

FORCED OUT - Artists are leaving Providence for cheaper digs out of town

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PROVIDENCE - For Michele Fremont, the timing couldn't have been worse. After nursing her toy design company from a struggling start- up to a \$350,000-a-year business, she suddenly had to move.

The reason: her building at One Allens Avenue is slated for demolition as part of the relocation of Route 195.

"You have no idea how hard this has been," she says, surrounded by piles of plastic drop cloths and unopened packing boxes. "Basically, you have to put everything on hold, find a new place, move your stuff and then crank everything back up again. And that's if you have any clients left."

Scott Lapham, a 32-year-old RISD grad who runs a small photography studio, knows how she feels.

Last fall, Lapham and about a dozen other artists who rented space in a building on Atwells Avenue received eviction notices. Why? Because city inspectors ruled that the building's fire alarm system was inadequate.

"It was a great place," says Lapham, who had to store his cameras and darkroom equipment with friends while he looked for a new studio. "The rent was cheap, it was close to downtown and there was a real sense of community. Then it was, like, everybody had to clear out."

Though their reasons for moving are different, Lapham and Fremont are part of the same disturbing trend.

Thanks to a triple-whammy of rising rents, soaring property values and continuing development both in and around downtown, artists and arts groups are finding it harder than ever to stay in Providence.

The market for studio space is extremely tight right now, says AS220 artistic director Umberto Crenca. In the past, if you were kicked out of one place, there was always another place to go. But now, with some of these big mill buildings being targeted for demolition, you actually have fewer options.

(AS220, by the way, owns its building at 115 Empire St. and is not threatened by the current wave of development.)

At the same time, other cities appear to be benefiting from Providences space crunch. Both Lapham and Fremont, for example, wound up moving their studios to Pawtucket.

Theres a lot more talk about moving out of the city than there used to be says

Lapham, who plans to move into his new studio on Pawtucket Avenue next month. Since I need to be close to Providence, I couldn't go very far. But I know that other people are looking at places like Central Falls and Fall River.

Growing frustration

Within Providence's close-knit artistic community, the loss of affordable studio space has been a topic of conversation and growing frustration for several years. But it wasn't until last fall that the shortage went from private grumbling to public controversy.

That's when New York developer Feldco Development Corp. announced plans to demolish a cluster of 19th-century factory buildings at Eagle Square, an old industrial district on the western edge of Federal Hill.

At the time, the buildings were occupied by 20 to 30 artists, most of whom had been attracted by the combination of low rents, large industrial spaces and the chance to be part of a lively, if loosely knit, artists community. The project also threatened Fort Thunder, an underground arts space popular with younger artists.

In December, after heavy lobbying from a coalition of artists and preservationists, the project failed to win approval from the City Plan Commission.

But the victory could be short-lived: last week, City Building Inspector Ramzi Loqa ruled that Feldco could move ahead with plans for a 26-store shopping plaza, known as Providence Commons, on the site.

The Providence Preservation Society and other members of the coalition that opposed Feldco in December have said they plan to contest Loqa's decision.

Meanwhile, other buildings that once provided low-cost living and working space for artists are also in jeopardy.

Last year, several artists and arts-related businesses were evicted from the former Silver Springs Bleaching and Dyeing plant on Charles Street. The reason: Home-repair giant Home Depot plans to demolish the plant to make way for its first Providence-based store.

At One Allens Avenue, as many as 30 artists and arts-related businesses will have to find new quarters as part of the planned relocation of Route 195. Among those affected by the move are the Rag & Bone Bindery, All Children's Theatre and a number of small architecture and design firms (including Fremont's Swan Design).

Even downtown, where city officials have tried to lure artists with a combination of tax breaks and loft-style housing, rising rents and a tightening real estate market have taken a toll.

Two months ago, award-winning puppeteer Erminio Pinque and his troupe of Big Nazo puppets were forced to vacate their headquarters on Weybosset Street in the heart of Providence's Arts & Entertainment District. The reason: Pinque's landlord, the Providence Performing Arts Center, wanted the space for a new post-performance reception area.

Pinque, who is currently on tour in Indonesia, is still talking with city officials about remaining downtown. In the meantime, he and his troupe have rented temporary space at the Atlantic Mills complex in Olneyville.

This is different

In one sense, of course, stories about artists threatened by greedy landlords and cutthroat developers are as old as art itself. After all, artists are often among the first to feel the pinch when older buildings and neighborhoods go upscale.

Certainly, that was the case in the early 1990s, when dozens of artists were evicted from the sprawling Foundry (then CIC) Complex on Promenade Street. Despite warnings that the city was losing a one-of-a-kind artistic resource, most, if not all, the Foundry artists were able to find new studio spaces elsewhere in the city.

But according to many observers, both inside and outside the art community, this time is different. This time the search for new studio and performance spaces may not stop at the city limits.

I think they're kidding themselves if they think people are going to stay in Providence just to stay in Providence, says Fremont, who looked at buildings in Providence, East Providence and Pawtucket before renting an unfinished 4,000-square-foot space on Webster Street in Pawtucket. I was paying \$7 a square foot in Providence. Now I'm paying \$1.75 a square foot. At those prices, I couldn't afford not to move.

