FOR years Hartford has been known as the insurance capital of the world. But in a former typewriter factory in the Parkville section, the city reveals another side of itself -- a kind of crazy cousin to the insurance business.

The factory houses Real Art Ways, an alternative arts center founded in 1975 that presents the very newest of art, film, music, spoken word and performance. Attracting about 40,000 people a year, RAW, as it is known, is more akin to places like the Kitchen and Artists Space in New York than to Hartford's own Wadsworth Atheneum Museum of Art, the nation's oldest public art museum.

Although the center has built a national reputation, locally it is not as well known. But its organizers hope to draw more visitors with expanded programming made feasible by a $300,000 renovation of the building, scheduled to be completed this month. The renovation will add a plush cafe in the style of a Turkish bordello, a new space dedicated to performances and a lobby. Art exhibitions will continue to be displayed in 5,000 square feet of galleries.

"We're in touch with today and with the moment, and we're looking toward the future," said Will K. Wilkins, the center's director. "Consequently, we're interested in controversy -- not that we're trying to create it."

Real Arts Way hardly shies from the provocative. For example, last March it held "Sex Work, or They Work Hard for Their Money," a film festival and forum on the sex industry.

One panel discussion featured a detective with the Hartford police vice unit, a call girl turned writer, a theologian from the Hartford Seminary, and a professor from Trinity College who studies women in the sex business.

The center has occupied at least a half dozen spaces since its founding by four artists in a second-floor walkup in the city's business district. At one point, it was evicted to make way for a parking garage. Early artists and performers included Laurie Anderson, John Cage and David Salle.
"When you present artists who aren't known, you can really only brag about it years later," Mr. Wilkins said.

In 1990, the center moved to the old factory, on Arbor Street. At the same time, Mr. Wilkins and a small staff were hired.

The center sits in a neighborhood populated by immigrants -- a diverse group of Hispanic, Portuguese and Asians, and Mr. Wilkins has tried to reach out to them with his programming. From 1999 to 2000, he held a Portuguese film festival.

In October, Christina Branco, a Fado singer, and her husband, who plays a Portuguese 12-string guitar, performed to an audience of neighbors and suburbanites. Fado is the Portuguese version of the blues.

The center has also sponsored public art projects in Hartford, like "En la barberia no se llorrra," which means "No Crying Allowed in the Barbershop," an installation on a Park Street storefront by Pepon Osorio. Put up in 1994, the piece comments on ideas of masculinity in Latino culture.

Steven Holmes, director of visual arts and public programs, curates many of the art shows, combing local and Northeastern galleries and traveling to New York every two weeks and Europe several times a year. "This Is Then," on view until Feb. 15, is a show about memory; it was inspired by the debate over how to memorialize the terrorist attacks of Sept. 11.

The center is also currently exhibiting the work of Kehinde Wiley, a painter who combines elements of hip-hop culture with an old master's influence to produce pieces examining black masculinity. That show is on view through Jan. 12.

A new program is the "Creative Cocktail Hour," to be held on the third Thursday of each month. It will feature music and live performance.

The center's leaders hope to build a 300-seat theater in the future, but such plans take money. The Greater Hartford Arts Council and the state Commission on the Arts are main supporters as are the Andy Warhol Foundation for the Arts and the Wallace-Reader's Digest Fund. In 2001, $100,000 was raised from private donors.

The center's annual budget is about $850,000; 12 years ago, it was $3,000.

Like other groups founded in the 1970's, Real Arts Way was conceived as an alternative to a museum, to show the work of living artists, not necessarily meant for posterity or even resale.

"Alternative centers are the incubators of the art world," said Roberto Bedoya, the former director of the National Association of Artists Organizations and now a Washington arts consultant. "Basically they prompt the future."

Mr. Wilkins said the center fulfills an important role in Hartford, as the only cultural organization dedicated solely to current trends.

"We've been able to thrive because we have connected with people in many ways -- public art projects, public forums, engagement in civic issues, programs for kids, seniors and everybody in between -- and we've done it with programming that cuts across class, age, sexual orientation and color lines," he said.
GRAPHIC: Photos: "We're in touch with today and with the moment, and we're looking toward the future," said Will K. Wilkins, left, executive director of Hartford's alternative arts center, Real Art Ways. The center, which is in the city's Parkville section, has been undergoing a $300,000 renovation, scheduled to be completed this month. (Photographs by George Ruhe for The New York Times)

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