

# Artists put down roots in South Boston building

By Barbara Rabinovitz  
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Over on South Boston's A Street, looks are deceiving. The street looks every bit the industrial strip it has been for decades, with its homely, brick-faced mill buildings overlooking murky Fort Point Channel.

But the vista belies another use of this mixed-use section of downtown Boston — namely the artists community that has taken root on A Street, as well as on Congress, Summer and several smaller streets running off them.

Almost 300 artists are said to have studios in the Fort Point Channel area. Most of them are leased from the Boston Wharf Company, which owns many of the mills that once were home for the city's premier industries.

But one of the buildings, a former printing plant at 249 A St., was purchased last year by a group of 35 artists, who now occupy it as members of a co-operative.

A housewarming of sorts is being held this weekend by the artist-owners of A Street as part of a neighborhood-wide "Open Studios" event. The two-day open house is giving the public a glimpse of how 35 determined people transformed a dingy, ink-stained relic of a building into workable and livable studio space.

The transformation began four years ago when the artists, living in constant fear of being displaced by the upscale tenants who were moving into the new or newly renovated downtown commercial buildings across the channel, decided to map out their own development strategy.

With the help of a \$27,000 grant from the National Endowment for the Arts, they incorporated themselves as the Fort Point Arts Community Inc., rented a modest office on Summer Street and hired a city planner, Jero Nesson, as executive director.

Their big break came in the fall of 1982 when Nesson got a call from a local commercial broker telling him the A Street building was on the market. Of sturdy construction, with windows on all sides letting light into the high-ceilinged interior spaces, the building turned out to be ideally suited for artists' studios," Nesson said in a recent interview.

An advertisement in the artists' community newsletter seeking interested investors drew responses from nearly three dozen artists each of whom plunked down \$1000. With those commitments, Nesson moved to obtain the necessary zoning and financial approvals. Neither was easily granted.

The South Boston community at first objected to the granting of a city variance that would allow a residential building in an industrial zone. But after numerous

meetings, the neighborhood leaders were won over

Several banks also were skeptical, with the exception of Mutual Bank which came through with a \$1.05-million construction and acquisition loan. The artists followed with another \$250,000 in equity; the city's Neighborhood Development and Employment Agency provided a \$160,000 loan; and the seller of the building took back a \$100,000 second mortgage. In August 1983, the building was purchased for \$900,000, or about \$11 per square foot.

A limited equity co-operative was formed to ensure that the units would remain in artists' hands and that there would be, in Nesson's words, "no profiteering." The arrangement requires that a unit offered for sale be sold only to another artist and that the sale price be limited to the amount the owner invested plus the cost of renovations plus an interest rate pegged to the Consumer Price Index or 10 percent, whichever is higher

The units were offered as "raw space," which included four walls, a door, power lines into the space, plumbing stacks, an intercom system and fire alarm hookups. The studios varied in size from 900 to 1900 square feet, the average being about 1400 square feet. The cost per square foot was \$25 to \$30 — no matter what the unit's location in the building — and the average price hovered around \$35,000.

The units were selected by lottery. The system left most people happy, "with the exception of the last three or four," he said. "We invited in a professional mediator to work out something for them, and he didn't have to do much. People came forward and gave up 100 square feet here or there . . ."

That spirit of cooperation prevailed throughout the development process, Nesson said. "At times it looked like the whole thing would fall apart, but people hung together and supported one another," he said. "The long-term benefit is they have a really co-operative arrangement"

Sculptor-painter Suzanna Schell, whose pine-beamed, plant-filled loft with her pastel collages on the brick walls is but one of the many imaginatively decorated units in the building, seconded Nesson's statement. "After an initial shake-down period, we all seem to be getting along," she said, knocking on the wooden arm of the rocker she was sitting in. "We're all in this for the long haul; we expect the turnover to be zero to low," she added, noting the building has a waiting list of 150 artists.

Round-the-clock heat (Schell's previous studio was in a nearby building where the heat was provided on an "industrial schedule"), parking accommodations and safe surroundings were just part of the building's appeal to the artists. Schell said. More than anything they wanted working/living space from which they would not have to move to make way for the so-called gentrifiers who invariably are drawn to artists' neighborhoods.

"As an artist-tenant, you kind of live undercover because you don't want to get kicked out," she said. An artist-owner, on the other hand, "is not subject to the control of the city government and the whims of landlords."

Or as Lenore Tennenblatt, a wood sculptor who works and lives at 249 A St., explained it, "The artists' community in Boston is very transient," even though it is also very large, "Artists are always being forced to move because of conversion (of the buildings to other uses) or high rents," she said.

One of her neighbors, photographer Larry Maglott, suggested that the real estate community might benefit from encouraging artists to put down their roots in urban neighborhoods, rather than uprooting them.

"This end of A Street was dormant before we got here. Now it's alive and safe," he said.

Barbara Rabinovitz is news editor of *Lawyers Weekly*.