

The ChronicleHerald.ca

Published: 2007-07-08

Creating a buzz

Queen Street Studios, the brainchild of competitive paddler and businesswoman Julia Rivard, provides a 'collaborative environment' and all the amenities young professionals might require f

By BILL POWER Staff Reporter

TAKE SOME descriptive marketing phrases like upstart and agile, and young and creative.

Toss them into a bin and shake them all around and the resulting smorgasbord might come close to describing the successful experiment in creative collaboration called Queen Street Studios in downtown Dartmouth.

In marketing and design circles, the Queen Street Studios moniker keeps popping up in an impressive range of contexts, including promotional materials for the nearby \$12-million Founders Corner condominium project and a soon-to-be unveiled branding campaign for the Downtown Dartmouth Business Commission.

A search for the source of the buzz leads to a renovated heritage property — a former firefighters' union hall — at 50 Queen Street across from the Dartmouth post office.

It's easy enough to find, just follow the parade of people carrying portfolios, laptop computers and oversized digital camera bags at just about any time of the day or night to and from the second-floor operation.

A wonderful blast of brilliant, natural light from oversized windows greets visitors to this storey-and-a-half workspace filled with computer screens and translucent job boards, which was until recently a rotting and underutilized storage space in the upstairs portion of an old building that faced a certain if undignified demise.

For creative director Julia Rivard, a former Olympic-level competitive paddler with ambitions to succeed in the challenging marketing and design field, the old building and her hopes for the future came together at exactly the right time.

"I was trying to run a business from the basement of our home and feeling very isolated and finding it difficult to stay motivated," she said of her mindset when she first spotted a For Sale sign on the Queen Street property.

"My work wasn't evolving and I missed the collaborative environment of college."

The graduate of NSCAD University saw in the ramshackle upstairs portion of the building the potential to establish a creative environment in her beloved downtown Dartmouth that would provide needed workspace for many colleagues in the design field who were migrating to the area to escape increasingly expensive working digs on the Halifax side of the harbour.

"As an independent, you might be doing great work, but if you have to show it to people in the basement of your home, it somehow doesn't work," said the creative director of this free-thinking exercise in creativity that has, in less than a year, become a business success story that has some serious players in the creative field sitting up and taking notice.

Ms. Rivard and husband Trevor Marshall and some associates gutted the structure and did most of the renovations themselves.

The business that opened in October last year is in one context the graphic design work of Ms. Rivard herself, but at the same time it is a creative laboratory for about 30 mostly independent professionals with varying backgrounds in digital and graphic design and technology, web design, animation and photography.

Ms. Rivard is a successful competitive paddler and mother of three young children who understands the power of collaboration.

"Together, we can produce work that is much better than what we could do on our own," she said of the environment at the studio.

Creative professionals seeking economical workspace can find it at Queen Street Studios.

For a professional membership fee of about \$675 per year, digital designers can get out of their basements and find some shared workspace that provides a good range of required amenities and some additional features like a shared conference room for meetings with clients and even a photo studio.

There are also less-expensive associate and student memberships.

"It's much like the shared-studio experience we had at college," said graphic designer Michelle Doucette, a member who bases her design business at Queen Street Studios.

"There are opportunities for us all to learn from each other."

Queen Street Studios operates as a design business that offers opportunities for independent members to participate on major contracts that would be out of range without collaborators.

"There is quick access to a wide range of creative professionals," said Shari Tucker, a Truro photographer and website developer who works with her Halifax-area commercial clients out of Queen Street Studios.

The availability of all this talent comes around full circle to provide Ms. Rivard with her required network of experts on everything from web technology to photography and the ability to put quickly together creative teams to tackle projects of any size.

Tim Olive, executive director of the Downtown Dartmouth Business Commission, said Queen Street Studios provides a good anchor for the growing population of people in the area working in the creative field.

He said the influx into downtown Dartmouth of people with arts backgrounds extends back a couple of decades and has achieved a sort of critical mass in recent years.

"Queen Street Studios puts space in a heritage building to innovative use and also provides a gathering place for people in the creative field who want to work together in an advanced sort of marketing environment," he said.

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