



By Vanessa Barnes Hillian

Frank Wright, who has a studio in the LeDroit, often puts himself in paintings.

## Old Northwest Buildings Attract Enclaves of Artists

By L. Lanier Cooper  
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The lingering scent of oil paints mingles with the musty smell of an old downtown building. A rickety bannister clings to the wall along a dimly lit staircase that winds up to hallways honeycombed with artists' studios.

Welcome to the LeDroit Building on F Street NW, a frayed historic landmark that since the mid 1930s has been a favorite address for fortune tellers, jewelers, musical instrument repair shops and, more recently, artists.

The gray, four-story building just off Seventh Street NW, and the six-story Atlas Building around the corner, have been taken over by artists looking for low rents, high ceilings and lots of natural light. Both buildings, built around the turn of the century, have enormous windows that provide abundant amounts of pure light from a northern exposure preferred by many artists.

The two buildings now house the studios of 70 artists in an area of the city that is becoming something of an

arts center. Across the street is the National Portrait Gallery and a block away, in the Lansburgh Building, are eight galleries and the city's Commission on the Arts.

"There is a unique sense of community here," said Frank Wright, a George Washington University art instructor who took a studio with three other artists in the LeDroit building 20 years ago. "Nowhere else in the city can you find venders, government people, street people and artists living and working together in such close proximity."

The creative enclave at the LeDroit and Atlas buildings includes well-known sculptors and painters, commercial artists who work for local department stores, art teachers and those who pursue art for pleasure only and never show their work.

Behind the doors that line the LeDroit's shabby hallways are studios as varied as the artwork produced in them. Wright's studio walls are crammed with

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Portrait artist Joey Manlapaz, who has a studio in Ninth Street's Atlas Building, says she doesn't mind the building's deteriorating condition.

## Artists Set Up Shop in Old NW Buildings

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artwork, broken picture frames and tools hanging from hooks.

The studio of Sharon Antholt, who shows her paintings at DuPont Circle's Gallery 10, is all but empty. There is nothing on the bare wood floor but a single easel and some paints and brushes.

LeDroit and Atlas artists can count on many of their studio neighbors to turn out when they have shows of their work, but most don't spend much of their studio time socializing.

"We see other artists in the halls and may chat awhile," said painter William C. Reynolds, who has rented a studio in the LeDroit since 1978. But, he says, "We come here to work hard in private, and mainly socialize with other artists we have either studied with in the past or have worked with."

Among the well-known artists who have had studios in the LeDroit or Atlas buildings was John Henry De Rosen, who died in 1982 at the age of 92. De Rosen designed and laid the Christ figure mosaic for the dome at the Shrine of the Immaculate Conception and painted murals for the Washington Cathedral and St. Matthews Cathedral. Other tenants have included Jacob Kanem, curator of Graphic Arts

for the National Museum and William Woodward, a George Washington University instructor who painted the murals of women in diaphanous clothing at Clyde's restaurant at Tysons Corner.

Reynolds, who worked as an assistant to De Rosen for three years, said his boss liked having young artists from the building around him. De Rosen, he said, enjoyed passing down to the younger artists some of the techniques he learned in Paris many years ago.

Thomas O'Callaghan Jr., a former LeDroit tenant who now works as assistant for education at the Phillips Collection, said he found the artistic community around F Street intriguing. "I loved the building, and the artists were terrific," O'Callaghan said. "The building reminded me of an old Venetian palace."

The LeDroit was built in 1875 and the Atlas in 1892, and both served for years as offices for lawyers working for the U.S. Patent Office. The LeDroit, once targeted for demolition as part of the planned redevelopment of nearby Pennsylvania Avenue, was named a historic landmark in 1974.

The Atlas and LeDroit buildings are not without problems, however. Over the years, occupants of both buildings have weathered

fires and several break-ins. Vagrants who occasionally find a front door unlocked sometimes appear in the hallways.

The LeDroit has had chronic heating problems, and in the winter the temperatures in some studios have dropped to near freezing, forcing some of the artists to work in heavy coats. In summer, temperatures in both buildings have been known to soar above 100 degrees.

"I know the buildings aren't in the best condition," said Orren Stein, their owner. Since the artists began moving in in the late 1950s, Stein said, he has recognized their struggle and provided studio space at minimum rents as his contribution to the art community. Studios rent for \$100 to \$250 a month, depending on size and the amount of natural light available, he said.

Said Woodward: "Since I can remember, people here have always been behind in paying their rents. Some never paid their rents, but Stein wouldn't kick them out."

The condition of the buildings is of little concern to tenants like portrait artist Joey Manlapaz. "Artists could care less about fresh paint on the walls, or whether the floors are mopped once a month or once a year," she said.