

CITY BEAT – AUGUST 2005**THE ART ACADEMY OF CINCINNATI BETS ITS FUTURE ON AN OLD BUILDING AND ON OVER-THE-RHINE****A Factory for Art**

By Steve Ramos

The Vandercook Printing Press is a hulk of iron and steel that weighs 300 pounds, and it's something you want to move only when absolutely necessary. The press, used for poster and book printing, is 65 years old and has been part of the Art Academy of Cincinnati's design department since 1996.

The letter press' previous home was the first floor of the Art Academy's Mount Adams building, its historic classroom facility along with its Eden Park building adjacent to the Cincinnati Art Museum. But it's one of the first items to be moved to the school's new facility at 1212 Jackson St., a gritty side street between Vine and Walnut in Over-the-Rhine.

After 117 years in picturesque Eden Park as the hilltop's oldest arts tenant, the Art Academy is relocating to a former printing plant and factory building in Cincinnati's first neighborhood. Fall semester classes begin in the new facility on Aug. 29, and until then there's plenty of work to be done – including some heavy lifting.

Everything comes together on a weekday afternoon in later June. Professional movers focus on transporting the press from Mount Adams, and then a small group of Art Academy students handle the old equipment across the stairs and hallways in its new home.

Students help with heavy lifting at small schools like the Art Academy. It takes an entire school to get this kind of monumental work done. (A \$65,000 Greater Cincinnati Foundation grant is paying for most of the move.) Everyone – students Rob Mohan, Alan Grizzell, Dustin Schleibaum, Ruth Wartman and Brandon Lancaster and instructors Mark Thomas and April Foster – get dirty pushing and tugging at the Vandercook press.

After sweat and strain, it all comes together and the press finally settles on a patch of dipped concrete flooring on the fourth level of the Art Academy's new home.

The student movers might think the hard work is over. But the truth of the matter is that the hardest work lies ahead for a small arts college whose future rests on the success of a chancy relocation from a popular locale to arguably the city's most trouble neighborhood.

NOWHERE TO GROW

The Art Academy of Cincinnati is an accredited arts college as quaint as its longtime Eden Park surroundings. Its enrollment is less than 200 undergraduate and master's students – as small as colleges come – and limited resources correlate with its tiny size.





Art Academy President Greg Smith and the school's 19 trustees are remaking its appearance and public persona with a new factory-like building in the urban center after more than a century in bucolic Eden Park. Critics of the move – a group as sizeable and as vocal as those who support the relocation – say Smith and the trustees are putting the Art Academy's future on the line at a reconditioned printing plant that at one time was home to Kenner Toys and BarrelHouse Brewery.

A lot has happened in Over-the-Rhine since the Art Academy announced its relocation to Jackson Street in May 2000 and purchased the building one month later. Much of the news is bad: riots in April 2001, multiple business closings and high street crime.

But Smith and the school administrators say moving to Over-the-Rhine is a do-or-die decision for an institution that needs additional space to grow. They say it's the best, if not the only, decision they can make.

In any case, the die has been cast. What remains is the work to ensure the move is the type of success to win over critics and grow the Art Academy into the 21st century.

A June 23 preview offers Art Academy board members, alumni, faculty and donors a chance to see the new school facilities up close and nearly finished. Academy staff and instructors stand throughout the building to answer questions and grant impromptu tours.

Guests appear impressed by what they see: two old factory buildings joined together by a soaring atrium and a crisscross series of stairs. Exposed ductwork adds to the raw look.

New walls carve classrooms and studios out of the once open spaces. But the majority of the facility remains true to its factory setting.

Asked if the concrete floor is going to be cleaned or finished, Smith answers slyly.

"It is finished," he says. "It's already been cleaned. This is how it's going to look. This is a factory for artists."

For the first time in 25 years, Art Academy faculty, administration and student body will mostly reside under one roof. (A separate sculpture studio will continue to operate in Over-the-Rhine.) Students will gain much needed studio space and the ability to work there around the clock.

It's not just that the Art Academy is rehabbing two mostly vacant buildings into an art college. It's also re-creating the buildings into a 24/7 hub of activity – something few people would have ever considered for Over-the-Rhine.

"In any other city it would be a major step forward, but you have to wonder about this city and its lack of leadership involving Over-the-Rhine and development," says local artist and former

Art Academy teacher Cal Kowal. “They set the sights too low on the building. It should be more fantastic. It should knock the socks off people.”

Kowal, who retired several years ago after teaching at the Art Academy for 32 years, knows the corner of 12th and Jackson streets well. He used to live in the Germania Building at 12th and Walnut.

