

THE PHOENIX

Where have all the artists gone?

Portland's creative exodus gives Southern Maine's mill towns a new lease on life

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8/9/2006 5:13:18 PM

Nancy Kureth is lost in the Biddeford mills again. We ascend a flight of stairs, wander down and back along a nondescript hallway lined with dusty wood planers and trash bags filled to bursting, and end up standing, confused, in a cavernous room with sunlight shining through giant windows, wondering where the exit is. The mill is silent except for the distant buzz of a table saw. At the far end of the hallway, a man on a scooter glides out of nowhere and swiftly disappears again.

"Shoot. This always happens to me," says Kureth. She's holding the same half-filled glass of water that she has been for the past 20 minutes of our tour through the mill district's crude studios — which currently house hundreds of woodworkers, painters, writers, musicians, and light-industrial workers.

Kureth, herself a mixed-media artist, works from a studio on Alfred Street, in a place that used to be her coffee shop and gallery, Collette's Cup. But if she wasn't working there, she'd probably be working here in the Lincoln Mill. Or in the Bugbee Brown building next door. Or in the Riverdam Millyard across the way.

In addition to her career as an artist, Kureth is also the first-ever staff member of Biddeford and Saco's first-ever Twin Cities Creative Council, and it's her personal passion, and her job, to market and protect what she calls the area's "secret" arts scene.

By way of spilling the beans, she's planning a big event in October to showcase artists from the "Twin Cities" (of Biddeford and Saco) and beyond. The event, she tells me, will be called "Milling About," "and something [more] about 'keeping the thread,' I don't know yet." Milling About . . . Whatever (a reprise of the first Milling About event, successfully held last year) will take place in an as-yet-unreserved spot in one of these mills joining Biddeford and Saco together in a labyrinth of brick tunnels and musty air along the Saco River. Kureth, originally from Portland, Oregon, moved here six years ago after Portland (Maine) and Kennebunk became too expensive for her to work or live in.

"Where are the stairs?" she says, wandering. She finds them finally and sighs. Just before we descend to the exit, Kureth stops. She suddenly becomes animated, tossing her red hair and widening her eyes in goofy, self-aware gravitas.

"It's scary sometimes. You could, literally, get lost in these. Some of them are connected. You'll think you're in one and then you'll look out a window and realize, somehow, you ended up in a different one."

Here in the mill buildings, the 24 of which are clustered on 50 acres of land which is part Biddeford (population 22,072) and part Saco (population 18,230), there's an arts scene that will eventually rival Portland's. Seriously.

And on the western side of Portland, the same could be said about Westbrook's Dana Warp Mill and its burgeoning arts cluster beside the still-operational Sappi Fine Paper Mill. Then there's the mill building in Brunswick and, newly, those in Sanford, which have attracted artists looking for cheap studio space. Many of those artists used to live and work in Portland.

If people like Kureth, local developer Steven Sobol, and Westbrook Director of Economic and Community Development Erik Carson have anything to say about it, the southern Maine arts scene Portland has powered since the 1970s will soon be fueled by creative capital manufactured in blue-collar towns.



Artists continue to flee
Portland for the southern mill
towns

Blue-collar Soho

Artists are typically a nomadic bunch. Often surviving on a day job that is occasionally supplemented by revenue from their creative work, they need cheap studios just to make ends meet. So they move to the areas no one wants - the raw spaces in warehouses, mill buildings, above storefronts - and hunker down under the real estate radar. But if the neighborhood then flourishes, as it typically does when a creative community moves in, artists must again move on in search of the next cheap thing. They are perpetually priced out of markets they helped gentrify.

It's happened in Washington DC, Boston, New York City, and in nearly every other major, funky scene in the country. And while some cities have tried to institute rent-control measures or other programs to hang on to their funky bunch, most can't, or won't, fight the real estate gold rush enough to stem the exodus. And so fringe towns scramble to reap the benefits of the fall out. Towns like North Adams, Massachusetts, which watched the arts organization Mass MoCA rejuvenate its huge Sprague Electric complex over the past 20 years. Or Pawtucket, Rhode Island, which offers grants and tax incentives to entice artists away from nearby Providence.

