

NEW USE FOR OLD SCHOOL

ARTIST COLONY BLOOMS IN UNLIKELY ENVIRONMENT

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By Steve Stephens

Dispatch Staff Reporter

Here, near Cleveland and 5th avenues, where factories, the freeway and burger and beer joints are as much a part of the neighborhood as the modest frame houses, everything looks out of place.

So it seems strangely natural to watch Andrea Bihari play Chopin while the shadows from the Timken roller-bearing plant creep into a room where fourth-graders once learned long division.

Bihari, and more than a dozen other musicians, sculptors, painters and dancers, have their studios and make their homes in the old Milo School at 617 E. 3rd Ave., at least for now.

But the school, though across the street from houses, is zoned for factories, not artists: Whether Bihari and the others will be able to stay is up to the city.

Rick Mann, who owns the 53,000-square-foot building, is confident he can get the school rezoned.

Milo School was built in 1894, but closed in 1977. After being sold by the city, it was home to the Milo Flea Market and later, the Victory Mission.

When the mission moved out last year - because of zoning problems - Mann decided to take a new tack.

The building already housed the studios of Carpet Graphics, and Mann thought that the high tin ceilings, hardwood floors and ample natural lighting would appeal to other artists. He envisioned a smaller version of the Torpedo Factory, an Alexandria, Va., artist colony.

"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 was right. Once word got out, artists started pouring in. In addition to the 14 who live there, another dozen have studios in the building.

"We've never run an ad, never really promoted ourselves," Mann said. "They found us, because they can't find this anywhere else."

Eventually, Mann hopes to have three dozen artists in residence; about half would live in their studios.

Mann said he expects the city to hold a zoning hearing within a month.

City officials say it is too early to predict how the hearing will go, but Mann is hopeful.

"I think when the city becomes aware of the things other cities have done," it will be receptive, he said. "I think we'll get a lot of good feedback."

John Piper, a painter who has lived and worked throughout the United States and Europe, was one of the first to move into Milo.

Piper, whom Mann calls "our senior artist," attends nearly every City Council meeting, talking to council members and officials, laying the groundwork for the rezoning: Without it, he'll be relocating again.

"I could work alone just as easily, but it's a pleasant experience here, kind of like a family," Piper said.

"It's hard to find working and living space in Columbus," Piper said. "New York is set up for that, Columbus is not. Milo is breaking ground for this city."

IT IS important for Piper to be able to live in his studio, because, he said, "You might feel like working anytime."

Bihari, pianist and aspiring composer, agreed. "I live, eat and breathe music. When you're working, you create this energy around you. I wouldn't want to be separated from it."

Bihari also enjoys the camaraderie within the building.

"Living together in the same building is so conducive to what we do," she said.

But will a building full of artists be good for the community?

MANN SAID that the artists agree to do community service work in the area when they sign their lease.

Some longtime residents are understandably skeptical of newcomers who say they

want to change the neighborhood, for better or otherwise.

"I'm going to reserve judgment on it until I learn more about it," said Mildred Ford, who has lived in the neighborhood for 35 years and is secretary of the E. Fifth Avenue Community Action Group.

"If it's going to upgrade the area, we need it," Ford said, "but not if (Mann is) just turning it into a motel. But we're not trying to drive anyone out.

"THEY SEEM like very nice people," Ford added. "I don't have any objection to what they're doing as long as there are no illicit things going on like drugs or prostitution. We have enough of that here already."

Dancer Dottie Escue is one of several Milo school residents who have gone door-to-door, introducing themselves to the neighbors and seeking support.

"I found a tremendous amount of support for what we are doing," Escue said.

Escue foresees latch-key programs and arts workshops at Milo for neighborhood children. "The young people could really benefit from us being here," she said.

She also discovered some of the realities of living in a troubled neighborhood.

"When I was out there talking to people, they said they want the crack houses out and the area cleaned up. Everybody was angry about the problems, but everybody was kind of hopeful for the future."