Diana Nelson Jones' Walkabout: New Allentown incubator to launch makers, artists and craftsmen with half-off rents

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By Diana Nelson Jones / Pittsburgh Post-Gazette

Neighborhoods with business corridors, however underused they may be, have a built-in advantage over those without. As one of the former, Allentown is a place to watch.

The vibe there is still faint, but it’s a 21st-century vibe, and it likely will get stronger. Allentown has a fortunate location, too, a few minutes’ drive directly up Arlington Avenue from Station Square on the South Side.

During a thunderstorm Wednesday, about 20 people showed up at the former Bold Baking Co. on Industry Street to tour spaces being offered at half-price rent — $3 per square foot per year — for two years.

The building provides room for about five artists, craftsmen and other career-oriented makers based on the money available to subsidize rents. Tenants can use another 30,000 square feet to expand, said Joe Calloway, founder of RE 360, a real estate company that owns the building and is headquartered there.

The tour was part of the Industry on Industry program, another business-building incentive of the Hilltop Alliance. Hilltop Alliance is a nonprofit community development engine that advocates for a dozen hilly neighborhoods south of Downtown.

Two years ago, the Alliance began subsidizing rents to fill vacant East Warrington storefronts and offering grants for businesses to improve their signage. It attracted eight new businesses — 70 percent of the owners are women and minorities — and anticipates two or three more this year.

Industry Street is parallel to Warrington, two streets south.
In exchange for subsidized rents, tenants will participate in a public art project for Allentown’s main street, East Warrington Avenue, with the Hilltop Alliance and a committee represented by the Greater Pittsburgh Arts Council, Neighborhood Allies, New Sun Rising, Local Initiatives Support Corp. (LISC) and RE 360.

Chase McBryde is the first Industry on Industry tenant, operating as Reanimated in Pittsburgh, a fabricating and design studio. Its short name is RIPPGH.

“I deal in reclaimed wood,” making anything from furniture to jewelry to toys, he said. “I was working out of my garage in Lawrenceville when I heard about the [subsidized] rent program. I didn’t find anything to suit my needs on Warrington, but this space was available and I moved in a year ago.”

On the day of the tour, he was painting a sign for Breakfast at Shelly’s, a restaurant soon to open on Warrington.

The doors of his workshop open outward, like a Halloween coffin, and he acknowledges a fondness for spooky symbols. But his is a lively business in yet another old Pittsburgh warehouse coming back to life.

Gritty, peeling, scuffed, paint-stained and sawdust-strewn, with grimy windows and exposed ceiling insulation, it is one of those marvelous hulks that bears the vague post-industrial aroma that I never want Pittsburgh to lose. Ladders hang from exposed brick walls, century-old wood lath and stamped tin ceiling panels lay in piles. Eight-foot opaque glass block windows line one side.

For much of this young century, I have followed Allentown through the eyes of its lifelong advocate and resident Judy Hackel. When Allentown seemed to have little to proclaim, she proclaimed it. She took me on walking tours. She pointed out beautiful architecture, the little retail that existed and the many well-kept homes, as if they were the exception. They were not. But blight and vacancy seemed to be winning.

I felt the stirring of a new vibe in 2013 when I learned about The Hardware Store, an incubator Josh Lucas established for media production and crowd sourcing entrepreneurs in the former Bud’s Hardware. Now called Work Hard Pittsburgh, it describes itself as “an entrepreneurial ecosystem.”

In 2014, every business on Warrington Avenue within a quarter-mile of a host antenna got free wireless Internet service with a $7,000 Urban Redevelopment Authority grant to Meta Mesh, a young tech company.
That year, Allentown won a state Neighborhood Partnership Program award of $1.5 million over six years, a tax credit incentive to lure investors to struggling neighborhoods. With it came a full-time business district manager in Siena Kane.

“We’re all aligned in Allentown to keeping the community Allentown,” Mr. Calloway told the assembled tour group last week, implying that Allentown doesn’t want to emulate other neighborhoods in becoming more popular. “We want to make this community great and to have you in on that community spirit.”

*The deadline for applications to Industry on Industry is March 11. For more information, call 412-712-3306 or send email to siena@pghhilltopalliance.org.*

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