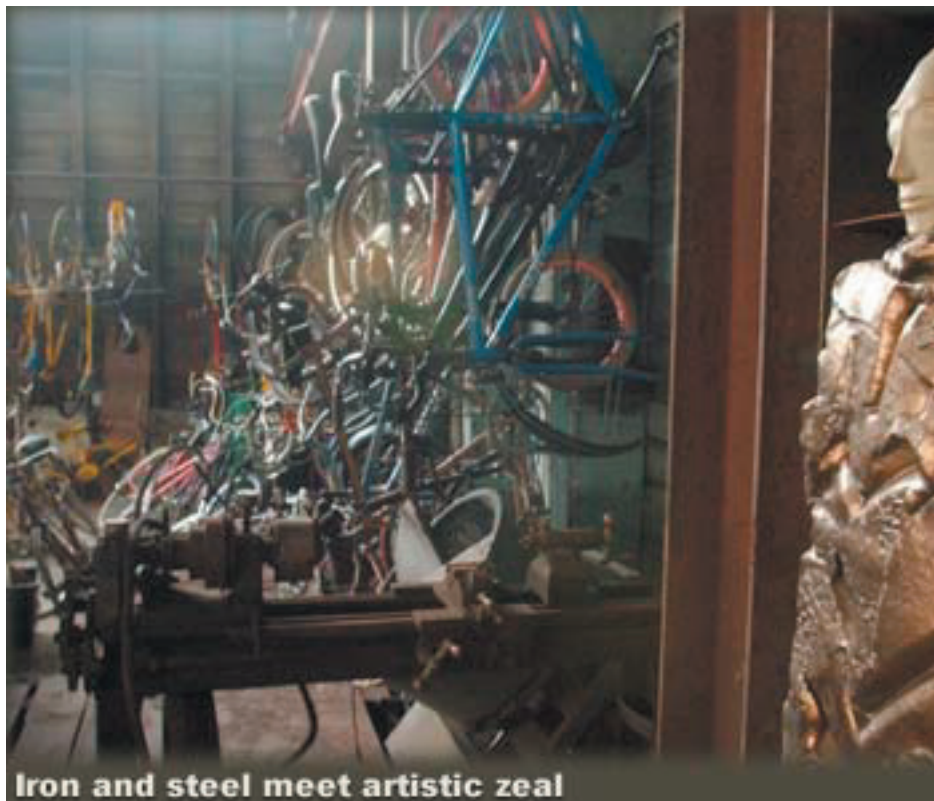


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Iron and steel meet artistic zeal



The Steel Yard, in the former Providence Steel and Iron Co., is a funky home to sculpture such as an oversized revolver and a hanging figure made of wire and metal bands. It has become an arts center and incubator for new businesses.

Artists who work in metals find space at former plant

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BY GREGORY SMITH

Journal Staff Writer

Journal photo / Sandor Bodo

PROVIDENCE -- When clever and earnest people work alongside one another, wonderfully creative sparks will fly.

That's the simple idea driving a fledgling industrial-arts center that has been hammered together at an old steel- and iron-fabricating plant in the Promenade section west of Providence Place mall.

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Rockefeller says he has been able to accomplish some of the things in his life only with the help of others, and he wants to spread that gospel of cooperation.

What Rockefeller and Bauta have produced so far is an arts center/business incubator that champions the arts and trades based on metalworking and the making of jewelry and ceramics. They had an open house last week to introduce their concept to a wider world.

Among other things, the Steel Yard rents lockers, work spaces, desks and equipment to artists and startup businesses, serves as an art exhibit space, and offers education courses to high school students and the public.

A nonprofit organization called Woonasquatucket Valley Community Build is the Steel Yard's anchor tenant. It teaches the techniques of welding, pottery-firing, metal-forging and brass-forming.

Available for use are a 12-foot-wide crimper, which can be used to bend steel up to 2 inches thick, a break, a shear, a buffalo punch, saws, a drill press, welding units and what-have-you.

One of the nonprofit's programs is the manufacture of a line of products called Made in Providence: tree guards, bicycle racks and holders for public trash cans. It has sold tree guards and bike racks to a developer and Olneyville Housing Corporation, which have installed them at Donigian Park on Valley Street.

The program is designed to employ artists and craftspeople and provide an educational opportunity for students.

"Space is such a large aspect of this," said Rockefeller, a baseball cap tugged over his head as he leaned over a laptop computer in a former draftsman's office inside a big work shed. "If you have space, things are kind of drawn to it inevitably in terms of projects or ideas. Space is just so limited and expensive."

