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# Acquiring A Studio Space:

## What to Consider Before You Invest

BY JESS BENJAMIN AND KIM CARPENTER



Because we artists often identify ourselves with what we make in our studio spaces, buying or renovating a property can be a stressful and emotional experience.

It was dark, depressing, and grimy. It smelled of age. This building hadn't been properly taken care of: the ceiling was painted black and the walls were covered with decades of old filth. It was probably the last place most artists would consider an ideal studio space.

But underneath all the years of neglect, I uncovered an ideal space for the studio I envisioned. I bought the property in Omaha, Nebraska in 2009. After two years of renovations, I now have an 8,000-s.f. ceramics studio featuring multi-use workspaces, a wood shop, a private gallery, a loading dock, a kiln and clay mixing area, storage space, and sleeping quarters.

Buying a studio space is a daunting and overwhelming experience, one that is just as much a personal investment as a financial one. I've now learned several important lessons.

### Spend Ample Time Up Front To Save Money in the Long Run

Time is money, as the saying goes. That's why before I even began looking at properties, I had to question whether I could spend the next several years remodeling a building while continuing to establish myself as an artist.

Renovations are key. No matter how perfect a potential studio may seem, there are always unforeseen repairs. It's crucial to make a realistic budget for what you can afford each month: not just for mortgage payments, but also what you can reasonably invest in the property over the next several years.

For that reason, I wrote a detailed business plan, which helped determine my budget and made it possible to approach banks for a small business loan. It took nine months to write my plan, which included financial details for the immediate future as well as five- and ten-year projections.

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The artist performed much of the renovation work herself, with help from friends and family.



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### Leave No Stone [or Brick] Unturned

You need to remember that banks will not view you as an artist. To them, you're a start-up entrepreneur. Come up with a vision statement, a business profile, and an economic assessment. Be realistic about future revenues and expenditures. Seek advice from friends who are self-employed and ask bank loan officers for feedback.

Find a realtor you trust—one who is willing to spend a lot of time with you. Consider a realtor who has worked with other artists. My gracious realtor worked with me for more than seven months.

Since you'll be spending most of your time in your studio, compare and contrast real estate multiple times. Remember: this is a business investment, not just a personal decision. Don't be swayed by the immediate visual of a "perfect" space. Never let your emotions interfere with what must be a well-reasoned, well-researched business decision.

Think beyond size and appearance. How old is the infrastructure? Is the roof in good shape? How is the exterior? These questions are just the beginning. That's why you have to bring in inspectors. Everyone knows

they should have properties professionally inspected before putting in an official bid, but the financial commitment to a studio—your business—requires even greater attention to physical detail.

Therefore, try to solicit expert opinions in addition to the inspector's. I visited multiple properties with plumbers, electricians, architects, and roofers. Tap into people you know and ask them to recommend experts.

The payoff can be big. For example, the second property I seriously considered was 8,000 square feet. It had the potential to be an ideal studio. However, the roofer, electrician, and plumber all discovered major problems. This appealing property could have cost me at least an additional \$100,000 before I had even made any of the improvements necessary to accommodate my business.

I know artists who unfortunately thought they were getting a "bargain" by purchasing the least expensive building available. One such bargain is considerably smaller than mine, so most folks would expect remodeling costs to be minimal in comparison. Yet that building's roof has been leaking for years, causing major damage to the entire infrastructure. This "bargain" studio has ended up costing considerably more money, time, and professional labor than my property. I continue to make improvements with less than one-fourth of my final buying price.

### Location, Location, Location

It's an old-but-true real estate maxim that location is everything—in this case, not only with respect to property and price, but also for attracting potential clients and collectors.

I focused on Benson, an old historic district of Omaha, just outside the downtown and midtown regions. Property is still affordable and Benson is also an established arts community (albeit for Indy and local music, not yet for visual art). I realized that, with my presence, Benson could become a place poised to take off as a more comprehensive arts destination.

Since the time I purchased my building, more people have been patronizing area restaurants, shops, and clubs. Architecture firms along with photography and painting studios are now located nearby, and another sculpture studio has recently opened. A close neighbor is also a recent M.F.A. graduate, and our connection provides vital conversation about artwork and property.

Another benefit of this location was one I hadn't anticipated: a sense of community. Benson is still predominantly working-class, and most residents haven't been exposed to ceramic art. Local kids regularly visit my studio, and two "tweens" like to spend time in my studio after school. They're intrigued by my work, and hopefully they will carry a life-long appreciation resulting from this experience.

### Be Realistic About What You, Friends, and Family Can Do

Before making the financial commitment, be honest about what you can, can't, and want to do yourself. I am a decent carpenter with some skills using machinery and tools, deriving both from my training in large-scale ceramics as well as my background working on a farm and ranch. You need to determine your skills honestly and remember to take both the time and the finances needed for renovations into account.

I bought a space that had been neglected. I spent the first six months focusing on the interior. I gutted 100 cubic yards of material. I did the majority of the work myself, but asked friends and family to help when necessary.

For example, friends helped me remove layers of carpet, tiles, linoleum, tar, and glue to expose the concrete and wood floors. I took all the interior walls and framing down, and friends salvaged everything possible. Using recycled materials, I was able to build mobile storage units, tables, and walls, which I can easily use to reconfigure my studio space.

Using my family's rolling scaffolding, I patched over 300 feet of water-damaged walls and ceiling. I hired an electrician and plumber I knew to bring the building up to code. Using a borrowed paint sprayer, my family helped paint the interior. Friends helped remove the concrete block wall to install a garage door next to the loading dock. I removed the signage and repaired the masonry with friends who are professionals.

### How Will You Use Your Space?

From the beginning, I wanted my studio to include both a workspace and a gallery. Although 8,000 square feet may seem large, I make every inch count. The workspace itself has 4,300 s.f., which easily accommodates my heavy equipment, including two electric kilns, a Soldner clay mixer, a pallet jack, and a Big Joe hydraulic lift. I utilized Craigslist and local businesses to help me find the best bargains on used equipment and materials.



Her remodeled studio space now features an impressive gallery plus efficient areas for making and storing large-scale ceramics. Jess Benjamin may be reached by e-mail at: [jessbenji@yahoo.com](mailto:jessbenji@yahoo.com).



Remember, you don't just own a building, you own a property, meaning the exterior space can serve multiple purposes. My studio provides street access, ample parking, a loading dock, and a gated area for storing supplies. The space is large enough to hold the outdoor kiln I factored into my long-term business plan and intend to build in upcoming years.

The gallery space occupies 1,000 square feet. Having a place to show my work was a major part of my business plan. I wanted to be able to invite people interested in my work directly to the studio, where they often feel more comfortable engaging with me on a one-to-one basis than they do in the more distracting environment of an art gallery. Even when these visits don't result in sales, they provide new ways

of thinking about my work and help establish lasting relationships with my clients.

For this reason, the space can't just be functional: it has to be visually pleasing. The gallery is flooded with natural light that best illuminates the large, stationary pieces. Moveable shelving holds smaller pieces, and a 40-foot-long moveable wall is for hanging pieces. The arrangement is fluid and dynamic, offering an easy viewing experience that naturally guides visitors from one piece to the next.

Finally, I converted the 1,500-s.f. basement into a cozy sleeping space. Whenever the kilns are on overnight, I now have a comfortable place to stay. @