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COLUMN

MILO RESIDENTS LEFT TO WONDER WHY OFFICIALS WANT THEM OUT



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The weird and wonderful whirligigs, some equipped with lights and speakers, have stopped twirling at Art Sentral studio.

On Friday, Aaron Alvic Schroeder, a professional sculptor and craftsman, had his business closed, his livelihood stripped away, by order of Judge Richard C. Pfeiffer Jr. of Franklin County Environmental Court.

Pfeiffer didn't explain, but he must have seen something he didn't like when he toured Schroeder's studio and the rest of *Milo* Arts Center.

City officials had asked the judge to kill *Milo* Arts completely by enforcing a buildingwide eviction order. Pfeiffer refused for now but left the artists' colony wounded and bleeding.

Milo Arts, 617 E. 3rd Ave., was built as a school in 1894. The structure features high tin ceilings, huge windows and the kind of natural lighting for which artists would cut off an ear. Today, it contains the homes and studios of dozens of painters, sculptors, musicians and actors.

Shortly after *Milo* Arts opened in 1989, I toured the center as owner Rick Mann told me about his vision.

"Take a young person who can only afford, say, \$250 a month for a place," Mann said.

"I would think that a place like *Milo* would be a dream come true at a time when the world is telling them to forget their art and become computer programmers."

Mann succeeded, and I've watched with admiration as the project progressed and as residents enriched the city with their work.

But kids should stick to computers, at least here in Columbus.

Last month, city officials, including Mayor Michael B. Coleman, passed the building on a bus tour of the neighborhood. The pooh-bahs said they didn't like what they saw and sicced code-enforcement

agents on Mann.

Officials gave the tenants -- some who have lived and worked at *Milo* more than a decade -- 72 hours to clear out.

John Piper, a musician, composer and painter, said he believes the city is acting out of ignorance.

Called the elder statesman of *Milo* by other tenants, Piper has been involved since the beginning. He remembers when city officials regarded *Milo* as an asset, not just to the neighborhood but to the entire city.

"(Then City Councilman and now state Sen.) Ben Espy was down here, and the mayor and all the other council members. They all knew and appreciated what we did," Piper said. "But those people are gone, so I guess we have to re-educate the existing authorities.

"We're not a bunch of hippies on drugs. We have serious, mature artists here."

The code violations seem picayune, especially because none of the tenants is complaining. Indeed, Mann and his wife, Donna, have sunk thousands of dollars into renovations, and they have the support of those who live and work at *Milo*.

But city officials say they know what's best and are just trying to help those involved.

The Manns and their tenants -- and nearly everyone else who knows anything about the case -- are suspicious.

"There is a substantial question in our mind as to why this building is being singled out," William Loveland, the Manns' attorney, told the judge at Friday's hearing.

But the reasons behind the city's actions are not "relevant," said Pfeiffer, who held the session in the lobby of *Milo* Arts, despite the city's contention that those inside faced extreme and immediate peril.

He put off a final ruling until Wednesday. However, the judge ordered the Manns to hire city firefighters, equipped with bullhorns, to roam the halls nonstop. The cost: nearly \$1,000 a day.

He also ordered Schroeder's business closed immediately. He gave no reason.

Pfeiffer's ruling probably amounts to a death sentence for *Milo* Arts, Pat Durkin said. The building has housed his business, Carpet Graphics, for 11 years.

Tenants -- unsure whether they'll have a home or workplace after Wednesday -- might hold off paying October's rent, Durkin said. And with the fire watch and legal bills, the Manns -- by no means rich -- will be hard-pressed.

"The process is chewing them up," Durkin said. "Maybe that's what the city was hoping all along."

Schroeder, who has a wife and two young children, doesn't know how he'll cope.

He calls Mann "a patron saint" but knows that bureaucrats often trump saints.

"This is like a hostile takeover, not by some big corporation but by a city government who must see a real opportunity to do a deal.

"I can't believe Michael Coleman could ever allow himself to be associated with these proceedings, especially if he realized how many lives he'll destroy," Schroeder said.

"You just can't ruin people's lives to enforce a few code violations."

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