CAMILLE LEFEVRE
TUESDAY, OCTOBER 6, 2015



ARTSPACE RESIDENTS QUEST SKINNER AND KARI WOLF
Photo Courtesy Quest Skinner

Artists can be the "connective tissue" of a neighborhood, but first need affordable housing

ON ANY GIVEN DAY, QUEST SKINNER MAY BE TRANSFORMING HER LATEST CONVERSATION WITH A NEIGHBOR INTO A VIBRANT PAINTING. "My art is an expression of the people I meet," explains Skinner, a long-time resident at Brookland Artspace Lofts in Washington, D.C., an affordable artist live/work project created by Artspace, which is based in Minneapolis. "I paint so much, my neighbors and neighborhood are part of my creative process."

Or Skinner might be giving the youth in her building, as well as a couple of Spanish kids from down the block, an impromptu art class. "I love being ingrained here and try to accommodate the whole neighborhood," she says. Skinner's day may include facilitating a skateboard painting class in the community, organizing a potluck or a mural project, or selling her affordable artwork in a public venue.

Brookland Artspace Lofts, she says, "is more than just a building; it's also the people inside and outside the building. When you give artists a fertile land that they can cultivate, and where they can create, they have a trickling-out effect into the community. The artists become vessels for community needs."

Three decades ago, D.C.'s Brookland-Edgewood neighborhood had few essential public services, fewer restaurants or retail stores, and plenty of

sidewalks pockmarked with broken pavement. Still, Dance Place—a well-regarded center for dance education and performances—anchored the area with its commissions and classes, as well as its outreach efforts. In 2006, Artspace helped Dance Place expand and renovate its facility into a singular arts campus, and added the construction of Brookland Artspace Lofts.

"Dance Place was its own institution in the neighborhood," says Jalal Greene. He worked on the Brookland Artspace Lofts, Mount Rainier Artist Lofts in Maryland, and currently heads the housing division in Montgomery County, Washington, D.C., which is in the planning stages for an Artspace project in Silver Spring, Maryland. "But Artspace helped create a more integrated, more holistic community with the addition of affordable artist live/work housing. Putting this major investment next to Dance Place brought in a new batch of residents, reenergized the whole area and showed people what was possible."

Skinner has been part of the cultural and community renaissance in the Brookland-Edgewood neighborhood. She lives and works out of one of the artist-lofts' 39 affordable units, each with residential and studio space. The building also includes a rehearsal studio, two classrooms, office space, intern housing for Dance Place and the Victor L. Selman Gallery on the main floor where residents exhibit their work.

"When you take an area that hadn't any life and you give it a pulse, all things can grow in that area," Skinner says. "Dance Place and the artist lofts have become that pulse for Brookland. We're the epicenter of activity, of creativity, and in turn we're like a centrifugal force, reaching out into the community and drawing in new people."

Artists and art as connective tissue

It's a winning combination: artists plus affordable housing with studio space in which to create; in a project that also includes a gallery or performance space, or with these amenities next door; in a historic building or struggling neighborhood in need of revitalization.

> "When you give artists a fertile land that they can cultivate, and where they can create, they have a trickling-out effect into the community. The artists become vessels for community needs."
>
> –Quest Skinner, Brookland Artspace Lofts Resident and 2014 Artspace Award Recipient

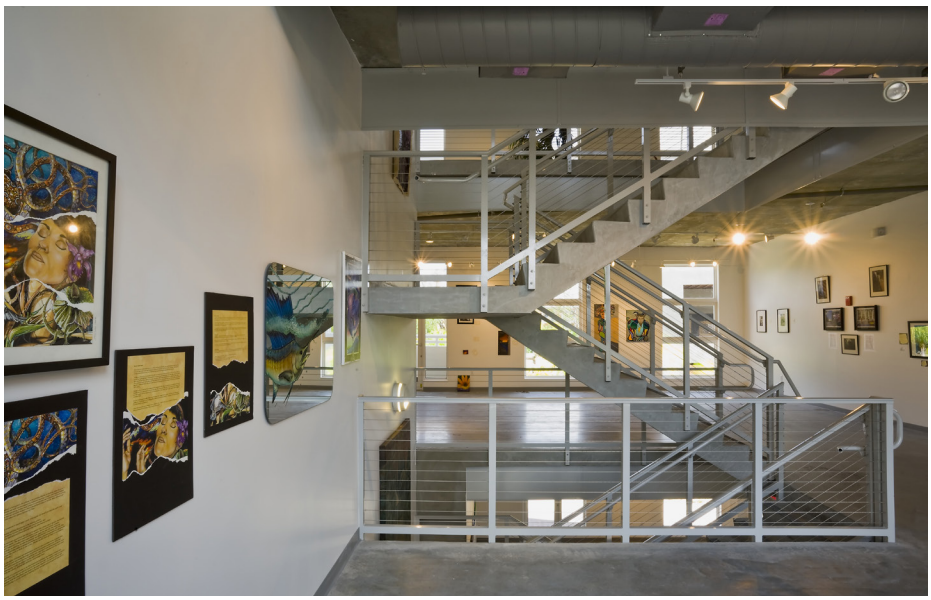
"We see ourselves, and the arts, as connective tissue," says Carla Perlo, the founder and executive director of Dance Place. The organization "intentionally programs diverse artists so we can attract a diverse audience, and we intentionally offer a diverse array of dance classes in different genres that will attract students with diverse cultural backgrounds." In conjunction with exhibitions and activities at the Brookland Artspace Lofts, Perlo continues, "We serve a magnet for people to come to, and/or live and work in Brookland."

