

Photo by Julia Zave

“The first time I came in here with Darren Scott from the Housing Authority, we got dive-bombed by hawks,” Jeff Mirel says, noticing this reporter’s expression as I step over yet another dead crow. “There were two or three of them and they would chase us. It was actually pretty scary.”

It’s getting darker as we work our way up to the third floor of the four-story, vacant schoolhouse on North Swan Street in Albany’s Arbor Hill. The hawks are no longer in residence, but it’s still spooky to walk through the former St. Joseph’s Academy at dusk, as the only available light makes its way through dirty or broken windows that haven’t been covered. “Those boards are fairly new,” Mirel says, gesturing toward the windows in an old classroom where original chalkboards are still on the walls and wooden desks sit in rows as if waiting for students to return with their notebooks and No. 2s.

Mirel is the founder and president of Albany Barn, Inc., a nonprofit organization with plans to transform the former Catholic school. He paints a bright picture of what the building will become: an artists’ Shangri-la and multifaceted neighborhood resource meant to foster economic growth and creative freedom in the Arbor Hill neighborhood.

Even in the dusty building among the dead birds and detritus, Mirel’s enthusiasm for the Academy Lofts project is infectious. Classrooms on the Swan Street side of the building and on the top two floors will be converted into 22 low-rent apartment/work studios (each approximately 700 to 800 square feet, with raised loft areas) and made available to income-qualified local artists. Approximately 12,000 square feet of the first two floors on the northwest side of the building, including the gymnasium, will become incubator space dedicated to creative projects done by local artists, residents and members of the community. The second floor will be expanded. Work studios, rehearsal suites, virtual offices, a digital media center, a small cafe and, potentially, an art supply store, will play host to artists, aspiring artists and creative ventures across a variety of mediums. These areas will be available to anyone for a small rental fee or as a part of programming offered through Albany Barn or an affiliated organization.

Behind the stage at one end of the gymnasium, Mirel envisions a dance studio and, in front of it, an open floor for exhibitions, with portable seating to be brought in for staged productions. They will keep the original skylights.

The idea for what is now Albany Barn began back in 2005, shortly after the tsunami that rocked Southeast Asia in December 2004, as Rock2Rebuild. Mirel had left a successful but unfulfilling career in the music industry and had just moved to Albany. “[The tsunami] was just such a horrible tragedy,” says Mirel. In discussions with a lawyer friend named George Kansas who ran a local open mic-night, the two of them talked about ways that they might be able to provide some small means of support to victims of the disaster. Given Mirel’s professional

experience and Kansas' local connections, they decided to throw a benefit concert.

“What actually happened then was kind of amazing,” says Mirel. The city of Albany agreed to let them use the Palace Theatre; labor and equipment were donated; and they connected with local bands and artists who were willing to contribute their time and talent. In just five weeks and on a microscopic budget, Rock2Rebuild drew approximately 2,000 people and netted more than \$26,000. “The really amazing thing, though, is that we were putting local art in service of a charitable cause and, at the same time, were able to create an audience for the artists themselves.” (Similar Rock2Rebuild events have since taken place: \$14,000 was raised for Habitat for Humanity following Hurricane Katrina, and a series of concerts has benefited Ronald McDonald charities.)

Mirel says that the success of Rock2Rebuild left him wondering if this sort of symbiosis could become a permanent model, “where we can put arts in the service of community and, at the same time, the community can lift local artists.”

Mirel sees similarities between the Arbor Hill neighborhood and the artist community that will move into the new space. “It’s just a different kind of low-income population,” he says. He hopes that bringing creative enterprise and creative individuals together under the same roof will foster collaborative efforts, creating opportunities for the artists themselves to achieve commercial success, but also benefiting neighborhood residents through increased community activity and access to creative arts programming. Once established, the belief is that the Academy Lofts will help to attract new local businesses hoping to cater to a reinvigorated Arbor Hill community. Those businesses would provide not only job opportunities to local residents, but easier access to important goods and services such as grocery stores selling fresh produce—goods and services that are currently lacking in a neighborhood that has double the vacancy rate and only half the median income of the rest of the city.



Photo of Jeff Mirel by Julia Zave

Mirel believes that artists are uniquely suited to an undertaking of this nature. “They can see through the blight. They can see the decrepit state of this building, for instance, and they can see the potential and beauty in it—and they can realize that beauty.” He believes that creative arts have the potential to not only revitalize forgotten physical spaces, but also to breathe life back into faltering neighborhoods and reconnect communities.

“I think that this has been a long time coming,” says Doug Melnick, director of planning for the city of Albany

and an Arbor Hill resident. He considers it a significant continuation of the work that is being done to implement the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Plan, which was developed several years ago—a community vision developed hand in hand with members of that community. “In my opinion, the project is a real linchpin. When you look around at other communities across the country, what artists can bring in terms of energy and economic development is absolutely fantastic.”

