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DAVID ARAI, PROJECT ARCHITECT



BALL & SOCKET ARTS

An overview of the former Ball & Socket Manufacturing Co. complex in Cheshire, now being turned into an art and retail center.

PASSION, NOT PROFIT

Ball & Socket Arts proving massive dreams can come true even in the face of seemingly impossible odds

BY TRACEY O’SHAUGHNESSY
REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

This spring, when Cheshire’s town-funded Artsplace moves into the second floor of the restored Ball & Socket Arts, it will mark a tipping point for the burgeoning arts and culture facility and a transformational moment for Cheshire.

After more than 10 years of painstaking and often imperceptible remediation on a 150-year-old factory complex, the nonprofit arts group has opened up retail space, conducted outdoor music festivals and hosted art exhibitions. Its emerging and unlikely success has made it a lynchpin in the town’s efforts to reimagine the commercial district in its West End, where Ball & Socket sits at 493 W. Main St., alongside the Farmington Canal Linear Trail.

“We’re doing it, we’re real,” said Ron Bergamo, chairman of the board of the nonprofit. “We had an idea that we would turn an old button factory into becoming a relevant part of the community again. We didn’t want it to be apartments and we didn’t want it to be a mall. We wanted it to be an arts and entertainment facility. We

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definitely have turned a corner. We finally have the proof of concept that we always wanted.”

In August 2022, Sweet Claude’s Ice Cream, a local favorite, moved from Route 10 to the corner of Ball & Socket’s Building 2, allowing the public inside the renovated structure for the first time. The moment was a turning point for the facility, said Joan Pilarczyk, Artsplace director, an affirmation that transforming the long-abandoned eyesore into a vital cultural hub could become a reality.

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STEVEN VALENTI REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN

Construction continues inside Building 2 at Ball & Socket Arts in Cheshire. A nonprofit group has undertaken the transformation.

MODEL: Possibly a blueprint for similar sites in state

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"When Sweet Claude's moved in, you saw the activity," she said. "It was a level of excitement building that 'Oh-my-goodness, this is really happening.' The building got cleaned up and straightened and you saw progress."

The restoration and opening of two of the sprawling factory's buildings — one that includes the ice cream parlor and the other that will house Artspace — has begun to make concrete the pipe dream of three artsy Cheshire High School graduates who wanted to turn the dilapidated site into an arts, education and entertainment complex in a town known more for its bedding plants and high school sports.

Ball & Socket Arts is the only arts nonprofit that has received brownfield funding since the brownfield program began, according to the state Department of Economic and Community Development. That unusual status — the group has raised more than \$1 million in private donations for the work — has helped the group secure additional town, federal and state funding, including a recent \$25,000 National Endowment for the Humanities grant to identify and develop historical themes for the site.

"I was fascinated by what they had done," said U.S. Rep. Jahana Hayes, D-5th District, who recently helped secure a \$625,000 federal grant for the nonprofit. "They took a factory that was in disrepair and really rallied the community, volunteers and donors."

For Hayes, whose district contains dozens of brownfields, the incipient cultural/educational/retail project "could potentially be a blueprint for other places in the district that have buildings even larger than the button factory that are just sitting empty. All over Waterbury there are places like that."

ABSENT AN ACTUAL TOWN GREEN

(the Congregational Church owns the land that has often served as a green), Cheshire has been moving to revitalize the western sector along Route 68 as a new, more pedestrian-friendly commercial district. The old factory sits alongside the linear trail in Cheshire, the most heavily trafficked area of the Farmington Canal Trail, according to the Connecticut Council of Governments. Had Ball & Socket not purchased the 3.6-acre site, Andrew Martelli, Cheshire's coordinator of economic development, doubts the town would have shifted its focus to its western flank. Instead, Martelli said, Ball & Socket has become "the centerpiece of the district."

"What I always liked about the plan is that you actually had a nonprofit group which was willing to take on this property, which in Waterbury we never had," said Martelli, who spent 11 years in a similar position in Waterbury. "We would tear down these beautiful old factories in the name of economic development and then there was never a group that was there that was willing to take it on. The town (of Cheshire) was nervous about getting involved. But if we didn't have this group that was willing to take on the liability and the work, it would have been a liability to the town."

