

Chelsea lofts to honor developer's vision

New lofts to honor developer's vision

By Katheleen Conti, Globe Staff | July 8, 2007

CHELSEA -- When Robert Kuehn Jr. took on the task of redeveloping the historic Chelsea Post Office into a satellite campus for Bunker Hill Community College in 1996, he seemed to have had the community, not just the challenge of the project, in mind.

"He was able to walk into a building and see beyond the number of pigeons" living there, said Juan Vega, executive director of Centro Latino de Chelsea.

Vega worked for Historic Massachusetts Inc., which acquired the post office building and partnered with Kuehn. "All the old walls in there, things left from the post office -- to be able to literally erase all that from in front of you and see a vision . . . see that it's a doable project -- I don't think he even blinked."

Kuehn, founder of Keen Development Corp. in Cambridge, died of a heart attack just over a year ago. But he left behind a vision for the redevelopment of the former Mary C. Burke School, built in the 1880s, into affordable lofts for artists, allowing them to live where they work.

A Boston nonprofit group, ETC Development Corporation, which won a bid to take over the former school's development rights, is honoring Kuehn's vision not only by design, but also by renaming the project as the Keen Studios.

Kuehn used the phonetic "Keen" for his company because people found it difficult to pronounce his name.

By the time the project, ETC's first in Chelsea, is ready for occupancy by mid-September, it will feature 23 artist home/studio spaces, 14 of which will be priced at below-market rates, said Paula Herrington, ETC's executive director.

"I was impressed by him," Herrington said of Kuehn, whom she met when she was working for Boston Community Capital. "Letting a community drive the process and creating something that would fit their needs -- that's just not the approach of a for-profit type of developer. It's extremely rare. He was very unique. That's why we just felt it was important to name the building after him."

Currently under construction, affordable units in the building at 220 Spencer Ave. will range from \$120,000 to \$222,000, and will be marketed for artists only.

People who apply not only have to meet income qualifications for first-time homebuyers, but also be approved by the Artist Certification Committee, which includes Chelsea artists.

Applications must be submitted by Thursday, and are available through ETC's website, etcdevelopmentcorp.org, at ETC's office on 405 Shawmut Ave. in Boston, or at Chelsea City Hall, 500 Broadway.

Names will be drawn through a lottery process, Herrington said.

To respect an artist's creative process, the units are an open layout, with only the kitchen and bathroom sectioned off. They feature 8-foot-tall windows and plenty of natural light, said project manager Matt Henzy.

Aaron Gornstein, executive director of the nonprofit Citizens' Housing and Planning Association, said Keen Studios "is a fitting tribute" to Kuehn, who was president of CHAPA when he died.

"Bob's legacy was really the adaptive reuse of historic buildings and the creation of mixed-income housing . . . creating housing for artists," Gornstein said. "He was a true innovator in that area over many decades."

Chelsea's growing artist community is eagerly awaiting the completion of Keen Studios.

John Kennard, a local photographer and one of the founders of the year-old Chelsea Artists' Collaborative, known as CHARCOLL, said that with four active galleries in town, "Keen coming on board is a great fit."

"With the affordability and availability of loft space, I'm surprised there aren't more artists here, which is why I hope Keen goes well," said Kennard, adding that CHARCOLL has helped to bring together about 50 local artists -- "some artists who've been here since the early '70s and some who came yesterday."

Darlene DeVita, a local photographer and member of CHARCOLL, said she is excited about the Keen development because of its artist-only requirement. She lives at the Spencer Lofts, which has an active gallery.

"Our hope is that they'll participate in our gallery," DeVita said. "You need artists in order to really make a town grow and thrive."

DeVita said she met Kuehn once. "I really liked him the moment I met him. He was this big, burly guy and you could just tell he was a caring guy," she said. "Artists need a place to live and work, and you can't afford these places in Boston."

Which is why Joe Greene, a local commercial and fine arts photographer, said he is tired of hearing people call Chelsea the new South End. "You can't afford the South End, you can afford Chelsea."

Greene, who manages the Pearl Street Gallery, said Chelsea may be going through a second wave of artists. Those who arrived in the early 1990s may have moved out when rents started going up.

Greene said he believes Kuehn "realized that when real artists live in the neighborhood, it brings only wonderful things to everyone else who lives around them.

"Art is something that bridges all differences that people have and brings communities together. Anything that keeps artists around and promotes art, it will be a good thing."

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