

Embattled Artists of

The homes and studios painstakingly carved out of old factories are now being coveted by real estate interests, but the artists won't go without a fight.

By Susan Brenna

WHEN THEY FIRST moved in eight years ago, Carol Wells, Rosan Pyfron and three other painters confronted a top-floor Brooklyn loft that was as cozy as a subway tunnel. The skylights had shattered and caved in, the wall-to-wall carpet was fetid from seasons of storm, and the new renters huddled like cave dwellers in dry corners. They rebuilt their pathetic dwelling by the glow of clamp lights on 50-foot extension cords, and by the music of the knitting mills on the factory floors below.

Now the loft roughly duplicates the layout of a Mexican village. In the center is a magnificent empty communal space, about 4,000 feet square and 28 feet high, where the loft-mates gather beneath their large, abstract oils and pastels for meals, fiestas and occasional open exhibitions, always heavily attended by local police officers and firemen who like the artists and seem to enjoy the artwork. Surrounding the skylit village square area are the sunny studios where the artists sleep and paint.

Altogether this loft is big enough to house either the five artists who rescued it, or 200 back-office workers from Wall Street.

The artists currently pay a total of \$775 a month for 7,000 square feet. They are living in a real estate time warp. Clearly the trends favor the office workers.

Within a month, about 300 painters, sculptors and other artists who pioneered loft living along the Brooklyn waterfront, including 29 in Wells' and Pyfron's Williamsburg building, could be looking for space in the Bronx or even outside the city. Unless they are rescued by a last-minute court ruling, they face almost certain eviction from their homes. One of the saddest aspects of the situation is that the

ern-style hangouts, no funky fashion outlets.

"My landlord told me I was moving into the next SoHo," Carol Wells recalled one recent day, as she and a friend, plaster and concrete sculptor Deborah Masters, pulled up to the curb by the bagel factory that faces her building.

"That's funny," Masters answered, stepping over a squashed bagel in her plaster-splashed boots. "I don't see any Dianne B's around here."

But even without heavy visual clues, the artists knew of the other artists in their neighborhoods. And over time, a new art scene developed. Only this one was quite different from its Manhattan counterpart.

Few of the Brooklyn artists could support themselves by their art, but neither were they so rent-poor that they had to spend all their time at their paying jobs. So a social pattern developed. Most

would work three or four days a week, generally at construction and building jobs, and do their artwork on the other days. Occasionally they'd run into each other eating early afternoon breakfast at a cafe beneath the Manhattan Bridge, or they'd be pressed into helping a neighbor move a ton of concrete sculpture into a battered Jeep or van.

For entertainment, they'd have each other over to their lofts. It was much cheaper than going out, and there was nowhere to go in these industrial neighborhoods anyway.

"The sense of community here is really important since artists sacrifice a lot in terms of money and traditional amenities," says sculptor Scott Pfaffman, who is a model of creative thriftiness. He sculpts whole poplar trees with chainsaws and chisels, and his wife, Florence Neal, produces paintings on the bark. One of Pfaffman's most successful recent works, an outdoor piece called "Yo! Culture," was constructed entirely of scrap metal and junk he found on the streets. "And that's what these lofts are," he says, "something we picked up off the street and made into something."

Masters says, "I'm 36 now, and all the people I knew in school are lawyers, doctors, business people and brokers. They call up and want you to go somewhere in Manhattan and pay thirty-five dollars for some terrible dinner, and when you say you can't afford it they just don't understand. The nice thing about us is that none of us expect that of each other . . . What we do together is really our life. And it's going to be awful if all of us have to move to Massachusetts or someplace where all the farmers think we're weird."

MANY NONPROFESSIONAL local artists who have come to know some of the loft-dwellers will miss them if they move. Wells and Pyfron are favorites at the Ridgewood-



of the saddest aspects of the situation is that office workers, or condo buyers, or whoever replaces them, may never know of the existence here of an exuberant, communal and hype-free contemporary art scene behind the red brick factory facades.

