New York City Couple Put Up Buildings that Cater to Artists and Galleries

Marianne and Ted Hovivian Own The BogArt in Brooklyn and Plan to Put Up Another One Called 'AnX'

By Keiko Morris

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Artists often are seen as harbingers of change in New York City's neighborhoods. But for Marianne and Ted Hovivian, they also have been good for business.

The Hovivians are planning to put up a 40,000-square-foot building in the East Williamsburg area of Brooklyn that will offer several studios and space for galleries.

The couple already own The BogArt, a 100,000-square-foot artist and gallery loft building next to the planned project site. And they said they field calls daily from artists and gallery owners looking to rent.

So the decision to develop more space for arts—this venture is called the "AnX"— seemed obvious.

"This is a successful formula for us," said Marianne Hovivian. "We know it well. There's a tremendous need for it."

Finding affordable work and exhibition space has been a constant challenge for city artists, particularly for visual artists who tend to need long-term spaces typically zoned for industrial uses.

"A lot of land has been rezoned for residential use, and what is left has become very expensive," said Paul Parkhill, executive director of Spaceworks, a nonprofit launched with the help of the city's Department of Cultural Affairs to develop affordable workspace for artists. "So artists, like small manufacturers, find it increasingly hard to find affordable space anywhere."

Even as rents rise and new residential developments take shape in East Williamsburg and neighboring Bushwick, the area's ecosystem of galleries, studios and artist-focused establishments continues to attract the creative set.

Williamsburg is on the map with Germany's Berlin as destinations for curators and gallery operators planning studio tours, said architect Gene Kaufman, the principal at Gene Kaufman Architect PC, who is designing the Hovivians' building as well as another artist studio and gallery nearby.

"There has been 20 years of growing demand for this," he said. "It has gotten to a friction point where it makes sense to invest and build a ground-up building for artists."

Down the street from The BogArt, IBK Construction Group LLC is planning a six-story, 50,000-square-foot building to house artist studios, said Alex Tukmanian, managing member of the company.

Preliminary plans for the Hovivians' "AnX," at 13 Grattan St., call for several studio spaces of 400 square feet to 960 square feet.
The metal four-story building will have 12-foot-high ceilings, terraces on upper-floor units and large windows to bring in natural light. Rents, which will include utilities, could range from $35 to $45 a square foot, Ted Hovivian said.

The Hovivians' dream is to work as partners with someone to create a rooftop sculpture garden.

"We want to give it as many amenities as possible," Marianne Hovivian said.

The first floor and cellar will have about 12,000 square feet of retail space. Ted Hovivian envisions a national retailer setting up shop on the first-floor.

Costs for the project, which is around the corner from the Morgan Avenue subway station, are expected to run $17 million to $19 million, including land acquisition.

The BogArt already draws thousands of people for events such as Bushwick Open Studios, said Bryan Rogers, an artist and co-director of Honey Ramka, a gallery at The BogArt dedicated to emerging artists.

"It's already known as a place to go for looking at art," he said. "If they were to develop other spaces, artists would move in there."

The Hovivians' entrepreneurial endeavors have reflected, in some ways, the city's evolving neighborhoods. They owned and operated a furniture-manufacturing company from 1979 to 2005.
They bought the building that is now The BogArt and the adjacent land in 1983 as they looked to relocate their business from a gentrifying Greenwich Village.

Crime in that East Williamsburg neighborhood, though, persuaded the couple to rent the building to industrial tenants and move their operations to another Williamsburg property.

Then as Williamsburg began to gentrify, the Hovivians decided to wind down their manufacturing business to explore developing the property that had been the company's home.

They already had experience managing two-and three-family properties, and after a 2005 rezoning, the couple hired Mr. Kaufman as the architect for a condo building on the site. They named the project The Rialto, and it sold out in 2009.

As development pushed many artists farther out, the Hovivians saw another use for the building at 56 Bogart St. Maintaining industrial tenants in the building had become difficult. Garment manufacturers came and went.

So in 2005, the Hovivians began turning the building into The BogArt.

They brought in Momenta Art, an artist-run nonprofit, as an anchor gallery tenant. That drew in other gallery operators.

Within the building, the artists have created a supportive community, often sharing space to make it more affordable, Marianne Hovivian said.

The Hovivians have deep connections to the art scene and say they enjoy being a part of it, but they are also aware that one day in the future the area around their artist-centered developments likely will change.

If so, the "AnX" could become office space.