



DoReMi: Creating an arts oasis in a forbiddingly costly city

by Sam Whiting

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Art collectors Deborah and Andy Rappaport are taking over an industrial building in Dogpatch to test a unique plan to save San Francisco's galleries from being squeezed out of this overpriced city. Their concept: offer space at a rent that is drastically below market rate in hopes that they will lose money or — best-case scenario — break even.

Ignoring real estate forces, the Rappaports have set up a for-profit entity that vows never to make one — and the cornerstone is 1275 Minnesota St., just off the T-Third Muni line at 24th Street, which will open in a year as a multipurpose complex in a concrete warehouse.

their project works, it could signal a radical relocation of the city's gallery world from its traditional center near Union Square to DoReMi, the new nickname for a swath that is 10 square blocks and touches parts of Dogpatch, Potrero Hill and the Mission.

"I said, 'Sign us up — we want to go,'" says Bryan Yedinak, whose gallery, Modernbook, will move from 49 Geary, the city's most prestigious gallery address, to 1275 Minnesota. "That place is booming. It's the perfect place for the new art center."

In the gallery world, this great diaspora south is the equivalent of the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's move from the Civic Center to South of Market 20 years ago. Just as SFMOMA is the anchor of the arts in Yerba Buena, the anchor of DoReMi will be 1275 Minnesota, with galleries, nonprofits, media arts, a restaurant and retail shopping. There will also be a climate-controlled corner for museum shows, public art in the atrium, pop-up shows, galas, a speaker program and live music — all under a trussed ceiling with skylights and full southern exposure.

"There is nothing like this that we've been able to find anywhere in the world," says Deborah Rappaport, 56 who will take possession of the warehouse on Wednesday. "There are places that have some components, but none that has everything."

The key component is a configuration that allows galleries to rent smaller permanent space than they might elsewhere because there will be flux space for rent as needed for large exhibitions. This format, plus amenities like a shipping center, staff kitchen and 24-hour security, will bring the effective rent down to "one-half to one-third what our gallery tenants would pay anywhere else," says Andy Rappaport, 57, a retired venture capitalist who has un-retired to create the project.



Husband and wife Andy and Deborah Rappaport, on Wed. March 18, 2015, at the warehouse they plan to turn into a two-story art gallery space.

Deeply invested

Andy and Deborah Rappaport, who have never been in the arts business, plan to invest “tens of millions of dollars,” he says, in a cluster of buildings that will include studios and other arts amenities under the umbrella of the Minnesota Street Project. Phase One is 1275 Minnesota, which the Rappaports have leased for 15 years.

They are selecting galleries that sell contemporary art and complement one another, and offering three-year leases at a guaranteed low renewal rate. That’s a deal that comes around “never,” says Nancy Toomey, who is also leaving 49 Geary. “My hopes are that it will create a new synergy with the arts community, which has been very disassembled.”

The Rappaports had been aware of this disassembly since moving to the city from the Skyline area of Woodside five years ago. Andy had been a partner at August Capital, on Sand Hill Road, and Deborah had served on the board of the Portola Valley School District. When their three girls moved on, the Rappaports did, too, selling the place on Skyline and buying a house on Union Street.

Besides dropping out of Princeton, Andy has failed at just two pursuits — surfing and retirement. So he bought two commercial buildings near their home in the city, and put his family investment fund in one of them. He is also a partner in the Noise Pop indie music festival, while Deborah serves on the board of Headlands Center for the Arts, the Berkeley Art Museum and Creative Capital in New York.

That seemed like enough until the day the Rappaports were visiting art dealer Catharine Clark. Clark, who is 47, opened the Catharine Clark Gallery at 23 and is on her fourth location, on Utah Street at 16th, staying just ahead of ever-escalating rents.

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“We were talking about how we didn’t want to live in a city that didn’t have a vibrant arts community,” Deborah says. “There have to be galleries, and there have to be artists’ nonprofits, and artists have to be able to afford studios.”

Because she and her husband had already been buying property, they knew that warehouse buildings zoned PDR (production, distribution, repair) in the southeast corner of the city could be used for the arts but not for offices. This holds property values down to within reason.

“This needed to happen fast or everybody would have left,” Deborah said, “and it would have been impossible to get them back — either gone out of business completely or moved to L.A. or New York or Sheboygan (Wis.) because the rents here were too high.”

The standard route would have been to form a nonprofit. But that takes too long, and becomes complicated when renting to commercial clients. So the Rappaports decided to be a for-profit that is not interested in making a profit.

Within months, they had locked up 1275 Minnesota, which is just around the corner from the headquarters of the Hells Angels Frisco chapter. Built in 1937, the 1275 site has been a set-design studio for both the Grateful Dead and Bill Graham Presents. A double-sawtooth roof is high enough to fit a second story, which will bring it to 36,000 square feet.

“Because the Rappaports are collectors and understand what the gallerists are going through, they have a conscience,” says Toomey. “A conscience and an interest in art.”

Future tenants

Four galleries have already committed to the location, plus the San Francisco Arts Education Project, or SFArtsED, which is planning to consolidate its visual arts classes there after 15 years in the Civic Center. This would give SFArtsED its own studio space for the first time in its 47-year existence.

“The greatest advantage of the Minnesota Street Project is the project itself, to bring children interested in the visual arts into a building full of galleries and artists,” says Chad Jones, interim executive director of SFArtsED. “It is the best possible place we could be doing it.”

By the time 1275 Minnesota opens, in 2016, Phase Two is expected to be under way. The Rappaports won’t discuss it yet, because the deal has not been finalized, but it could close in a matter of months.

The Minnesota Street Project will form the southern boundary to a sprawling arts region. Already there are the Museum of Craft and Design, San Francisco Center for the Book, Workshop Residence, Southern Exposure and CCA’s Wattis Institute for Contemporary Arts. But they are too spread out, and to combine them and make a day of it requires visits to three distinct neighborhoods on a tour that is divided by two highways, 101 and 280.

“A lot of people just don’t know about this area, strangely enough,” says Clark, a force in galvanizing the arts community below 15th Street. So eight months ago, she called a meeting of 40 arts professionals to come up with a name for it. The first acronym they tried, MiPoDo (Mission, Potrero Hill and Dogpatch) is unwieldy, so they switched around the syllables until they hit DoReMi, which is just sonic enough to work.

“In a way it doesn’t matter what we call it,” Clark says. “It just matters that we call it.” She has plotted 30 existing destinations, and she finds more to add every time she walks DoReMi, usually in heels just to prove it can be done. The quadrant runs from 14th Street to 24th, and Bryant to Third, requiring her to clack-clack over the 18th Street footbridge spanning 101.

Also on Wednesday, the same day that the Rappaports take possession of 1275 Minnesota, Clark will unveil the DoReMi map while hosting an event for SFArtsED, with singing and a dance performance choreographed by Joe

S O U T H E R N E X P O S U R E

Goode. The fold-out map, designed and illustrated by a CCA student, will be free to anyone who walks in her door or any other gallery.

“We really want this to work,” Clark says. “We don’t want to see any more attrition of arts organizations from San Francisco.”

A trained ballet dancer who stands 6 feet in her heels, Clark makes an energetic ambassador for DoReMi as she carries around her colored map, going door to door like a retail politician. The other day she carried it by Project Artaud, the pioneering live/work lofts, where renowned solo performer John O’Keefe was coming in with his morning coffee.

O’Keefe, who has been here for 25 years, had not heard of the nickname, but he is willing to try it out.

“DoReMi. That’s a good one,” he says with a laugh. “Just protect us from the developers.”