



RESIDENCE

FOR THE RIGHT- BRAINED

A NEW AFFORDABLE-HOUSING PROJECT IN SAILBOAT BEND IS HELPING TO SHAKE THE “STARVING ARTIST” TYPECAST.



text Jillian Mills photography Robin Hill

graphic designers, photographers, writers and actors — are as unlike one another other as are their varied crafts. Yet they share a common bond — an undeniable, almost overwhelming, creative energy. The term “eccentric” takes on a whole new meaning inside these walls.

Artspace began in 1995 when the Broward County Cultural Division saw a need for economical accommodations for artists. “We searched Broward County for available buildings,” says Mary Becht, director of the division. “But everything we found was too expensive.”

Three years later, Artspace, a leading nonprofit real estate developer for the arts based in Minnesota, entered the picture. It had worked with historically designated properties in the past, so the challenges in Sailboat Bend — Fort Lauderdale’s only historically designated neighborhood — were nothing new. “We wanted to bring new life there,” says Dean Crowell, asset manager at Artspace. “But we recognized that this was historical property that could not be redeveloped.” The property in question was the neighboring West Side School. The answer was to build the venture adjacent to the school, resulting in a balance of old and new.

Shortly after, the property was purchased by Lennar Homes, a Miami-based homebuilder. “Up to that point the school board had been working with us in trying to save the school,” Becht says. “Lennar understood what we were trying to do.”

With donations from various organizations, corporations and individuals, construction could finally begin. It was 2006, more than a decade since the cultural division had started its initial search.

But first, Artspace needed an architect, one who would design a building sensitive to the needs of the artistic lifestyle. Miami-based Zyscovich Architects welcomed the challenge.

“This is not a building that simply came to be occupied by artists,” says Mario Suarez, senior associate at Zyscovich. “This is a building that was built and designed specifically for them.”

Since this was a shelter where they would both live and work, the first essential was light, and lots of it. The answer came in the

• Dana Craft shares his two-bedroom apartment with five geckos, two iguanas, one skink and a snake. Reptiles inspire him.

Keith Kimmel’s space is adorned with luminous, in-progress abstract paintings. Splotches of paint that have escaped his brush now lie smeared on the floor. He’s intense, like his art.

Vincent Frato’s walls are shrouded with his favorite photographs: a lone man in a stairwell, a boy and a horse, a derelict window. An enormous eight-foot-square homemade easel leans against his bedroom wall where, in a traditional setting, a nightstand might sit.

This is certainly not a traditional environment, and these residents are not your typical tenants. Dana, Keith and Vincent are just a handful of the eclectic personalities living at the Artspace Sailboat Bend Lofts, a new three-story, 37-unit affordable-housing project for the arts in Fort Lauderdale. The renters here — painters, musicians,

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): Visual artist Diego Romero and singer/songwriter Michelle Riu show off their respective talents. Laqui, a sculptor and abstract artist, displays her art, including a bronzed head recently on view at the Boca Raton Museum of Art School. Nzingah Oniwosan, an artist and musician, exhibits one of her pieces and her colorful personality. Dana Craft poses alongside his wildlife mural, a work-in-progress. **PREVIOUS SPREAD:** At the center of the lofts is a spacious common area, which also doubles as an art gallery where the residents’ work is always on exhibit.

form of expansive eight-foot-high windows in each unit along with heightened 12-foot ceilings. Another necessity was space. “The apartments are oversized,” Suarez says. “They are about 30-percent larger than your typical apartment.”

In terms of the building, the firm envisioned a convivial community. Its solution was to create an airy central gathering space on each of the three floors, which doubles as a gallery. It incorporated oversized kitchen counters in each unit, so counter space could not only be devoted to cooking, but also to artist-related needs, like mixing paint. And the last element was an enormous elevator; so large pieces could be transported with ease.

But what was gained by way of individual space was lost in details. “In terms of cost, there had to be a trade-off,” Suarez says. “More space translates to less finishes.” The result — austere concrete floors and exposed air ducts — was akin to a blank canvas, ready for the artists to move in and breathe new life into them.

A lottery was deemed the fairest way to select the residents from the pool of hundreds of applicants. But there were stipulations: True to the concept of affordable housing, the rents are very low, so potential tenants had to fall into a certain income bracket. For example, according to Crowell, the income for one person moving into a one-bedroom unit could not exceed \$24,000, increasing for the larger units. (Out of the first 124 applicants, more than half surpassed the income limit.) Additionally, the artists had to demonstrate their individual skill, bringing portfolios, published articles and playbills to their interviews. This was to ensure an authentic artist’s community, a slice of bohemia where creative individuals could flourish and eventually give back to the area.

And give back they have. Since the January move-in date, one of Vincent’s photographs won the “Best in Photography” award at the Broward County Main Library. Nichole Lopez, a painter and graphic designer, lent her talents to create the Web site and brochure for the Artspace Sailboat Bend Lofts project. Laqui, a visual artist from

Argentina, is currently constructing a larger-than-life spatula — a representation of the women’s role in Latin culture — for submission to this year’s Art Basel Miami Beach. And, in September 2008, writer and performer Nerissa Street will be putting on a one-woman show entitled, *No Exit* in Sailboat Bend. “As much as Fort Lauderdale has given to us,” Street says, “we can now give something back.”

So what’s it like living in such an inspired environment? “It’s sort of like being back in college,” Dana Craft says. But rather than the stereotypical cluster of empty beer cans and stacks of cast-off pizza boxes, the halls at Artspace are accessorized with colorful murals, words of encouragement and smears of paint. As for the age-old custom of asking one’s neighbor for a cup of sugar, well, they’ve tweaked that too. “It’s great,” Craft says. “If you need red paint at 3 a.m., you can just go next door and grab it.” ●

OPPOSITE (clockwise from top left): Two-dimensional artist Lisa Rockford takes a break to show off one of her multi-media pieces entitled *A New Man* in the common area. Nichole Lopez — a photographer, graphic designer and mixed-media artist — flashes a smile in front of her work. Keith Kimmel labors over one of his “abstract realism” paintings inside his studio. “This is all just a part of my artistic journey,” he says of the unique living environment. Louis Davis, a photographer, specializes in photo construction, joining many different photographs together to form a cohesive collage.

