is home to many of the city's cultural venues, as well as the Chase Center on the Riverfront event facility, with more than 87,000 square feet of flexible space for meetings.

"Now the only hotel in the district is the Westin Wilmington, but a few are slated for the future," said Jessica Bittmann, director of sales for the Greater Wilmington CVB. "One broke ground a couple of months ago, a Homewood Suites, right on the river across from the Chase Center."

For group off-sites, getting creative is a priority.

"We've had a lot of inquiries lately for unique venue options or something out of the box," Bittmann said. "A lot want to go somewhere not a lot of people have seen."

Located in Riverfront Wilmington is the Delaware Theatre Company (DTC), the state's largest professional theater and a landmark on the Christina Riverfront. The 389-seat DTC offers a mix of classic and contemporary plays as well as new works. Groups can host pre- or post-performance receptions in the gallery.

Also set in the Riverfront district is the cutting-edge City Theater Company, which performs in The Black Box at Opera Delaware on the waterfront. Groups can attend the off-Broadway productions as well as

Green THUMBS

Just as vibrant and varied as its arts scene, Greater Wilmington is home to a multitude of gardens and outdoor green spaces for groups. Following are some of the most popular group spots.

Longwood Gardens (www.longwoodgardens.org), touted as one of the great gardens of the world, features a four-acre Conservatory, outdoor gardens spanning 1,077 acres and 86 acres in the Meadow Garden. The venue offers everything from horticulture displays to beautiful fountains and inspiring performances.

"Longwood is scenic and features gorgeous fountains likened to those at Bellagio," said Jessica Bittmann, director of sales for the Greater Wilmington CVB. "Custom tours get deep into the art of historical preservation."

Mt. Cuba Center (<https://mtcubacenter.org>), which recently merged with Red Clay Reservation in Northern Delaware, for a total of 1,083 acres, offers groups a two-hour guided tour with personalized service from a knowledgeable docent. Groups can also arrange classes such as the Leaf Impression Tile Workshop and Create a Butterfly Garden.

Bellevue State Park (www.destateparks.com/park/bellevue), a 328-acre state park in the suburbs of Wilmington in New Castle County overlooking the Delaware River, was named after Bellevue Hall, the former mansion of William du Pont Jr. Venue options include Bellevue Hall, outdoor spaces and an equestrian center.

While **Winterthur Museum, Garden & Library** (www.winterthur.org) features well-preserved architecture and indoor exhibits, its 1,000 acres of streams, meadows and forest, as well as a 60-acre garden, are the highlights. Founded by Henry Francis du Pont, Winterthur's collection includes American antiques from the country's early history as well as from the du Pont family, who once owned the estate. The garden features a reflecting pool, an array of flowers and statues, and is open to group tours, as is the complex.

Another du Pont family entity, the **Hagley Museum and Library** (www.hagley.org) spans 235 acres and is home to a museum, historic mansion, gunpowder mill, library and lyrical garden. The garden surrounds the Georgian-style mansion and sits along the Brandywine River. The property can host an intimate lunch for 20 or cocktail party for up to 200, utilizing a variety of spaces such as the Soda House and Copeland Room.

The **DuPont Environmental Education Center** (<http://www.delawarenatureandsociety.org/DuPontEnvironmentalEducationCenter>) overlooks the 212-acre Russell W. Peterson Urban Wildlife Refuge, which is home to bald eagles, beavers, dragonflies, turtles, butterflies and other critters. The center can host small dinners and meetings.

The **Delaware Center for Horticulture** (www.thedch.org) offers activities throughout the year as well as workshops. The DCH's main attraction is its manicured gardens. The center also includes an art gallery and grounds overlooking Brandywine Park. Attendees can combine a trip to The DCH with a hike down Brandywine Park's trails to the river.

Rockwood Park & Museum (www.nccde.org/431/rockwood-park-museum), in New Castle County, was built by Joseph Shipley, a Quaker merchant banker. Its Victorian Gothic mansion, constructed between 1851 and 1854, offers a ghost tour as well as a historic garden tour. The mansion's Rockwood Parlor can host up to 20 people while the carriage house and outdoor spaces are also available for groups.

—Marlene Goldman



MT. CUBA CENTER

participate in teambuilding improv workshops.

For opera buffs, the Riverfront also hosts Opera Delaware, the only profes-

sional opera company in the state and one of the oldest in the country. The Opera Delaware Studio can host groups for a meeting or cocktail reception, with views overlooking the Christina River.

