

A space for artists

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Abstract: Wiens has deep connections to local artists -- as founding member of Red Raven Gallery, a member of Silverton's Lunaria Gallery, an arts columnist and a former board member of the Keizer Art Association. Jessica Ramey, volunteer executive director of DIY Studio, has rented about 1,200 square feet on the building's first floor, behind the Subway sandwich shop.

Full text: Many local artists dream of sharing studio space with their peers. They're tired of working in cramped bedrooms or drafty garages. They long to be near other creative folks, preferably in a vibrant downtown. Salem Art Association's Project Space provides a few short-term opportunities each summer, but private efforts to create an art colony have sputtered. The main hangup has been money -- until now.

Enter Mike Tevis, a developer who splits his time between Palo Alto, Calif., and Portland. He's developing the second floor of the Salem Arts Building, 155 Liberty St. NE, into The Hive, a warren of 24 studios for artists and entrepreneurs. They'll be small but affordable, with rents from \$195 to \$550 per month.

"I am an art appreciator," Tevis explained recently while showing off the still-vacant second floor. "I can barely paint a wall white....but I like hanging out with artists."

Track record

This could sound like a pie-in-the-sky idea, except that Tevis already has put about \$4 million into the building since buying it for \$875,000 in 2003. He renovated the exterior and added skylights, new heating and air-conditioning, and handicap-accessible bathrooms.

He has turned the building's fourth floor into 10 apartments, from studio to two-bedroom; all are leased. The third floor has been transformed into three apartments and 10 commercial spaces; all but three small spaces are leased.

Meanwhile, Tevis also has developed six art-centered properties in Southeast Portland, including the Ford Building at SE 11th Avenue and Division Street. He's also renovating the old Salem Overhead Door building on Hyacinth Street NE, which will offer 60 industrial-style spaces for techies and artists.

At first, Tevis said, Salem attracted him mainly as an investment alternative to Northern California real estate, which he described as "Googled and Yahoo'd off the charts."

But as he spent more time in Salem and Portland, he also came to love Oregonians' lifestyle. "The quality of people is fantastic," he said.

Along the way, he learned an important lesson: "Smaller is better," a phrase he repeated several times during the tour. His prospective tenants don't need a lot of space; in fact, they can double up and share one of the mini-studios whose outlines now are taped on the second floor's concrete surface. The key is keeping the space affordable -- and fun.

Tevis plans to keep the big room's industrial feel, with exposed ductwork and worn sheetrock and brick walls. New 8-foot-high interior walls will separate the studio spaces, allowing light and air in while remaining open to neighboring sights and sounds.

"No glued-down carpet or drop ceilings," Tevis said. "We're looking for a New York loft feel."

Aside from the fact that Tevis is doing this long before he collects a dollar of rent, The Hive will hold other advantages for artists and tech types, he said. The rent will include utilities and fees, making life simpler for the tenants. Leases will be month-to-month -- a plus, he says, for artists who live with uncertainty.

He expects to have renovations complete during the first quarter of 2014.

Artist-to-artist

Tevis, 53, brought a developer's eye to the project, but progress was slow until he connected with jewelry designer Helen Wiens this year. She and painter Carolyn Canoy rented a roomy basement studio in the building. Wiens was so enthusiastic about plans for The Hive that she has set aside her own artwork to market the building for Tevis.

Wiens has deep connections to local artists -- as founding member of Red Raven Gallery, a member of Silverton's Lunaria Gallery, an arts columnist and a former board member of the Keizer Art Association. She has been reaching out to her peers through social media and face-to-face contacts. So far her efforts have resulted in deposits on four of the 24 planned spaces in The Hive.

"I never in a million years thought that I would be a property manager," Wiens said. "I am having so much fun. I love talking to people and doing something I believe in. It will be great for downtown."

One of the early deposits came from painter Dayna Collins, who will split a 450-square-foot studio with mixed-media artist Tory Brokenshire. Collins took the step even though she has two studio spaces elsewhere.

"I love being part of an art community and being with other artists in communal space," Collins explained. "I often complain about things in Salem, but this is a cool vision. I want to be part of it."

Jessica Ramey, volunteer executive director of DIY Studio, has rented about 1,200 square feet on the building's first floor, behind the Subway sandwich shop.

The nonprofit, which fosters creative re-use of recycled materials, had enjoyed about 3,000 square feet for minimal rent in the Salem Center mall. It had to leave when another tenant signed up for the space.

"For us, this is the perfect thing for our growing organization," said Ramey. The location draws people who are interested in art and recycling, she said; in fact, tenants from the building's upper floors have volunteered to staff DIY Studio during evenings.

That kind of synergy is high on Tevis' and Wiens' list of goals for the Salem Arts Building. Making space for 50 or so artists and tech workers means more people on the streets, more people patronizing downtown businesses, they say. The building's common spaces can host art shows and special events like the opening of Artists in Action's "Something Red" show on Wednesday. More events will reinforce the feeling that there's plenty to do in Salem; people needn't drive to Portland for their arts fix.

"It's starting to happen here already," said Tevis, "but a year from now, people will be thrumming together in the hallways, carrying big things in and out."

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Salem Arts Building events

Something Red: The opening reception and award ceremony for Artists in Action's 11th annual event will be from 7 to 8 p.m. Wednesday at the Salem Arts Building, 155 Liberty St. NE. John Doan, harp guitarist, will entertain.

Art Walk: "Something Red" art will be shown and sold at 20-plus businesses during an art walk from 5 to 7 p.m. Wednesday; the juried show will continue through Dec. 31. Map cards are available at The Art Department, Travel Salem and other businesses, and the Something Red website, somethingred.org.

Everyday Heroes: Exhibit by Salem Photo League honors local residents who go above and beyond to help others. The exhibit will be open from 10 a.m. to 4 p.m. on Saturday and Dec. 14 and 21 at the Salem Arts Building.

Subject: Artists; Art;

Location: Northern California

Company / organization: Name: Yahoo Inc; NAICS: 519130;

Publication title: Statesman Journal

First page: D.1

Publication year: 2013

Publication date: Dec 1, 2013

Year: 2013

Section: Life

Publisher: Gannett Co., Inc.

Place of publication: Salem, Or.

Country of publication: United States

ISSN: 07395507

Source type: Newspapers

Language of publication: English

Document type: News

ProQuest document ID: 1463083570

Document URL: <http://search.proquest.com/docview/1463083570?accountid=36203>

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Last updated: 2013-12-03

Database: Statesman Journal (Salem)

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