

Diverse Mix of Artists Call Baltimore's H & H Building Home

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Special to Capital News Service

BALTIMORE -- The lower floors of Baltimore's H & H Building are filled with camping gear. The upper floors are filled with artists.



Inside the H & H Building, a nondescript structure at the corner of North Eutaw and West Franklin streets, is a representative slice of Baltimore's underground arts scene -- urban, organic, do-it-yourself, invisible to many city residents, yet attracting national attention.

Dan Deacon, the Baltimore musician who composed part of the music for Francis Ford Coppola's latest film, "Twixt," says the H & H and other buildings like it are anchors for artists.

"Whenever I go to a city with a similar building, which Baltimore has the luxury of having several, where almost the entire building is occupied by artists, it's just like a mainstay -- a place you know you can go and find creativity and cultural expansion," said Deacon, an experimental musician and Baltimore resident, who has performed and organized events in the building.

"It's definitely important. And the H & H is a prime example of that."

The activity inside the H & H Building resembles Baltimore's art scene in miniature. All kinds of art is created here, displayed here, performed here.

Places like the H & H Building "become community centers for the art community," Deacon said, describing them as "large, semi-public spaces that invite people, the public, into their homes."

"These spaces are great spaces for people who want to experience culture and nightlife but not go to a venue or bar that focuses on alcohol," Deacon said.

The basement, first and second floors are occupied by the business that gives the building its name: H & H Outdoors. The Army-Navy surplus, clothing and camping equipment store, founded in 1947, moved here in 1973. The store is open from 9:30 a.m. to 6 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

The owners of H & H Outdoors could not be less concerned with the artists living above their store.

"I know that there are artists up there," said Ken Rosenblatt, whose father founded the H & H Outdoors business. "I hear them playing music sometimes. ... I really don't have much interaction. I don't have any plus or minus opinion."

The third and fourth floors hold art galleries alongside apartments. The Nudashank Gallery and the Whole Gallery operate on the third floor. Gallery Four is held on the fourth floor.

In addition to the residential spaces, the fifth and sixth floors also operate as mixed-use spaces and often hold live music concerts. The fifth floor's performance space is known as the Fifth Dimension and the sixth floor's venue is Floristree.

"One thing that I think is kind of cool is that it grew up organically," said Dustin Carlson, an artist and co-founder of Gallery Four.

"The main thing about our building," Carlson said, "is it wasn't like somebody decided, 'We're going to make an arts building and it's going to be like this.' It was really something that was predicated by artists ... artists who lived in the city who saw that they had the ability to fulfill a need that the city didn't already have (fulfilled), and to showcase different types of art that didn't have a venue."

Visitors who come through the building's side entrance to take the elevator to upper floors encounter the hallway's white walls and some miscellaneous garbage.

The elevator car is full of character and graffiti and, last fall, included a language experiment toying with the name of the director of the Baltimore Museum of Art, Doreen Bolger. "Doreen Bolger/ Doorbean Folgers."

This graffiti is telling of the building's importance in the city's arts community. Bolger, head of one of Baltimore's most traditional arts venues, is a strong supporter of the underground arts and visits the H & H often.

The ride up to Floristree is rickety and concert posters fit comfortably alongside the car walls' graffiti. Floristree's walls have been painted a wide spectrum of colors, and a large botanical display hangs from the ceiling in front of the stage.

The main stage is often irrelevant, though, as performances take place all over Floristree's large, high-ceilinged space.

"When anybody thinks of the H & H, they think Floristree," said Ed Schrader, the leader of Baltimore's Ed Schrader's Music Beat, which has performed many times at Floristree.

"It's the one consistent great D.I.Y. space that hasn't stopped," Schrader added. "You know there's nothing like that around the country. Most D.I.Y. spaces get shut down in their first year. It's crazy. It's pretty inspiring. ... It's like if you're thinking of the New York City music scene back in the late '70s, you think of CGBGs. That's just how it is."

Though Floristree may be the face of the building to the city's underground music fans and players, the building's other spaces have drawn comparable attention over the years.

The artists behind Gallery Four have done installations for Baltimore's free summer arts festival, Artscape, and the galleries in the building have operated as satellite exhibitions for Artscape, according to Gary Kachadourian, the visual arts coordinator of the Baltimore Office of Promotion and the Arts from 1987 to 2009.

Floristree has also lent its space to outside groups' events, including Wham City's Artscape alternative, Whartscape, and the Transmodern Festival.

Gallery Four co-founder Carlson arrived at the H & H Building in 1996, moving to Baltimore from Indiana to attend the Maryland Institute College of Art.

"When we moved into the space, it was pretty raw," Carlson said. "The living areas were not necessarily shanties, but they were just sort of ... pieces were put together out of found materials. The walls didn't go all the way up to the ceiling, and nothing was really refined or finished, drywall or anything like that.

"Everybody working on the project was about 18 years old so it took us a lot of time to get the money together and do all the work to bring it up to the way it looks now."

Gallery Four operated under a variety of nicknames before being officially opened under the current name in 2000. Before 2000, Carlson and some collaborators lived in the space, hosting a few shows but not working as a formal gallery, as the space does today.

Artist activity began in the building long before 1996, Carlson said. It wasn't until the mid-'90s that the artist live-work spaces in the H & H Building started to become organized as they are now.

In 2000, the upper floors of the building became legitimate living spaces in the eyes of the city, as proper zoning was secured for artist live-work spaces.

The zoning process was started by Towner Management, which purchased the building over a decade ago.

Barker French, the building's property manager and vice president of Towner Management, started working with the H & H Building in 2005, when he joined the company.

Towner's chief operating officer emeritus, Jay French, "always felt that the artists were an important part of the community and wanted to support that," French said. "And to the extent that we can, we support them. We try to be reasonable with rent, we try to get them wide latitude to operate, but at the same time, (hold them responsible) for their actions, too."

The tenants of the upper floors hope to be living in the H & H for years to come. The threat of removal isn't a foreign concept, however. But French is confident artists will continue to have a space in the building.

"We've always told them that, at some point, we may develop it and there may not be artist housing," French said. "But it's not around the corner or anything. ... What we've always said is that we want to support the arts, so we will do that as long as we can. And that's what we do."

April 2012 University of Maryland Philip Merrill College of Journalism