

COULD THE NEXT ARTS ENCLAVE TRANSFORM THE SUBURBS?

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Asheville artists Jon Sarver, left, and Todd Fowler talk about growing more urban artwork onto buildings around west asheville in front of a large mural on the sky lanes bowling alley. Photo William Woody

When sculptor Molly Sawyer moved to Asheville from New York City just over three years ago, she had trouble finding housing but no problem getting studio space.

She rented a sprawling section of a warehouse in the River Arts District's Switchyard Studios with high ceilings and plenty of room to spare. While they looked for a house, she and her husband even slept in the space. She jokes they were "just spending some time there" since city code prohibits people from living in commercial buildings.

Rent was unthinkableably cheap — about \$1 per square foot — and the neighbors were interesting and supportive, although they threw the occasional wild party after hours. There was no heat or air conditioning, but Sawyer said she learned to dress appropriately.

But in July of last year, the city shut down Switchyard Studios along with its neighbors, including The Tannery. The buildings lacked the water pressure to fight a fire, among other issues, city officials said.

Now, artists like Sawyer are moving away from downtown and towards suburban development, seeking low rent and room to spread out.

Last fall, she moved her studio to 144 Tunnel Road, next door to Black Dome Sports, and in May, she opened the adjacent space for use by other artists. The business, called sOlid studios, provides 1,245 square feet for art shows, workshops and more.

And she's not alone. A symptom of the River Arts District's growing popularity — and corresponding rising rents — other art groups have relocated to Tunnel Road and areas of Swannanoa River Road.

"We're pioneers," Sawyer said. "It's not just take what you can get. It's more be flexible enough to use what's offered."

But can the arts establish themselves in these surprising places? And will rents hold steady, or will they continue to rise just as they have in more desirable parts of the city?

Tunnel arts district?

Earlier this spring, Sawyer returned to the River Arts District for the Spring Studio Stroll and toured buildings in the area.

"It's saturated," she said. "It's completely saturated."

The artists there feel the same way. In 2014, an independent study for the City of Asheville, "Alternatives to Gentrification in the East of the Riverway" explored worries about the area.



Sculptor Molly Sawyer works on a piece in her personal studio, a room in tunnel road's sOlid studios, a space that she rents to artists, on Friday. Photo: Angeli Wright

Ninety-six percent of the artists surveyed said they were concerned about the future affordability of studios.

The study reported the median rent was \$333 a month. For artists who do not share space, the average rent was \$12 per square foot. The majority of artists surveyed — 61 percent — reported spending more than 30 percent of their income from art on rent.

However, 57 percent of all the artists said their rent was affordable at that time. The same proportion estimated they would need more square footage in the next five years.

“It is becoming difficult to find space in the River Arts District because studio availability is limited,” said Julia Fosson, president of the River Arts District Artists.

Many of the buildings have had waiting lists, and although lots of people inquire whether she knows of anything available for rent, she said she doesn't hear much bickering about rents or the need for relocation.

The River Arts District isn't the only option for studio space. For some artists, the area isn't the best fit.

"Not everybody needs to be down there," she said. "Everybody has to work in their own way, and if they are doing more wholesale and selling elsewhere, they don't need the sales of people coming in or tourists coming in."

Sawyer said her sculpture business is exactly the sort that can thrive outside of the River Arts District.

"I'm not a walk through-kind of artist," she said. "I'm not doing demos. I don't like to be interrupted while I'm working."

Sawyer's art doesn't exactly lend itself to casual purchase. She sculpts figures and horses in plaster and bronze, and the finished pieces measure several feet high or more. She also creates installation art and wall sculptures made from drift wood. None of it is pocket size, she said.

Sawyer hopes SOLid studios will give other artists the opportunity to seek solace when they need it. She said other artists have approached her about using the space for large projects, and photographers such as Micah Mackenzie use it to set up shoots.

The low rent on the building allows Sawyer to rent the room for \$20-\$35 an hour, a price that includes parking in the large lot behind the building.



Sculptor Molly Sawyer leans on a desk in her personal studio inside tunnel road's sOlid studios, a space she rents out to artists, on Friday. Photo: Angeli Wright

From boots to slippers

In corners around town, other art professionals are moving toward more suburban areas.

Also on the east side of town, Southside Studios hosts more than a dozen artists, most of them potters, in a former lumber warehouse near the Swannanoa River.

Ginger Huebner moved from the River Arts District to Southside several years ago before departing for her own building nearby.

