

Artists are revitalizing Salem's vacant spaces

Tom Mayhall Rastrelli, Statesman Journal Published 3:22 p.m. PT Nov. 19, 2014 | Updated 4:41 p.m. PT Nov. 19, 2014



(Photo: Tom Mayhall Rastrelli / Statesman Journal)

A convergence of talent and creativity is underway in Salem's fine arts community. In August, the Salem Arts Building opened 23 art studios collectively named the Hive ([/story/life/2014/08/06/studio-space-open-salem-arts-building-hive/13706765/](http://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/08/06/studio-space-open-salem-arts-building-hive/13706765/)). Last month, the Art Studios at Mission Mill opened. Its 15 studios were claimed in a week leaving a waiting list of artists eager to join.

"It shows that there is a real need," Debbie Leahy, manager of the Art Studios at Mission Mill, said. "People want a space. They want to collaborate and commune and not mortgage the house."

"There's a myth that artists work in solitude," Catherine Alexander, founding member of the studios, said. "That myth is partially true but it's also partially false. Artists like to be in community. They inspire each other. They

encourage each other, and they support each other."

(<https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/08/06/studio-space-open-salem-arts-building-hive/13706765/>).

The studios are on the second floor of Willamette Heritage Center's Mission Mill. The space had been empty for two years when Alexander and Leahy discovered it by chance. While planning the opening [Compass Gallery](http://www.compassgalleryusa.com/) (<http://www.compassgalleryusa.com/>) on Mission Mill's main floor, they asked about office space and discovered a hodgepodge of offices on the vacant second floor perfect for small art studios.

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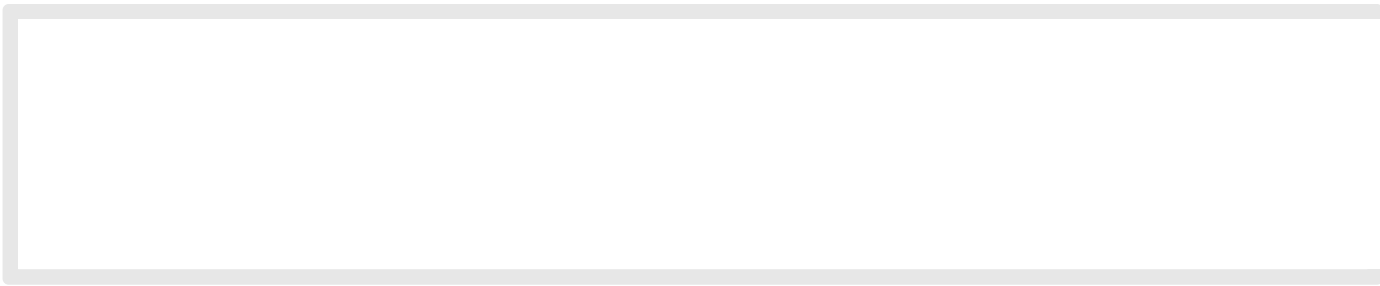


It was a win-win. The heritage center could rent the space without renovating. The artists had studios and a kitchen, classroom and lounge where they could create and collaborate. Two months later, the space is filling with art.

(<https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/10/28/art-compass-gallery-wildlife-birds-willamette-heritage-center-salem/18073777/>).

Katie Davis and Katie Stewart, who collaborate on floral design and event coordination at [Ponderosa and Thyme](http://www.ponderosaandthyme.com/#!about/c1ihx) (<http://www.ponderosaandthyme.com/#!about/c1ihx>), needed an affordable space where they could meet clients and make art. Davis paints with espresso — yes, the coffee kind — by a large window in their studio. Stewart is expanding her printmaking skills by learning calligraphy. They call their studio a "sacred space" and "sanctuary."

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"My goal for this space is to have my stuff out," Stewart said. "I have two little kids, so I have to constantly put my stuff away. By the time I set it up each time, I've lost the creative flow. I can walk into this space and know my stuff is ready."

Tory Brokenshire and [Dayna Collins](https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/10/30/salem-artist-raised-hillcrest-art-program/18031193/) ([/story/life/2014/10/30/salem-artist-raised-hillcrest-art-program/18031193/](https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/10/30/salem-artist-raised-hillcrest-art-program/18031193/))' studio is painted with vibrant colors and decorated paintings, assemblages of found objects and multimedia sculptures. They call their space an "art fort."

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"We got the key on Wednesday and were painting late Wednesday afternoon," Collins said.

On breaks, the artists discuss their work. They come while their kids are at school or in the evenings after work. They brainstorm and plan classes and workshops they will teach. Their shared enthusiasm and creativity is bearing fruit.

[\(https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/10/30/salem-artist-raised-hillcrest-art-program/18031193/\)](https://www.statesmanjournal.com/story/life/2014/10/30/salem-artist-raised-hillcrest-art-program/18031193/)

But it's about more than art. Alexander and Leahy see the Hive and other 'cultural creatives' as partners in a larger mission. They define 'creatives' as people who make trends and affect cultural change in art, literature, music and cuisine, things that are essential to thriving metropolitan areas.

"If you look at a district like the Pearl District in Portland or almost any metropolitan area in the U.S., cultural change, gentrification and urban revitalization happened first with working artists," Alexander said.

"The timing of these things coming together with the economy and space being available is the perfect storm of variables," Helen Nute Wiens, property manager of Salem Arts Building and the Hive, said. "We're seeing newer younger people coming into downtown and creating businesses. The whole thing is on the verge of something happening. The image of downtown Salem as old and boring, that image is changing."

Alexander said there are a well over a dozen artists working downtown that are unaffiliated with a collective. They are tucked away above and between retail spaces. She hopes leaders will continue to emerge in Salem and create a broader awareness of creativity in the city.

"Salem is right on the verge of making a transformative change when it comes to creativity, not just with art but with food. There are some really cool things happening right now in our community, and this points to the fact that we're ready," Leahy said. "We built two and they came, and I bet we could build a third."

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If you go

What: Arts Studios at Mission Mill's open studio events

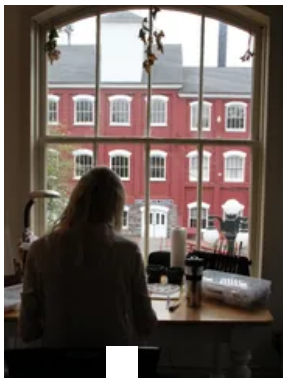
Where: Willamette Heritage Center, 1313 Mill St. SE

When: 5 to 7 p.m. every second Thursday of the month

Info

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Artist Catherine Alexander works at her desk at the Art Studios at Mission Mill. Alexander and her partner Debbie Leahy realized their idea to convert the vacant space into creative workshop for local artists. (Photo: Tom Mayhall Rastrelli / Statesman Journal)



A wall covered in old photographs serves as creative inspiration for Elizabeth Bauman in her space at the Art Studios at Mission Mill. (Photo: Tom Mayhall Rastrelli / Statesman Journal)

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