Outside of a small circle of local creative-types, Biddeford has never been known as a creative Mecca. Neither has Sanford, or Westbrook, or any of the other former mill towns around the state that are lately finding that artists and craftspeople — the building blocks of that now omnipresent political pet term “the creative economy” — are moving to them from Portland, Portsmouth, and other costly locations out of state. These cities' mills, which at the turn of the century employed thousands of textile and paper workers, had been the bane of city managers since the 1960s, when many of them were left vacant after companies shut down or cut back drastically. No Maine city has suffered more from the withering local manufacturing industry than Biddeford, which just after the Civil War was one of the largest cotton milling complexes in the country, employing 9000 people. But by 1958, a manufacturing industry hemorrhaging jobs overseas had taken its toll. Biddeford's last major textile company closed and unemployment approached 16 percent, more than twice the national rate of 6.4 percent. The some two million square feet of textile rooms which covered shared Saco Island and downtown Biddeford were mostly abandoned. It was, as Biddeford Economic Development Director Bob Dodge says, “an economic disaster.” Dodge, a child growing up in Biddeford at the time, watched seven percent of the population leave the city between 1958 and 1960. The mill highlife, it seemed, was over.

The mills in Biddeford and Saco sat empty for 30 years before furniture makers desperate for construction space discovered the spot in the late 1990s. According to Andrea Strassner, director of the Saco Museum, many individual artists — painters, writers, and graphic designers — began moving into the mill district in 2000. More soon followed, attracted to the cheap rents practically guaranteed by an invisible arts scene. Despite these beginnings of hipness, Biddeford and Saco remain stubbornly blue-collar towns. In 2005, voters in both cities turned down a bond that would have allowed the municipalities to buy out and close the controversial trash incinerator called the Maine Energy Recovery Company (known to locals as MERC) straddling the downtowns. MERC employs about 100 people and dispenses a lung-clenching, burnt-cookie odor over much of the mill district and downtown.

Still, local artists say the mill space is perfect despite its rough edges. Rachael Weyand, director of the nonprofit group Heart of Biddeford, estimates there are between 800 and 1000 artists in Saco and Biddeford and around 300 of them rent studios in the mills. The mill space tends to be raw — renovations often cover only the basics, like electrical wiring, dry wall, and windows that aren't cracked. Or aren't cracked that much. Any other upgrades usually come out of the artist's pocket. But the spaces, bare as they are, have what it takes to create — high ceilings, wide doors, loading docks, and lots of light. Plus, they're cheap. At least, for now.

In Brunswick, where around 25 artists rent studios in the Fort Andross Mill, rents run around \$6.50 per square foot. In Sanford, which has only just begun to market empty mill space to artists, rents at one mill are just over \$6 per square foot. Rents in the Biddeford and Saco mills range in price from \$4 to \$6 per square foot. At Westbrook's Dana Warp Mill, which is already nearly filled to capacity with artists and other businesses, rents go for \$5 per square foot. Portland, by contrast, is noticeably pricier — the typical rate per square foot here runs between \$10 and \$15.

Portland's loss

Artists populating and enlivening otherwise abandoned industrial spots isn't new to southern Maine. It happened in Portland. Creative people have, of course, always been around, but it wasn't until the 1970s that what could be called a creative community first emerged in the Old Port warehouses left vacant by a declining waterfront economy. In the early 1980s, construction on the Portland Museum of Art was finished. The Maine College of Art purchased the Porteous building in the mid



SNITCH: Artist Nancy Kureth is telling on Biddeford and Saco's secret arts scene.

1990s. Arts organizations such as the Portland Stage Company became the anchors of a drifting downtown. And city planners began to think this arts thing might be worth celebrating.

In 1993, Portland hired two consultants, at the cost of \$66,000, to study the impact of Portland's arts-scene. In 1995, when the consultants released their study showing the millions annually that the arts poured into Portland's struggling economy, Portland policymakers quickly buddied up to artists.