The embryonic and decade-long progress of Ball & Socket Arts was far from certain when the group bought the facility in 2021 for \$1 million from Dalton Enterprises. Chief among doubters was the state's top environmental official at the time, Daniel C. Esty, himself a Cheshire resident. He worried that the well-intentioned effort would founder on astronomical environmental clean-up costs. "What I really don't want to see is a project launched with great enthusiasm only to founder on environmental burdens that weren't thought through carefully at the outset," he said at the time.

In 2013, after the trio secured the building, the group told The Sunday Republican it expected to spend \$800,000 on environmental remediation. It expected the project would open in 2016. Ball & Socket Arts president Iona Somogyi, the only remaining founder, speaks ruefully about that naiveté. "We got this place because nobody else wanted it," she said. "We found out why nobody else wanted it once we got it."

In the decade since, Ball & Socket Arts had two of its initial founders drop out, leaving Somogyi, a costume designer at the Yale School of Drama, at the helm. One of the other founders left in 2019, followed by the third in 2020.

"It was a blow because we were really close friends since the seventh grade," she says. "You have to make sure when you start a business that your visions are aligned. I think (Guimond) wanted out because it was so hard. I just felt that it was a good idea and that other people would see that it's a good idea." She now jokes that when the project be-



The front parking area of Ball & Socket Arts at 493 W. Main St., Cheshire. A nonprofit has undertaken a multimillion-dollar renovation of the site. PAUL BISBORT REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN



Iona Somogyi, left, president and co-founder of Ball & Socket Arts, and director of programming Lydia Blaisdell survey the construction progress at Building 2. Somogyi said old buildings deserve to be preserved. STEVEN VALENTI REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN



The Tudoresque entrance to the old Ball & Socket Manufacturing Co. REPUBLICAN-AMERICAN ARCHIVES

gan, she did not even know "what a Ric Rac" was. The phrase is shorthand for the Resource Conservation and Recovery Act of 1974, which gives the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency the authority to control hazardous waste from cradle to grave. "We didn't know anything about anything," she said. "We learned it all on the job."

For Bergamo, who joined the board of directors in 2019, the convergence of these factors, particularly the opening of retail and gallery space, provided the visual currency to make what had seemed like a pie-in-the-sky notion, gain traction. "You have artists with an idea. You have a brownfield, which is onerous for anybody to deal with. You have a non-developed building and you have somebody who wants to do it as a charity," he explained. "What's going to get them to be a success? We needed to get something open. We had to be real. You can ask for money all day long and people may give you \$100. For us to be a success to bring in million-dollar donors, five-figure donors, we had to be open. Now, many minor donors have become major donors. We're open and they did pull this off."

THE PROJECT IS FAR FROM COMPLETE. The nonprofit Ball & Socket Arts, which began with a core group of 134 donors and has now in-

creased its donor base by tenfold, is setting its eyes on tackling the biggest chunk of all — rehabilitating the 35,000-square-foot section the group calls Building 1. The brick complex, which faces West Main Street (Route 68), encompasses about 80% of the buildable structure and is intended to house a performance venue, retail space, food court, visitors center and a local museum. Tackling the project entails hazardous material abatement — largely the removal of asbestos and lead paint — project architect David Arai said. The group is using a \$925,000 state brownfield grant to repair the structure's roof. It will then install a sprinkler system, funded by the \$625,000 federal grant. Workers will then tackle the flooring, a project expected to take all year.

"They are looking at this as not just their project but to find ways they can fill the community's needs in related fields and missions," said Scott Wands, deputy director of grants and programs for the Connecticut Humanities. Wands said other organizations have redeveloped factories into residences, like the Old Winchester Repeating Arms in New Haven, or included retail, like the old Colt factory, none have used the arts as an economic engine. "We've got a group that's using arts, culture, history as the driver of economic redevelopment,"

he said. Whereas, there are other places where they are working on redevelopment and then carving out portions for culture. It's kind of the inverse."

In the past two years, several significant grants have moved the group closer to its goals. In fiscal year 2022 the town of Cheshire appropriated \$350,000, including a \$150,000 state grant, to build a municipal parking lot on the factory site, to provide parking for the arts center and those accessing the nearby linear trail. It was the first time in the project's 10-year history that the town budgeted funds for the work, rather than serving as a municipal "pass through" for state funds. "Understandably, there was probably some skepticism from some about how successful (Ball & Socket) could be," town manager Sean Kimball said. "Credit goes to the folks at Ball & Socket, whose patient fundraising and persistence have really started to see the fruits of their successful labor."

