With plans for a new home in Sherman Heights, nonprofit Space 4 Art looks to the future

Space 4 Art Executive Director Jennifer de Poyen: “It started out mainly as visual artists, but it’s diversifying. It’s really wonderful to have the synergy of different art forms.” Hayne Palmour IV / San Diego Union-Tribune

By MARTINA SCHIMITSCHEK FEB. 3, 2019 5 AM

For 10 years, Space 4 Art has been a place for artists of all disciplines to come together and be creative. The live-work and studio spaces in two warehouses on 16th Street in East Village were designed and built by artists with the core goals of keeping costs low and creativity high.

Now the non-profit organization is looking to build a new permanent home in Sherman Heights. Plans for the 42,000-square-foot facility include exhibition and performance spaces, live-work units for at least 35 artists, about 20 work-only art studios, classrooms, shared work space and metal and wood shops as well as outdoor work and performance areas.

The industrial-looking complex, which is in the planning stages, is the vision of Space 4 Art founders Robert Leathers and Cheryl Nickel. Building the new arts center on Market Street between 25th and 26th streets is the second time the couple has needed to shift gears and goals since they moved to San Diego County 18 years ago. When they came here from upstate New York, they thought they would ease into retirement and concentrate on their art. He quilts. She sculpts.

But the life they envisioned never materialized. They became aware of how difficult it was for artists to find creative space in San Diego with the gentrification of downtown. Drawing on their backgrounds, the two stepped in and founded Space 4 Art in 2008. “With Petco (Park), artists were being displaced,” Nickel said. “It was evident even at that time that San Diego wasn’t affordable.”
Leathers is an architect whose expertise is volunteer-led projects, including parks, playgrounds, community centers and theaters. Nickel is an artist with a master’s degree in landscape architecture and experience in outreach.

Adrian Gonzalez, who previously worked as an intern and now is back working at Space 4 Art as a young architect, works on making an architectural model of the new Space 4 Art building as Executive Director Jennifer de Poyen watches. Hayne Palmour IV / San Diego Union-Tribune

The warehouses on 16th Street seemed ideal for their needs. With an army of volunteers, they converted 15,000 square feet of space into an artist hub for $120,000. The no-frills live-work units now start at $800 a month.

“It started out mainly as visual artists, but it’s diversifying. It’s really wonderful to have the synergy of different art forms,” said Jennifer de Poyen, the organization’s executive director. The thriving community thought it had found a permanent home. “From the beginning, we looked at options for rent with the ultimate goal of buying,” Leathers said.

The property’s owner, Bob Sinclair, was willing to sell the land to Leathers at a reduced price. But all that changed when Sinclair died in a 2013 motorcycle accident and his estate sold the property to the real estate investment and management company HP Investors for the full market value. The sale caused the Space 4 Art, which is now leasing from the new owners, to lose one of the three original warehouses, which caused a loss of nine studios, the two galleries and outdoor performance space. Eight live-work tenants and 20 studio spaces remain. But only a permanent property will guarantee affordability.

Leathers has drawn up the plans for the new property with structures made of corrugated metal siding, heavy beams and lots of windows for natural light. Many of the spaces have views of the bay and Coronado Bridge, and residential units come with private outdoor areas.

“The first impression will be of industrial architecture from the early 1900s,” Leathers said. “It should look like an arts center. If I had my druthers, I would have found an old warehouse and rebuilt it.” Cost estimates to build the new facility range from $12 million to $14 million, and completion will take anywhere from two and a half to four years. Money will come from bank loans, grants, private donations and tax credits. But more is needed.
Naming-right opportunities are available for many of the new spaces. And a campaign for personalized balusters is also underway. The name of each $50 donor will be engraved in a 4-by-4-inch baluster. Those balusters will be used throughout the complex. “The hand-engraved balusters are in keeping with the ethos of being a grass-roots organization,” de Poyen said.

Once completed, the facility should be self-sustaining, de Poyen said. Live-in units range from low-income affordable housing starting at $850 a month up to market rate. In order to gain residency or studio space, artists need to go through a portfolio review.

The move will also be an opportunity to make an impact on the neighborhood. With open areas and rooms available, the complex is seen as a community gathering place, even beyond art. Ideas such as a weekly farmers markets are being talked about.

“Art serves as a powerful force to bring in community and bring community together,” Leathers said. Space 4 Art will also continue its outreach programs working with King-Chavez Community High School and High Tech High in Chula Vista. The organization works with classes to provide STEAM-based learning. “Many kids don’t have the confidence to believe in themselves,” de Poyen said. Art gives these students an opportunity for creative thinking in different disciplines in a non-competitive atmosphere. “A lot of kids could really benefit for art to be part of their education,” Nickel said. “It’s surprising how successful it can be sometimes.” “You put artists with other artists and magic happens,” de Poyen said. “You go into the community and more magic happens. You bring in kids and they teach us things about ourselves and more magic happens.” For Leathers and Nickel, it’s a nice way to spend their retirement.

Space 4 Art community meeting

What: Update on Space 4 Art’s efforts to build a permanent home, a 42,000-square-foot facility on Market Street in Sherman Heights.
When: 6-8 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 7
Where: The Sandbox, 325 15th St., East Village
Online: sdspace4art.org  Schimitschek is a freelance writer.