

The GLASS Quarterly Hot Sheet

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Guest Blogger: Glass as tourist attraction (Part I)

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The Museum of Glass in Tacoma, Washington, is promoted by the regional tourism office.

The term “tourist” conjures up images of slow-moving hordes of out-of-towners dressed in bucket hats and fanny packs, easy targets for the derision of sophisticated locals. Yet tourists and the dollars they add to local economies are highly sought-after by municipal and regional officials looking to improve their fiscal realities. The top of the tourist class are the cultural tourists, a type of visitor assumed to earn more money, spend more money, and support upscale businesses and institutions. Nearly every ambitious city official wants to attract the museum-going tourist, and an increasing number of them are turning to the sparkling jewel of art made from glass to lure them.

History has proven the power of glass attraction as the cities of Venice, Italy; Novy Bor, Czech Republic; and Waterford, Ireland, have become well established tourist destinations in part because of their glass industries. But even as some historic glass factories are closing down ([See Waterford blog item here](#))—casualties of an ongoing economic shift in highly-skilled production from Western to Eastern Europe, or to Asia—a number of cities have been trying their hand at glass tourism. This attempt to create new glass-oriented tourist destinations is different because the focus is on Studio Glass rather than production glass. This raises new questions about the effects of harnessing the creative energies of artists working with glass in the service of building visitor traffic. What are the implications for artists and the work they create? What follows is a closer look at three U.S. cities and their programs that provides some insight if not complete answers.

Tacoma, Washington

In Tacoma, a trio of landmarks defines the city: [The Museum of Glass](#), the [Chihuly Bridge of Glass](#), and the [Hotel Murano](#). The Chihuly Bridge of Glass, a pedestrian walkway connecting downtown to the waterfront, is owned and maintained by the City of Tacoma. The hot shop cone, part of architect Arthur Erickson’s Museum design, single-handedly produced a recognizable skyline for the city.

“The City of Tacoma purchased the Supertund site that was our working waterfront and committed to its cleanup. This site is where the Museum of Glass was built,” Amy McBride, arts administrator for Tacoma’s [Community and Economic Development](#) department said in an emailed response to written questions. “The city also built the parking structure that supports the museum and developed the plazas and esplanade that surrounds the museum.”

Around 162,000 visitors come to the Museum each year, says Julie Pisto, the museum’s director of marketing and communications. “The Museum of Glass is consistently promoted by the Greater Tacoma Regional Convention and Visitors Bureau, which serves as an important and effective marketing organization for the entire region,” writes Pisto in an email. “The CVB encourages active member participation and the Museum is represented on its Board. The museum also works in a close partnership with the Tacoma Art Museum and Washington State History Museum as the ‘Tacoma Museum District.’ The City of Tacoma sponsors the Museum’s Mobile Hot Shop, which travels across the nation”

To those people who wonder how this town with six hot shops became synonymous with glass blowing, Zak Nelson, communications manager for the [Tacoma Regional Convention + Visitor Bureau](#) has an answer. “The glass art community here is truly a ‘glassroots’ movement: this isn’t just a marketing campaign or a museum plunking down in Chihuly’s birthplace,” he emails in response to questions. “It’s real community here, and you see it everywhere you go: not just in airports, but in old haunts like the Swiss Pub.” He cites the [Hilltop Artists in Residence program](#), which Chihuly’s friend [Kathy Kaperick](#) started with his help in 1994, as the perfect example. It teaches junior high and high school kids how to blow glass so they’ll have something to enjoy about coming to school every day. Although Chihuly was born in Tacoma, he runs his own shop on Seattle’s Lake Union. Despite having only about six hot shops in the city, Tacoma has put itself on the international art map through the city’s efforts.

“I’ve been a collector of glass art for nearly two decades, so making a trip to Tacoma [was] akin to a pilgrimage,” wrote [blogger Suzanne Wright](#) after her visit.

So has formerly run-down and crime-ridden Tacoma found the formula for urban renewal through glass? If success looks like lots and lots of Chihuly, then yes. But if success looks like a vibrant downtown, open 24/7, then ... not yet, but there are numerous hopeful signs. Still, some visitors express unease: “We were all kind of unnerved by the lack of people in the city downtown—even at rush hour on a Monday morning,” writes blogger Jenna Huntsberger on her site [modern domestic.com](#).



The lobby of Tacoma’s Hotel Murano features original works by Karen LaMonte and Dale Chihuly among many others. courtesy: hotel murano, tacoma

Though crime rates continue to fluctuate, there have been more years of decline than increase in the past decade according to [official statistics](#). And there could be no better sign of Tacoma’s rising profile as a tourist destination than [The Hotel Murano](#), which opened in 2008 with contemporary glass exhibited on every floor. This upscale hotel is part three of Tacoma’s glass trifecta, and was voted the number six hotel in the United States according to readers of [Conde Nast Traveler](#) this year. It was beat narrowly by the number one [21c Hotel](#) in Louisville, Kentucky, another city becoming known for glass art.