"We have to preserve this industry because there are other places [artists] could go," Portland's director of planning, Alex Jaegerman, told the *Portland Press Herald* at the time.

There are now more than 45 galleries in Portland, a recognizable "Arts District" along Congress Street, and dozens of arts performances a week in various media. But when culture flourishes, so does the real-estate market. As of August 1, the average price for a home in Portland is \$299,000, according to local real-estate agent John Hatcher.

Lately, Portland's studio space has gotten pricier along with the housing market. And studio space is just plain harder to come by on the peninsula than it is in the exurbs. In 2005, a building at 490 Congress Street which had housed more than 30 artist studios was purchased and the artists were evicted to make room for high-end condos. Portland Artists' Dwelling and Studios (PADS), a group formed in 2000 by arts activist Jessica Tomlinson and local artist Rose Morasco to find large-scale affordable studio spaces in Portland, fizzled out when the two realized that buildings capable of housing 40 studios or more just weren't available on the peninsula.

In March, the 20-member Bakery Photographic Collective, which had rented studio and showroom space at the Calderwood Bakery building at 61 Pleasant Street for five years, [moved to a larger, cheaper space in the renovated Dana Warp Mill in Westbrook](#) after their Portland rent rose from \$6.50 per square foot to \$12. The decision to move out of Portland was one the Collective's directors mulled over for months. Tomlinson, who is also director of public relations for the Maine College of Art, was so concerned about the prospect of losing the Collective that, when asked by one of the Collective's directors to write a recommendation for them to the city of Westbrook, she made sure to note in her letter that the Portland arts scene would suffer if the group moved. She carbon-copied the letter to Portland's mayor Jim Cohen and Director of Planning and Development Lee Urban.

Portland's city managers kept quiet, but Westbrook piped up. They used a city business-incentive program to woo the Collective with a \$30,000 low-interest loan to cover start-up costs. According to Westbrook's Carson, this was the first time the city had used the business incentive to attract a group of artists. When the council voted to give the Collective the money, onlookers in the chambers stood up and cheered.

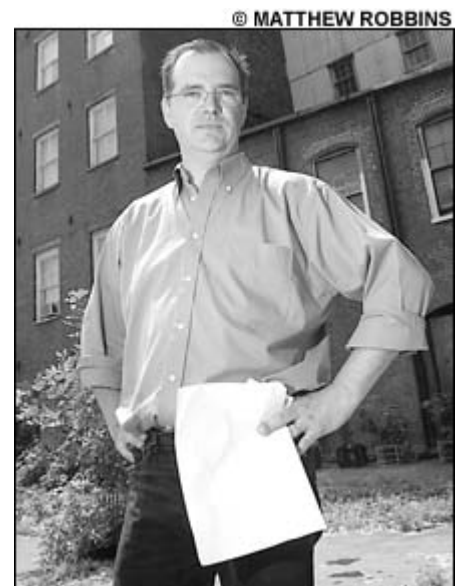
"It's a recognition by everyone that creative people make money and creative people grow money," says Carson. "It's another sector for us to understand that we need to encourage."

Too little, too late?

Portland has made some recent efforts to stem the exodus of penny-pinching artists. Last year, the nonprofit Portland Arts and Cultural Alliance, an advocacy organization for Portland artists, received a grant from the Maine Arts Commission and the city to create a database of Portland's artists. PACA is also studying the economic impact of the Portland arts scene for the national nonprofit, Americans for the Arts; that data will be ready in 2007. Tomlinson, the vice president of PACA, expects the survey data will be ready sometime this winter. It will be the first time a Portland organization has conducted a comprehensive survey of the arts community since the city-commissioned arts report was released in 1995.

This summer, developer Peter Bass began accepting applications for eight units of affordable live/work space for artists in his Sherman Street building. The city sold Bass the Parkside Studios, as they're now called, on the condition that the units remain arts housing in perpetuity. Bass also owns a live/work building on Anderson Street, art studios on Merrill Street, and a Saco live/work development which he completed in February 2005.

