



RiNO

Art touches everything in a constantly
evolving Denver neighborhood

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A RUNNING JOKE IN northeast Denver's RiNo area is that the neighborhood bird is the construction crane. In the past decade, so many new buildings have appeared here along the South Platte River, Brighton Boulevard and the other streets running north from downtown that people returning after a few years' absence might not recognize the place.

The industrial warehouses at the north end of RiNo were razed and turned into the Mission Ballroom, a concert venue where Denver's own Lumineers put on the first show in 2019. Toward the south end is Central Market, a bustling food hall that took over the 1928 H.H. Tammen Building, which more recently housed a dealership for vintage cars.

Change is a constant in RiNo, which is short for River North. The other constant is art.

Among the businesses in RiNo are 22 galleries, though art is hardly confined to those places. Artists have been in RiNo for decades, but now the art district pays them to paint murals, which are on every conceivable surface, including utility boxes and dumpster enclosures. There are also walking tours that wind through the neighborhood's alleys to see the street art there.



The mural "Let the Music Play" appears on the side of the Raquelitas Tortillas building. Artist Brendan Cooney spray paints a new mural on Larimer Street.



Pedestrians stroll under the watchful gaze of the “Tattooed Rhino” mural by Jules Muck at 2944 Larimer Street. Rhinoceros imagery abounds in RiNo, a neighborhood along the South Platte River that derives its name from the shorthand for River North.

EVEN THE NAME “RINO” is a relatively recent change, only adopted after the popularity of the namesake River North Art District exploded. Before then, this area was mostly known by three other names: Five Points, the historic center of Denver’s Black community; Elyria-Swansea, home to a largely Latino population; and Globeville, so named because it was initially settled by immigrants from all over the globe.

For all the shiny, new buildings popping up all over RiNo, the community has gritty, industrial roots. The first developments were subdivisions like Ironton, built to house workers smelting ore from mountain mines or those who worked at the Union Pacific railroad.

Most buildings from those early days are gone – but not all of them. Some have been adaptively reused. One building that began as a warehouse became artists’ studios and galleries, then transitioned to its current incarnation as Ironton Distillery, which also serves craft cocktails and wood-fired pizza.

These changes can be hard on those who have long called the neighborhood home, a struggle sometimes detailed in the neighborhood’s art. In 2020, a street artist known as Jolt painted a mural depicting a rhinoceros, wolf and vulture seated at a bar, with one of the animals saying, “So a rhino, a wolf and a vulture walk into a community ...” But the artistic comment on developers and newcomers lasted less than two months before some unknown person whitewashed over it in the middle of the night.

Some people are doing what they can to embrace the new people and artistic ethos of RiNo while preserving what they loved about the old neighborhood. One such place is RIVER, a mural-covered bar perched above the South Platte River.

To call RIVER a bar is selling it short: It specializes in cocktails made with bubble tea, but it is also a coffee shop, art gallery and performance venue for music and comedy shows. It’s apt that such a business mashup sits here, surrounded

by a mix of industrial, commercial and residential spaces.

RIVER owners Gil and Kourisa CdeBaca were longtime regulars of the Welcome Inn, the dive bar that previously occupied the space. When that business closed during the pandemic, many assumed the building would be sold and torn down to make way for condos.

The couple was shocked when Gil’s uncle Karl CdeBaca handed them the keys last year and offered them a five-year lease. Years earlier, Uncle Karl had purchased the property to keep a neighborhood mainstay from disappearing. Kourisa, who has been bartending for 20 years, was the first person he thought of to take over.

RIVER also represents the very real pressures occurring in RiNo at the moment. A for-sale sign atop the building advertises the opportunity to redevelop the lot into a 12-story building. But Kourisa is dead set on ownership. “We’re buying it,” she said matter-of-factly. “We’re putting a fundraiser together to help us purchase it,

which we will conquer.” The current list price: \$5.4 million.

Gil and Kourisa aim to connect the many communities that call this area home – the Black and Latino neighbors who have lived here for decades, plus the mostly white aging hipsters and younger folk moving in now. RIVER might be packed on a Saturday night, owing to a hip-hop show. The drag queen who performed Tuesday is often the bartender come Wednesday. Everything is a bit unexpected, including the boozy bubble tea.

WITH A DOZEN BREWERIES, two wineries and two distilleries, RiNo can feel like a playground for adults. Down Delgany Street from RIVER, the new RiNo ArtPark aims to carve out a piece of the neighborhood for a different kind of play.

In the not-too-distant past, the ArtPark’s space was home to the building where the Denver Police Department repaired its vehicles and stored stolen bicycles it had recovered. Today, ArtPark is a three-acre greenspace and sculpture garden anchored by affordable art studios, the nonprofit Alto Gallery and CoCuA – short for Community Cultural Accelerator – a cafe designed to help small-scale food businesses grow.

There’s also a Denver Public Library branch where most of the library staff is bilingual in Spanish.

“We may be surrounded by breweries, but we’re still serving the public,” said Senior Librarian Mónica Lozano.

