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HEADLINE: AN ARTS NEIGHBORHOOD IN HARTFORD

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BODY:

A MID the bustle of reconstruction in downtown Hartford, an avant-garde arts complex is taking shape.

Its location, in a historic district across the street from the Civic Center, is no mistake. As in three other cities - New Haven, Stamford and Norwalk - Hartford is developing a neighborhood in which arts organizations and commercial enterprises are deliberately juxtaposed. The goal is insuring both the economic viability and cultural enrichment of the area.

Four performing and visual arts organizations and an office for arts advocacy will open their doors in the center at 100 Allyn Street on Feb. 29. The rehabilitated building was built in 1911 and for years housed the Crosthwaite Wireworks Company.

Real Art Ways, Artworks Gallery, Company One Theater, Hundred Feet Dance Project and the Connecticut Advocates for the Arts will occupy the basement and part of the ground floor. An open atrium at the entranceway will reveal exhibitions on the basement level below, and window exhibitions will line the street, to entice passersby to come inside.

The second and third floors will be rented out as commercial office space. Stecker, LaBau and Arneill, the architectural firm that restored the 32,500 square-foot brick structure, will move from its Constitution Plaza office to the center's fourth floor.

The only existing tenant to remain on the premises will be Anthony A. Ciccheti, who has operated a men's custom-tailor shop there for 30 years.

"Around the country there are more and more examples of this kind of partnership between business and the arts," said Gary M. Young, executive director of the Connecticut Commission on the Arts.

"Most communities have good communications, transportation, new construction - but to be competitive they must also offer a high quality of life," he said. "That has come to mean cultural life. The arts have proven their worth in that respect."

The Hartford Arts Center, like those already begun in New Haven and Norwalk and approved for construction in Stamford, will offer mixed space for commercial or art use at rents about 30 percent of market rates, or

about \$3 a square foot. It will contain a variety of exhibition spaces, performing space, artists' studios, video and audio equipment for the use of artists and classes for the public. Admission to exhibitions will be free, special events will cost about \$4.

The City of Hartford did not contribute financially to the center. The \$1.2 million project was made possible by the Aetna Life and Casualty Insurance Company, which purchased the neglected building for \$300,000 in 1979 with the idea of converting it to an arts center. But in 1983 Aetna sold the property for \$375,000 to a partnership of investors brought together by Martin Crean, an executive in Aetna's real-estate division.

Aetna gave the partnership, which included Stecker, LaBau and Arneill; Bartlett, Brainard, Eacott, general contractors; and the William H. Farley Company, a real-estate concern, a low-cost mortgage with the stipulation that a minimum of 25 percent of the building must be rented to arts organizations.

With the added sweetener of a 25 percent Federal tax credit for the restoration of a historic building, the new owners were able to charge low rents.

"Without Aetna, we would have gone to conventional financing and leased to conventional tenants," said Mr. Farley. "We could have made more money that way, but we have a major commitment to Hartford. This seemed a neat way to help preserve its artistic traditions. There was a movement to take all arts organizations out to West Hartford, and we feared that the quality of life in the city was in jeopardy."

Real Art Ways has acted as the master lease holder, "bringing together a mix of artists that we were not equipped to assess," said the architect, David LeBau.

Until now, RAW, a nine-year-old experimental art, music and video center modeled along the lines of The Kitchen in New York City, has been forced to move from one space to another. Each time a low-rent location was found, the wrecking ball of downtown renewal was close behind.

"This will be the first time that we have a guaranteed, long-term lease and heat all winter," said Joseph Celli, director and a founder of RAW.

RAW grew from a cooperative of five artists in 1975 to a regional locus for the creation and performance of advanced works by both internationally known and new artists in video, film, dance, art, sound and light, he said. It has a current annual operating budget of \$600,000.

"RAW has exercised leadership among the smaller organizations and achieved a nationwide reputation," said Mr. Young.

"Its existence in Hartford as a showcase for the newest and most progressive movements in the arts is an indication of the sophistication of the city," he added.

Mr. Celli has pursued the business community for support and advice.

"RAW does not operate on a deficit," he is fond of stating.

"We've never had one," he said. "That's not the correct way to run an organization."

His efforts have been rewarded by support from Hartford's corporations and private foundations. As one businessman who helped organize a RAW presentation told state officials, "I still don't understand what they do here, but they do it real well."

To introduce the art tenants to the public, RAW will throw a party from 5:30 to 9:30 P.M. Feb. 29. The entire building will be open for inspection, there will be dancing to two live bands and refreshments offered. Proceeds from tickets, priced from \$15 to \$100, will benefit the five resident arts organizations.

One of the tenants, the Connecticut Advocates for the Arts, functions primarily to insure adequate financing for the Commission on the Arts, "but we also lobby for specific arts projects," said Warren Dubin, chairman of the volunteer board. A paid lobbyist and a paid part-time business manager will move the operation from New Haven to RAW's new offices "near the Commission and the legislature," noted Mr. Dubin.

Connecticut ranks 35th among the states in contributions to the arts, or 41 cents per capita, Mr. Dubin said. New York is second, at \$1.98 per capita, Alaska is first at \$10, Puerto Rico is third with \$1.80, Massachusetts is eighth. "Our goal this year is to rise to 24th place, at 42.4 cents per capita," he said.

Artworks Gallery opened in 1976, but because of reduced government and private financing, lost its paid director and its space last year.

"We began meeting once a month in taverns and art schools, and we managed to keep an exhibition schedule going in other galleries," said Roger Crossgrove, Artworks' president.

"This is an important step - having a showcase for contemporary, regional artists on a continuous year-round basis," he said.

Hundred Feet Dance Project, co-directed by Bonita Weisman and Evan Williams, will offer 7:30 A.M. dance-fitness classes to people on their way to work, priced at \$3.50 for 45 minutes. Programs for serious dance students will be held during the day and dance recitals will be scheduled in the evenings.

The fifth tenant is Company One, founded by Stephen Rust, a Hartford actor. With a core of six actors and a dozen more available on call, he will stage noontime theater and other small-scale performances starting March 3. Larger productions that cannot be accommodated in the limited performing space will be moved to various city theaters, he said.

"The actors won't be paid much, but at least they will have a steady income," said Mr. Rust. The company is supported by a variety of grants, he said.

What the center will provide, explained Mr. Celli, is "a support system that allows young, emerging artists to focus on what they are doing, rather than dissipating their energies on housing and economics.

"Times are much more difficult for them than they were when RAW was young," he said. "Facilities then were relatively cheap and there was largesse from the government."

He is sensitive to criticism that RAW has become "too established."

"If institutionalization means that we are able to do new, innovative, experimental art projects, I'm for it," he said. "If the institution becomes more important than the work we are doing, that's the time to be apprehensive."

GRAPHIC: photo of David LeBau and Joseph Celli