

“The light is fabulous,” agrees Maureen Fritchen, a fine artist, whose studio in the Racine Business Center has north facing windows. (You can see her art at <http://absolutearts.com>.)

Another Business Center artist, Jerry Belland, explains the appeal of an area like Uptown, where other older buildings stand ready to become Racine’s newest homes for artists. “In communities around the country, artists act as pioneers.” <http://jerrybellandart.net>

Belland suggests turning to cities like New York to see what could happen in Uptown. There, artists looking for inexpensive space kick-started the transformation of a slummy, warehouse district in Manhattan into the desirable SoHo neighborhood of galleries, restaurants and artists’ lofts.

Artists found the Business Center nearly two decades ago and continue to plant themselves in studios carved out to fit their individual needs. Montgomery says the Business Center has never been marketed specifically to them, but artists find it by word of mouth.

That is the story for Fritchen. Working in larger formats and in need of space, friends with studios invited her to a December open house, an annual event organized by the Racine Business Center’s artists. She liked what she saw.

A good friend invited Belland to use her studio while she was away a few years ago. Newly retired after 34 years of teaching and beginning the transition to “artist,” Belland recalls the fun of having a room dedicated to his own work and the discipline of keeping his own schedule. “Then she returned. The idea of going back home was a terrible idea,” says Belland, who has had his own studio in the Business Center ever since.

Because the Business Center and its thriving community of artists and the nascent Uptown Arts District are so close, Montgomery envisions the growth and development of each complementing the other. He looks at the dramatic turnaround of Racine’s downtown when he thinks about what is possible in Uptown. Buildings for purchase or rent in the Uptown Racine Arts District can accommodate artists with an interest in combining their living and working spaces. The Racine Business Center is not zoned for residential occupancy.

Racine has been Fritchen’s home for more than 20 years. She describes the city as a great place to live and work – for its lakefront, summer activities, friendly people and the art scene, especially over the last decade. She knows the economy has hurt artists and recalls reading that their incomes have fallen 75% in the past two years. “That said ...artists still need a place to create,” says Fritchen. She also believes the affordable living and studio space that can be found in the city and the Uptown Racine Arts District could draw more artists from markets like Milwaukee and Chicago.

Fritchen credits her studio for making her a part of a community of artists that share ideas. “There’s a lot of really great art criticism that goes on,” she explains. At the same time, she finds that her fellow artists respect one another’s space.

Montgomery says that the services The Business Center provides for all tenants are well suited to artists’ needs. Mail can be sent to the building; there’s a cafeteria, secure parking, fire protection, 24-hour security – including a guard to escort those who work late to their cars.

“They accommodate you very well,” says Alice Hazarian, who shared a studio with some of the first artists to move into the building when she first came to the Business Center. Hazarian appreciates everything about the building and is pleased that it is so affordable. She is also certain that if she could no longer manage the cost of her studio, the Business Center would find another space for her. “They’d work with me; they have become like family,” she says.

As new studios are developed, the Business Center is setting aside common gathering areas, which Montgomery envisions can one day serve the artists as gallery space. Planning ahead, he says the Business Center wants to keep the artists’ studios close together within the complex. And, they are now thinking the time might be right to market to artists beyond Racine.

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