

CARLO ROTELLA

Dream space

A post-industrial garage is a haven for creative minds

By Carlo Rotella | DECEMBER 09, 2011

LOOK AROUND the Boston area, or any old manufacturing center, and you'll see industrial infrastructure repurposed for the post-industrial age. Big, solid factory buildings and warehouses have been turned into restaurants, bars, museums, convention centers, stores of all kinds. Condo conversions turn some of these buildings into residences, and high-ceilinged lofts make for good artists' studios, but our main impulse in refitting manufacturing facilities is to create places where consumers can spend their dollars in the leisure economy.

Part of what they consume is nostalgia for a bygone era in which the city's main function was to turn raw materials into finished goods. The city we live in today is organized primarily around providing services and handling information, and for many urbanites the hands-on life seems to have receded into a historical distance best enjoyed as decor while sipping a drink.

But all that sitting around and appreciating other people's handiwork doesn't satisfy the urge to do something yourself, and that urge helps explain the wild success of Artisan's Asylum. Founded last year and, after a couple of expansions, currently



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The Artisan's Asylum has been wildly successful, recently moving to a bigger space.

housed in a 25,500-square-foot chunk of the vast defunct Ames Envelope plant in Somerville, Artisan's Asylum is a shared space for all kinds of people who make things: roboticists, bike freaks, engine jockeys, sculptors, furniture makers, boat builders, musicians, painters, engineers, and tinkerers of all kinds. You can rent space there, share tools and ideas, take classes, teach, hang out. Some people run businesses out of it; some pursue hobbies; others come around because they have an unfulfilled yen for handiness or company or both at once. It's an art-manufacturing business incubator; a school; a fantasy garage/basement workspace big enough for the whole neighborhood.



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The junk robot sculpture in the social area is the creation of Skunk, an Asylum renter and welding instructor.

When I dropped by on Tuesday evening, the cavernous gray- and red-painted atrium was abuzz with activity. Staff members glided on scooters between rented work spaces, which are divided by waist-high walls so that everybody can see what everybody else is up to. In a machine shop stocked with donated or shared equipment, a knot of students huddled around an old South Bend engine lathe while a guy with a piratical scar on one cheek showed them how to handle its eccentricities. Next door, a bike-building guru known as Skunk instructed a young woman in the basics of welding while other students looked on. They all flipped their masks down, she called out “welding!” in an excited voice, and a potent brightness rose up from in their midst.

In a classroom on the other side of the building, an instructor covered another student's head in alginate goop, demonstrating how to make a mold of his face. When I asked the student next to me why he was taking the class, he said, “My mom has MS, and I want to make a powered orthotic device for her. I need to know how to make a positive of her leg that I can work with.” His expertise was in software, so he was

studying up on the molding and mechanical engineering skills he would need to do the job.

Eric Van Dyke, the shop steward of Artisan's Asylum, told me, "The mix here is about 50-50 between people who've never done anything like this and people who know a lot about what they're doing." He works in a clean room at a biotech firm, so, he said, "All I see is white and silver all day. Like a lot of people, I come here after work to get my hands dirty."

Gui Cavalcanti, the robotocist who co-founded and presides loosely over Artisan's Asylum, worked on a mechanical mule that Boston Dynamics developed for the military. "But I wanted to build my own projects," he said, "and I want other people to build their own projects. We have a set of generations that have come to rely on Facebook, but they still have an intense need for human interaction, and they want to do stuff with their hands."

Artisan's Asylum offers gift certificates, which seems like an inspired idea. For Christmas, you can help a loved one get his or her hands dirty by making something in like-minded company. "That need hasn't gone away," said Cavalcanti. "It's just been waiting."

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