

Arty Party: Randall Gallery Is Unusual Venue

By Robert Sanford

Of the Post-Dispatch Staff

Mark Widmann is an enemy of boredom. More specifically, he is an enemy of ballroom boredom.

"You could be in St. Louis attending some events and you could have someone take you to them," he says. "You could have them put a blindfold on you. When you got to the first one they could take off the blindfold and ask you where you were. You'd say you were in a hotel ballroom."

"If you continued with a second test in Clayton you would come up with the same answer."

"Do a third in the county and the results would be the same. Always a hotel ballroom. On and on. It's boring."

Widmann became a student of ballroom boredom while working in catering. His critical studies led to his present business, which, for lack of a better title, can be called the party alternative environment business, or non-traditional environment business. The idea is to provide a fresh place with a fresh atmosphere as a location for a party—a place that's interesting.

"The idea has shown surprising appeal," Widmann said. The party place that Widmann offers is the Randall Gallery, 999 North 13th Street. It is an old building—built a few years after the Civil War as a food warehouse - and it has been refurbished with white walls and natural wood floors in a style popular among art galleries.

The building offers three floors with big rooms, some with arched windows, and it has arched doorways between basement rooms.



The Randall Gallery is not an art gallery in the complete sense, though a customer can buy an art object there if so inclined. The building, renewed, was opened in 1989 by lawyer Jack Randall as a complete, functioning sculpture gallery.

"We did a fair amount of business but not enough," Randall said. "St. Louis is a tough place to sell art. It seems that people who want to spend real money on art go to New York or Chicago."

"At any rate, in St. Louis they like to go to the openings and taste some wine and cheese. They may not buy anything. I remember one opening that was a three-day affair. We handled 1,500 people and there were no sales."

"But one thing we noticed was that the visitors really enjoyed the building," he said. It's a big, nice, clean space in an old industrial city. Most of the floors are the original wood. The place has character. Customers liked to attend events there even though there was no restroom for men. So the thought occurred to us that if people like it so much they might like to use it commercially as a meeting place.

With Randall and Widmann in agreement, the building was refurbished again. Restrooms were added, plus a large elevator and a big fully equipped kitchen with stainless steel fixtures and two walk-in refrigerators.

To provide parking, the operators obtained permission from two neighbors, Sverdrup Corp. and the Post-Dispatch, to use some nearby fenced parking areas.

"There aren't a lot of new business success stories these days," Widmann said, "but this is one. This place just took off." Often when he has a wedding or reception there he ends up with two or more new reservations. He has been incredibly successful.

One of the appeals of the gallery as a meeting place is the art on view. Randall owns a number of pieces of welded iron and junk sculpture by Mark Coughlin. They include figures playing cards, hockey, baseball, etc. They are good-humored and have a certain rakish attraction. Work by several other St. Louis artists is on view.

"It seems to be standard fare for guests at

weddings and parties to ham it up for "funny" photographs with the junk sculpture figures," Widmann said. That serves to break up the ballroom boredom. That and the appeal of the loft-like space, space that sometimes is used by photographers shooting fashion work.



"A much-commended ingredient of the party package is the food," Widmann says. The full kitchen allows fresh-food preparation on the scene. The food charge can be \$30 per person at the low end of the price scale, he said. A wedding reception special can be as low as \$55 per person. The rental fee for the gallery is \$1495.00 on a Saturday and \$895.00 the rest of the week. The average number of people at events is 260. "Some usual charges such as parking and party equipment rental are forgiven," he says.

"This sort of catering is called society catering," he said. "There are probably about eight firms in the city that can produce distinctive food and serve it well."

Depending on what customer wants, the building atmosphere can be changed with plants or whatever the designer wants. With or without these special additions the guests ooh and aaah and devote the evening to having fun. At least, they don't appear to be bored.