

The Columbus Dispatch

OFFICIALS ORDER ARTISTS TO LEAVE FORMER *MILO* SCHOOL BUILDING

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Illustration: Photo, Map

By Mary Mogan Edwards
Dispatch Staff Reporter

A century-old school building that has served as home and studio for dozens of artists for the past 11 years could be emptied and padlocked Monday because Columbus officials have declared it a fire hazard.

Tenants of the old *Milo* school at 617 E. 3rd Ave. came home Friday to find a city notice ordering them to vacate the building within 72 hours.

No smoke detectors, no sprinkler system in the lobby, a broken fire alarm and standpipe, and an obstructed exit were among the fire-code violations listed on the notice.

Residents of the old school, which Rick and Donna Mann began marketing as an artists' colony in 1989, met yesterday morning to discuss the city's order.

They would not allow a reporter in the meeting nor give their names, saying they're worried that doing so could hurt their chances of negotiating a solution with the city.

One man, who lives in the building and has a photography studio there, said he won't obey the order. "I have my whole studio here, and I don't have anywhere else to go," he said.

He doesn't think the building is unreasonably dangerous. "Anyplace can burn up, can't it?" he said. "I chose to live here. It's important to me."

Another artist, though, said he'll leave if the order isn't lifted. "I don't want to move out, but what choice do I have?"

Photographer Chip Willis lives on the North Side but keeps a studio in the *Milo* building.

"I knew there were some problems, but I didn't know they were that bad," he said yesterday. "I like this space -- I love the people, and there are so many interesting architectural things from a photographer's standpoint."

The Manns have had plenty of chances to fix the former school's many building-, fire- and health-code violations, said Mark Barbash, director of the city's Trade and Development Department.

"There's a long history to this," Barbash said. "We don't issue vacate orders lightly."

As early as 1995, city officials toured the building with Rick Mann and told him what needed to be done to meet code requirements, Barbash said.

Residents forced to move can get up to \$650 in relocation assistance from the city, he said.

The vacation order came Friday after a visit by a team of inspectors from the city's health, fire and building divisions.

Mr. Mann said problems in establishing clear title to the building have made it difficult to borrow money to fix code violations. A partner in the venture died a few years ago, and the estate is unsettled, Mann said.

He hopes to save the artists' colony. It was hailed by its first tenants in 1989 as a dream come true -- an inexpensive place to live, work and share creativity with other artists.

"The residents are talking about setting up a 24-hour fire watch," Mann said. "Whatever it takes, they're willing to do."

Barbash said the city has allowed other violation-ridden properties to remain open under interim conditions. "There are things you can do to stave off complete vacation."

Although Barbash couldn't say whether something could persuade inspectors to keep the *Milo* building open after Monday, he hopes the Manns can prove they'll make the required fixes.

"This building is a community asset," Barbash said. "We would not like to see it demolished."

The former school was built in 1894 and dominates the *Milo*-Grogan area.

Mayor Michael Coleman has singled out *Milo*-Grogan as a neighborhood that needs and deserves revitalization. A November "Neighborhood Pride" blitz of property inspections, street-cleaning, streetlight fixing and graffiti removal is planned.

Caption: (1) Tom Dodge / Dispatch

Photographer Chip Willis works with Yen Pang, right, while Kim White helps out with makeup at *Milo* Arts. Willis might have to move his studio because city officials have ordered that the building be vacated.

(2) Map

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