The Art of Success

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Full text: IN HIS PAINT-SPATTERED SHIRT, pants and shoes, Zoran Crnkovic certainly looks like an artist. But in the year since he moved into his studio in Long Island City, Queens, he has shown himself to be something else as well: a tireless entrepreneur.

In recent months, he has organized more than a dozen weekend open houses for the artists with studios in his building, dispatching hundreds of invitations and dashing off dozens of press releases.

"In order to survive financially, artists have to sell their art," says Mr. Crnkovic.

In Long Island City, artists like Mr. Crnkovic aren't the only ones acting oddly out of character. In his neat Ralph Lauren polo shirt and pressed khaki shorts, Daryl Wills certainly looks like the successful landlord he is. But lately he, too, has developed a strange second calling: patron of the arts.

Mr. Wills has carved a series of artists' studio spaces out of the 125,000-square foot industrial building he owns across from Silvercup Studios. He even helps fund the open houses that artists stage there.

"Artists add ambience to the neighborhood and give the building an identity," says Mr. Wills.

A potent mixture of 500 artists; a growing list of art museums, including the temporary home of the Museum of Modern Art; and a few ambitious landlords have led to the creation of a de facto arts incubator in the industrial heart of Long Island City.

The new scene features artists who work together like any other small business owners: coordinating marketing efforts, pooling information on government grants, sharing materials, and even joint venturing on projects. And in supporting roles are landlords with vacant space and big ambitions. Those plans, though, may one day put them on a collision course with the very artists they are now supporting.

At little cost to themselves, the landlords are using their vacant space to attract artists and lay the groundwork for a hoped-for transformation of the area into a latterday SoHo a place of trendy shops id exalted rents.

Ironically, it is just the sort of makeover that drove artists to flee SoHo 20 years ago in favor of such out-of-the-way places as Long Island City.

Pooling interests

Temporarily, the longer-term conflicts between landlords and artists and within the two camps themselves have been papered over. There is a clear consensus that everyone's best shot at prosperity lies in pooling their interests and working together.

The artist entrepreneurs have led the way in a manner that could well serve as an example to people in other industries, from furniture makers to animators.

"In Long Island City, the community of artists has become a chamber of commerce for artists," says Melissa Wolf, a painter and the executive director of the Women's Studio Center, a nonprofit that rents studio space to artists and runs workshops on topics as diverse as writing grant proposals and estate planning.

Kenneth Greenberg's approach is typical of how normally highly individualistic artists are working together. An artist who creates neon lighting for Broadway, TV and film, Mr. Greenberg devotes his spare time to managing a Web site called ArtFrenzy. It carries postings of business opportunities for artists and acts as a sort of online catalog, displaying images of local artists' work.

For other artists, open houses like those put together by Mr. Crnkovic have paved the road to commercial success. During such an event last year, Gloria Spevacek, a sculptor, sold a bronze penguin for $1,000. In the
same show, Roxie Munro, a children's book illustrator and painter, netted nearly $10,000 from the sale of three large oils and six smaller works.

Another artist, Kristy Schopper, decided that what she and her colleagues really needed to help them succeed was a place to network, collaborate and socialize. To fill that gap, two years ago she helped launch The Space, a communal studio and resource center in a 15,000-square-foot industrial building owned by William Modell. On a month-to-month basis, the sporting goods scion allows the center to operate rent-free.

Mr. Modell and a handful of other landlords have become powerful backers of area artists. Few have thrown more resources into that effort than Jerry Wolkoff, owner of a 200,000-square-foot industrial building on Crane Street.

He has sliced vacant space in his building into studios averaging 400 square feet, which he rents out at the discounted rate of $400 per month, including utilities and taxes. Elsewhere in Long Island City, small studios rent for between $12 and $18 per square foot, while in Brooklyn's artsy and increasingly chic Williamsburg section, comparable space ranges from $20 to $25 per square foot.

He also allows aerosol artists to use the exterior of his building as their own veritable canvas. "Artists add cachet to a neighborhood and make it much better," says Mr. Wolkoff, a major developer on Long Island. "Look what they've done in SoHo, Chelsea and part of Williamsburg." His building currently has 70 artists, including Mr. Crnkovic.

Marjorie Seaman, president of Seaman Realty & Management Co. and a believer in the idea that "artists improve neighborhoods," has also helped. She has arranged for local artists to display their work in two Long Island City building lobbies and even aided Ms. Munro in winning a big commission for a mural in Manhattan.

Making things happen

Hard-nosed civic groups, too, believe that good things can come out of the art business. The Long Island City Business Development Corp., for example, often invites artists to its networking meetings, not just in recognition of the entrepreneurial side of their efforts, but also as a not-so-subtle way of encouraging business owners to buy art for their office walls.

"There is a chance that they can make contacts," says Dan Miner, LICBDC's director of business services. And from those contacts, not just careers but small businesses can blossom.

In Long Island City, that had better happen fast. With new zoning in the area encouraging commercial and residential development, artists worry that their success in boosting the area's image could ultimately cause rents to spike.

Their angst is not theoretical. Early next year, The Space reverts to William Modell. "The artists know they will eventually move," he says. Similarly, the Crane Street building's artist studios are temporary; Mr. Wolkoff is waiting for the market to improve so he can put up an office building. With the city's economy still limping, that day could still be a long time coming.

Subject: Series & special reports; Small business; Artists; Rents;

Location: Long Island City-New York City NY

Classification: 9190: United States; 8360: Real estate; 8307: Arts, entertainment & recreation

Publication title: Crain's New York Business

Volume: 18

Issue: 41

Pages: 19