“I could have bought the building, and now I wish I had,” he says.

Kowal, who left the Art Academy on poor terms, refuses to comment on current leadership. But he suggests that a lot has to happen to make the move successful.

“It is a tough neighborhood, but it’s not any tougher than other cities,” he says. “But you got to have a vision. You got to develop around the school. I go to Chicago four times a year and they’re always putting up new buildings. When was the last time a new building went up in downtown Cincinnati? Twelve years ago?”

(Western-Southern’s new office tower at Third and Broadway streets is currently under construction.)

The announcement of the Art Academy’s purchase of the Pembroke Building at 12th and Jackson and its plans to move from Eden Park and Mount Adams was met with praise from Cincinnati political and business leaders desperate to jump-start Over-the-Rhine. There were pockets of gentrification momentum in the neighborhood, and the arrival of the school and its students and faculty could only help energize further development there.

When Smith announced the Art Academy move in 2000, he saw the project as one piece in the neighborhood’s development. Five years later, the Art Academy stands tall as Over-the-Rhine’s most important development project in terms of size and the number of new people it brings to the area on a daily basis. It’s an unexpected responsibility for a small art college.

Asked if he thinks that the Art Academy is standing alone in its financial commitment to the neighborhood, Smith responds with a vocal no.

“This project is not about developing Over-the-Rhine,” he says, speaking a few days after the June 30 reception. “This move is about preparing the Art Academy for the future and allowing the institution to grow. There was nowhere to grow in our current location. This move is and always has been about the best interests for the Art Academy.”

THEN YOU GET TO REALITY

Any real estate agent or tourism official will tell you that Eden Park and the adjacent Mount Adams neighborhood is Cincinnati at its leafy best. The park – with Krohn Conservatory,

expansive fields around the Mirror Lake fountain and overlooks offering spectacular views of the bending Ohio River – has been a center of the city’s cultural life as well, home to the Art Academy, Cincinnati Art Museum and Playhouse in the Park.

To many Art Academy alumni, faculty and current students, especially students’ parents, the choice between Eden Park and Over-the-Rhine is a no-brainer. Eden Park and all that it offers is an oasis compared to the urban core. The reality of the Over-the-Rhine riots and its remaining scars matter to parents deciding where they want to send their college-age children interested in studying art.

What’s unique in the Art Academy equation is that the choices aren’t between old and new construction. They’re between the old and the older.

Two old buildings in Mount Adams and Eden Park represent the past Art Academy campus. Actually, it comes down to one building, the landmark that represents the institution, the Eden Park building adjacent to the Art Museum. The building’s skylights and its ability to capture northern light, its grand staircase and its large windows remain favorite memories for alumni.

There are also fond memories for many people involving the Art Academy’s new home – although it has nothing to do with art. From 1995 until earlier this year, the Pembroke Building was home to the popular BarrelHouse Brewery, known for its support of homegrown beer and music.

By adding the Cincinnati Art Museum warehouse to the Pembroke and expanding north, the Art Academy has a size and depth it never had before. The building occupies the mid-block of 12th, Jackson, 13th and Walnut streets.

Originally, Smith and Art Academy leaders were hoping BarrelHouse would leave before their lease extension. But the school accepted the reality of a first-floor brewpub in their new home. Then things got strange.

“In the ideal world, we (Art Academy) would prefer to have a building with no one in it,” says Nancy Glier, director of administrative services.

The Art Academy wanted the space for a gallery, but BarrelHouse wasn’t ready to move. Its chillers and pumps and storage occupied the basement, the new location for student lockers.

When the Art Academy contested their use of the building’s basement – something that wasn’t specified in their lease – the court granted BarrelHouse squatters’ rights. School architects had to design around the brewpub both of the first floor as well as the basement.

In 2004, the Art Academy purchased two loading bays that the BarrelHouse controlled in order to complete the atrium that links the two buildings and serves as the main common area for students and visitors.

“You do a lot of dreaming and then you get to reality,” say Glier, who resembles the Art Academy’s “school mom” in appearance.

But don’t be fooled by appearances – Glier is in complete control on the facts about the building’s steady transformation into a college. She has a financial background, but her work overseeing all details about the building involves more than just dollars and cents.

In April, after designing around the brewpub, Glier and the Art Academy leaders read the newspapers: BarrelHouse was for sale and would be moving out.

Glier says the Art Academy was owner of the BarrelHouse lease when they purchased the building and the brewery’s operation was secured at 12th Street via its lease extension through 2013. But the Art Academy didn’t take into account the idea of BarrelHouse leaving and losing their rental revenue.

