

San Francisco Chronicle



Potrero flats are emerging hot spot on art scene

by Kenneth Baker

September 30, 2013

For decades, San Francisco art galleries have clustered - nearly 50 in peak years - in the Union Square area, relying on the shopping district's heavy, affluent foot traffic and on the galleries' proximity to one another.

But real and threatened rent increases - the city has no commercial rent control - spurred by San Francisco's social-media boom have led a handful of gallery owners to vacate downtown and create a new gallery neighborhood: Potrero flats.

A sketchily defined area just north and west of Potrero Hill, and just south and west of the Design District, Potrero flats contains old warehouse and factory spaces that, once refurbished, are perfect for showcasing artworks that need a lot of ceiling height and breathing space on walls.

Potrero flats has already started to establish its reputation with the first big fall event on the city art scene: the recent opening of new spaces with inaugural shows at the Catharine Clark Gallery, the Jack Fischer Gallery, Brian Gross Fine Art and the George Lawson Gallery - all within two blocks of one another.

"I think there are people in this art community who are starved for something to shake it up," Gross said, "and this could be it."

Todd Hosfelt could be the one who started it all. He first had a gallery downtown, on Second Street, then on Clementina Street, in a luxuriously large space at a seedy address since demolished to make way for a residential complex.

When he moved to Utah Street, "I had no intention of starting a new 'gallery district,'" Hosfelt wrote in an e-mail. "The space was my primary concern. I looked at about 50 properties in SOMA, the Mission, on Market Street and in this neighborhood before I found this one. As soon as I saw it, I was smitten. The light was so beautiful."

The hinterlands

When he first announced his move to Utah Street, Hosfelt said, "People thought I was crazy for moving to the hinterlands. But when people saw my space, they all got it. Traffic in the new location was good from day one. It's easy to park here and close to 101 and 280, which makes it convenient for people from the Peninsula or East Bay. I don't think having a concentrated group of galleries will mean we'll do more business. But if we only cared about selling art, we wouldn't need a space like the one we have."

About 20 years ago, the space to show one's art was at 49 Geary, in a disused, ominously named Bankers Investment Building whose pioneer tenant, the StephenWirtz Gallery, still maintains one of the city's most elegant showplaces. The San Francisco Museum of Modern Art's reopening nearby on Third Street in 1995 made downtown seem like the place to be. But now that appears to be changing.

"I knew that the 49 Geary building," which still holds a dozen credible galleries, "was an outdated paradigm," said Steven Wolf, a former tenant who relocated to 19th Street - a little beyond the Potrero flats zone - in 2010. "The giant grouping in a single building seemed less useful with the rise of art fairs," he added, referring to the high-ticket art commerce in the United States and abroad that has many dealers considering an end to traditional retail operations.

Asked about whether he foresaw 49, as it's short-handed, and vicinity emptying of galleries, or of tenants generally, Jeffrey Fraenkel, whose prestigious photo gallery still is at the address, laughed. The Potrero flats area is zoned for factory space, and galleries are not considered offices. But downtown is zoned for offices, so there's little chance of any vacancy persisting at 49 Geary.

Good for sculpture

Gross, who was a tenant for 18 years at 49 Geary before moving to Potrero flats, found another reason besides economics for loving his new location.

"One of the thrilling aspects of this space," Gross said, "is that it has a loading door. I've always wanted a garage door in my gallery. I'm getting weekly, even daily, e-mails from sculptors who want to show here." He could never fit their work into the 49 Geary space.

Even before Potrero flats began cementing itself as a gallery hot spot, some art lovers had come to the neighborhood occasionally to see exhibitions at the Hosfelt Gallery or at nearby nonprofit venues such as Southern Exposure and the CCA Wattis Institute of Contemporary Art. But the rush of novelty of the new galleries' shows on the Saturday of the four (five, counting Wolf's) concurrent openings brought a great crush of visitors.

"I've always loved this neighborhood" San Francisco native Clark said of Potrero flats. "But as a young dealer, it seemed important to be where the big galleries were," she said of her move in 1995 from a Hayes Valley hole-in-the-wall to 49 Geary.

A larger spread

Fischer, whose new street-level gallery flanks Lawson's on Potrero Avenue, said, "I have almost three times the space here for what I was paying *prior* to the increase at 49 Geary." The rent increase, which would have taken effect at the end of March, was about 65 percent. "So I actually have them to thank," added Fischer, who found his

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

new space on Craigslist. "They forced me out and moved me into what I think is going to become an interesting hub."

In 2007, Clark moved out of 49 to her own space on nearby Minna Street. She saw the audience for her exhibition program evolve in size and commitment as the relocation asserted her independence. But as the San Francisco Museum of Modern Art began 30 months of demolition and construction outside her gallery door, Clark felt it imperative to move again.

So far, at her new ground floor space on Utah Street, Clark said she's had "far more walk-in traffic that we had on Minna ... we're having lots of students coming through. But it might be too early to judge."

In the flats

Some of the galleries and art institutions around Potrero flats:

Catharine Clark Gallery: 248 Utah St., www.cclarkgallery.com

Jack Fischer Gallery: 311 Potrero Ave., www.jackfischergallery.com

Brian Gross Fine Arts: 248 Utah St., www.briangrossfineart.com

George Lawson Gallery: 315 Potrero Ave., www.georgelawsongallery.com

Todd Hofelt Gallery: 260 Utah St., www.hosfeltgallery.com

Steven Wolf Fine Arts: 2747 19th Ave., www.stevenwolffinearts.com

Southern Exposure: 3030 20th St., www.soex.org

CCA Wattis Institute for Contemporary Art: 360 Kansas St., www.wattis.org