The library and the park welcome new arrivals to the neighborhood while also providing a haven for the people here since long before the area had a cutesy nickname. Teenagers on skateboards cruise around the concrete outside, crossing paths with hipster dads doing the same.

The city-owned park is a permanent presence of art, culture and community in a district that some feel has otherwise been overrun by developers and high-rises. Even as surrounding lots sell for unfathomable prices, this can always be a

Barbara Aguirre and Obe and Whitney Ariss run The Preservery. Gil and Kourisa CdeBaca own the bar RIVER. Our Mutual Friend Brewery is aglow.



place for those who were here before it was cool. If every old building were to disappear or every mural to be whitewashed tomorrow, ArtPark would remain.

AS A NEIGHBORHOOD in a perpetual state of transition, RiNo is torn between what it was and what it is becoming. Married restaurateurs Obe and Whitney Ariss found this out six years ago when they opened The Preservery at 31st and Blake streets.

When they first started looking for a restaurant space, they didn't know much about RiNo or that it was part of Five Points, the historic Black neighborhood where their business is now. But soon, they were spending all their time here, especially after stumbling on a 1930s warehouse that had most recently housed an eccentric collector's cars. It was surround-

ed by chain-link fence and covered in graffiti, but the exposed brick and wooden beams called out to them.

"There was something about this neighborhood at the time that reminded us about the diehard rawness of New Orleans and Detroit," Whitney said. But that also meant the restaurant's concept had to evolve to fit the neighborhood.

The Arisses opened The Preservery as a fine-dining restaurant and market, boasting a library wall of preserves: jars of peaches, beets and other Colorado favorites. However, they quickly realized that wasn't what the neighborhood needed – their restaurant was destination dining for customers visiting from outside RiNo. Obe and Whitney decided they would rather cook for their neighbors.

Eventually, The Preservery transitioned its menu to classic American fare, mixed

with Mediterranean elements reflecting Obe's Lebanese heritage. Offerings now include Buffalo cauliflower, fried chicken sandwiches and falafel.

One popular menu item – a bowl of chicken noodle soup – has two prices. For \$12, customers can engage in a "get one, give one" model or, for \$6, they can purchase the soup as a giving meal only. Either option provides a meal to a person living without shelter. Every few weeks, Obe hand delivers hot, wholesome meals to tent encampments in and around Five Points.

NEW RESTAURANTS, NIGHTLIFE, shops and residences continue to spring up on RiNo's main corridors of Brighton Boulevard, Larimer Street – often called North Larimer to avoid confusion with downtown's Larimer Square – and other nearby streets. As this happens,

The "Larimer Boy/Girl" mural by Jeremy Burns is painted on the sides of fins attached to the building exterior. When viewers approach on Larimer from 27th Avenue, the mural appears as a girl. When approaching from 28th Avenue, it appears as a boy.





Internationally known artist Shepard Fairey's "Power & Equality" appears in the Denver Central Market parking lot. "Owl and Moon" by Lushy can be seen at 3111 Larimer Street. Casey Kawaguchi's murals adorn the side of INDUSTRY RiNo Station.

the existing industrial sites continue to move out, like the Volunteers of America Michael Kern Kitchen, where 750,000 Meals on Wheels are prepared annually. The facility will move into a larger center over the next year or so.

Another longtime business leaving the area is IMAC, a company that has tested and created cheese cultures in their Larimer Street facility since 1989. Once the cheese scientists move out, the 13,000-square-foot space will initially be taken over by immersive theater company OddKnock Productions. After that, it may be temporary artist studios. But the building is slated to eventually be torn down and replaced by mixed-use development.

One establishment cherished by longtime neighbors is the Butcher Block Cafe at 38th and Wynkoop streets, which is

surrounded by a hotbed of construction. Burritos and hashbrowns slide onto patterned tables of '70s orange and brown tufted booths. Workers from the Pepsi bottling plant across the street line the counter. Orders come through the kitchen window constantly, going out to tables full of people who have been coming here for years, as well as curious newcomers who pop in and feel as though they've uncovered a hidden treasure.

The family-owned greasy spoon also churns out dozens of pans of their famous cinnamon rolls each day. "They're very generous with their butter, which I appreciate," said one of the clerks at the library in ArtPark.

Mickey Michel has certainly seen Denver change over the more than 40 years he's been "chief cook and bottle washer."

The cinnamon roll recipe was perfected by his son, Corey, who passed away suddenly in 2020. Though Mickey, now 70, still works nearly every day, it's hard to picture how much longer this little piece of old Denver will remain. Every surrounding lot has sold in the last decade, including Pepsi, whose corner lot will be redeveloped in the coming years.

RiNo's constant change challenges the culture of northeast Denver. But the evolution has also brought more art and experiences to this urban core, whose little pockets are separated by railroad tracks, busy thoroughfares and the South Platte. Like at RIVER, another of the Pepsi plant's neighbors, where the CdeBacas will keep slinging bubble tea cocktails to anyone in the neighborhood, even if they're new here. 🍷

People bike along Brighton Boulevard. Twenty years ago, RiNo was an industrial area full of warehouses. Many of the old buildings are disappearing, such as this long warehouse covered in murals by Gamma Gallery, which was recently demolished.





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