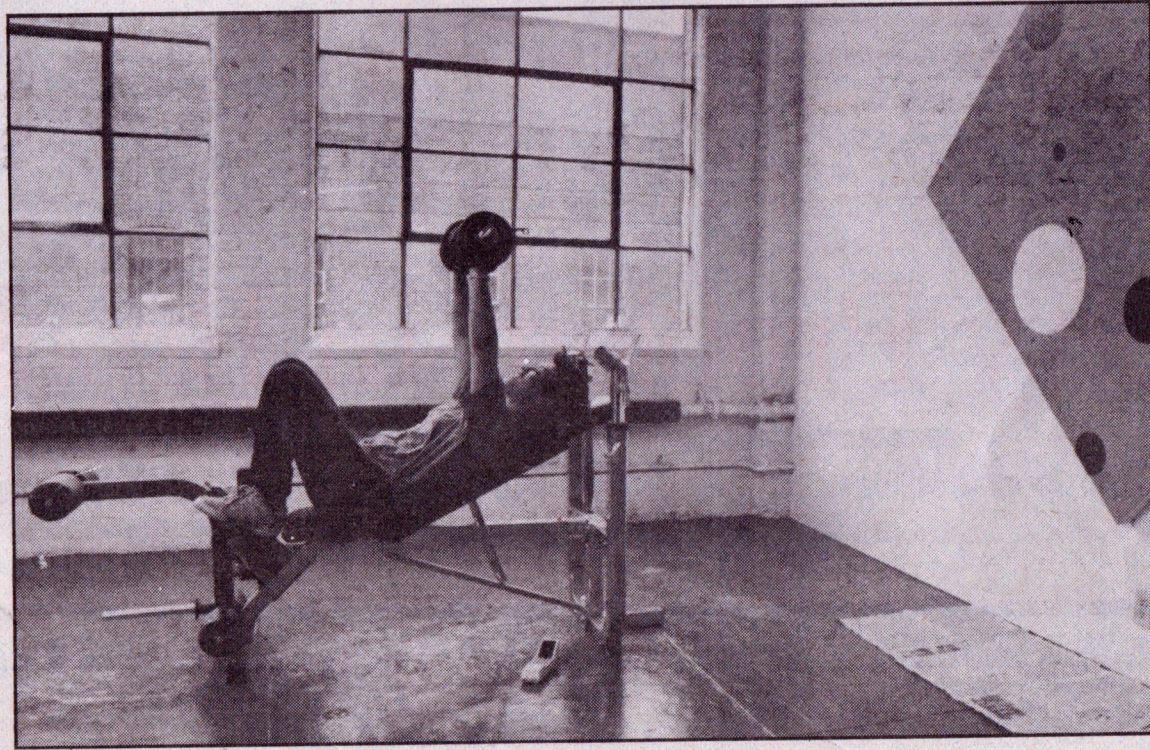
There are only two reasons that artists moved into Brooklyn factory lofts. The first consideration, as always, was price. In the mid-1970s, Manhattan loft living was growing prohibitively expensive, even as Brooklyn factory lofts — many empty for years — went begging. Such artists as furniture maker Jan Girard, who saw the rent on her SoHo loft hiked from \$580 to \$3,500 just months before the loft law protecting Manhattan tenants went into effect, said she didn't waste any worry on whether her Brooklyn loft lease would be protected under city laws. "I just wanted a landlord who wanted me," she said.

The only other reason for an artist to move to Brooklyn was to escape the noise and hype and commercial pressures of the SoHo and East Village art scenes. A whole river, not to mention a sea of snobbery, separated the artists from that scene. To move into the top floors of the old Fulton Ferry and Williamsburg and Greenpoint factory buildings was literally to melt from sight. Even 10 years later, nothing at the cobblestone street level hints at the presence of artists several flights above: no galleries, no Cedar Tav-



Newsday Photos / Susan Gilbert

An old Brooklyn factory at 223 Water St. has become an artist commune near the one where Robin Parker works out when she isn't sculpting.



Wells and Pyfron are favorites at the Ridgewood-Bushwick Community Center. They began teaching weekly painting classes there at the suggestion of local Assemblyman Vito Lopez. He recalls he told them that if they wanted community support in their tenancy fight, "they should give some of their resources back to the community."

Two Fulton Ferry painters, Susan Leopold and Pamela Crimmins, decided three years ago to help the children from the nearby Farragut housing project brighten their neighborhood with murals. For two years they voluntarily taught painting classes at a community center. At the end of each year's classes the children produced a mural. This year, Leopold and Crimmins privately raised \$6,600 to pay themselves a small stipend, and the third neighborhood mural was finished last week — a depiction of a red heart, broken down the middle, beneath the message: "Crime Hurts."

Still, the factory district is where the artists come home at night, and in their scattered enclaves they are on a first-name basis with practically all their neighbors. Such familiarity is almost unavoidable. The only way they can get into each other's apartments, for example, is to yell up from the street — there are no doorbells in these factory buildings. Anyone who has ever had

a friend over is identified for the whole block.

