

Born in a Barn

One man,
his dream
and the
birth
of a stellar
artists'
community

| Christa Martin



“Something like this should have happened years ago. **I think artists need a place to work and live.** The community needs the artists as well.”

—Angelo Grova

BRUCE WILLEY

It could be a concept for a new reality TV show: About a dozen people move into a funky apartment complex in an ultra-liberal small town, get artsy, talk to each other sometimes and maybe do coffee. That part is optional. Here's the catch: There's no winner, no cameras and no prize. It probably won't fly on the networks because this idea actually is real, and it's already under way in Santa Cruz.

Near the juncture of where River Street meets the redwoods on Hwy. 9, there's a slice of big-city life, with a small-town twist: an innovative live-and-work artists' community (apartment complex and more), spearheaded and financed by one man—artist-teacher-all-around-nice-guy Angelo Grova, a county resident for 34 years. The pristine apartments are hidden behind a restored red barn—formerly a hide house belonging to Salz Tannery—which now houses MichaelAngelo Gallery, an art showroom and studio collective that Grova brought to life three years ago. The seven two-story apartments, with nearby parking and storage units, possess the same architectural look of the red barn.

One of these swank new digs belongs to John Poole and his wife Betty

O'Donnell. But on a much-too-warm Santa Cruz morning in late September, watercolorist Poole is locked out of his new apartment. (His move-in date would be Oct. 1). He hasn't received the keys yet, so all he can do for now is peek through the window.

“They're gorgeous—lots of space for working and living,” Poole says, loudly enough to hear over the commotion from the gamut of tools being used by construction workers trying to wrap up the remaining work on this massive project.

Poole's docile dog Tailer runs around with her ball. She drops it at strangers' feet, hoping to get in a game of catch. Her demeanor is much like Poole's. He, too, is absolutely friendly and engaging and will probably make the perfect neighbor in this complex. But if only he could get inside his new home and show it off a little. Property owner Grova (the one with the keys) isn't around at the moment but he'll surely show up soon. Until then, Poole will return to create humorous watercolor paintings in the studio he has at MichaelAngelo Gallery.

Later in the morning Grova cruises around the parcel; the apartments have been unlocked. Poole gets a gander inside his unit: two stories, about 850-

square-feet, cozy, but nonetheless it still has a spacious quality due to a towering ceiling. Downstairs is a fine set up: a kitchen with a patio out back, a bathroom and a living room/artist workspace. (All seven units are designed the same and there is one low-income apartment.) The living room/bedroom area—very city-like, very hip—is situated at the top of a narrow staircase. Each pad, except for the low-income unit, goes for \$1,450 a month.

There's only one main requirement: The tenants must be artists. (At least, that's the plan.) Everyone from the palette is welcome: watercolorists like Poole, fabric artists like his wife O'Donnell, computer graphic artists, oil painters or glassblowers.

For the new residents, everything is fresh and exciting. But for Grova, it's been a lengthy trip to get his dream converted into a reality. The process really began about 15 years ago when the artisan began leasing the dilapidated 5,000-square-foot barn (now the MichaelAngelo Gallery) from the owner of Salz Tannery. After renovations, little studios were built inside and “people were going nuts” to be in there, Grova says. Finally, three years ago, he



purchased the entire acre parcel, including the plot of empty land that would become the apartment complex and the historic tanbark shed that has been converted into storage and parking areas, while still maintaining its historic shell.

