

## ARTY CATALYST FOR CHANGE

[EAST Edition]

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### Document Text

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Nova 535's owner looks to bring film and fashion, music and merriment.

Almost 15 years ago, Mike Novilla started buying dilapidated apartments on the east side of Crescent Lake and fixing them up.

He turned those investments into a thriving, neighborhood- enhancing venture that he now wants to replicate through Nova 535, an "art lounge" he will open this weekend in adjacent Uptown.

"I want to be the change agent for the neighborhood," said St. Petersburg native Novilla, 40, of his nearly \$2-million investment at 535 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St. N.

The concept is a new one and certainly new to an area that looks a lot like Crescent Lake did when Novilla first started buying.

Nestled among weathered buildings, some of which are being revived, Novilla is unveiling something that is part gallery, part event space, part nightclub.

"I thought about a nightclub, but I didn't want that all the time, yet galleries are so sterile," said Novilla, who cultivated an artistic sense through European travels. "I wanted to create something that draws people from all over the world to meet interesting people."

Starting with a 1920 building constructed as Slap Happy's department store, Novilla said he wandered around the structure until a rehab concept "revealed itself" to him. He gutted the original, added a mezzanine level toward the rear, designed in dual wrought-iron staircases and a floating pulpit, and attached a two- story patio on the outside.

He left the terra-cotta brickwork exposed, as with the original heart pine rafters. The grand opening will put the 7,000-square- foot space to a test.

Along with displays of paintings, the event will include "living statues," a Moroccan fusion dance performance, hanging acrobats and more.

"I like art," Novilla said, "but I like to have a good time."

Nova 535 borrows liberally from Studio@620, the downtown art space operated by Bob Devin Jones, who sees Novilla's effort as a welcome addition.

"It's ambitious and it should be," said Jones, who started the nonprofit Studio@620 in 2004. "They're pretty sure about who they are."

Jones said he sees such venues as the "third space and a half" because they are not work, not home, not the coffee shop, but another site for interaction and exchange. He said Studio@620 has done well but that a for-profit model like Novilla's can as well because there is such arts enthusiasm in the community.

As Jones does, Novilla will also rent his space for parties, meetings, weddings and other events.

He has equipped it with a commercial-grade sound system, a catering kitchen and a 60-foot bar. He said he already

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has a few events lined up for next month and has been getting a steady stream of interest, now that he has the operation mostly assembled.

"I hadn't wanted to bring people in until it was presentable," Novilla said of the five-month rehab period. "Now, I can't keep people out."

Though he aims to have Nova 535 used mainly for private gatherings, Novilla said he will have a monthly public art party. He may develop other regular hours but is still ironing out the details. As for content, his reach is far.

"We want this to be a place to have paintings and sculpture, but also film, music, video games, graffiti, fashion, everything," he said. "We're here to make money, but we want to make it fun."

Paul Swider can be reached at pswider@sptimes.com or 892-2271.

#### Fast Facts

Nova 535

Where: 535 Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. St. N

Phone: (727) 821-6682

Web site: nova535.com

Credit: Times Staff Writer

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#### Abstract (Document Summary)

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"I hadn't wanted to bring people in until it was presentable," Novilla said of the five-month rehab period. "Now, I can't keep people out."

PHOTO, JAMES BORCHUCK, Times: Nova 535's owner, Mike Novilla, invested \$2-million into gutting and redesigning the building on Dr. [Martin Luther King Jr.] St. N. "I like art, but I like to have a good time," he said. PHOTO, JAMES BORCHUCK, Times: A 1920 building that once housed Slap Happy's department store is now the home of Novilla's art lounge.

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