

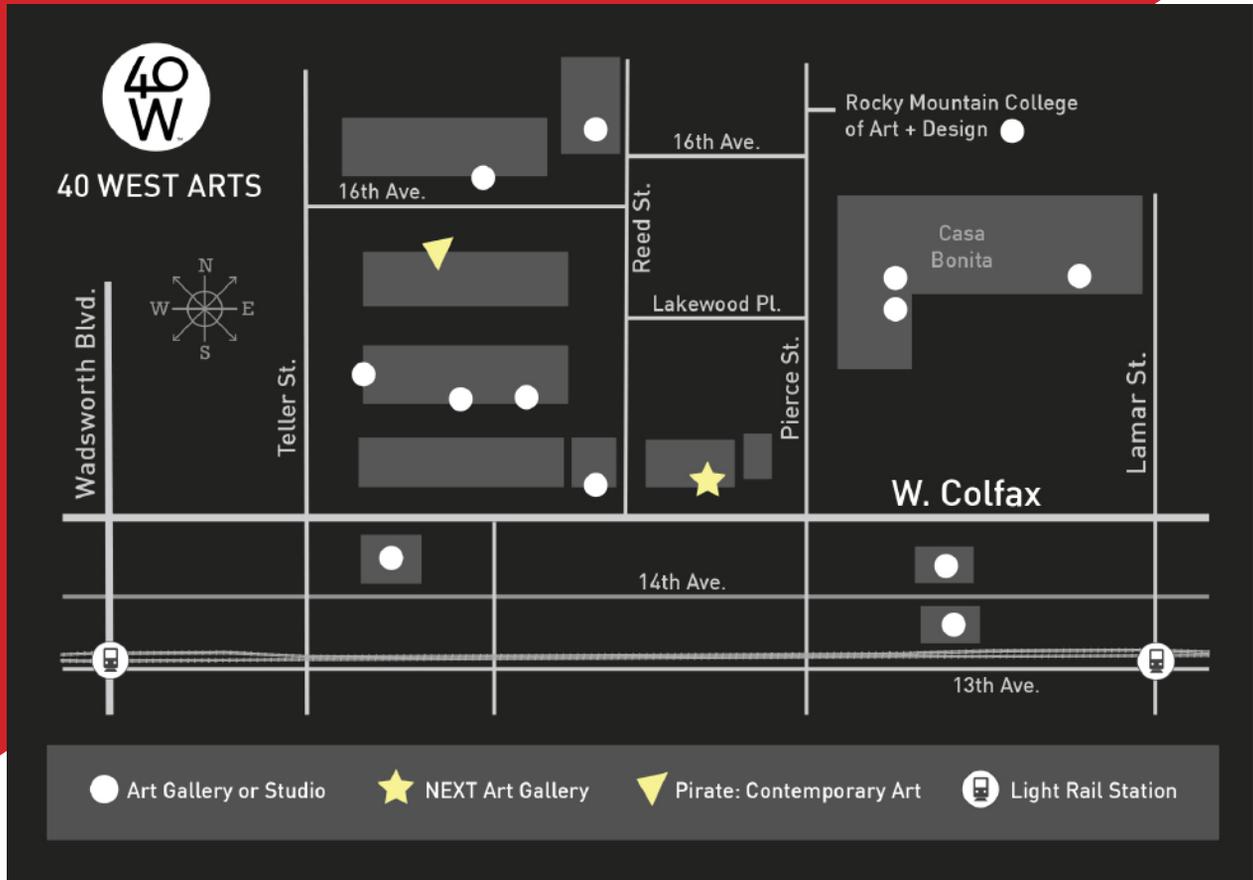


# *A Dream Realized:*

• **The 'Little Arts District That Could'  
Comes of Age with the Arrival of  
Two Top-notch Galleries**

**By M. Perry Williams**





**I**t started as a dream . . . a collective dream by a community—and they did what is most often forgotten when we have a remarkable dream—they wrote it down!

Its essence was first recorded in the 2006 West Colfax Avenue Action Plan—a document created by a blue ribbon committee appointed by Mayor Steve Burkholder (Lakewood Mayor, 1999-2007) and led by then City Councilor Bob Murphy (who’d be the next Mayor, 2007-2015). The committee’s charge was to explore how to re-energize Lakewood’s historic West Colfax Avenue and ways to make it once again a vibrant commercial and entertainment destination that would rival its mid-century glory days when it was recognized as the Gateway to the Rockies, with its neon-bedazzled eateries, shops, supper clubs, and motor inns.

Among the plan’s many recommendations, it encouraged the formation of special districts

and the use of art and art-related activities to ignite and catalyze change. And by 2011, both a business improvement district (BID) and a non-profit arts district were born.

“West Colfax had been in decline for decades, but it had such a rich and storied history,” recalls Bill Marino, then a local entrepreneur who served on the committee and now is board chair for 40 West Arts and the chief executive for the BID. “The committee and the 200+ contributors weren’t afraid to dream big, planting the seeds for change and shaping a vision that would resonate with businesses and residents alike. The notion of an arts district generated excitement.”

Five years from the adoption of the plan, with sustained efforts from local business owners, residents, a passionate Champions Group, a newly formed BID, and an ever-supportive City, the dream became a reality as 250 community



Originally located in Navajo Arts District, Pirate has been welcoming arts patrons for over 30 years. Photo courtesy of Pirate.

members gathered at a garden party on the historic campus of Rocky Mountain College of Art + Design to celebrate the launch of 40 West Arts. Now, in a bit more than a half-decade hence, the dream continues to grow as two of metro Denver's most popular, most innovative, and most critically acclaimed artist-led galleries have made the move to 40 West Arts District.

