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WASHINGTON'S CORRIDOR:

Winter Street Studios

Houston has a way of keeping good secrets. And as far as hidden treasures go, certain neighborhoods have more treats in their bag of tricks than others. As the next trendy club, chic watering hole, or gastronomical hotspot opens up along Washington Avenue, industrial remnants of another era quickly give way to slick storefronts and commercially driven enterprise. Yet, some former relics of the corridor's industrial age remain and have undergone a rebirth, lending character and frequently, quirky charm to the area. One such transformation took place at 2101 Winter Street 5 years ago.

Hidden away behind the Mahatma Rice plant off of Sawyer Street, Winter Street Studios is home to 87 local artists who spend their days, nights,

By Jenni Rebecca Stephenson,
Executive Director of Spacetaker

“Painted stark white and adorned with Christmas lights, the structure stands out as a creative refuge among the surrounding warehouses and row houses.”

and frequently, weekends toiling away in their studios. But it's not all work at 2101 Winter St.— Winter Street hosts some fantastic art events throughout the year, including the Houston Press' Artopia, Avenue CDC's Art on the Avenue, and Spacetaker's Winter Holiday Art Market. And on a good year, Winter Street also serves as a hub for the citywide FotoFest Biennial. 2010 will be one such year.

Train tracks flank the old furniture factory, once scheduled for demolition. Painted stark white and adorned with Christmas lights, the structure stands out as a creative refuge among the surrounding warehouses and row houses. Initiated over 4 years ago, the acquisition and renovation of the building was a joint venture by developer Jon Deal and the Avenue CDC (Community Development Corporation). In 2005, the first few artists took a leap and moved into the second floor in hopes that Winter Street would become a strong artist community and center of art activity. Five years later, those hopes have come to fruition.



Nicola Parente

Of the artists based at Winter Street, there is a wide array of specialties. Painters, photographers, printmakers, and jewelers grace the sun-streaked hallways. You can frequently find up and coming artist Kevin Peterson painting in his studio on the first floor. “Issues of race and the division of wealth have arisen in my recent work,” he says. An apt focus for an artist based in an area situated between new apartment developments along Taylor, Washington Ave clubs with excessive valets, and what remains of the area's low income housing. “This work deals with the idea of rigid boundaries and the hopeful breakdown of such restrictions.”

Upstairs on the second floor, another painter focuses on a slightly different aspect of the area. Italian born Nicola Parente states, “One of the main influences in my painting is

the re-gentrification occurring in and around Houston over the past 10 years. Having my studio in an industrial building has allowed me to be surrounded by what most inspires me: fast moving trains, destruction, construction and reconstruction, and the vast diversity of the ever changing neighborhoods.” Parente most recently commented on the dark and excessive side of build-up via a visual summary of un-

recycled waste created from collected debris in his two-person show, Natural Recyclers and Wasted Resolve at the Art League Houston. In contrast, Winter Street is a perfect example of recycling and rededicating urban space. Parente agrees and continues, “Being at Winter Street has enriched my artistic life, from the many friendships made to the synergy of being around talented artist to the valuable resources of Spacetaker, all under one roof. The experience is priceless.”

Parente highlights the communal benefits of Winter Street Studios and observing the artists chatting and laughing outside the building's heavy metal doors, one does indeed get the sense of a “collective.” In that cooperative spirit, the artists of Winter Street organize an open studios event on the second Saturday of each month. Participating artists throw their doors open to show their work, their workspaces, and to exhibit their works-in-progress. Open to the public, this event has become an exciting opportunity for art fans to get up close and personal with the working artists in their community.

In addition to artists, a handful of small creative-based businesses call Winter Street home, like bareCommunication, a team of energetic PR types responsible for the Skirt! webzine and Absolutely! In the Loop Magazine. Kaboom Books, an independent, locally-owned used book store, houses its excess inventory on Winter Street's first floor— just around the corner from my nonprofit, Spacetaker.