In Fort Lauderdale, the Sailboat Bend Artist Lofts has had a similar impact on the neighborhood. Completed in 2007, the project provides 37 affordable live/work units for artists and their families. The building also has a gallery, and a three-story community room for meetings, exhibitions and lectures. Next door, the renovated Historic West Side School is home to the Broward County Historical Commission. "For this community, Sailboat Bend was a first, a game changer," says Steve Glassman, project manager, Cultural Division, Broward County.

"The county was ahead of its time with this project," he continues. "It became a harbinger of things to come. Sailboat was the springboard for a burgeoning arts and technology community that's grown in the area,"



QUEST SKINNER, COMMUNITY PROJECT
Photo Courtesy Quest Skinner



SAILBOAT BEND ARTIST LOFTS GALLERY, FLORIDA, Photo Courtesy Artspace



OPENING OF BROOKLAND ARTSPACE LOFTS IN D.C., Courtesy

which has expanded to include the nearby F.A.T Village Arts District—an arts and technology area with artwalks, exhibitions, restaurants and tech startups. "Artists, gallery spaces and arts events activate a neighborhood," Glassman adds.

"We provide the arts and culture for communities that may not have the access to or the resources for them otherwise," says Niki Lopez, an artist and resident of Sailboat Bend since 2008. "We bring people into our homes and studios to see how we work, and we take our creative processes and artwork directly into the neighborhoods through the gallery in our building, through classes and outreach, and by collaborating on art projects with community partners."

Projects like Sailboat Bend Artist Lofts, Lopez adds, are an integral step in "creating cohesiveness between artists and the community."

The ripple effect

Artspace was founded in 1979 to advocate for artists' need for affordable space in which to live and work. In the late-1980s, Artspace decided to take a more proactive role and became a nonprofit developer of artist live/work housing. Artspace is now a national leader in the field, while other developers across the country have followed its lead.

In 2007, the Contemporary Art Institute of Detroit helped redevelop a vacant apartment structure in Southwest Detroit's Hubbard Farms neighborhood into the Whitdel Building, which includes affordable artist housing, a digital media lab, studios and exhibition space. In the Sugar Hill district, Midtown Detroit, Inc., has been working to create an arts district with the development of 71 Garfield, a mixed-use building with residences and studios for artists.



ST. PAUL ART CRAWL AT NORTHERN WAREHOUSE, Courtesy A-Z Gallery

> “For this community, Sailboat Bend was a first, a game changer.”
>
> –Steve Glassman, project manager, Cultural Division, Broward County

In Bradenton, Florida, the Village of the Arts is an artist-led project that transformed 200 funky, dilapidated, 1930s-era cottages into artist live/work housing, yoga and art studios, and retail stores—creating a destination arts village that welcomes visitors from around the globe. “The neighborhood was considered blighted before the artists came in,” says Johnette Isham, executive director, Realize Bradenton. The City of Bradenton and the nonprofit Realize Bradenton helped with the project.

“The Village of the Arts was part of the community development organization’s initiative to transform the blight,” Isham continues. “Today, it’s an amazing case study of what people can make happen when they work together, and a placemaking initiative that generates tremendous civic pride.” Building in the Village of the Arts’ success, the City of Bradenton recently announced a new initiative: an adjacent Village of Innovation.

“The Village of Innovation will be affiliated with the local universities and be an incubator for entrepreneurs,” Isham says. “It also shows that the city recognizes the importance of a creative community for economic development, to foster innovation and to create an entrepreneurial ecosystem.”

From historic to hipster

In the 1800s, a neighborhood next to the Mississippi River in downtown St. Paul, Minnesota, became a major warehouse and distribution center serving the entire Upper Midwest. In 1990, Artspace created its first affordable artist live/work project there: the Northern Warehouse Artists’ Cooperative. At the time, it was a bold move. The area had been listed on the National Register of Historic Places, but area was rife with underutilized and abandoned structures.

Recently the urban neighborhood, which is now known as Lowertown, was named America’s top hipster zip code by RealtyTrac. Lowertown is also home to a new baseball stadium, a restored historic and fully operational multi-model train depot and transit hub, numerous restaurants and cafes, a farmers market, music festivals, and warehouses home to both market rate and luxury housing. Artist Kara Hendershot moved to the Northern in 2004 and “it changed my life,” she says.

“To be able to create my large-scale work in a space that accommodates me is amazing. And the building participates in the St. Paul Art Crawl, which gives me connections to other artists and buyers I wouldn’t otherwise have. I can open up my studio and build my audience, while also developing my work, which is a great strategy for me.”

Hendershot admits that, “it’s been weird watching the neighborhood change. Sometimes I feel we—the artists—are being squeezed by our own success as major developments like the stadium coming in.” At the same time, however, she adds, more people means more opportunities to make the arts community visible, and to increase public awareness of the



BROOKLAND ARTSPACE LOFTS, DANCE CLASS, D.C., Courtesy Artspace



SAILBOAT BEND ARTIST LOFTS, Photo Courtesy Artspace

value and importance of the arts.

Bringing artists into a neighborhood via affordable live/work housing historically "is a great way to develop areas that need developing," but can "lead to gentrification," says Steve Glassman. "So city planners need to ensure there's a balance, in order to keep artists in place with affordable space in which to live and work."

Artspace and other developers' creation of affordable artist live/work housing is a proven initiative that reinvigorates neighborhoods, and brings members of diverse communities together. "Artists and art are the great equalizers," Glassman says. "They bring people of all ages, from all backgrounds and income levels and cultures, in to one place to share in an appreciation of art."

> "The neighborhood was considered blighted before the artists came in... today, it's an amazing case study of what people can make happen when they work together, and a placemaking initiative that generates tremendous civic pride."
>
> –Johnette Isham, Executive Director, Realize Bradenton

Camille LeFevre is managing editor of *The Line*.

This story is part of a national series—supported by Artspace—about the arts, housing and community transformation. You can read the first story in the series here.