“They wanted us to buy their lease,” she says. “We needed the money, and they wanted us to buy them out of their lease. But we needed money for our project.”

The Art Academy let BarrelHouse out of the lease and took the basement and first floor spaces. It was a rush to get the brewing equipment out in time to make way for new construction.

Asked if she can point to one specific success with the building project – perhaps the exit of BarrelHouse – Glier keeps her focus on the overall goals.

“The big success is the fact we are creating a new space for our students,” she says. “Bring a student down who hasn’t seen or experienced the building yet and see how excited they are. The kids run around and see their studios. They’re excited about their school, and then I realize it’s going to be a wonderful thing for the institution and we’re going to see this school in a different way. You know, I love the term ‘art factory’ because that’s what it is.”

MORE TO DO

BarrelHouse is gone, and its 12th Street space has become an indoor break area for construction crews working on the building. Once the Art Academy opens, the space will be closed. There wasn’t money left in the budget to rehab the space, and the building’s main entrance is around the block on Jackson Street.

Asked about the work that still needs to be done, Smith mentions a rooftop garden, a meeting room and public space. Second phase plans include Jackson Street landscape improvements and additional signage to remind passerby just what’s going on behind the brick walls.

About 175 undergraduate students are planning to attend the Art Academy in the fall, a little less from last semester. Twenty-six students are moving into apartments on nearby Main Street

this month. The Gateway Parking Garage, the city's gift to Kroger, is open for business, and the attached condo project will be finished by year's end.

Finally, it seems, this small slice of Over-the-Rhine – which includes Ensemble Theatre of Cincinnati, the hipster nightclub alchemize and new condos at the American Building on Central Parkway – is coming together.

Clearly excited about these developments, Smith remains focused on what goes inside the Art Academy building vs. what goes on outside its walls. After all, there are limits to what he and school staff can control, which is the biggest question clouding the move's success.

A few days before movers start packing his office. Smith and Academic Dean Keith Kutch sit in Smith's office in the Art Academy's other old building, the former school on St. Gregory Street, to evaluate the move. For the past five years Smith and school staff have been busy preparing and paying for the relocation.

There are blueprints scattered among papers on a desk alongside drawings of billboard ads promoting the Art Academy. It's a time of great excitement, energy and worry – Smith knows that fund-raising still must close the capital campaign's \$1.8 million gap – but his conservative nature comes out when he speaks of the new building.

"In my opinion, this is not about bringing the Art Academy into the 21st century," he says. "I see this move as dragging the school into the 20th century. There is more to do."

There are other art colleges in the Greater Cincinnati area – Miami University, Northern Kentucky University, Xavier University and UC's College of Design, Art, Architecture and Planning – as well as popular art colleges in Columbus, Indianapolis and Cleveland. The hope is that there's renewed excitement for the Art Academy when it opens the doors to its new home later this month.

The Art Academy might not have the largest student body or be the best-known arts college, but its move gives it a trademark facility and the opportunity for new promotion. Smith wants pre-eminence for the Art Academy, a chance for it to become a place the best art students want to attend.

"I'm old school," offers past Art Academy instructor and acclaimed painter Stewart Goldman. "I was there for 33 years before leaving in 2001. When I came in 1968, I was a painter and I wanted a teaching job. I saw the value of a small art school. I think it's important. But it's always been a question about how you maintain a small arts school."

Back in 1998, when the Art Academy officially separated from Cincinnati Art Museum, the institution was little known. Today, it has a chance to gain the spotlight with the heft of brick and mortar, a massive structure equal to other major cultural institutions.

Goldman offers that the higher student enrollment the Art Academy needs to support the new facility is the real tradeoff about the move.

“I don’t want to get in the position of saying one place is better than another place,” he says, “but in terms of moving downtown the negative is that you’re going into an area that could cause some problems. At the same time, it’s also an area that could be invigorated.

“Someone needs to verbalize that this move is about more than just needing space for more students. Someone needs to explain why it’s important to the kids. It’s ultimately about a vision and the kids.”

Look closely at the industrial walls and the high-ceiling rooms, and you’ll see a great space for learning. Look closely out the east windows, and the urban neighborhood opens up before your eyes.

Management of this new building includes ensuring the safety of students and faculty, issues that were of less concern in Mount Adams and Eden Park. The reality is different and serious.

But Smith offers that, once students and faculty arrive in the new building, it’ll be interesting to see just what happens to the blocks around them. He knows that the arrival of the students will change everything and that their tomorrow rests in the city’s oldest neighborhood.