Around Campus

New Brunswick say cheese, please!
Devco teams up with Mason Gross in Rockoff Hall photography project

By Douglas Frank
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Two Mason Gross School of the Arts photographers – a graduate student and an alumna – are documenting New Brunswick and its people in the latest example of the cultural partnership between Rutgers and the city.

The New Brunswick Development Corporation (Devco), a nonprofit organization that works with the city to create redevelopment projects, commissioned the photographers to take photos of the city for permanent display in Rockoff Hall, the new apartment building for students downtown.

Jamie Lyn Davis, a second-year graduate student, and Deborah Bowie, who received an advanced degree last year, have been asked to shoot their interpretations of New Brunswick environs and people in their own styles: Davis’ work mainly consists of color landscape and architectural studies while Bowie specializes in portraits in black and white.

The two are working under the guidance of Jason Francisco, assistant professor of visual arts and a documentary photographer, who selected the photographers and meets regularly with them to review their images. They have been shooting since September and will continue through June.

The faculty adviser has been a great help. “He thought we would make a good combination for the project with our different styles, and though we have gone to the same places, our work is totally different,” Davis says. Both take images on film rather than use digital technology, and they use medium-format and 35MM cameras.

So far the two have photographed downtown New Brunswick, the College Avenue campus and various neighborhoods close to the Douglass campus and most of Easton Avenue in a combination of buildings, people in the city and students on campus.

Although the duo is having a great time, the work is also a valuable learning experience. “Doing a project for someone else puts a little discipline in my own shooting,” Davis says. “I’ve surprised myself by shooting things that I wouldn’t ordinarily shoot. But then I’m really pleased with the result.” The artists hope to have at least 100 framed images for display. The works will be exhibited first in the Mason Gross gallery this summer and then permanently in the Rockoff building.

The project is the brainchild of Devco’s president, Chris Paladino, who came up with the idea during planning of the Rockoff project.

“We were working with our interior designers and kicking around ideas on how we could make some of the public space more attractive and more homelike and less institutional,” Paladino says. “Going through the art selection process, we thought why not make it an opportunity to involve Rutgers in images of the city and the university? And when we decided to make Rockoff Hall different from traditional student housing, we thought that a partnership with Mason Gross was the obvious choice.”

“This is really an ideal project that unites Mason Gross with downtown New Brunswick,” says George Stauffer, dean of the Mason Gross School. Since Stauffer’s arrival in fall 2000, he has been intent on building bridges with the city, especially downtown. “This project is part of new efforts to strengthen the arts in downtown, and together with the George Street Playhouse, the State Theater and the American
Repertory Ballet, to plan for a broader, more integrated arts program. In this program the visual arts are front and center, and our new 5,000 square-foot art gallery becomes yet another attraction on theater row."

Meanwhile Devco, building Heldrich Plaza, which will include the Heldrich Center for Workforce Development, is thinking about commissioning another photography exhibit depicting people working for a living throughout the state of New Jersey, according to Paladino.