

Can Artists and Dealers Still Make it in Wicker Park/Bucktown?

After all, artists are only the *reason* the neighborhood took off to begin with

By Katie Copenhaver

“This neighborhood is supposed to be artsy, but where is the art?” asked Lisa Flores, owner/director of the six-month-old All Rise Gallery at 1542 N. Milwaukee, located just south of the six corners intersection at North, Damen and Milwaukee avenues. Even though she is across the street from the Flat Iron Arts Building, the heart of Wicker Park/Bucktown’s art community, and next door to the critically successful Heaven Gallery, Flores raised a valid question. Both All Rise and Heaven are located in second floor spaces—and the same is true for the galleries in the Flat Iron Building. There are no storefront gallery spaces in view.

In fact, the blocks of Milwaukee Avenue that lie between Division Street and North Avenue tell the story of a neighborhood that has gone through a dramatic gentrification and redevelopment over the last 10–15 years. A wide variety of businesses speak to the different clientele inhabiting this neighborhood. The artists, musicians and middle-class Latino families who coexisted for a number of years have been displaced by increased rents and property values, replaced by young urban professionals.

The practical Ben’s Shoes, with its, “Better Quality For Less” slogan on its faded metal sign, seems out of place between the funky Una Mae’s Freak Boutique and upscale jewelry store, Epiphany. Mom-and-pop food and furniture marts as well, as vintage and recycled clothing stores, still pepper Milwaukee Avenue, but they sit uneasily beside chains that include Cingular Wireless, Urban Outfitters, Starbucks and yuppie hang-outs the Debonair Social Club and Bin Wine Café. Buildings from the turn of the 20th Century sit beside newly-constructed buildings from the turn of the 21st Century, creating an inharmonious mix of architectural styles reflecting the tenuous balance of residents within this community.



The irony of this situation is that the neighborhood became desirable in the early 1990s to real estate developers and yuppies *because* of the unique Bohemian atmosphere created by artists who then lived and worked here. Now, those artists have few outposts left.

The event that, more than any other single factor, brought publicity to this neighborhood is the "Around The Coyote Annual Fall Festival" (ATC) and its newer annual winter festival, held in the Flat Iron Arts Building and in varying neighborhood spaces. What started as an artists' open studio event, in which most participants lived and/or worked here, has become a neighborhood art festival, with most participants coming from outside the high-rent area.

There were rumors surrounding this year's fall festival of ATC having trouble getting space outside the Flat Iron Building. Addressing those in a recent interview, Executive Director Allison Stites explained that ATC has to negotiate with the Chicago Park District for the use of their field houses before every festival because there is no long-term agreement in place. However, she and the ATC board are working to change that. "They're in transition in the parks, and for whatever reason, there's been this drive to put more structure on whatever events are happening," she said. "It makes sense to them that it would be contractual and organized and standardized. I think that's what they're trying to do, but there's so much bureaucracy involved that it's been a real struggle to get to a place where there's a system."

Stites added that the cultural programmers at the Chicago Park District want to see this happen, but it will take time before the parties involved come to a consensus. For now, they are working on a good

faith agreement for Around the Coyote to use park space in exchange for offering free art classes to neighborhood children.



Meanwhile, the latest casualty of Wicker Park/Bucktown redevelopment is an artists' and musicians' studio building at 1513 N. Western. The building was recently sold with the intention to convert it to condos, said artist/tenant Kristin Komar. This affects between 12 and 15 visual artists, some of whom have been there for up to 20 years, and all of whom were to move out this month. Komar said the rent was affordable, and she's been having a hard time finding a comparable studio elsewhere. "I'm at a point in my 'emerging artist' career, where I've outgrown my apartment studio, but I can't yet afford a big swanky space at \$500-750 or more per month. I'm somewhere in between, and there doesn't seem to be a market out there for people like me. And, when I do find something that caters to artists like me—the building is sold out from under us."

The antidote for artists being at the mercy of landlords and developers is to own the property themselves. The Acme Artists' Community, now called the Bloomingdale Arts Building, developed at the northwest corner of Western and Bloomingdale Avenues, was supposed to be the model for an artist-owned and operated live/work community. The concept was to offer affordable condominiums for artists and teachers with a community room for collaborative meetings and projects. They also wanted art-related businesses, and maybe a restaurant, to occupy part of the first floor. Unfortunately, a number of problems have scarred that ideal.

It took several years to secure financing for the ACME project. According to resident Frank Crowley, he and his wife, Pauline Kochanski, began attending monthly meetings with other future residents in 1997 to discuss what kind of place they wanted it to be. Construction, however, did not begin until 2001. Crowley and Kochanski's space was not ready for move-in until 2003.

"Immediately after that, the plumbing problems started," said Crowley. These consisted of roofs leaking on some of the upper floor units and sewage back-ups into the first floor units, which were reported a few times by The Chicago Reader. Responding to complaints, the city of Chicago inspected the damage, determined they were caused by faulty construction and ordered repairs. While some repairs have since been made, apparently some have not.



Crowley explained that even though his unit has not had these defects, he and Kochanski have been affected by the ensuing difficulties within the building. He said that once the problems with the facility began, divisions developed among the members of the condo association, which led to animosities that have continued. Since then, "cooperation has been at a minimum," he said, adding that he and Kochanski are "utterly disappointed" with how their dream of a cooperative artists and teachers community has turned out.

On the September afternoon that this reporter visited the Bloomingdale Arts Building, there was one broken door and the public women's washroom on the first floor was out of order. In addition, the storefront gallery space vacated by the original tenant a year ago, Woman Made Gallery, has still not been rented or purchased. In a recent conversation, Woman Made executive director Beate Minkovski summarized why they left: "Our operations suffered because of problems with the building." She added that they had moved there

because the artists' community was a really good concept, and she thinks it is sad the situation did not work out for her gallery. On a better note, Community TV Network remains a stable presence in the building's other main business space.

Other hopes for artists to keep a foothold in the neighborhood include the Flat Iron Arts Building, whose owner Bob Berger, though controversial to some artists, remains committed to keeping it for artists' studios and art-related businesses. (While Berger has been oft touted as a friend of the arts—such as in a story on artists' space in the Oct. 5-11 edition of Time Out Chicago—he has a long history of bizarre behavior toward artists, including once having plans to mount "reality TV"-esque cameras in the Flat Iron.) Within the building, the artists' co-op, Gallery 203, continues its long-term tenancy, along with Around the Coyote's ATC Space gallery and others, which host openings on the first Friday of each month. While many tenants continually question the wisdom of paying rising rents, the high-traffic location ensures that many still do.

Meanwhile, Stites said her goal for Around the Coyote, the Chicago Park District and other players is to create a "Wicker Park Emerging Art Center" in a jointly-owned location, with room for educational programming, galleries and studios. Plus, the emergence of young galleries is important to the vitality of the area. As Lisa Flores explained, "I opened the gallery in reaction to what's going on in the neighborhood in order to legitimize its artistic perception."



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Top Photo

Photograph of Wicker Park, taken from inside the Coyote Building,
Maria Gedroc

Second Photo

All Rise Gallery

Third Photo

"Bear" by Chris Kerr, showing at All Rise Gallery until Nov. 4.

Bottom Photo

"Big Sigh," by Kristin Komar