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Putting down artistic roots

By Keith Ervin

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Moving into his new artist loft means Brian Murphy won't have to go through another winter wearing a heavy coat and duct-taping his wrists against the cold of an unheated warehouse when he paints.

Alicia Berger will no longer have to rent a truck every time she takes a large painting to the Pioneer Square gallery that shows her work. Because her new home, work space and gallery are in the same neighborhood, she and her teenage daughters plan to sell their car.

Welcome to the Tashiro Kaplan Artist Lofts, the newest step in revitalizing the Pioneer Square arts community after a decade of assaults by economic boom and bust, fire and earthquake. Artists and their families begin moving Saturday into 50 light-filled lofts in a \$16.5 million affordable-housing development by Artspace Projects of Minneapolis and the Pioneer Square Community Association. It is the largest property in Seattle to be developed specifically as an artist colony.

Dancer and choreographer Tonya Lockyer says that unlike Pioneer Square's few remaining colonies of artists in commercially managed buildings, the new lofts are a colony where artists are not hiding, where artists are not making do. This is a space that says, 'We support what you do, we want you to have good facilities to do it, you deserve security.' "

Other artists say they look forward to the collaboration they expect to do with artists of varied stripes.

"There's just a lot of energy when you get around other people who are as committed to making art as you are. You feed on each other in a way," said Berger, who is a painter and video artist. Cultural community tenants include painters, sculptors, video and installation artists, photographers, dancers, actors, musicians and writers. And 15 children are moving with their parents to what has been an almost childless neighborhood.

Artist lofts are on three new floors built above new gallery space in the Kaplan Building. Five art galleries and a coffeehouse have signed leases or are close to taking space in the renovated buildings that cover a triangular block bordered by Third Avenue South, Prefontaine Place South and South Washington Street. The businesses will begin to open this summer and fall.

Gallery owners like the security of five- to 15-year leases. SOIL Cooperative is returning to Pioneer Square from Capitol Hill, and Garde Rail is coming back from Columbia City. Other galleries are Forgotten Works, 4Culture and the new Platform Gallery.

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"We wanted to be around the energy of other galleries and people collecting and art walks," said Karen Light-Piña, owner of Garde Rail Gallery.

4Culture, also known as the Cultural Development Authority of King County, has not made a final decision on moving its offices and gallery from the Smith Tower to the Tashiro Kaplan, said Executive Director Jim Kelly.

But 4Culture has been a big supporter of the artist lofts. "I think what the public sector has said is that the arts are important to our community," Kelly said. "We want artists to live and work in our community. We don't want them all to go to Tacoma or some other place. We want Seattle to remain an arts-friendly city." Funders include 4Culture, the state Building for the Arts Program, The Allen Foundation for the Arts, South Downtown Foundation, The Seattle Foundation and the Seattle Office of Housing. King County sold the property to in 2000 for \$2.58 million. This isn't Seattle's first effort to create housing for artists. Since 2001, six "live/work" spaces have opened in Wallingford's Good Shepherd Center and 11 spaces in Pioneer Square's Harbor Lofts.

But "the TK," as artists are now calling the project in the former Tashiro and Kaplan buildings, is the largest in Seattle — and the largest such project yet for Artspace Projects, which has been doing projects around the country since 1979.

Artspace, whose only permanent office outside Minneapolis is in Seattle, hopes to create more affordable housing for artists here. The nonprofit real-estate developer Thursday made a proposal to the Seattle Office of Housing to build artist lofts as part of a larger affordable-housing project on surplus city land southeast of downtown at South Dearborn Street and Hiawatha Place South.

Luring tenants back

Cathryn Vandenberg, a longtime jewelry maker, spearheaded the seven-year effort to create new "live-work" space in Pioneer Square after she saw other artists pushed out of their homes and studios by a changing real-estate market. She and her painter husband, Michael Fajans, lost their loft of 15 years in 2000.

As the first staff member of the Pioneer Square Community Development Organization, Vandenberg did a door-to-door survey of the neighborhood in 1997.

"I found out there were over 500 artists in studios in Pioneer Square. I had no idea," she said. "It was amazing how many buildings were filled with artists and studios. I would say there are under 200 left. That's a round-figure guess."

Reasons for the decline included a real-estate market in which landowners began renovating buildings and seeking more affluent tenants. High-tech firms moved into Pioneer Square during the dot-com boom of the 1990s, forcing rents up and pushing artists out.

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Disasters took their toll, too. Seventy artists were displaced by a 1996 fire in the Polson Building, and more lost their homes and studios because of the 2001 Nisqually Earthquake. By the time the dot-com bubble burst, hundreds of artists had scattered to more affordable places: Georgetown, Ballard, Elliott Avenue, Tacoma, Bremerton, the suburbs. Some of the more rooted artists hung on.

Lockyer and her partner, dancer and theater director Sean Ryan, are moving into the Tashiro Kaplan because of the affordable rent — from \$700 to \$1100 a month for one- to three-bedroom lofts — and because the landlord won't kick them out in favor of a higher-paying tenant.

"When you get a gnarl in a tree and it grows back, it's stronger," Lockyer said. "The TK is like that. This time we're going to have a great building and you're not going to be able to kick us out."

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