

After four years of anticipation, the first tenants move in at the Tannery Arts Center

It's a new sheet of paper, a blank canvas, an empty vessel.

But it won't remain that way for long.

The new Tannery Arts Center on River Street in Santa Cruz has been, at various times, a dream, a controversy, a clean-up site, a blueprint and a construction project. And finally, for a number of local artists, it's home.

Move-in day at the Tannery has arrived for the first tenants of the \$36 million project, four years in the making. At the site of the former Salz Tannery, the live-work community for artists, musicians, performers and writers is slowly buzzing to life.

The studio, two- and three-bedroom apartments are filling up gradually to minimize the chaos of a mass move-in. The two buildings -- 100 apartments in all -- are expected to be fully occupied by the beginning of April.

Though the buildings are sparsely occupied, those who have already moved in and those just about to are sounding notes of optimism and excitement, not so much for the new affordable housing units at the Tannery, but of the vibrant community of creative people they feel certain to emerge there.

"Already people are very excited about being here," said painter and interior designer Sarah Bianco after her first two nights in her new apartment. "It feels pretty empty right now, but still there's a positive energy about the place."

"The sound is incredible," said Jesse Autumn, a Santa Cruz harpist and pianist, who moved into a studio one-bedroom apartment, which cost about \$450 a month. "What's really exciting is all these different subgroups of people who are getting to know each other in a positive environment. Everyone is here for that, wanting to live in a community where everyone is really inspired by each other."

Those who have emerged with a key to a Tannery apartment had not only to qualify for the project's low-income restrictions and satisfy its bureaucratic requirements. They also had to get lucky. The apartments were awarded on a first-come-first-served basis, which meant long lines when the units first became available last November. And that meant camping out.

One of those close to the front of the line was a 69-year-old former construction worker named Roland Law who last week moved into a Tannery unit with his wife Violetta. Law, who had moved from the Arbor Cove Senior Commons in Santa Cruz to live at the Tannery, said that he had not been following the various stages of the Tannery project as it developed. "I didn't know what this was all about for the longest time," he said. "I just signed up a few weeks before the November deadline."

Law now works with stone and metal as a sculptor, as well as doing jewelry work and blacksmithing. "I had always dreamed about doing art work," he said. After a lifetime of hard labor, he first enrolled in art classes at Cabrillo College about 20 years ago. Now, he not only wants to pursue his art, but he wants to be an active part of the emerging community at the Tannery.



Harpist Jesse Autumn moves her instruments into her new apartment at the Tannery Arts Center on Tuesday (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)



Govind Rae, left, and Dustin St. Wright help fellow Tannery Arts Center resident Jesse Autumn move some of her instruments into her new apartment (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)



Painters Sarah and Pasquale Bianco unpack as they move into their two-bedroom apartment at the Tannery Arts Center on Wednesday. The pair runs Painting by Bianco. (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)

"My wife and I believe in community. This was one of our goals, to come in here and meet the families and the other people, and help each other, pool our resources, become one big family."

Artist and arts promoter Adrian Rasmussen was the very first person in line for a Tannery unit, and the first to move in. The experience in that line led Rasmussen to start up a new social-networking Web site centered on the artists of the Tannery called TanneryConnections.com. It's there where artists post information about themselves and images of their work. Rasmussen, a former partner in the now closed Hide Gallery, said that the new Web site is not aimed merely at Tannery tenants.

"We want to portray the vibrancy and the life of what will be going on here," he said. "The last thing anybody wants to see here is a closed community. Sure, this is a way for Tannery people to meet each other and get to know each other. But it's also to let people from the outside know what we're doing, what we're collaborating on, and the all the ideas coming out of here."

South African-born sculptor Jonathan Chorn befriended Law in the queue to secure a unit. He said that the Tannery isn't just about making affordable housing available to the artistically inclined, but presenting a model on an ideal way to live. "So much in Western society is built on people living in an isolated, compartmentalized ways. And we'd really like to break through the illusion that that is how things have to be. I'd like to see us all inspire one another to live in a different way."

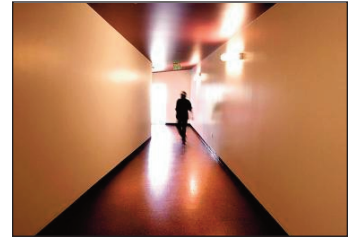
The Tannery is still a work in progress. Even after the units are all occupied, a real culture will be sometime in emerging. The next phase of the project is to build artist work studios where the former Tannery now stands, and to establish other a performance venue, a black-box theater and other amenities such as a café.

"They've done a good job at doing what artists have done organically for years," said painter Margaret Nevin who's waiting for her move-in date. "That's to take old, industrial buildings no longer being used and revive them."

As the weeks go past at the Tannery, a culture will emerge. The blank walls of the interior corridors will be hung with art. The windows facing both River Street and, on the opposite side, the San Lorenzo River, will show signs of life. Many of the artists will realize that the eyes of the community will be on them to establish a creative life that will benefit the local culture and the economy.

"I know there are a lot of people skeptical about this," said painter Sarah Bianco who runs the small design business Painting by Bianco with her husband Pasquale. "We just have to prove this can work by living example."

"It can be a hard life," said the harpist Jesse Autumn. "You know what you're doing is not always going to work out. You have to work very hard to meet your creative goals. It's a touch-and-go situation, and it can be very isolating. But this gives everybody a support system and we all need that."



Artist Kirby Scudder walks the halls of the Tannery Arts Center (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)



Harpist Jesse Autumn moves one of her instruments into her apartment building at the Tannery Arts Center on Tuesday. County artists have begun to move into the 100 low-income apartments at the new arts center on the River Street property that once housed Salz Tannery. When complete, the project will house artists of various mediums, work studios, a gallery and a performance center, among other amenities (Shmuel Thaler/Sentinel)