Across the street from St. Joseph’s School is a lonely basketball court adjacent to an unused square of concrete. The city of Albany has secured funds from various sources to develop Albany’s first “green” park on the site, using renewable resources and sustainable infrastructure to create a multigenerational public space. “There will be basketball courts, a play area for kids, places for quiet enjoyment and an area that’s designed for public uses like performance and presentations,” Melnick says. He hopes that once the Barn is complete, they will be able to forge a partnership to ensure maintenance, functionality and creative utilization of the new park.

The name Albany Barn comes from the old-fashioned concept of a barn raising: the idea of building something significant within a community utilizing input and efforts from that community. Ed Anker—one of the founders and an Albany Barn board member—says that the Barn, the community and the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Plan have become “intrinsically linked.”

“This project will serve as a model for community participation and outreach,” Anker says. “One of the things that we have been insistent upon is that, as a condition of tenancy, all of the residents in the building will be required to run classes in the space specifically geared toward the neighborhood residents and children. Our goal is to become part of the already diverse fabric of Arbor Hill and serve as a beacon for the neighborhood.”

“This is really a model that we need to see more of as a whole,” says Sampson Contompasis, local artist, gallery owner and arts activist. “Artists are an often forgotten about and pushed aside part of the community. Once in play, this will be a valuable asset to the community, but also to local artists and other artists as well.”

Albany Barn was, in fact, directly influenced by a larger, national organization known as ArtSpace. Founded in 1979, ArtSpace has made the creation and retention of affordable living and working spaces for artists its primary mission. Mirel first encountered the group in Providence, R.I., at their AS220 project, and brought them into initial planning phases as a consultant for Albany Barn. An interesting study done by ArtSpace found that the artists living in these low-rent apartments did not see their income rise significantly, but that they found they had much more time to dedicate to their chosen artistic endeavors.

“Believe me,” says Contompasis, “I’ve had my fair share of tough times paying rent before. Having things subsidized for your income level is an extraordinary thing. For anyone in their craft, being able to focus on what they’re doing rather than what they have to do to support their art—such as work 60 hours a week or more at another job—is a massive help.”

A musician himself, Mirel claims that he has found that his finest talents lie in being a facilitator of “artists who are more talented than I am.” Ultimately, he feels that if they can provide a space that will allow artists the time, the inspiration and the ability to collaborate, his goal has been accomplished. “If we also manage to provide them with tools and enterprise which help them to achieve more financial success, then that’s wonderful too. Then maybe they stay in the neighborhood. Maybe they buy a house here and fix it up. There really is a method to our madness.”

Tony Iadiciccio is the creative director for Albany Center Gallery and sits on the board of directors for Albany Barn. According to Iadiciccio, Albany Barn has already received almost 200 pre-applications from artists of varying disciplines, and that more than half of those have requested residential space. Those pre-applications have allowed the board to ascertain what types of leases will be desired, what amenities are considered important and other necessary details.

Choosing those artists who will be accepted to take up residence in one of the 22 apartments will be no small feat. As a nonprofit endeavor, the first criteria will necessarily regard income qualification. The second part of the process will be based on an objective review conducted by the board, members of the local arts community and neighborhood residents. Likely, some combination of portfolio work, a standardized questionnaire and a viable business plan will be weighed when considering applicants.

One major aspect of the Albany Barn incubator space is that the organizers hope to attract more than just individual artists; they are looking to also bring in creative businesses such as marketing firms that need graphic designers or musicians to write jingles. By locating the business and the creativity under one roof, Mirel has hopes that their endeavors will become mutually (and financially) beneficial. Once an artist does achieve a certain level of commercial success, however, that artist will no longer be eligible for residence at Academy Lofts and will be compelled to make way for new and needier artists. Perhaps, as Mirel has suggested, they might be inspired to remain in the neighborhood, opening studios or buying homes.

When the idea was still in its infancy, Mirel says that he would talk to anyone who was willing to listen—and that he found significant support. Will Berglund, an attorney at the well-known Albany firm O’Connell and Aronowitz, became involved during the early stages and is currently a member of the board; his firm donated the 501 (c)(3) paperwork that was necessary to establish the nonprofit. Anker, an architect, began working with Mirel eight years ago and has been instrumental in much of the planning of the physical building as well as a source of valuable information. “Ed is actually the guy that recommended we go and talk to the Albany Housing Authority pretty early on.”

When looking at potential locations, it was Darren Scott at the AHA who recommended St. Joseph’s Academy. Scott thought that the Albany Barn’s mission would fit in perfectly with the Arbor Hill Neighborhood Plan. “Things like housing, revitalization, arts and cultural sources,” says Mirel. “It was definitely good timing and good luck, but there was also a lot of good direction from people that would ultimately come to form our board and from the amazing people at the Housing Authority.”