Jane Hunter, managing director of All Children's Theatre, tells a similar story. Part of the exodus from One Allens Avenue, Hunter and her troupe looked at 30 or more locations before settling on a building off Warren Avenue in East Providence.

We wanted to stay in Providence, but the market was just too expensive, she says. Fortunately, we're close to the East Side. But we still have a lot of work to do, and of course people will have to learn how to find us again.

Such comments are music to the ears of development officials in other cities, many of whom are actively trying to launch arts districts of their own.

I think what you're seeing is a natural outgrowth of the success that Providence has had in reviving its economy, says Herbert P. Weiss, programs manager for Pawtucket's Office of Planning and Development. That's good for Providence, since it means that real estate prices are going up. But it's also good for us, since it means that some of the artists who wouldn't have thought about moving to Pawtucket before are giving us a second look.

Pawtucket, in fact, is one of two Rhode Island cities (the other is Westerly) that have created legally defined arts districts modeled on Providence's Arts & Entertainment District.

Like Providence, Pawtucket's arts district offers financial incentives, including breaks on state sales and income taxes, for artists and arts-related businesses that relocate within the district. But Pawtucket has gone further. Among other things, it maintains a database that includes information on building locations

rental prices and availability.

Whats more, says Weiss, the city will help arrange financing for people who want to buy their own loft or building.

Basically, its all about customer service, says Weiss, who has fielded calls from artists in Maine and Massachusetts, as well as Rhode Island. If people tell us they want to own rather than rent, then well try to help them do that.

So far, the citys arts-friendly approach seems to be paying off.

In December, the annual Foundry Artists Holiday Sale was held in a former mens clothing store in downtown Pawtucket. The sale, which still showcases the handiwork of many of the artists displaced from the Foundry complex a decade ago, had been held in Providence for 19 years.

Other new arrivals include Stone Soup, the venerable coffeehouse and folk music club which moved from Capital Center to Slater Mill last summer, and the Jewelry Districts Sandra Feinstein-Gamm Theatre, which recently agreed to anchor a performing arts center planned for downtown Pawtucket.

Were making a strong effort to market the city to artists and arts groups, says Weiss. We think the city has a lot to offer.

Beautiful buildings

Then there are artists like Eric Bright, a nationally recognized ceramist who rents a studio in a former mill building at Eagle Street and Kinsley Avenue, near Eagle Square.

A few months ago, Brights landlord put the building up for sale. But rather than packing up his potters wheel, Bright began looking for ways to buy the property.

I dont think people realize how beautiful these buildings really are, he says as shafts of late afternoon sun pour through 8-foot windows and bounce off refinished oak floors. They may look deserted, but theyre actually home to a very vibrant community of artists. Frankly, Id rather live here than on Benefit Street.

As for Pawtucket, Bright says its nice place to visit, but he has no desire to call it home.

I dont have anything against Pawtucket, but as far as Im concerned, there are only two reasons to go there. One is to renew my drivers license. The other is to shop at Lorraine Mills, aka Lorraine Fabrics, a discount fabric outlet on Mineral Spring Avenue.

At the same time, Bright and other artists are concerned about what they see as a widening gap between Providences arts-friendly rhetoric and projects like the Eagle Square shopping plaza and the Charles Street Home Depot.

On the one hand, they make the city sound like this great place with all these historic old buildings and a wonderful arts community, he says. Then they turn around and let developers knock down the buildings and throw out the artists. It doesnt make any sense

City officials say they're working on the problem. But they also complain that artists often come to them as a last resort, after threats of rent hikes or eviction notices actually come true.

The city is willing to work with any artist or arts group that has a problem, says deputy city solicitor Patricia McLaughlin. But we also find that artists aren't always willing to involve us in what they're doing. They have to be willing to work with us for us to help them.

Signs of hope?

Ironically, the controversy over Eagle Square and an earlier squabble over the closing of the Safari Lounge, a popular hangout for artists and musicians on Eddy Street, may lead to a more constructive relationship between the city's political and artistic communities.

City officials are already talking to Bright and several other artists who are interested in buying Bright's building at 532 Kinsley Ave.

Meanwhile, a group of women artists is renovating a former public library branch in Olneyville Center. The six-member group, which calls itself the Hive Archive, hopes to turn the building into a local arts center, with live-in artists studios, a community darkroom and film center and performance and rehearsal spaces.

McLaughlin also hopes that a series of new legislative initiatives, including an easing of the state's notoriously strict fire and safety codes, will help make renovating older buildings more attractive to landlords and developers.

That, in turn, could result in more work and living spaces for artists.

Right now, to renovate an older building anywhere in Rhode Island, you have to bring it up to the same safety codes as a new building, she says. In many cases, especially when you're dealing with some of these big industrial properties, it's just not cost-effective.

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* SWAN DESIGN OWNER Michele Fremont talks with Mike Hereford, a senior relocation agent for Cinnabar Service Co. which is representing the State Department of Transportation for the Route 195

Journal photos/MARY MURPHY