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DEATH OF THE MILO DREAM

After 18 years, the arts center's owner is tapped out, and a sheriff's sale looms

BY JORDAN GENTILE / DECEMBER 14, 2006

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It's been a tough couple of decades for Rick Mann. The intense, shaggy-haired owner of the Milo Arts Center has won plaudits from the city's cultural leaders while becoming an implacable foe of its government; he's wrecked his marriage, sunk himself into debt and stared down an arrest warrant.



Ben French

"I can't do it anymore": Rick Mann started the Milo Arts Center in 1988

And he's done all of this in pursuit of one of the most financially impractical ideas imaginable: building a communally run sanctuary for artists in a crumbling neighborhood a mile northeast of Downtown.

That dream appears to be flaming out, as Mann announced this week that the Milo Arts Center would be put up for sale at a sheriff's auction on Jan. 5. He can no longer pay the mortgage with the rent revenue the place generates—or by liquidating other properties he owns, as he said he's done in the past—and his creditors have been smelling blood for months.

"I've tried to cover for everyone and fill in the gaps," he said. "I can't do it anymore."

Why he's persisted this long—18 years, through numerous setbacks—will perhaps always be a mystery, even to him.

A real estate broker who'd become successful by making very sane financial decisions, Mann purchased the abandoned, century-old Milo Elementary School at 617 E. 3rd Ave. in 1983 because he wanted to rent it out as storage space.

“I thought,” Mann said with an ironic tone, “that it could pay some of my bills.”

However, fate intervened in the form of Pat Durkin.

Durkin was a Columbus College of Art and Design grad in his 30s with a burgeoning carpet-design business. By 1988, he needed a larger space in which to create his works—hip, abstract-looking rugs that lie in many of the country’s swankiest pads—and a friend tipped him off about the old school building.

It was exactly what Durkin was looking for.

“The hardwood floors, the natural light, the high ceilings—it all lends itself to the creative process,” Durkin said.

He visited the building, introduced himself to Mann and signed a lease. Word of this quickly spread to other artists, who promptly did the same. Soon an authentic bohemian enclave—where some artists lived and others merely rented a studio—had materialized out of nowhere.

This influx of talent led Mann, Durkin, John Piper—a Columbus painter who had shown his work in New York and Los Angeles—and other tenants to re-imagine the building as something they’d never seen in Columbus: a loft-style facility that kept rents low enough for residents of modest means to live off their art alone.

This would only be possible, they believed, if everybody pitched in by doing the scrubbing, hammering and other upkeep usually handled by landlords with a budget for such things.

And *much* upkeep has been needed through the years.

Thoma Swanson, a painter and Dominican nun who began renting a studio in 2000, recalled times when heat, electricity and other basic amenities were seriously lacking.

“I won’t even get into the state of the *bathrooms*,” she said.

There’s some dispute over how successful the center ever was at fulfilling Mann’s utopian mission. But most agree that Milo’s first few years, now a decade and a half in the past, were its halcyon period.

The vibe was positive, creativity flourished and a number of now-successful artists got their start within the center’s rugged confines. Red Herring Theatre, which currently performs at the gleaming Riffe Center, began in a modest performance space at Milo. Robert Post, a nationally renowned performance artist, rented a rehearsal room for years. Many visual artists prospered.

“There was such a sheer passion with the group involved,” said Denny Griffith, CCAD’s president, who had visited the place in its early days when he was assistant to the Columbus Museum of Art’s executive

director. "I always felt Rick had a kind of vision for how this thing could really develop into a vital artists' community, and I thought the artists that were there at that stage of the game shared that vision."

In 1989, when the city threatened to evict Mann's tenants because the landlord didn't possess the correct occupancy permit, Griffith, Ray Hanley—the late Columbus arts czar—and other prominent figures came to the center's defense, writing to City Council and stressing that Milo was important to the city's cultural life. The tenants were ultimately allowed to stay.

This, however, would not be the final clash between Milo and the city. And it would not be the costliest.

Mann sat in a sun-dappled living room at the Arlington Court Nursing & Rehabilitation facility last Sunday, drinking coffee and nibbling on a bagel.

He goes there each week with some of Milo's residents to visit Piper, who is now in his 70s and in poor health. The group has begun to call these meetings "church"—a time to "nourish our souls," Mann said, by talking with old friends and reliving good memories.

"It's been like a pressure valve," he said, to relieve the stress they've endured.

Much of that stress stems from a crisis that began in September 2000, when the city again tried to shut down Mann's operation, this time citing multiple fire and safety hazards.

A warrant for his arrest, stemming from 1997 building-code violations that hadn't been resolved, was reissued.

Milo residents still believe the true motive behind the city's fire-hazard accusation was to force Mann to sell the building so officials could transform it into a community center. They point out that fire inspections conducted in the two preceding years indicated that the building had passed muster.

Mann fought in court for months to keep the center open, and—because the landlord was bringing the building up to code as fast as he could—Judge Rick Pfeiffer, who has since become Columbus's city attorney, brushed aside the city's pleas for eviction and tossed out the arrest warrant.

But the cost of the new renovations, legal bills, lost tenants and lost time would set Mann back \$2 million in the following years. He liquidated some of his other properties. And after his wife Donna left him—in part, he said, because of the stress the situation put on their lives—he even slept on the floor of his Milo office for a few months to help save money.

“The fallout from what the city did touched so many lives,” Mann said.

By the beginning of this year, Mann said, he was losing \$15,000 a month on the place. Nearly all of the working artists from the early days had long since moved out, replaced by younger residents who some Milo veterans say, only half-jokingly, are posing as artists just for the cheap rent.

Mann said the center’s community activism had largely stopped, as had many of the public art exhibits and performances that had once brought people in from the outside.

All of this, he said, contributed to Milo’s current malaise: If the city killed the building, the people inside—including himself—gave it the knife to use.

“If we had been stronger, if there was still a strong connection with the community, they never would have tried to take us down,” Mann said.

Some of the newer residents said Mann’s idealistic rhetoric is phony, pointing out that he neglected to inform them he’s putting their home up for sale. (They discovered it on the sheriff’s website.)

But others not only love Mann, they still believe his vision can work. Some, like Josh Proctor, a house painter who moved in three years ago, are trying to create a nonprofit group to raise funds and save the center.

“My parents split up when I was a young age,” he said. “In some ways, this place is more like a family than anything I’ve ever had. It’s a very nourishing environment.”

Despite all the coming and going that Milo has witnessed, Mann’s first tenant still works from a large, carpet-strewn studio inside the center. And he’s not too worried about having to move anytime soon.

Durkin said he believes the building will remain a home for artists no matter who ends up holding the deed.

Still, he said, whoever owns the place will have to raise the rent or get a subsidy from the government to make the venture work.

Both of those options, of course, would be in conflict with the values—self-sufficiency and affordability—that Mann insisted upon for years, even at the risk of going broke.

Griffith, CCAD’s president, commented in his 1989 letter to City Council that he was amazed at how self-sufficient the Milo Arts Center had become. In words that now seem more like warning than congratulations, he said he’d visited many other artists’ facilities nationwide and had never seen anything like it.

He then went on to praise Mann,
specifically.

“It’s clear to me that your passion drives the work you do,” he wrote. “I
only hope your personal support for this venture won’t wring you dry.”



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