



J Crist Gallery

Longtime Boise art enthusiasts Charley and Jacqueline Crist relocated J Crist Gallery to this new building earlier this year on South 17th Street, near downtown Boise.

Art never looked so good

Boise gallery design 'controls' light to enhance viewing

By **Gaye Bunderson**
IDAHO BUSINESS REVIEW

A stroll through the new J Crist Gallery is meant to be more than a casual look at art on a wall.

The building is the first in Boise to be specifically designed and built from the ground up as an art gallery, and its minimalist arrangement presents the interplay of light, simplicity, and natural elements with the created works of artists and artisans.

Construction of the building started in September 2004 and finished six months later in the spring of 2005. Gallery owners Charley and Jacqueline Crist had displayed art for 10 years in the Belgravia Building in downtown Boise but wanted a larger and more open space for displaying works of scale.



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— Jacqueline Crist,
J Crist Gallery

"When my husband saw this perfect piece of land for sale, the wheels started turning," said Jacqueline Crist.

The new gallery soon went up at 223 S. 17th St., near the now-defunct Glazed Over Donuts shop. The structure was designed by Boise architect Dwaine Carver of Trout Architects;

Todd Weltner of Vertical Construction, Boise, was the contractor.

"Being a ground-up project afforded many opportunities that could not have been explored otherwise," said Carver. The gallery "experience" literally starts now upon arrival.

Visitors enter the gallery through a high-walled courtyard and walk into an open, airy structure with floor-to-ceiling windows and skylights.

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The \$600,000 project is 3,400 square feet in entirety, with a main gallery of 1,200 square feet. The ceilings are 18-feet high. The former gallery had only 12-foot ceilings and merely 200 square feet for art display.

"When people walk into the new gallery, they are just awed by the sheer volume of the space and its unique architectural integrity," said Crist.

Longtime acquaintances, the Crists and Carver began collaborating on the design literally before the land was purchased. Carver had worked on renovations at the Belgravia site in 1998 and learned "certain workings of the gallery."

"When (the Crists) started exploring the idea of moving, I was involved with initial real estate considerations, including evaluating existing buildings for renovation," Carver said.

When the present site was selected, art administrators and architect worked together on the primary ideas of the building and, later, collaborated on more specific details.

Those details included functionality, greater dependence on natural light, the use of basic materials, and a structure that works symbiotically with the presentation of art.

"I think the architecture can interact with the artwork and viewer without subverting the relationship between the two," said Carver.

The materials most frequently commented upon are the plywood cabinetry built by Boisean John Studebaker and the strand board floors and ceilings. Concrete, stucco, and plywood were also effectively used.

"I suppose it's the idea of a humble and common material used directly and undisguised that people find intriguing," said Carver. "They often express surprise that these materials can be used in a way that strikes them as beautiful and correct."

The control of light was a central factor in design. All elements from canopies to clerestory windows were geared toward proper illumination. Carver refers to them as "mechanisms for the manipulation of light — each of the components has a different role to play in that."

(A "clerestory" — pronounced "clear-story" — is a high window in an exterior wall. It often refers to any window above a lower ceiling in a high-ceiling space.



J Crist Gallery

The high ceilings at the J Crist Gallery near downtown Boise are architecturally designed to enhance illumination in the open exhibit space.

In the case of the J Crist Gallery, the clerestory windows are above the light shelf, or the lower ceiling.)

Carver said that although natural light seems to flood the gallery, it is all actually carefully controlled by the system of canopies, light shelves, skylights and a "cloud ceiling."

The canopies shade areas of the gallery, while the cloud ceiling controls the skylights by rendering reflected light that washes down the gallery walls. The light shelves follow a similar strategy, but in reverse, bouncing sunlight upward and onto the ceiling.

Contractor Weltner, who was also involved in building the Severn Gallery in Ketchum, said construction of the J

Crist Gallery differed from other projects he has undertaken in its use of exposed structural panels and large trusses — "and the level of finish is higher," he said.

He calls the structure, with its use of wood framing, "very economical."



Todd Weltner

The current exhibit runs through Nov. 23 and features the watercolors of Chris Binion. Gallery hours are Tuesday through Friday, 9 a.m.-5 p.m. and Saturday, noon-4 p.m. Information: 336-2671, info@jcrystal.com, or www.jcrystal.com.

Did it present any construction challenges? "There was more a critical eye during the finish stage, and the exterior stucco system was held to a very high standard," he said.

Though the Crists can now display a higher volume of artwork and much larger pieces, the kinds of art the gallery presents will not change.

"It's a very contemporary space, very sleek and modern," said Crist. "But very traditional art seems to be as successful in this environment as very contemporary and conceptual artwork styles."

The Crists do art consulting and on-site installation in homes and businesses. One of their big clients is Saint Alphonsus Regional Medical Center and its satellite medical facilities.

They also do exhibition consulting and custom-framing and fabrication. Portions of the gallery, hidden from patrons' view, hold archives of a large inventory of artwork in all media that Crist draws upon when compiling her art presentations for retail clients.

"Patron response has been beyond my wildest expectations," said Crist. "When anything is new, people are always interested in it. This seems to have even broader appeal with people who don't even know us."