In Portland, only a handful of artists studio buildings remain. The largest of these are the studios at 536 Congress Street, where roughly 30 artists rent from a landlord who is himself an artist; and the 609 Congress Street studios, where around 60 artists rent.



The Bayside Neighborhood Association is awaiting 501(c)3 status for its new Bayside Community Development Corporation, which will work to enhance the creative economy in this notoriously industrial area of Portland. Ron Spinella is president of the BCDC and co-owns the Three Fish Gallery, on Cumberland Avenue, with his wife. He says BCDC will prioritize buying, developing, or otherwise subsidizing buildings containing artists studios. Spinella envisions a "working arts district" in Bayside, with rents rivaling those in the southern Maine mills.

**HIS OWN PRIVATE SOHO:
Steve Sobol's cheap rents
have artists talking.**

"What we've got to do is keep people here," Spinella says.

Mayor Jim Cohen held Portland's first summit on the creative economy in May and plans to release a report on the summit's suggestions for the arts community by the end of the summer. He also plans to convene a creative-economy steering committee, which will find ways to implement the report and will present those ways before the council.

While Cohen says generating affordable live/work space for artists is definitely a primary concern for the local creative economy, he also says area mill towns and their burgeoning arts scenes only bode well for Portland.

"I think that it's positive," he says. "I tend to look at what we do as a region. That while there may be a political border, the economy flows across the region. The people of Portland benefit when the economy of Biddeford is strong."

The regional view

One long-time gallery owner says Portland doesn't necessarily need artists within the city walls to keep its arts heart beating.

Peggy Greenhut Golden has owned and operated Greenhut Galleries in Portland since 1977. She retains some of the most popular Maine artists in the country, including Tina Ingraham and the late Neil Welliver. Golden says it may not be bad news that artists in Portland are being wooed to bigger studios in area mills.

"Portland is the biggest, if not second largest arts city in the state — Rockland probably being up there as well," says Golden. "There's not a Saturday that goes by that we don't see people up here from Boston. The good news for artists is they still should be considering Portland the city they want to show in regardless of where they end up working. From my perspective, the spaces out in Westbrook, or wherever they're moving, probably are bigger and airier and less noisy and, I think, given some time, they might actually really be happy. It may be a blessing in disguise."

On December 30, 2004, Steven Sobol, a former fine-arts manager from New York City, bought the sprawling Riverdam Millyard in Biddeford for \$945,000. He was funded in part by two business loans totaling \$285,000, both from the Biddeford Saco Area Economic Development Corporation, a nonprofit partnership of the Twin Cities and their joint chamber of commerce. The mill had been the home of a textiles company that shut down in the late '70s. Sobol says about 13 artists and craftsmen rented studios in the building when he bought it; he now rents to 46 such "creative economy" tenants.

Sobol spent \$500,000 renovating the Riverdam spaces — erecting walls to create practice studios, repairing windows to improve lighting, re-wiring the building — to create studios that artists would want.

"My basic instinct was correct, and that is that the building is an ideal place for people to come and work and develop their craft," he says.

Thanks to rapid-fire word-of-mouth marketing, Sobol now has 60 tenants in Riverdam, occupying 68 rooms (Sobol says he has space for up to 30 more tenants). On July 13, Riverdam welcomed the Union House coffee shop and gallery, which, according to Nancy Kureth, is the only gallery and hang-out spot in town since she closed Collette's Cup in 2003.

"There is a broad creative energy that is really palpable that is here," says Sobol. "Which makes me really feel that Biddeford is benefiting from the growing pains in the Portland arts scene."

Artists who have escaped that pain include Scott Mullenberg, a bookbinder who operates his own company — Mullenberg Designs. Mullenberg used to work in a studio in Portland years ago but last worked out of a space in Westbrook's Dana Warp Mill. In September, Mullenberg moved to Sobol's mill because of a better "vibe," a functional space, and cheap rent. In Westbrook, he shared a 2000-square-foot studio with one other artist for \$701 a month. His own studio in Biddeford, at 620 square feet, costs him \$232 a month.