Pirate: Contemporary Art, an independent, artist co-op gallery with roots back to 1982, has been at the cutting-edge of innovative art exhibitions for more than three decades and was long a popular destination on Navajo Street. Pirate describes itself as "an audacious and eclectic alternative, artist-run cooperative art space . . . many member artists have come and gone, but Pirate persists. It's an institution that remains flexible and edgy."

With the latest real estate boom in Denver, Pirate and its 30+ artists set sail for Lakewood. Pirate has settled in the heart of 40 West Arts, one block north of West Colfax at 7130 West 16th

Avenue, the street that boasts seven murals from the district's first West Colfax MuralFest in 2015. It's also neighbor to The EDGE Theater, 40 West Gallery, and C2 Gallery located in the adjacent building and a short two-minute walk along a painted footpath to 40 West Studios, a workspace for more than a dozen district artists and creatives.

"Pirate has always had a repertoire of high achieving contemporary artists," says Artist Laura Phelps Rogers, a member of both 40 West Arts and Pirate. "The regional and national acclaim [associated with Pirate artists] will help extend energy beyond the district. 40 West can harness this to attract and build a greater base of artists, art patrons, and art collectors."

NEXT Gallery, also an acclaimed, independent co-op gallery, had been a neighbor to Pirate for more than a decade, and now is just a block away in its new West Colfax digs. According to its website, the NEXT Gallery "is driven by all its artists . . . that continually push the co-op to move in new directions." This group of more than 20



The NEXT Gallery sign welcomes patrons into their new West Colfax location. Photo by Miranda Samon.

artists was the first to make the move, opening in April 2017 in the old Metz Lumber building at 6851 W. Colfax. Now NEXT Gallery is centrally located near Pirate's new location and a two-minute walk to Lamar Station Plaza, home to Lakewood Arts Gallery, Gallery of Everything, WestFax Brewing Company, and iconic Casa Bonita of pop culture fame. NEXT's new space is just a block from all of these creative destinations as well as only two blocks from RTD's W Line light rail station.

"As a gallery that's been around 10+ years, our co-op members felt that we could move in and hit the ground running. And having local support was a major factor," explains Artist Charlie Walter, who was among the first NEXT members to exhibit in the new space.

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**// We believe our move will help the district. Our fan base will visit and explore this growing art community. That was certainly the case during our opening on April 28th. We had more than 200 visitors that evening and that was during a snow storm! Our hope is that more and more artists will see the value and commit to this creative community. //**

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- Charlie Walter, *NEXT Gallery Artist*



Artist Charlie Walter (second from right) mingles during NEXT's inaugural opening in 40 West Arts District. Photo by Miranda Samon.



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*- Liz Black, 40 West Arts Executive Director*

“The arrival of Pirate and Next helps solidify our transition from being 40 West Gallery and 40 West Studios centric to a broader district-wide focus—that’s been an important goal all along,” shares Liz Black, 40 West Arts’ executive director. “These two accomplished galleries help to anchor the other creative assets here. The fact that they chose us says a lot about us as a district.”

The three integrated local organizations—40 West Arts, West Colfax Community Association, and the BID—worked hand-in-hand to welcome and support the arrival of both galleries, providing local contacts, promotional support, a modest pool of incentive dollars . . . and rumor has it—a case or two of Pabst Blue Ribbon beer during renovations!

“No doubt that Denver’s loss is Lakewood’s gain. These two remarkable groups of creatives will bring a whole new crowd to West Colfax, broadening the momentum already here and further inspiring our local community!” asserts



Pirate’s iconic neon sign will be relocated to 40 West Arts District. Photo courtesy of Pirate: Contemporary Art.

Kevin Yoshida, architect, urban designer, and BID Board President. “And there’s more on the horizon—new retailers and restaurants are coming—it’s just a matter of time. And the Artspace project in the works here, a 30-40 unit live/work development, will add even more energy with its community galleries and gathering spaces, helping insure that our creative workforce has the opportunity to stay here in an affordable environment.”

Distinguished artist, designer, and West Colfax resident Lonnie Hanzon, a blue ribbon committee contributor, called 40 West Arts in its early days “the Little Arts District That Could” in recognition of the dedicated champions, artists and art patrons, who breathed life into the grassroots creative movement. “These weren’t just dreamers,” he adds. “They were doers, too!”

40 West Arts has come a long way, and the arrival of Pirate and NEXT is a bonanza for the district. But there’s plenty more to do—more infrastructure improvements, more place-making and way-finding to make the district more pedestrian friendly, and the first phase of the NEA “Our Town” Grant-funded *ARTLINE*, a four-mile route connecting three district parks with an interactive walking and biking art experience. All this is a tribute to those who put it in motion—and every person who advocated, invested, and volunteered.

So many have contributed to the momentum that is 40 West Arts. With all the outpouring of energy, effort and emotion—maybe . . . sometimes, dreams do come true.



The City of Lakewood received ULI’s prestigious Impact Award in 2017, the first-ever in the “Inspire” category, for its collaboration with 40 West Arts on a project that inspired a community and has a lasting public impact. Pictured left to right: Kevin Yoshida, Vanessa Zarate, Roger Wadnal, Alexis Moore, Bill Marino, and Jeff Temple.