The architecture also breeds familiarity. Most of the artists live on the top one or two floors of five-story factory buildings, and their huge windows face into each other across narrow, often unpaved streets. Masters could look out her Water Street windows one day last week and see her friend Robin Parker, a sculptor from New Mexico, lifting weights. If she had wanted to, Parker could have watched the Iran-contra hearings from across the street on Masters' television.

Neighborliness, or nosiness, also has become institutionalized. "When you see somebody new in one of these buildings, you just go up to them and ask, 'Who are you?'" says Masters, a leader of the Brooklyn Loft Tenants Association.

Over the years the artists have shared similar career hassles. It has been difficult to get shows in Manhattan because it was hard to get gallery owners across the river. So they have built an informal network among themselves to publicize their work. For years they opened their studios each spring to weekend walk-in browsers, but as Parker recalls, "What you'd get was a lot of people wanting to use your bathroom and asking how much rent you paid." So instead, they mount an outdoor show each spring. (This year's show, in Empire State Park on the East River, is open 10 a.m. to 6 p.m. through May 24).

They have also insinuated their work into other public showcases. There is now a borough-run gallery in Brooklyn's War Memorial Building on Cadman Plaza, and another in the Grand Army Plaza arch. The Brooklyn Museum is mounting a series of shows titled "Working in Brooklyn," a sampling of the best local paintings and sculpture.

Slowly the artists have come to be recognized by Manhattan gallery owners. And now Williamsburg is about to have its first commercial contemporary gallery. On a street dominated by wholesale meat butchers, artists' representative Lori Ledis and her husband, Robert Slam, plan to open a gallery in September in the loft they occupy. An unofficial show of paintings called "Soul" hangs in their kitchen.

Their neighbors are somewhat stunned by the goings-on at their loft. "It's the first time they've seen limousines on North Sixth Street," says Ledis. The limousines are dispatched for collectors who still refuse to come over from Manhattan unescorted.

But even as the first signs of a SoHo-like scene appear, the artists are on their way out.

Scott Pfaffman, above, sculpts whole poplar trees; Susan Leopold coached neighborhood children through the painting of the mural behind them.



An attempt to protect their leases by having New York state's loft laws extended from Manhattan into Brooklyn failed before the board of estimate last year. "Have you ever been to one of those meetings? We got five hundred people down there to testify and they didn't even listen to us," Masters said, describing the artists' first brush with bureaucracy in action.

In its 1986 decision, the board refused to protect the leases of Brooklyn loft tenants, with the exception of those in a few buildings in narrowly prescribed areas. And even those buildings had to have residences occupying at least 45 percent of the building space. To extend lease protection further, board members argued, would be to hurt the waterfront

manufacturing climate. Factory owners would be inconvenienced by the demands of tenants in their buildings, the board said, and some might move out.

But Masters argues that the artists, will not, for example, suddenly begin to demand that their manufacturing neighbors shut down at night, as some have suggested. "It's ridiculous," she said. "We work all night. Why shouldn't the bloody knitting mills work all night?"

The artists believe that the real beneficiaries of their eviction will not be their neighboring knitting mills or bagel makers, but rather the office and condominium developers pushing northward along the river from Brooklyn Heights.

So now, each month every artist in the neighborhood pays \$50 into a legal fund to challenge the board of estimate's decision in New York State Supreme Court. Next month an appeals court judge is to determine whether to issue an injunction against evictions until the case is decided. Without such an injunction, many of the artists are almost certain to lose their homes.

Few say they will stay in New York. The artists who live along the Brooklyn waterfront are now, for the most part, in their 30s and early 40s. They simply haven't got it in them to find another abandoned dump in which to spend months chiseling out asbestos insulation with their sculptors' tools. It will fall to a younger group than they to establish the next artists' community in the Bronx, or Red Hook.

"To stay in New York, what New York artists need is enough understanding of quantum physics to turn back the hands of time ten years to when we moved in here," said Scott Pfaffman.

"A lot of us in the group were thinking we might move to the Bronx, but eventually we'd all get kicked out of there too, and you get to a certain age where you just can't do it anymore," said Parker. She is thinking of moving back to Albuquerque, a vision she terms "totally depressing."

What's occurring is not just another sad group parting from which everyone eventually will recover, like college graduation. The breakdown of this community, and the scattering of these artists, could have disastrous effects on many careers.

"It's hard enough to be noticed when you're in New York," Masters said. "But if you're not an established artist, and you're not showing all the time, it doesn't take long to disappear." ■