

Drawing artists away from the city

In an effort to revitalize town centers, suddenly it's chic to make space for creative communities

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By Megan Woolhouse, Globe Staff | June 24, 2007

SoHo in suburbia?

Yes, if Deborah Fairbanks has her way. Two years ago, the MIT-trained architect bought a turn-of-the-century mill in Marlborough, and is spending millions to convert the cavernous space into lofts to sell to artists as living and work space.

"You give up so much to be in the city and you don't have the room to do what you want to do," Fairbanks said, standing in one of its slick model units. "People come out here and are just blown away by the space."

With its 15-plus-foot windows, exposed brick interior, and rooftop views the mill has all the ingredients for prime artists space -- except location.

Some 40 miles west of Boston, out in the expanses of central Massachusetts, Marlborough is hardly on the art world's beaten path. A former factory town, its downtown has been emptied by the malls on the outskirts, its once vast apple orchards torn down to create housing subdivisions and office parks.

Marlborough doesn't have a prominent arts organization or full-time city planner. Even an effort to create a modest museum celebrating the city's shoe-making heyday hasn't been able to get off the ground.

"It's a blue-collar community," said Enilton Lisboa, a local real estate agent. Any artists' lofts "will have to be something real cool to succeed."

Yet Fairbanks's bold bet may not be so far-fetched. Traditional artist communities in Boston are getting so expensive that artists are drifting further from the urban center.

ArtistLink, a clearinghouse for information about affordable artists' space in Massachusetts, has more than 350 units listed for sale or rent. Many are outside metro Boston, but usually in cities larger than Marlborough. There's a former school in Chelsea, mill buildings in Lowell, an old rope factory in New Bedford, all hoping to lure artist tenants.

Karl Frey, owner of a Lowell warehouse and a principal at Vespera capital in Connecticut, opened up the building to local artists for \$200 a month two years ago after a proposed redevelopment effort fell apart. He was overwhelmed by the response. He now has more than 100 tenants, many of whom live in Boston and commute to Lowell to work.

"Every time we put a floor out, it's leased," he said. "The fact that this is where Jack Kerouac is from doesn't hurt."

Richard Florida, an economist at George Mason University and author of the best-selling book "The Rise of the Creative Class," said many artists struggle to afford city rents. That has pushed artists into traditionally suburban areas, where they either commute to from the city, or move there and work from home.

Artists are different than 9-to-5 commuters beyond just the hours they may keep; many use the Internet to promote their work. When the number of artists in some outlying communities reaches a critical mass, a local arts and culture scene takes hold. Portsmouth, N.H., with its abundance of artists and galleries, is a good example, Florida said.

"You will see more of this in the suburbs," he said. "And it's all about the fact that they're proximate to Boston. In Arkansas or the Dakotas, this might not succeed."

Indeed some cities and even states are trying to lure artists as a matter of economic policy because it can help boost the local economy.

In Paducah, Ky., for example, city officials and local artists created the Artist Relocation Program in 2000, recruiting artists from across the country as a way to revitalize the city's blighted downtown neighborhoods.

The city offered low-interest loans to artists willing to buy units in abandoned factories along the Ohio River. More than 70 artists from a dozen states took advantage of the offer.

"A lot of small towns are realizing that to just chase after a manufacturing plant is not that safe a future," said Ann Markusen, a professor of public policy at the University of Minnesota who has studied artist migrations and their economic impact on communities.

Her home state has one of the largest economic programs built around recruiting and promoting artists. Minnesota Citizens for the Arts, a statewide arts advocacy organization, has received millions of dollars in state funding since the late 1990s, including \$13 million in 2002 alone.

A report by the group, along with the Forum of Regional Arts Councils, found that the non profit "art and culture" industry had become a driving force in the state's economy, employing more than 22,000 people and contributing \$92 million a year in government revenues.

"It's like an epidemic," Markusen said. "All the small towns are building strategies around artists."

Fergus Falls, two-and-a-half hours outside Minneapolis, is one example. About seven years ago, a non profit group called Artspace purchased an old hotel called The Kaddutz with a plan to renovate it and rent 10 artists' apartments.

Artspace founder I. Kelley Lindquist said a local artist rallied the town's conservative business community to help "Save the Kaddutz." The business community in turn won an \$800,000 grant for the project from the state.

The Kaddutz has plenty of tenants. Lindquist said about half are from urban areas, the others are locals. All were drawn to the town's rural setting of rolling countryside and proximity to lakes and sailing.

The project, however, has not spurred overwhelming change in the town, which Lindquist described as "still in flux." Some new cafes and sandwich shops have opened; fewer buildings are empty.

"They're 60-percent winning," he said of the revitalization effort. "They're working really hard at it. Any empty building sends a shivering message to any commercial developer."

In Marlborough, Jennifer Grant and her fiancé will be among the first residents of Fairbanks's artists' housing, called Renaissance Lofts. The couple plans to move into a first-floor, one-bedroom unit by the end of the summer.

Grant, a 26-year-old graphic designer at Brandeis College, wanted to live in an artists' community but couldn't afford her first choice: downtown Lexington. She met Fairbanks and her husband at the building and fell in love with it. The space was customized, so she could configure it as she wanted.

And she wasn't put off by location.

"The space was so unique," Grant said. "It could be in the middle of nowhere and we'd buy it."

Renaissance Lofts sits near downtown, in a neighborhood of single-family homes, auto body shops, and storefront churches. There are other hints of renewal in the city. A nearby old armory building was recently bought at auction by a developer and there has been talk about condos.

A wine shop and Starbucks opened not far away. And the new Assabet River Rail Trail is less than a quarter mile from the lofts.

Fairbanks plans to remove part of the roof of the three-story building, to create a courtyard in the center of the structure. Renaissance Lofts will also have a rooftop deck, work and storage space in the basement, and exposed framing and ductwork.

Units start at \$235,000 for 1,300 square feet. Some apartments span two floors. Others include basement work space. A handful with special features or private deck space are priced at \$400,000 to \$500,000.

So far, it's been a slow, tough slog for Fairbanks. The housing slump hit just as she got underway;

construction has taken longer than expected. She had to fire one local real estate agent who failed to show the property. So far, she has taken reservations on seven of the building's 29 units.

"Artists' communities usually grow out of groups of people together for some reason already," she said. "This is kind of pulling one out of the sky."

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