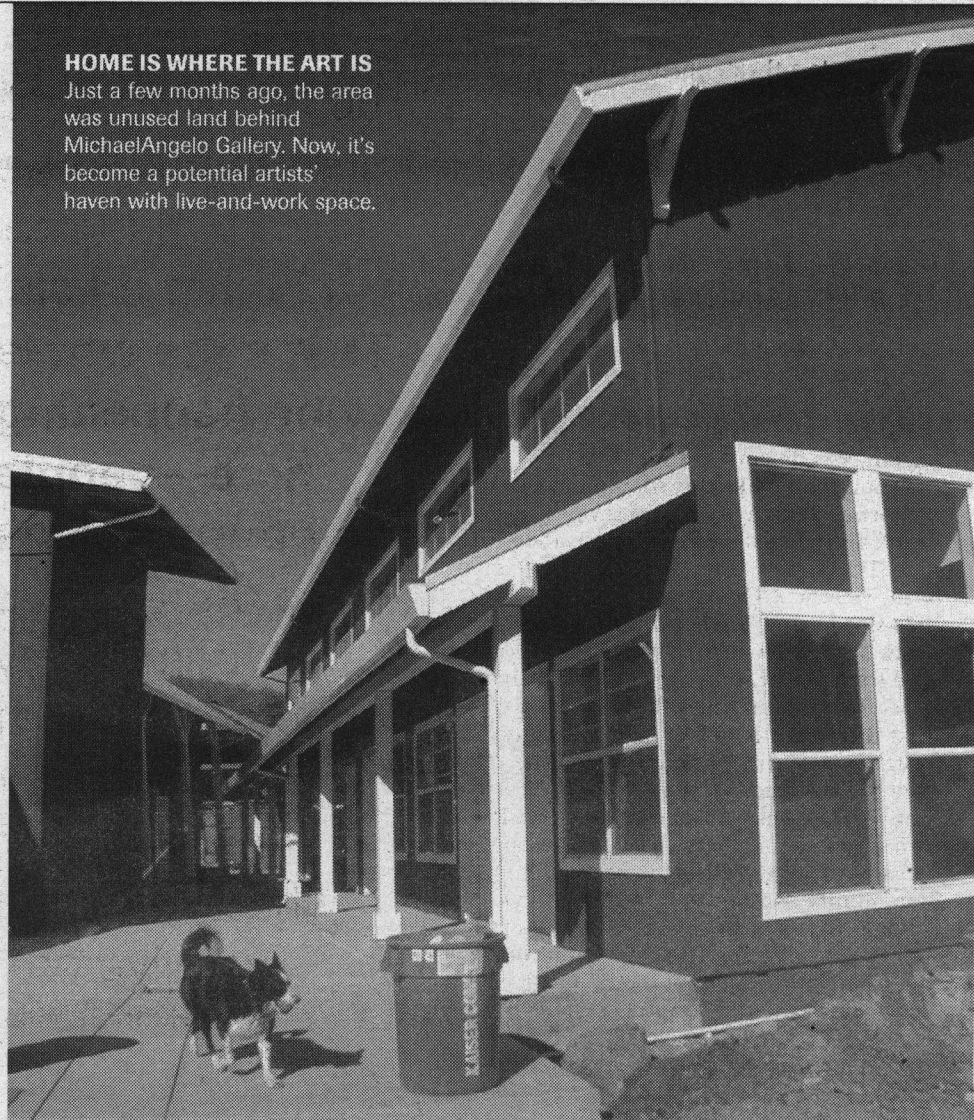
As Kaiser Construction workers began building the complex, Grova started screening potential residents. The process was not much different than any other rental application, with that one requirement: that his tenants (hopefully) be working artists.

This community Grova is introducing to Santa Cruz has the potential to serve as a pilot program for other artist groups interested in establishing similar concepts, such as what's being proposed across the street in the other rundown red barns: the Salz Tannery Arts Center Project. Construction could possibly begin in three years and it may open in five, says Tom Nordyke, an independent consultant working with the city Redevelopment Agency on the much-hyped idea.

"If we achieve the entire vision for it, [it will be] one of the few in the country," Nordyke says. The massive arts complex is proposed to include about 100 live-and-work units for artists and another 100 to 120 work studios, all at "affordable rent ... [about] \$1/square foot." Additionally, the entire center (175,000- to 200,000-square-feet total)

HOME IS WHERE THE ART IS

Just a few months ago, the area was unused land behind MichaelAngelo Gallery. Now, it's become a potential artists' haven with live-and-work space.



may include a theater performance space, office spaces and more. But a project like this isn't cheap. Nordyke says the budget is a little over \$40 million, with a slew of funding sources coming from bank loans, low-income housing tax credit, historic tax credit, possibly some arts programs, tax exempt bond financing, and a possible \$5 million capital campaign.

Grova's community across the street is a severely downsized version of the Salz Tannery Arts Center Project. The artist has poured about \$1.3 million into making his dream a reality.

"Something like this should have happened years ago," Grova says. "I think artists need a place to work and live. The community needs the artists as well." But he acknowledges that it's a two-sided coin. "Some people like to work in their own space where they live and some prefer to live apart from their work. But a lot of times the problem is that they don't have the money because of the cost of this community. Having a home and a studio space is restrictive. The idea [of this community] was that I could give them a better place to live and work. ... I [want to] keep it an artist community and not make it a dot-com situation. ... [I want to] try to keep it as pure as possible, but it has to be on the quiet side, no sculptors or loud music. My goal was that if I could build this complex I could have a better opportunity to make it become part of

"The benefit is that Mike's going to be around a bunch of other artists. **That's the whole vibe happening here—people to bounce ideas off of.** It's more community oriented than just having your neighbor on whatever street you live on."

—Hannah Miller

the community at large because we probably have one of the largest groups of artists per capita in the United States."