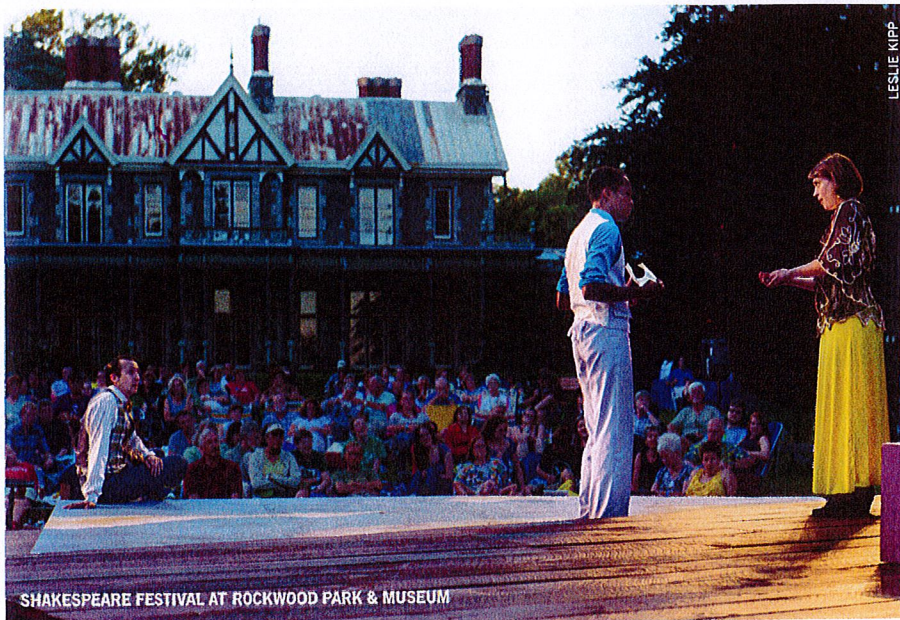
Fine arts are represented along the Riverfront at The Delaware Contemporary, housed in what was once a railroad passenger car factory and featuring rotating exhibitions from local and international artists.

"The Delaware Contemporary can host scavenger hunts and events, and can do outside caterers," Bittmann said.

Venues open to groups include the Atrium Lobby, which can accommodate a dinner event for 50 or reception for 300 guests.



GRAND OPERA HOUSE



The Wings Foundation Auditorium can host a conference or evening program, with theater-style seating for 120 guests.

Also open to groups is the Delaware Children's Museum, with over 37,000 square feet of interactive, hands-on activities.

While Riverfront Wilmington is a magnet for the arts and entertainment, other areas of the city spotlight the city's cultural strengths as well.

Cultural Milieu

One of Wilmington's main draws is the Delaware Art Museum, with roots back to the founding of the Wilmington Society of the Fine Arts in 1912. The museum regularly exhibits works from its collection of over 100 Howard Pyle art pieces alongside the largest collection of pre-Raphaelite art outside the British Isles. Other artists represented included N.C. Wyeth, Maxfield Parrish and Frank E. Schoonover.

Unique event spaces include a grand entrance hall, a contemporary asymmetrical reception space and an outdoor patio and sculpture garden. The museum's permanent collection galleries and traveling exhibition spaces can also be used.

"Groups can do workshops and organize scavenger hunts," Bittmann said. "There are teambuilding exercises, such as picking up and continuing what someone else is working on. There are also clay workshops."

Just over the Northern Delaware border, in Chadds Ford, Pa., the Brandywine River Museum of Art offers groups tours of the collection, which includes three generations of Wyeth family art. Six of the galleries

can be open during an off-site event in the evenings and up to 120 guests can be accommodated for a seated dinner and up to 600 for a cocktail-only reception. Other spaces to rent include the first floor museum restaurant and lecture room.

The museum also offers shuttles to the N.C. Wyeth House & Studio and the Andrew Wyeth Studio. Both studios are owned by the museum and were gifted by the artist's wife, Betsy James Wyeth, and both are National Historic Landmarks. The studios are open for group tours.

Some of the city's smaller galleries can host off-site functions, such as the Carspecken-Scott Gallery, which exhibits works by contemporary Eastern and Mid-Atlantic artists, and the two-story Chris White Gallery.

The Mezzanine Gallery, located in Wilmington's Carvel State Office Building and open to groups, features one-person exhibitions of Delaware artists that include painting, photography, sculpture and folk art.

At the core of Wilmington's cultural scene is a variety of performing arts and theater groups. One of the most historic venues, the Grand Opera House, was built in 1871 and features a diversity of live performances with more than 100 shows a year, from the Delaware Symphony Orchestra and OperaDelaware to the First State Ballet Theatre and stand-up comedians.

"The Grand Opera House will work with groups on meetings and can partner with caterers," Bittmann said.

Both the Grand Opera House and Baby Grand theater offer options for off-site




events or a corporate meeting.


The Queen, an old movie house that had been dormant for 60 years, was restored using the pillars and brick from the original building and was turned into a modern music venue run by Live Nation. The stained-glass artworks there now depict the likes of Beyonce, Pink and more-underground acts like Primus. The theater can host events and offers custom menus and cocktails.

Other smaller companies and venues include Playhouse on Rodney Square, featuring off-Broadway productions. The Wilmington Drama League is one of the oldest community theaters in the country, while the Candlelight Theatre in North Wilmington also features a wide variety of productions.

For a hands-on art experience, Liquid Alchemy Beverages, which makes its own craft meads and ciders, organizes paint nights as well as plant nights where attendees can make their own terrariums. Its gluten-free honey-based wines and mixed drinks have won multiple medals in competition.

"It's a cool spot and they are such wonderful people to work with," Bittmann said.

Plant Nite also offers groups wine and cocktails while attendees can create a tabletop garden. 

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