

Spaces for artists to live and work eyed for Mount Clemens

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Artist Carole Kabrin talks with guests near her sketch art from different court trials she has done for major news organizations during an art show at The Connector art space attached to the City Hall Artspace Lofts in Dearborn on Friday, February 21, 2020. Residential/workspaces give artists a place to work and show in the building that was the former City Hall. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Ralph Parus once made jewelry and small sculptures in a shop in the basement of his brother's home in Jackson, Mich.

Now he's creating his art in the front room of his 750-square-foot apartment in City Hall Artspace Lofts in Dearborn, a three-building campus where artists live and work in the old city hall.

"The main thing that I like is all the energy. It makes it easy for me to live here, to work here and to create here," Parus, who moved in four years ago. "It's a beautiful place."

That's what folks are striving for in Mount Clemens.

They're working with Artspace to create a live/work development for artists that could end up being a multimillion-dollar project, said Phil Gilchrist, executive director of the Anton Art Center and co-chair of the Mount Clemens Artspace Steering Committee.

"It's important in that it's going to establish an arts infrastructure," he said. "Part of what the artists and the creative community need in Macomb County are more brick and mortar places to do and take workshops."

Gilchrist added: "the fact that this development offers affordable rent to artists, it helps enable artists and creative folks to pursue their passion."

Parus said he was the first person to move into the Dearborn project in 2016 after he was searching for live/work spaces in Michigan. He just signed his new lease about three weeks ago. He said his rent started at \$580 a month and is now \$650 a month.

"You can still put food on the table and still do your work," said Parus, who is in his early 60s, semi-retired and a student at Wayne State University finishing up a bachelor's degree in fine arts.

More: [New Discovery Center to open in downtown Mount Clemens in spring of 2020 \(/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2019/12/27/discovery-center-mount-clemens-macomb-childrens/4403057002/\)](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2019/12/27/discovery-center-mount-clemens-macomb-childrens/4403057002/)

Artspace is the leading non-profit developer of live/work artist housing, artist studios, art centers and arts-friendly businesses in the U.S., according to its website.

It has 53 properties, about six in development and has consulted with 230 communities in the last 15 years, said Wendy Holmes, Artspace senior vice president for consulting and strategic partnerships.

She said the group works where it is invited. It has one development in Michigan — the \$16.5 million project in Dearborn. Holmes said Artspace has had conversations with other cities in Michigan, including Detroit, Ann Arbor and Grand Rapids.

The Dearborn project is a mixed-use arts campus that was renovated into 53 units of live/work space from studios to three-bedroom units and new work studio spaces in the Connector building, according to Artspace's website. It has a resident community room and access to an art and tech lab.

The old city hall building was sold to Artspace for about \$1.6 million, according to a 2016 Free Press story on its reopening as artist lofts.



(Right to left) Resident artist Monica Feliciano discusses her artwork with Colette Burton of St. Clair Shores in her live-in art space in the former Mayor's office at the former Dearborn City Hall in Dearborn on Friday, February 21, 2020. Residential/workspaces give artists a place to work and show in the building. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

"It's really an economic development strategy for the city. Where artists congregate, then economic development happens," Holmes said, adding that such projects also are a way to keep young people and their families in a community.

She said the average length of stay is eight years in all of its buildings, with artists ranging in age from their 20s to their 70s and 80s. She said it always has waiting lists for its properties.

Artspace constructs or restores locations and adheres to affordable housing guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development in setting its rents, according to its website.

Its projects normally span four to seven years, with each built to address the needs of the specific community. Funding comes from a mixture of public and private sources. Holmes said there are no additional taxpayers' dollars involved. Artspace says its projects are fully supported and funded at the time of groundbreaking.

Most Artspace live/work projects are mixed-use buildings with housing on the upper floors and non-residential space on the lower levels.

More: [New Sterling Heights Community Center pops with color, art, sports and meeting spaces](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2020/02/28/sterling-heights-community-center-opens-march-2/4905876002/) (/story/news/local/michigan/macomb/2020/02/28/sterling-heights-community-center-opens-march-2/4905876002/).

In Mount Clemens, a feasibility study was completed and now a market survey is gathering information about amenities artists would like to see in the development, Gilchrist said. The survey will help determine what size of a development is feasible and sustainable.

Artists from as far as Ann Arbor and Port Huron can complete the online survey. About 200 responses have come in by Feb. 24. Gilchrist said 500 responses are needed by March 17, when the survey closes. Survey results should be ready by summer.

Gilchrist said a couple of sites in Mount Clemens, including where the old county parking garage was situated downtown, have been identified as possible locations for the project.

Holmes said Artspace can put properties back on tax rolls that weren't on before.

Gilchrist said the live/work spaces are more than just an apartment building. They have big windows; big, wide doorways to allow items to be moved in and out easily; wide hallways, and shared work and exhibit spaces to use.

He said this development can draw more people into the city to live or visit, sparking commerce and economic development.



State Representative Jewell Jones shows off a jacket by designer Al Wissam during a fashion show at The Connector art space attached to the City Hall Artspace Lofts in Dearborn on Friday, February 21, 2020. Residential/workspaces give artists a place to work and show in the building that was the former City Hall. (Photo: Ryan Garza, Detroit Free Press)

Gilchrist said conversations about this type of development were first approached about a decade ago, but fell to the back burner. It was reinvigorated a year or more ago.

He said Artspace's expertise in developing, operating and managing the properties "took a big question out." The group also has a multi-step process in developing a project.

Gilchrist said there's been no census on the number of artists in Macomb County, but he estimates there are hundreds and maybe thousands. He said with Artspace's broad definition of artist, people who aren't considering themselves artists would qualify under the definition.

In terms of cost, Gilchrist said much will depend on the end result of the research. The feasibility study cost \$25,000, a tab picked up by several groups. The \$30,000 market study is being paid for the Community Foundation for Southeast Michigan, he said.

More: [Small millage, but big vote for Detroit Institute of Arts tax renewal](https://www.detroitnews.com/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2020/02/25/detroit-institute-arts-property-tax-millage-renewal-dia/4830252002/) (/story/news/local/michigan/wayne/2020/02/25/detroit-institute-arts-property-tax-millage-renewal-dia/4830252002/).

Parus said he likes being in a community of artists, with a variety of them in his building -- from those in multimedia to film-making to dance to music. He said he's worked with a couple of residents, but they mostly talk about their work or a show they are doing.

"There's always gonna be a need for live/work spaces," he said. "I'm not sure if they'll ever be too many. A lot of people enjoy living and working in the same place."

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