At this point about 100 artists have become involved with the Steel Yard, some just volunteering their time and interest or displaying their art. Others ply their trade, such as Brower L. Hatcher, who has taken over the end of a big shop building to work on his commissioned sculpture for a municipal building in Santa Fe, N.M.

In a way, the Steel Yard could be one part of the answer to a question that civic leaders have been asking in recent years: How do we help the Providence artist community stay together when the cheap mill space used by many artists is being priced out of their reach?

But the Steel Yard represents a rare confluence of factors: two young artists who happen to be

blessed with some money cutting a deal with the owner of a classic piece of 19th- and 20th-century manufacturing who was willing to let it go at a discounted price of \$1.4 million. And he took a promissory note from the buyers to boot.

Their site is the former Providence Steel and Iron Co., which ceased business in 2003, its centennial year, when William E. King sold to Rockefeller and Bauta.

King was an early convert to their vision, which was the preservation of a historic site along with its historic use. As a career employee of Providence Steel and Iron who became its proprietor, King wanted to see the traditional metal trades carried on.

“Mr. K’s a hero because he believed . . . rather than make a quick buck,” said artist Erik Bright, who along with Rockefeller, Bauta and a fourth partner are rehabilitating the adjacent Monohasset Mill for artist live/work condominiums.

For Rockefeller, the Steel Yard is an artistic, environmental, political and social statement all in one.

“Working in metal, I can’t really describe it,” he said haltingly. “It’s extremely empowering.

“Steel and metal are these classical symbols of strength. To be able to manipulate them and work with them, I think, does great for one’s self-esteem and for how one perceives and defines their own success.”

Rockefeller said the Steel Yard is emblematic of a quiet fight to save the old mills in Providence that have been havens for small manufacturing and commercial enterprises but are being demolished or snapped up for conversion to residential and office uses.

If the trend continues, he said, “we’ll be left with an urban suburbia.” There needs to be a balance, he said, that allows some manufacturing and commercial uses to survive.

Said Bauta, “I’m a mill lover, just like all my partners” at Monohasset.

The Steel Yard was the brownest of brownfields when King sold the property. Six hundred tons of lead-contaminated soil were gouged out and carted to a licensed landfill, per the instructions of the state Department of Environmental Management, according to Peter Eiermann, executive director of Woonasquatucket Valley Community Build.

The property will have to be capped with clean soil, a biosynthetic material or concrete, and the remediation is expected to cost from \$250,000 to \$350,000.

Rockefeller and Bauta are a story of real estate development, business, historic preservation and environmentalism, as well as the arts. Both in their 20s, the sculptors came to Rhode Island to go to college.

Despite being the member of a famous wealthy family, Rockefeller said no one should make the mistaken assumption that a fortune is the Steel Yard’s foundation. The Steel Yard will have to stand on its own as a for-profit or nonprofit enterprise, he said.

In order to ensure that, he might have to carve away a portion of the 2.9-acre site for development of revenue-producing residential housing. One of the three structures on the site, a rehabilitated brick

office building, is leased at discount rates to architects and an information-design firm called Tellart that creates Web sites.

There is 30,000 square feet of interior space on the property, including the rambling shop building and the work shed, which has a rail line running into it.

Otherwise it's a funky tableau of junked vehicles, including half of a cab of an old fire truck, intriguing sculpture such as an oversized metal revolver and a hanging figure made of wire and metal bands, and characters such as the cigar-chewing Paulie Iannella, a former employee of Providence Steel and Iron who stayed on to keep the shop equipment running and to indulge his hobby of restoring cars, for which the shed comes in handy.

A crude brick pizza oven is an outdoor gathering spot, and at one end of the yard is an old tractor-trailer set up as an experimental urban hydroponic garden, where mint and basil grows. From time to time one of a number of dogs or cats ambles by.

Across the way, Bauta's olive-drab military surplus vehicle covered in camouflage netting is parked near Rockefeller's hand-me-down 1972 Ford Ranchero 500, which Rockefeller hopes to restore.

"This project is not a stable and a sure thing," Rockefeller warned. Its future will depend on the businesses that grow there and pay their own way, and on donations and other kinds of revenue or cost-sharing.

Rockefeller and Bauta own the site in the name of Millhaus, LLC, a for-profit corporation doing business as 27 Sims, which is the property address. Borrowing money against their personal assets, they have provided a line of credit to 27 Sims and are looking to refinance the loan.

The annual city property tax bill went up this year, from \$20,000 to \$54,000.

For the time being, the Steel Yard thrives on artistic zeal as well as the line of credit.

"We're really trying to build an artists colony . . . a creative outlet" in which the participants "feed off the energy of other people," said David Allyn, a sculptor and studio manager.

"Everyone's investing in their future."