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Where Art Studios Bloomed

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By RICHARD MORGAN



Daniella Zalzman for The Wall Street Journal

Nikki Hotvedt

The day Dustin Aksland arrived in Manhattan two years ago, the photographer lucked into a discounted Chelsea studio space near the Gagosian Gallery.

For \$450 per month, he shares a 300-square-foot workspace. It was, Mr. Aksland said, "beyond my wildest dreams—even beyond the dreams people tried to make happen in San Francisco," which he had left to come to New York.

Office space in Chelsea, home to posh galleries, gleaming towers and the High Line, goes for an average annual rent of about \$44 per square foot, according to brokerage firm CB Richard Ellis. Mr. Aksland's studio share was priced at half the going rate.

The building at West 21st Street and 11th Avenue where the photographer found refuge has since 2006 been transformed into an underpriced artists' paradise by happenstance.

The person in control of the property, developer Alf Naman, needed time to

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Daniella Zalman for The Wall Street Journal

Daphane Park

ready grander plans for the site. Rather than let it go fallow, he turned the raw building over to artists.

Dilapidated buildings used as creative communes aren't unusual in the hinterlands of Brooklyn or Queens. But there are vanishingly few affordable places for working artists in polished neighborhoods like Chelsea, where a pricey gallery scene has boomed for

years.

Mr. Naman had become an arts patron through real estate. But this relationship between a developer and some less-than-lucrative tenants is ending.

"We always knew it would end," said Thomas Beale, a sculptor who founded a ragged gallery named Honey Space inside Mr. Naman's building in 2008. "We just never knew how long it would end up lasting. It's been amazing."

The inhabitants nicknamed the raw structure Cold Castle and huddled under blankets during candlelit banquets at a long dining table. Many of the furnishings were cobbled together with reclaimed wood or tin. Artists often worked in fingerless gloves, able to see their breath.

"It was cold," recalled Daphane Park, an artist who has been there since 2007. "And so we rigged our own heat—this inner warmth, this great magical lucky glow." She said space heaters helped, too.

An air of legend soon accumulated around the discounted building: The banquet table grows to 80 feet in length in some artists' tales; the man glimpsed tuning his guitar in the common room was a guitarist from Sonic Youth. At Honey Space, visitors have been allowed to come and go without supervision even as art has been stolen, according to lore.

The recession delayed development plans and kept the artists in place, but in interviews several tenants said they are set to decamp by the end of September as the building is readied for renovation. Mr. Naman didn't return calls for comment.

There have been other islands of affordable living for artists in prime parts of the city, but these typically come with hefty help from government coffers.

Westbeth, the nation's first federally funded artists' colony, opened in the West Village in 1970 and quickly filled with folks who never left; its waiting list was closed in 2007.

Manhattan Plaza, another federally subsidized complex, houses scores of artists but no longer adds names to its waitlist for discounted studios. Only market-rate apartments are now available there, with a minimum income of \$84,000 required.

These havens have played crucial roles in the before-they-were-famous struggles of New York artists. The photographer Diane Arbus lived at Westbeth, and comedian Larry David lived at Manhattan Plaza (where he met Kenny Kramer, inspiration for the "Seinfeld" character).

The artists who found space in Mr. Naman's Chelsea building enjoyed low-rent arrangements of varying degrees of generosity.

Mr. Beale said he has been in the building rent-free since 2006. Others reported bartering artwork in lieu of traditional rent payments, and even an unlicensed nightclub set up in the facility to raise rent money.

As the arrangement continued, cash payments to the landlord crept in. "We were

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gentrifying internally," said Mr. Beale.

The artists said rental arrangements were handled with little more formality than a handshake. "I tried to respect it. Not everyone did," said painter Andrew Poneros, an early resident. "Friends of friends were given keys and invited to squat."

Adam Stanforth, a painter, compared it to squatting with permission. "It was pretty loosey-goosey," he said.

The end of artistic road at Mr. Naman's building will trigger an artistic diaspora with challenging math: find a low-rent work space by moving far afield—in some cases, that means a shift to Hudson, N.Y.—or pay double or triple for a studio in the city.

"It was a good time for art," painter Amy Storey said of her period in the building. She is scouring Craigslist for a new city studio but has written off Brooklyn's Bushwick section for an interesting reason: "My son's there—that's his territory."

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