



By Ian Hurley

Souchitta Chanthompalit and Erik Lantz recently opened their shop, Sacred Gear, next to Upper Crust on Washington Street.

Changing shops bring new energy to downtown streets

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Salem - In recent weeks, Salem's downtown landscape has shifted. New shops have cropped up, while others have moved on to new spaces.

Newcomers in recent months include Cabin Fever, a furniture store on Essex Street specializing in Brazilian imports, and Salem Naturals, a Wharf Street shop that carries organic and eco-friendly products promoting a healthy lifestyle.

On Washington Street, the new Sacred Gear is a hip clothing boutique that offers young professionals an artistic mix of upscale and casual dress in the spirit of Urban Outfitters.

Owners Erik Lantz, 29, and Souchitta Chanthompalit, 32, bring different talents to the business. Chanthompalit worked as a visual coordinator for seven years while Lantz has a background in sales management.

The shop is a cross between Newbury Street chic and funky discotheque where loud dance music creates an upbeat shopping atmosphere. There are clothes for men and women, as well as accessories including hats, belts and handbags.

Many of the clothing styles reflect a colorful and edgy street chic -- there is an eclectic array of T-shirts adorned with retro tattoos and graffiti influenced graphic designs

One T-shirt by Triple 5 Soul, a Brooklyn-based designer, features a black and white photo of a New York City street scene complete with large theater marquis in the background and a crowd of people waiting in line for a show. In gold letters across the front it reads, "Sold my soul for fame, sex, drugs and money."

Lantz points out Sacred Gear focuses on unique items that are often handmade and feature unique details, such as one lime green T-shirt that has eye-catching red stitching.

He and Chanthompalit are happy to be a part of their Washington and Essex corner, surrounded by other new businesses like Gulu-Gulu Cafe and Upper Crust, which they say lend a vibrancy to the block.

"Salem is on the route to becoming more of a shopping destination," Lantz reflects. "It's always going to be the Witch City, but to be more than that is tremendous."

Easy, breezy, beautiful

A four-year veteran of the downtown, the Picklepot Gallery relocated this month to Pickering Wharf at 75 Wharf St. The move, owner Jeff Bowie,

says, has brought more foot traffic and a lovely ocean breeze.

"I have both my doors open right now," she laughs. "I'm loving it."

Although she sacrificed office space -- about 100 square feet worth -- Bowie says she's hoping the move will pay off by helping to increase store numbers.

"The economy's been bad. I'm hoping to survive it," she says. "I plan to be here a long time. I'm bringing in new artists, tweaking lines."

Of the dozens of local artists Bowie features in her shop Collaborative Artworks, a Lynn-based textile artisan, is one of the best sellers. The artist uses an Asian dyeing technique called shibori, which is similar to tie-dye, to splash sunset colors across T-shirts and tank tops made of silk and cotton.

"Her stuff is flying out of her," says Bowie.

Another Gloucester artisan, Beth Williams, crafts earrings out of glass beads she makes herself, working the glass by hand painstakingly on a metal rod over a small flame. The one-of-a-kind earrings come in bright candy colors and funky patterns, ranging about \$50 a pair.

A boost in feng shui

Treasures over Time, a shop specializing in jewelry, accessories and crystals, has left its two-year post on Essex Street and taken over the Picklepot's former space at 143 Washington.

The move, co-owner Sivan Sergott said, has brought with it nearly double the space of her old spot, with plenty of room for storage.

"There was unusable space in the old location," she says. "It was long and narrow and I had to block off [retail] space for storage."

The Washington Street location has more of a gallery feel, with its sunlit windows and plenty of space for expanding the shops line of estate jewelry.

"We've tried to bring in all the best of the mineral kingdom into the store," Sergott says. The gemologist has more than 25 years of experience at her craft and often offers educational classes and lectures on gem identification, crystals and minerals to the public.

Out of all the positive changes the new space brings, Sergott says, the best is having her own front door for the first time. On Essex Street she shared an entry way with Salem's 13 Ghosts, a tourist shop that was only open one month a year. Often, she says, people would mistake her front door with 13 Ghosts.

"This way we have our own entrance," she says. "People will know who we are and what we do. I'm looking forward to having more local business as well."

Changing face of tourism

Rinus Oosthoek, executive director of Salem's Chamber of Commerce, says the city seems to be consistently attracting new businesses, despite the slippery economy, thanks to its booming tourism trade. Now is a great time for businesses moving in, he says, thanks to the city's recent efforts to

attract the cruise-ship industry. This month and next, two cruise ships carrying a total of more than 500 tourists will be stopping off in Salem, with more on the way in the future.

"The city is trying to get more attention from the cruise-ship industry," he said. "We have a lot of positives that will attract cruise ships."

In recent years, more high-end businesses such as Fiddlehead, J. Mode and Rouge Cosmetics have opened shop, which Oosthoek says, has helped boost downtown foot traffic.

"High-end stores become a destination by themselves," he says. "It helps if you have walk-by visitors too and Salem has a lot of those."