

# Jerry Beck of the Revolving Museum and poet Ed Marshall turn Middlesex Street storefront into a Lowell attraction

By Kathleen Pierce, [kpierce@lowellsun.com](mailto:kpierce@lowellsun.com)



Ed Marshall, left, and Jerry Beck, the creative forces behind *Onto Um*, which includes a bank of books, at left, that serves as a display table. [sun/kathleen.pierce](http://sun/kathleen.pierce)

LOWELL -- Poetry in a pot. Poetry on towels. Poetry sandwiches.

Words are selling like hotcakes at *Onto Um*, a house of creativity that's sprouted up in an unlikely place: the long-boarded-up Marston Building.

Across from a workers' union and next to a homeless shelter, this guerilla gallery is a longshot for a tourist attraction. But *Onto Um* is "taking some of the spook out" of the

neighborhood said Ed Marshall, who conceived of this theater of the mind marketplace on Middlesex Street with Jerry Beck of the Revolving Museum.

Ed Marshall, left, and Jerry Beck, the creative forces behind Onto Um, which includes a bank of books, at left, that serves as a display table. sun/kathleen pierce

In a gleaming new storefront, there's a faux deli where words, not salami, are sold by the pound. A scrub brush may cost you \$40 at Onto Um, but instead of a bar code slapped on the back, there's a poem.

"I think of it as a cross between Andy Warhol's Factory and Marcel Duchamp," said Beck.

This general store of words and art may not be what city planners had in mind when they conceived the JAM plan, but the concept has drawn crowds to this part of the city that's poised for renewal.

"We got 100 people to come down to Middlesex Street. Would they have come down here for any other reason?" said Marshall, a poet who lives in East Hampstead, N.H.

The curiosity factor of Onto Um, a name taken from a former catch-all shop on Dutton Street where Beck originally wanted to open this haven for creativity, has generated sideways glances and increased traffic.

"It's interesting to see that part of the city and that building come to life," said Frank Thoms, a downtown dweller who went to the Onto Um opening in late-May. "I'm sensing that things are coming."

Roy Krantz, a creative redeveloper from Boston, purchased the vacant 1889 building in November 2006, hoping that a cafe, restaurant or wine shop would open on the first floor. He has converted the top floors into trendy condominiums that are now for sale.

He lent the space to Beck and Marshall for Onto Um, which will close by the end of the month, but still changed the face of the long-forgotten real estate company headquarters.

"It's delightful. It's Jerry being Jerry, but it's added a lot of life here. We had cops coming in at the opening," said Krantz.

After Onto Um closes, a cafe and performance space, run by Andy Jacobson of Brew'd Awakening Coffeehaus will open. That, too, will be temporary. After a year, Jacobson plans to open a black box cafe in a turbine steam building a block away.

"This is new urbanism," said Krantz, whose next project is the redevelopment of a soap factory in downtown Pittsfield.

Just as members of the creative economy are spurring growth in hardscrabble urban neighborhoods across the region, Onto Um is doing the same for Lowell's next great hope.

"It's a nomadic concept that can travel to multiple cities," said Beck, who helped revitalize Lowell when he transported his museum from Fort Point Channel in Boston to Shattuck Street six years ago.

There is no question Onto Um has Beck's unmistakable mark.

There are bookshelves made of books, paper burgers seasoned with poems like "Stripping wallpaper layer by layer, the book of life read backwards" instead of condiments. A black-and-white towel with "In our house, heaven is a light switch away" lines a wall and magnifying glasses and rubber baguettes are for sale. Some are by Beck, others by Marshall.

"It's all about having fun," said Marshall, a Lowell native who came to poetry later in life.

He writes four-line poems, a method that spoke to Beck, who was struck by Marshall's punchy style last summer when he read his words on a scroll along Lucy Larcom Park.

The collaboration got Beck, an installation artist, to return to words.

"For the longest time, I couldn't write. Spurts would come out and I'd think that's pathetic," said Beck. "I flunked English. I almost didn't graduate school because I couldn't write. Poetry saved me."

And the men, both in their 50s, seek to do the same for others.

"We want people to experience poetry in a forum, rather than in dusty old volumes under their night stand," said Marshall.

Onto Um is open on Fridays from 6 to 9 p.m. and Saturday and Sunday from 1 to 5 p.m. through June. 155 Middlesex St., Lowell. The next Onto Um event takes place June 13-14, from 11 a.m. to 6 p.m. at the Jambra Neighborhood Festival and Cultural Fair. On June 28, from 8 to 10 p.m., the mythic Onto Um road show takes off.

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