

# CITIZEN-TIMES

PART OF THE USA TODAY NETWORK

## Asheville London Road neighborhood edges into the public eye

Emily Patrick February 26, 2016



(Photo: Maddy Jones/mjones@citizen-times.com)

What's true of garden plants is also true of neighborhoods: First they sleep. Next they creep. Then they leap.

Overnight, it seems, Asheville's quiet industrial zones evolve into bustling neighborhood centers: the River Arts District, South Slope and now, London Road.

But in truth, these changes don't happen overnight. Plenty of sleeping and creeping precedes them.

Rather, perceptions change suddenly when there's something new in a neighborhood. This summer, Burial Beer will be that something new when it opens its six-building complex off London Road.

The half-mile-long commercial district has housed automotive businesses and building supply companies since it was christened in 1932, but its central location, just east of Biltmore Village and south of Sweeten Creek Road, means its appeal is growing broader.

The owners of Burial Beer have already proven they know how to spot a neighborhood that's about to pop into the public eye. When they rented their space on Collier Avenue three years ago, most people didn't know what to call South Slope. Now, tourists and locals swarm the area for its breweries, restaurants and nightlife.

Is Burial a harbinger of a similar renaissance on London Road?

"We see similarity in the properties, certainly – something in a neighborhood that is up-and-coming, that has retail, that has more residential going in," said Burial co-owner Jess Reiser. "They're still a little off the beaten path ... This property still has that setback off the main drag. We're still kind of trying to keep it secret, I guess."

But on Collier Avenue, the secret is out.

And Burial's London Road two-acre complex isn't exactly inconspicuous. The two-story building that will serve as the taproom was built by the government in the '30s to house the Civilian Conservation Corps workers who were building the Blue Ridge Parkway. Its floor-to-ceiling wood interior and original cubbies, where the workers presumably stored their belongings, will draw visitors. And then, there's the beer.

## More than meets the eye

The buildings along London Road give the impression it's all light industry — auto suppliers and plumbing stores. Those businesses are certainly there, but in recent

years, artists, craftspeople and niche businesses have moved in. They haven't altered the facades, however, so Plank Fitness, a trendy personal training studio that opened in 2013, still resembles the auto shop it used to be.

Similarly, artist Randy Shull's warehouse still looks like a machine shop from the street. Inside, everything is white: walls, steel girders, ceiling-mounted gantry. His paintings, energetic like Jasper Johns and Robert Rauschenberg, are already hanging on the walls, even though Shull is still working on the 8,800-square-foot space, and they make the massive room look poised for an art opening. Shull is planning one for May.

He bought this building with his wife, Hedy Fischer, in 2013. They also own 8 London Road, which they bought in 2006.

Shull said he's curious to see how Burial Beer will change the neighborhood, but he doesn't expect change to happen quickly.

As the area grows, he predicts it will remain distinct from Biltmore Village, even though the two neighborhoods are adjacent.

"If Biltmore Village could think of itself as partially industrial and suitable for artists, then sure," he said. "But I don't think it sees itself that way."

More accurately, the city doesn't see it that way. Development rules in Biltmore Village are strict. Any new construction requires a permit from the Historic Resources Commission, which regulates even small details like shutters and light fixtures.

By contrast, London Road is almost a free for all. By law, it's a commercial industrial district, so acceptable uses include multi-family residential, nightclubs, golf courses, lumber yards and a variety of other business pursuits.

For Leslie Rowland, the mixture of businesses — including the scruffier ones — is the neighborhood's strength. In February, she opened London District Studios, which houses retail space for lifestyle goods and art, three open studios and an area for classes and coffee, in Shull's building at 8 London Road.

"This isn't Disney World. If you want that, you can go downtown," she said. "I see the car shops and the motorcycle shops and the funky gas station (remaining) here because that's what makes it interesting. That's what gives it its edge."

## A river runs on it

But will the industrial businesses remain as property values rise? In London Road's industrial district, two of the sixteen parcels are for sale — a propane store and a tire shop — and two sold in 2015.

If there's an impediment to development on London Road, it's infrastructure, many business owners agree.



Artists Randy Shull, right, and Hedy Fischer stop for a portrait in their studios at 22 London Road. (Photo: William Woody / [wwody@citizen-times.com](mailto:wwody@citizen-times.com), William Woody / [wwody@citizen-times.com](mailto:wwody@citizen-times.com))

Devorah Thomas and her partners moved their business, City Real Estate, from Montford to London Road in July. They were surprised by what happens when a steady rain falls. The narrow tributary at the edge of the property swiftly rises and floods the whole street.

"We're willing to deal with it because we really want to be here," she said. "But we need the city's participation, as will all buildings on this road."

The water rises so high it makes the road impassable. She said London Road doesn't get as much attention as streets in Biltmore Village, which also has flooding problems.

The businesses aren't the only ones who use the street. It's a shortcut from Sweeten Creek to Hendersonville Road, a way to bypass the traffic of Biltmore Village, and it's a main thoroughfare for the Shiloh residential neighborhood.

"I think maybe that neighborhood hasn't gotten as much attention as other parts of town," said Thomas, who has lived in Shiloh for three years. "Hopefully as the times are changing, that will have to change as well."

Better drainage and sidewalks could make London Road attractive to retail and restaurants, she said. Burial Beer already has plans to open a restaurant on its property. The prospect of a livelier district is exciting to Thomas and her partners.

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### **Meet London Road**

London District Studios, 8 London Road, will host its grand opening 5-9 p.m. on March 4. The meet and greet will feature an art exhibition by London District resident artist Kehren Barbour. Her collection of sculptural works, made from deconstructed pianos, is called #postpianoproject. She's taken apart 34 pianos — roughly 20,000 pounds of material — and created small, affordable wall sculptures from wooden and wire elements as well as larger installation pieces using the iron harps. For more information, visit [facebook.com/londondistrictstudios](https://www.facebook.com/londondistrictstudios).

Artist Randy Shull will open his space at 22 London Road for a new media exhibition, "Love, Devotion, and Surrender," featuring work by nine artists from around the world. Most of the artists on the docket have shown at major national and international museums such as the Museum of Modern Art and the Whitney Museum of American Art. They include Bill Viola, Tony Oursler, Rafael Lozano Hemmer, Marilyn Minter, Jesper Just, Nathalie Djurberg, Jen Dnike, Clayton Cubbitt and Petra Cortright. The show opens on May 13 with a reception from 6-10 p.m. and runs through June 1. Additional hours will be announced. To learn more about Shull, visit [randyshull.com](http://randyshull.com).

City Real Estate, 121 London Road, is planning a grand opening celebration in June. To learn more, visit [ashevillecityrealestate.com](http://ashevillecityrealestate.com).