"It's a very sweet space," she said of Southside. "It is a community of artists, sharing space and sharing resources."

Huebner is both a working artists and the founder of Roots + Wings School of Art and Design, which offers classes for ages 3 to adult. In June, she moved her studio and the school to a former grocery store at 573 Fairview Road.

She also relocated her studio, where she creates collages from mixed media and chalk pastel, to the 9,000-square-foot building.

She hopes to rent out half the space to other artists to create a multi-generational community.

Although Fairview Road has the look and feel of the suburbs, Huebner said she doesn't think of it that way.

"I feel like people do look at Biltmore Village or Oakley as a suburb, but to me, it's actually super central to Asheville," she said. "It's really easy to get to where we are."



This Patton avenue building near sky lanes bowling alley will soon host frostbite, an ice cream parlor. Building owner Jon Sarver said a mural is in the works for the suburban building. Photo: William Woody

Across town, another school of the arts is taking a similar approach.

Heather Maloy leased the former Spurs building at 1501 Patton Ave. Inside, she'll create space for her professional ballet company, Terpsicorps Theatre of Dance, and a school for children and adults.

She has plans to transform the former honky tonk into three separate dance areas. One room will be large enough to host audiences of 40-60 people for recitals and visiting professional events.

White paint and some indoor demolition will go a long way, she said, and the building already boasted high ceilings.

"If you step back and think about what you can do with the building, it's actually kind of a cool, mid-century modern building," she said. "I was shocked when I walked into that building. From the outside it doesn't even look like it would have high ceilings."

She said most people she's talked to are open to the idea of a dance company making its home among the fast food chains and convenience stores of the west side of Patton Avenue.

"People will say, 'Wow that's really different from where you were before' — because it is," she said. "Because it's not just going to be Terpsicorp's space (for professionals) but because we're doing a school, I think people's minds have opened up a little bit about that area of Patton because it's really convenient and centrally located for people."

She said the reason for moving the school to Patton Avenue is simple: The rent is "exponentially cheaper" than in the River Arts District, where, like Sawyer, she rented room in the Switchyards building.

Still, the low cost comes with a price. Maloy said she'll miss the community of artists on the other side of the river.

"Like anything else, it's nice to be in a community with people who inspire you," she said. "It will be interesting to see how long it will take for artists to make their way over to where we're going to be ... We just hope it happens fast."

Patton's true colors

Although Maloy will miss the company of other artists, her new neighborhood brings her closer to a new audience.

“It’s close to Candler and Leicester and those areas,” she said. “I don’t know that there’s been a dance studio close to there before, so I think it’s opening up a whole new world of exposure to the arts to people who haven’t wanted to drive farther than that.”



sOlid studios, a space available for rent to artists, can be sectioned off into rooms or left open to meet an artist’s needs. The work of sculptor Molly Sawyer, manager of the space, hangs on the walls. Photo: Angeli Wright

She said it’s rare to reach both Asheville’s urban community and Buncombe County’s rural community.

“You definitely see different types of people out there (on Patton) that you do not see downtown,” she said. “I think it’s wonderful to mix everybody together.”

Jon Sarver, who owns Maloy's building in addition to nearby parcels with a group of investors, said welcoming both communities is one of his goals as a property owner.

His group also owns Sky Lanes bowling alley — both the business and the property — and they're determined to retain the longtime customer base while welcoming newcomers from West Asheville and downtown.

"I don't think we want to change Patton Avenue," he said. "I think it's really important to respect the people who were here as Asheville grows."

As a real estate agent with offices in the River Arts District, Sarver has seen rents rise in that neighborhood. He doesn't foresee similar price hikes on Patton Avenue, though, at least not anytime soon.

Sarver and his partners do favor local tenants over chains, he said, but they won't make major changes to the property beyond upgrading the bowling alley equipment, re-stripping the parking lot and refurbishing the vintage sign for the bowling alley.

Perhaps the most visible change: A group of local and national graffiti artists recently painted a mural on the bowling alley featuring a flaming bowling ball, custom tags and a portrait of Jeff Bridges as The Dude from the movie "The Big Lebowski."

A second mural is likely as a new tenant, Frosbite ice cream store, moves into the former Papa John's building, Sarver said.

Are the murals a sign of more art tenants to come?

"More than a decision to go with the art community, it was a decision to go with something local," Sarver said. "I don't think we're banking on it changing. It's just — it's a great location."