Ball & Socket restored Building 3, which houses an art gallery, administrative office and classroom space, entirely through private donations, Somogyi said. The town's parking lot investment, the first time it put "skin in the game," opened the door for the relocation of Artspace, the only town-run art school in the state, from its current home in a former VFW facility near the dog park and public works department, to the second floor of that building. Cheshire approved another \$357,000 of American Rescue Plan funds to restore the interior.

Within the last two months, the EPA began testing groundwater — the nonprofit's primary challenge — to determine whether the organization's remediation efforts have put it within acceptable federal standards.

"The question was: Is their idea the right idea?" said Arai, the architect. "They pulled it off because they had the willpower to pull it off. The reality is that 99% of redevelopment out there is about the money. This wasn't about turning a profit or making money. It's about their vision, doing something great for the town. You have all these spaces that are perfect for showing off art. That makes the concept of (turning the building into) an arts center and not anything else."

"It's been persistence," Kimball said. "When you watch the work they do, it's really blood, sweat and tears.... So many towns are certainly jealous of us for having this passionate group who maybe don't have all the resources of big developers but they have the passion."

FOR YEARS THE TOWN'S LARGEST EMPLOYER, Ball & Socket was one of the world's largest

manufacturers of metal buttons, at its peak producing 2.5 million gross tons of metal fasteners annually. Like so many other metalwork factories, that meant the liberal use of solvents — to clean and degrease product and materials. Those solvents, often stored in enormous drums and buried on site, ultimately proved damaging to soil and watersheds nearby. By the 1980s and early 1990s, when the factories closed, the contaminants remained, an albatross on the surrounding communities and a deterrent to any developer wanting to repurpose the site. (Related story on Page 3D.)

"To the layman it's just like 'Why is this taking so long?'" said Martelli, the town's economic development czar. "It's just that there are so many moving parts, there are so many state agencies. I've been through this; I know how long these things took."

Somogyi, who speaks with a weary intensity leavened with self-deprecating humor, now agrees. "It scares people more than it needs to," she said. "The buildings are nothing more than an empty building with some raccoon droppings, asbestos and lead paint. All of that can be fixed."

Somogyi said she did not expect to lean on the state as heavily as Ball & Socket has, securing more than \$7 million in Department of Economic and Community Development grants, bonds and Rescue Plan funds. "I think we hoped millions would fall out of the sky," she said. "What I learned is a major capital project like this is a long game. We had to hang with it until this coalition of people surfaced, and they have."

"If people don't take these brownfields and use them for something else, then they still fall on the back of the state to clean them out," she said. "The state would love people to take these brownfields and have people do something with them. You can't build a building this cool any more. The materials don't exist anymore." That includes the old-growth wood throughout the structure and the period windows Somogyi personally took charge of.

No one involved in Ball & Socket Arts would estimate how long it will take until the project is complete. Mass MoCA, the North Adams museum constructed on the site of the converted Arnold Print Works, took 17 years to complete. Ball & Socket isn't waiting for completion. It has already held concerts, gallery openings and workshops in its completed building. "I firmly believe they will be successful," said Kimball, the town manager.

"You have a very dynamic, hard-working board of directors, you have town involvement, you have paid staff, and to me there's no end in sight," Martelli said. He said the organization already has mission-based tenants waiting for the retail space to open up. "What's cool is I get calls from people who want to be in that building. There's just a vision here. This has become a grassroots effort that's grown into this whole community effort," noting that the group has raised more than \$1 million from Cheshire donors. "The people here in town really want this. They want an arts center. They want a place to be able to go to, grab an ice cream, drop your kid off at the arts center, and see a show."

As Pilarczyk reads for the move of Artspace, she takes a philosophical view.

"I think when you're going in the right direction, no matter how slowly you are going, you're going to get there. That's what Iona has done. She has walked through this process, solving the next problem and the next problem to realize her dream," she said. "Iona has enlisted the help of everyone in town, no matter what they have to offer."