The AHA, which has been instrumental in many aspects of the Arbor Hill rehabilitation project, has been actively involved with the Albany Barn project from early on. In addition to helping secure funds from sources such as the Empire State Development Corporation and Restore NY, as well as the sales of housing and historic tax credits, the AHA also will be running Academy Lofts.

“That’s really kind of how this has grown,” Mirel says. “And it’s really informed the way that the board works. When we were putting the board together, we really focused more on time and talent than on treasure. We wanted to bring in people who could manage this project to go the distance.”

Initially, some people already living in Arbor Hill were skeptical of Albany Barn, which looked like an outsider project that might be of questionable benefit to the neighborhood itself. One of those was Barbara Smith, but she says she’s not skeptical any more.

“A couple of years ago,” says Smith, 4th Ward councilwoman and Arbor Hill resident, “there were some who raised legitimate concerns [about the Albany Barn project] at the neighborhood association meetings.” One of the prevailing worries was that this new element might be a path towards the gentrification of the neighborhood. Smith says that she initially shared that reservation but, over the ensuing years, her fears have been allayed. “That’s something that we’ve talked about. I look forward to everything being very well thought out and very organized. I think it’s going to be a great asset to the community.”

Smith even views the project as a possible incubator of artistic talent within the community already established in Arbor Hill. “There are not sufficient resources in Arbor Hill for children and youth,” she says. “I think that this has the potential to be a place where new ideas and new dreams can be nurtured.” An African-American

literature and women's-studies scholar, she points out, "During the Harlem renaissance, some very well known people like Langston Hughes stayed at the YMCA there. This idea of an artists' studio live-and-work space, well who knows? Maybe the next Hughes or Zora Neale Hurston will end up living there."

The physical restoration of the building has only just begun. Tentatively, the date for completion and occupation is set for March 2013. While the building won't be LEED (Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design) -certified by the U.S. Green Building Council, Anker says that the Academy Lofts will still be "green." Builders will be utilizing materials that have a low level of volatile organic compounds, which significantly reduce chemical emissions that cause smog and a number of related health issues.

"The Barn's mission is to create a sustainable live/work space in the city of Albany," Anker says. "Not only from a physically sustainable standpoint, but also from an operations standpoint." To that end, they are wiring the roof for solar panels and looking into grants to help purchase them. They are also looking into possible thermodynamic energy sources and intend to retain as much of the original building as possible. "We have to figure out what's safe, what's salvageable, what makes sense," says Mirel. "We want to preserve everything we can but we also want it to be a little bit raw." The artists and the community, he implies, ultimately will be the ones to truly transform and personalize the space.

Until then, however, Albany Barn has already established a presence in the community through a storefront space at 46-48 North Swan St., aptly named Stage 1. "You can't expect to revitalize a neighborhood if you're not a part of that neighborhood," says Mirel. He views Stage 1 as an entry point into the community, a place where they can offer some of the types of programming that will be available at Albany Barn and get to know their neighbors. And he sees it as a place "for the residents to become involved and learn more about the project and also to influence the project. It's a very important stage in development, and a sign of our commitment to the neighborhood."

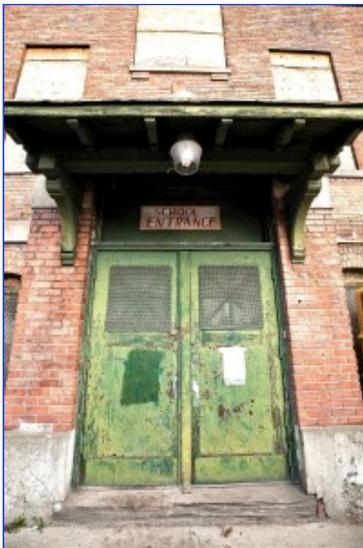


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Stage 1 has become a fixture on the First Friday/Art on Lark circuit, has hosted Wine And Dine events, offers dance classes, and annually features the artwork of local children. The storefront also offers studio, rehearsal and design space for a small fee and has just welcomed Bananerd Media, an Albany-based graphics, web-design and video-production start-up into the building as well.

The Stage 1 location provides but a glimpse at the sort of programming and collaboration that the completed

building will make available in the reviving neighborhood. “I think that there will be more people coming into Arbor Hill to take advantage of the programs and exhibits and other things,” says Smith. “And I think they are going to get a different perspective on Arbor Hill as a result of spending more time here.” This Friday (April 6), you can catch the 1st Friday Trolley to spend some time at Stage 1 between 5 and 9 PM for an informal reception and photography exhibit called *Eye of the Beholder*.

As Mirel and I leave the building just after sunset, we are approached by two boys on bicycles, one of whom asks, “Hey mister, can you spare some change?” Mirel apologetically shakes his empty pockets, but makes sure to let them know that he’s working on the change.

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