Bonnie Killion is another new resident of the artsy neighborhood Sobol built. Killion and Jim Conn moved their store, North Atlantic Leather, from Congress Street in Portland to Riverdam in January. North Atlantic Leather, and the leather-goods repair work it did as Killconn Creations, had occupied the same storefront in Portland for 20 years. North Atlantic moved to a bigger

space at Riverdam for a third of the cost.

Their new store is in a sunny corner of the mill. Brightly colored leather bags, wallets, and other small items hang on display racks near the door, which is marked with a simple, wall-mounted sign. In the back part of their enormous, open space, Killion has her own desk and plenty of room to do her custom leather work.

Buried deep in the Riverdam maze, it's unlikely anyone would find their shop unless they know where to look, but Killion says custom work makes up the bulk of their business now so they don't mind.

"The rent here is a third less than what we paid in Portland for space double the size," says Killion. "It was a good move."

Lost in the funhouse

The day is getting hotter, but Nancy Kureth continues walking at a brisk pace along the sidewalk bordering the massive WestPoint Home mill on Biddeford's Main Street. WestPoint Home makes the fuzzy Vellux blankets commonly found in hotel rooms. The mill stretches the length of three blocks along the end of Main Street, which bends up to cross the river to Saco Island. Traffic to the right of Kureth is so infrequent pedestrians often wander across the street without watching for oncoming cars. Empty storefronts pockmark the strip, including the former site of Reny's department store, one of downtown Biddeford's retail anchors.

"People were really, really upset when that closed," she says, motioning to Reny's.

The windows at WestPoint Home are blocked up or covered by thick metal gates. It's impossible to see inside, where 300 employees work gluing synthetic fur onto lightweight polyester. WestPoint Home was pulled out of bankruptcy in 2005 when it was purchased by an out-of-state company, which then laid off about 100 workers.

"Look at the square footage we're going past right now," says Kureth. "It's ludicrous, it's huge."

Mills available to artists cover roughly 810,000 square feet in the Twin Cities mill district. This does not include WestPoint Home or various mill apartment complexes in Saco, none of which rent creative studio space.

At the end of what at one point appeared to be a Main Street lined only with the WestPoint Home mill, Kureth takes a left into the North Dam Millyard, owned by developer Doug Stevens. Unlike the Bugbee Brown building, the Lincoln Mill, and Sobol's Riverdam on the other side of the district, Stevens has erected a sign by the road listing the businesses inside his mill. "Showroom Open" seconds a banner on the side of the building.

Inside Northdam, jazz music plays through speakers mounted in the ceiling of a bright foyer. There is an L-shaped receptionists' table here, unmanned, and a smaller table along the far wall on which sit two fat lamps topped with red-and-white-striped shades. These shades are the work of artist David Fuller, whose designs are sold nationwide. In a testament to his success, someone has lined up framed examples of the magazine covers that have featured his work — Country Living and Southern Home.

On the same floor is River's Edge Wood Products, which makes custom cabinetry. River's Edge moved to the mill in March. Fuller, one of the first artists to discover the mills, has worked here for more than a decade. Kureth walks a few steps in one direction, changes her mind, and goes down another hallway. She's looking for a boxing ring she wants to show me. She shakes her head.

"It's so funny, you ask local people about what's going on in the mills and they say," and here she alters her voice to mimic a Maine drawl, " 'Nuthin' there. Nuthin's goin' on in there. They're empty, they're closed.' Getting the public in here is kind of hard, people don't just wander down here and peek in."

Kureth agrees with Golden's prediction that Portland will eventually become the commercial center for a regional scene where most art is produced in studio space in Biddeford, Saco, Westbrook, Brunswick, and Sanford.

"I think, right now, we're just asking people to take a chance," she says. "We've got all this space; what do you want to do? You come up with an idea and we'll help you out."

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COME ON IN: Westbrook's Erik Carson welcomes Portland's arts refugees.