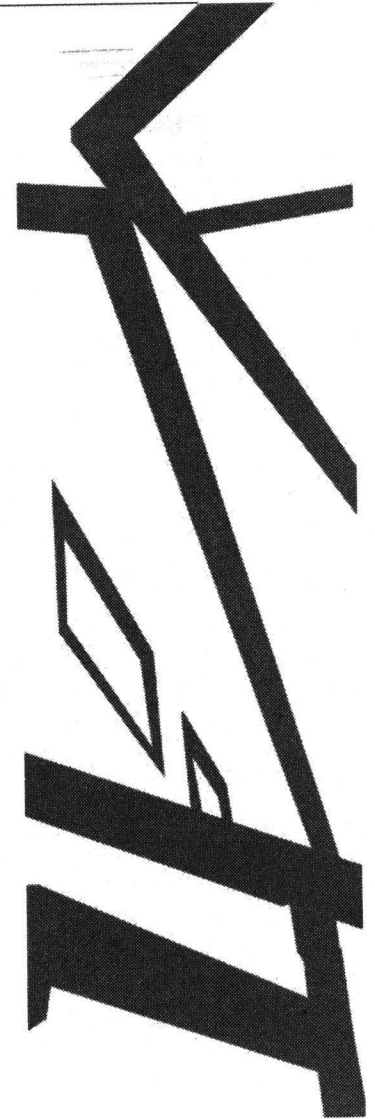
But there are rumblings about an exodus of our creative types, moving to other towns. High rents for both home and studio space, coupled with the obvious difficulty of generating an income as an artist, have caused concern among some locals.

"That's why it's good to have arts villages," says Chip, the single-monikered chair of the city arts commission. "The underlying thing a lot of people don't talk about is the basic civic and economic value the arts have. Santa Cruz is starving for an industry ... in the dot-com bust. ... People always need culture, and culture will always be there. ... Support the artists who are here on a base level by providing housing that's sustainable and affordable."

He offers up kudos to Grova's live-and-work artist complex. Although Chip hasn't yet visited the new premises, he says the concept sounds beneficial in that it might be able to offer those artists opportunities to collaborate and share ideas.

"It's kind of an old idea that we haven't explored that much in Santa Cruz," Chip says.

The only known community similar to Grova's is a cluster of live-and-work artist studios on Swift Street on the West Side of Santa Cruz. Along the same vein





CREATIVE POOLE Artist John Poole at work in his studio at MichaelAngelo Gallery.

BRUCE WILLEY

“It’s exciting to be here in this time because of all the artists and creative energy that will be focused in this area.”

—John Poole

are the 17th Avenue Studios, a collective group of workspaces, but no residences.

“A community of artists ... inherently feed off each other in inspiration and tools and mediums,” Chip says.

But that doesn’t mean they have to be best friends. Grova is not by any means forcing his tenants to mix or mingle. He prefers to let the relationships evolve naturally. Grova, of course, is always available to his tenants if problems arise. (In his free time he’ll teach art at UC Santa Cruz Extension.) He’ll also continue offering a variety of classes at his own studio in the MichaelAngelo Gallery.

In April, Poole (a new resident in the community) acquired a studio at the barn, which he will continue to retain, even though he’s moving into the apartments. The available studio was a rare opportunity: Vacancies don’t come about too often at MichaelAngelo Gallery. Prior to moving his workspace, Poole had been painting out of his home in Soquel for many years until he and wife O’Donnell moved to Corralitos about four months ago. But the daily commute quickly became too lengthy—traveling into Santa Cruz to MichaelAngelo Gallery, where Poole spends about 30 hours a week, and to O’Donnell’s job as a student coordinator for biology classes at UCSC. When Grova showed them the apartments, it

wasn’t a hard sell: The complex was in town, not far from O’Donnell’s work, right next door to Poole’s studio. Moving there presented the opportunity to be part of a unique adventure.

“It’s exciting to be here in this time because of all the artists and creative energy that will be focused in this area,” Poole says. Other benefits include, “being able to talk to other artists, not just about the creative process in doing your work, but making contacts to sell your work, meet potential clients or patrons, get commissioned for works. For the most part, being around the stuff, the paint, the marble, it is inspiring. Like, when you go to a museum or gallery and you see some work that you really resonate with—it’s very inspiring. You can’t wait to get back to your studio and do something.”

The prospect of exposure is especially appealing to Mike, a self-taught glassblower who’s moving here from Chico, accompanied by his nonartist girlfriend Hannah Miller.

“The benefit is that Mike’s going to be around a bunch of other artists,” Miller says. “That’s the whole vibe happening here—people to bounce ideas off of. It’s more community oriented than just having your neighbor on whatever street you live on.”

These people are clearly thinking. It’s

not uncommon for artists to be stereotyped as being impossibly creative and talented, but sometimes lacking in business sense. Yet this group is clearly aware of not only the economic benefits of moving into the complex (they don’t have to rent additional space for a studio), but the networking possibilities are also vast.

A newcomer to the entire artistic scene is Jay, who will move into the low-income unit in the community. He’s a displaced tech worker now employed at San Lorenzo Lumber in Santa Cruz. Through mutual friends he met Grova, who became both a friend and mentor to him. Jay has dabbled in computer graphics work but considers himself dwarfed by the artistic talents of his new neighbors. That’s part of the reason for his move into this community.

“I’m a little apprehensive about fitting in,” Jay admits. “[I’m hoping] to advance my talents, which are kind of raw. ... I’m hoping to learn ... about new trends and techniques. ... These people, they produce a lot, they are very inventive.”

For more information about the MichaelAngelo Gallery or the live-and-work artist residences, call owner Angelo Grova at 426-8934. The gallery is located at 1111 River St. The new apartments are directly behind the gallery.