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Foundation Studies

Gregory Smith leads the Art Academy of Cincinnati in new directions, as the institution settles into its new Over-the-Rhine digs.

The Art Academy of Cincinnati's new home required the combination of two older structures in Over-the-Rhine. The result is an atrium stretching six stories up, buzzing with drive, art and ideas. It's the center of the beehive.

This is more than a school. It's a community within a community. Inside, studio space for more than 100 students clusters around the atrium and runs the length of the hallways. Students work side by side with easy access to their professors. Outside, changes crop up on Vine Street, with Cincinnati Center City Development Corporation (3CDC) and local developers renovating derelict buildings to create unique condos and storefront space.

At the start of the millennium, the Art Academy was a hermit crab that had grown too big for its shell. Without working elevators, large lecture halls or space for all the equipment needed for the school's expanding programs, a move from the old historic location was deemed necessary, despite sentimental attachments to the buildings in Eden Park and Mount Adams.

Art Academy President Gregory Allgire Smith remembers the exact moment it became clear that the school would have to find a new home. It was in July 1999, a year after the Art Academy legally separated from the Cincinnati Art Museum. When the facilities committee asked Smith to create a plan for improvements, it became obvious that the school was trying to do more and more in a space that could not expand.

"Everything we bumped up against had to do with the facility," Smith says.

One option was to obtain a third building, which meant even more time spent commuting. Smith realized, albeit hesitantly, that the school needed to relocate.

The search started in the early 2000s. After scouting more than 25 locations, a spot at 12th and Jackson Streets in Over-the-Rhine was a perfect fit.

Why?

"The arts," Smith says.

The neighborhood is home to the Cincinnati Ballet, Opera, Symphony, Music Hall, Suder's Art Store, the Ensemble Theatre and Main Street's design firms and galleries. The academy opened at this location in fall 2005 and since then, The New Stage Collective and Know Theatre have also come to the area. The School for Creative and Performing Arts is planning to move to 12th and Race soon.

Plus, Smith says now that the school is no longer relegated to two buildings separated by a 10-minute walk, students and faculty share a greater sense of community.

Upon entering building, the breathtaking atrium is an obvious treasure. But there are also classrooms galore: a woodworking shop in the basement with towering pieces of poplar and cherry leaning against the wall, drawing studios with massive "light monitors" in the ceiling to allow for plenty of sunlight. There are also plans to finish the roof in 2008 as a modern indoor/outdoor space to hold events. Smith says \$700,000 has already been raised for the million-dollar project.

April Foster, who teaches printmaking, remembers the old, inconvenient days, when the letter press was in Mt. Adams and the printmaking equipment was in Eden Park.

Studios used to be reserved for painting majors, but now there's room for all juniors and seniors to share the four-person studios.

"It's like we're neighbors in a neighborhood," says Jeff Smith (no relation to President Smith), a painting major from Covington. "You can go and ask for help when you're working."

In the atrium, Smith talks to a student who says he was here working through those snowy days in mid-February, even

though classes were cancelled. "I just always assume the building's open," the student says.

In fact, students do have access to the building at all times.

"It doesn't make sense to give them this space and then tell them they can't get to it," Smith remarks.

The academy houses three galleries. There's even potential for a street presence in the space left when the Barrelhouse Brewery moved from 12th Street. One of the ideas is to create a small shop for works related what's currently being showcased in the galleries.

Some say that move is evidence of the Over-the-Rhine renaissance, that the Art Academy brought a sense of stability to the area.

"We moved here because it was good for the academy," Smith says. The positive local impact was secondary, but it has come nonetheless. For a neighborhood that has so much support from businesses and the community, the Art Academy was like having an "anchor tenant" move in.

Smith looks out the window in an upper-floor classroom and counts all the neighborhood construction projects. More than 100 condos will be available soon. "3CDC wants to get homeowners," he notes.

He stops one interested professor in the hallway to tell him about the new Gateway Quarter leasing office in the Bank Café building at 12th and Vine Streets.

Over-the-Rhine already has a few Art Academy residents: the Bank Café and the neighboring building houses 24 students, thanks to 3CDC, and Smith wants to create more student housing in the future. After 135 years, the academy is no longer purely a commuter school.

"Housing is an important aspect of undergraduate life," he says.

Smith wants enrollment to reach more than 250, and hopes there will be enough housing for half the student body. The apartments currently house out-of-town freshmen.

Ran Mullins, owner of Over-the-Rhine's Metaphor Studio and the creative mind behind the community web site iRhine.com, says now that the school has "put their stake in the ground," others are feeling comfortable about building there. "It really spurred a lot of development on Vine Street."

Being a 1992 Art Academy graduate, Mullins knows the school is a valuable resource for interns and new hires. "They have great students. They are very adaptable."

He continues, "I think the facility is truly incredible. People didn't think he (Smith) could do it and now that he's done it, they're amazed." He adds, "I do believe that the Art Academy's move to Over-the-Rhine has brought a number of young people to the streets, whether they're going to Suder's Art Store or going downtown to get a bite to eat."

And proponents of OTR couldn't be more thrilled. The relocation helped solve one of the neighborhood's biggest quandaries: attracting the creative class. "Clearly the Art Academy helps us reach that goal," says Brian Tiffany, president of the Over-the-Rhine Chamber of Commerce. "That's the creative class at its earliest stages."

Tiffany also says that the school, in bringing a critical mass of people, is partly to thank for Over-the-Rhine's decrease in crime. Comparing crime rates January 2006 to January 2007, there's a 38 percent decrease. He adds that the area has had consistent double-digit decreases in crime since May 2006.

And now that the academy isn't as isolated as it used to be, there are more opportunities to be part of a community. Take a drive through Over-the-Rhine and you'll see the mosaics. More artful and certainly more appealing than any graffiti, the artworks immediately stand out. In collaboration with the Peaslee Neighborhood Center, the school is using local artists such as Suzanne Fisher and volunteers to collaborate with residents. Children, high school students and people in neighborhood social programs are working on "vest-pocket" parks, such as Imagination Alley on Vine Street. So far, graffiti has not been a problem. If anything, Smith says, it adds to that sense of ownership in the neighborhood.

The condos and arts programs have played a part in attracting merchants to the area. The owners of downtown's Metronation fell in love with a space in Over-the-Rhine. Park+Vine, an environmentally minded general store, is set to open in June, and restaurateur Jean-Robert de Cavel recently announced plans to open a café in the neighborhood.

Whether he intended to or not, Greg Smith and the Art Academy of Cincinnati are doing exactly what good art is supposed to do: inspire.