

Crafting lofty ambitions

Small town creates haven for artists with new downtown housing.

In its heyday, Peekskill, N.Y.'s main street thrived with tall churches, squat factories, ornately decorated hotels, a theater at which John Wilkes Booth is said to have performed, and a host of haberdasheries, millinery shops and farm supply and hardware stores. But when the factories left town, residents and other downtown attractions followed, and an urban renewal era replaced many of the historic buildings in the 1960s with bulky structures. Now, in an effort to restore Peekskill's Main Street, the city of 25,000 is staging a revival and attempting to lure a creative class of residents with housing specially designed for artists.

Peekskill has launched an art loft program that is encouraging developers to refurbish historic buildings and build new ones that feature live/work studios for artists. By attracting artists to the community, city officials intend to build a new industry to replace the jobs that were lost, and they envision a streetscape filled with studios, galleries and customers. The city adapted its building codes in the 1990s to allow the upper floors of downtown buildings to be used as apartments and studios for artists.

Peekskill's first Art Loft units were completed in 2002 by Syracuse, N.Y.-based Monahan Development. Designed in a Victorian-inspired style, the \$5.9 million brick-faced structure boasts turrets and detailing, and stretches along one block on a key avenue. Other art lofts were built on the opposite side of the block in a style that matched that of the existing 19th and early 20th century buildings.

The 28 artist residences — each 1,200 square feet, with soaring ceilings, single bathrooms and loft space for bedrooms — filled lots that had been empty for decades. Units were priced between \$89,500 and \$139,500 and were sold out within six months, even though ownership was restricted to those who made



Peekskill, N.Y., opened its first Art Loft units in 2002. The Victorian-inspired building stretches along one block on a major downtown avenue. The building and others like it have since attracted more than 150 artists to the community, which is banking on art to revive its economy.

more than half their income from their art. A review board, which included the city's director of planning and development, evaluated each potential resident's application.

With \$1.3 million from a New York state grant left over from the first loft project, New York-based developer CPC Resources began a second project, devoting \$7 million to the new building. Ground was broken on the Main Street Art Lofts this summer. Situated near City Hall, the building will feature five storefronts and 10 lofts on a previously ignored vacant lot. Each unit will have 1,300 square feet of space, 12-foot ceilings and large windows designed to take advantage of natural light. The buildings' style will mimic the traditional brick structures that have given Main Street much of its appeal, right down to the cornices leaning out from their tops. Farther down the street, construction of

a smaller building with two storefronts and two lofts is planned to begin shortly after the larger project breaks ground.

Today, more than 150 artists have moved into Peekskill as a result of the city's efforts. The city is supporting the artists' community in numerous ways, from providing buses for annual studio tours to encouraging landlords to convert more existing space to art lofts.

Streets that were virtually barren one year ago boast studios, toy stores and craft shops, and real estate tax revenues increased nearly \$1.3 million last year. Equally important, a reputation that had been savaged by decades of decline is coming back strongly. In fact, two leading regional publications recently put Peekskill on their "best communities" lists — and the artists' community was the primary reason. AGC

— Tony Seideman is public information officer for Peekskill, N.Y.