

American★ songwriter

the craft of music



CROSSTOWN ARTS
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Memphis gains momentum with new creative hub.

PHOTO & STORY BY LYNNE MARGOLIS

Like most older American cities, Memphis has its share of once-proud edifices that somehow became monuments to urban decay. Among its biggest was the 1.1 million-square-foot Sears Crosstown building. In its heyday, it was a buzzing hive of retail commerce housing a department store and pre-Amazon mail-order distribution center, where thousands of well-treated employees shipped items like Harmony guitars to generations who launched dreams from Sears catalogs.

But the imposing art-deco structure, built in 1927 and expanded repeatedly, sat abandoned for nearly 20 years — until new dreamers hatched a plan to make it come alive again. They envisioned a creative hub containing an intimate, 125-capacity performing venue, a 400-seat black-box theater, large gallery spaces and shared art-making areas including a digital lab and recording, woodworking, printmaking and photography studios, A-plus living spaces and studios for musicians, visual artists, writers and other creatives doing three-month residencies in any discipline. Plus a bar, and a café. And in just eight years, they turned it into reality.

While urban revitalization is hardly a new concept, Crosstown Arts — the brainchild of Christopher Miner and fellow visionary Todd Richardson — is so innovative, it could become a template for sustainable arts support and mixed-use development. That's because the nonprofit organization and its 50,000-square-foot home are supported by the rest of Crosstown Concourse, a diverse "vertical urban village" with mind-body-spirit-oriented restaurants, retail shops, for- and non-profit entities such as healthcare providers, a charter high school, market, craft brewery and 265 apartments. One restaurant provides immigrant/refugee cooks unable to afford their own restaurant space to share their talents and earn a living. A nonprofit bakery employs

parents transitioning from homelessness, paying \$15 an hour plus health benefits.

The entire place not only stands as a shining example of what determined dreamers can achieve, it also exudes a sense of possibility — and feels like a vortex of creative energy, spiraling like the massive red staircase connecting Crosstown Arts' first and second floors.

"We all have stories of going in that building, breaking in and doing whatever," says Jim Thompson, owner of high-end speaker company EgglestonWorks. "Everybody's had this idea of, 'Wouldn't it be cool if we did something with that great old building?' That's not that crazy. The crazy part is they convinced other people to come along with them and do it. And they pulled it off. That's amazing."

Thompson says of his friend Miner, whose attempt to establish a residency program in Jackson, Mississippi, inspired the project, "He's created something you can't do an elevator pitch on. There's just a million things going on and you have to experience it."

He's right. It's impossible to get a true sense of the vision and its realization without stepping inside the platinum LEED-certified building, where smooth concrete and glass meet walls intentionally left weathered. Atriums stretch from concourse level to the 10th floor, carrying echoes of music, laughter and the occasional bark. But it's not cacophonous — it's just the vibrations of life, ebbing and flowing as day shifts to night, when café meetings and after-school

programs segue into conversations in the comfortably funky midcentury-modern Art Bar, or performances in the intimate, 125-seat Green Room. On weekdays, residents share provided family-style meals; they also share a stocked kitchen. Two craftsman-style bungalows across the street provide less echoey environments for music residents like Memphis-based Alex Greene, who says Crosstown is helping to fill a void for edgy, avant-garde artists through adventurous bookings and events such as its annual Continuum Festival. That two-day gathering is all about collaborations among artists of different genres; residencies also provide opportunities for cross-pollination.

Miner, a video artist, photographer and musician from Jackson, Mississippi, studied and taught at Yale and New York's Hunter College. But that city left him broke, and he missed his artistic inspiration: the South. So he and Atlanta

native Sparks returned to Jackson. Then they missed their New York creative community, so they developed a nonprofit residency program to bring northern artists to them.

But Miner was unfamiliar with running a nonprofit, so he asked Richardson, a college friend with contacts at Memphis' Stax Museum of American Soul Music, to hook him up with anyone who might offer advice. Those advisors loved his plan so much, they told him to do it in Memphis.

"I said I would, but I don't know where. They said, 'We know these people who own this million-square-foot Sears building, and they're trying to figure out what they're

This could become a template for sustainable arts support and mixed-use development.

gonna do with it.”

In 2010, Miner and Richardson formed Crosstown Arts and pitched a “blue-sky” idea — a gallery, performance spaces, residency programs, work spaces, a cafe serving healthy meals to musicians and artists. Seed money covered a feasibility study; they learned their plan was actually doable — if they could gather enough funding from government, philanthropic and private sources, which hinged on securing major lease commitments. For two years, Miner and Richardson, an art historian and professor, recruited tenants, while presenting examples of programming they hoped to deliver in the building.

After years of debate about its future, stakeholders gave Crosstown Arts the \$2 million building. By late 2012, they had secured eight anchor tenants. Design work began. They raised \$200 million before breaking ground in 2015; Crosstown Concourse officially opened in August of 2017. In the two years since, they’ve proven their funding model actually supports arts programming and operations — and more dreams.

To disprove naysayers who said Memphis wouldn’t back Crosstown’s creative vision, they turned a 1,200-square-foot building across the street into a venue and began hosting shows. They still make Crosstown Arts at 430 N. Cleveland, aka 430, available for \$80 a night (including PA, seats, etc.) to anyone who wants to book it for performances, exhibits or creative presentations.

“We don’t curate. It is just community based, and there’s just tons of cool shit that happens there. It’s amazing,” Miner says.

One dream that started as a 430 notion turned into what might be Crosstown’s most successful project to date: Mellotron Variations.

A few years ago, Memphis musician Robby Grant inquired about using that space to compose music on vintage Mellotrons with Jonathan Kirkscey, a Memphis Symphony Orchestra cellist and film scorer. He was planning only one performance, but wanted to negotiate a longer-than-normal rental to develop it. Miner loved the idea so much, he offered to clear out gallery space for a month, then stage and record two shows and front money for an album pressing if he could recoup through



Makaya McCraven performing at Crosstown Arts

ticket sales.

They broke even, and Crosstown used the performance video to secure a \$20,000 National Endowment for the Arts grant that funded a bigger collaboration with Wilco’s Pat Sansone and John Medeski of Medeski, Martin & Wood. That begat the Mellotron Variations performance, live album and concert film, which recently screened at Crosstown Arts and in Nashville.

Second-generation Memphis musician and recording engineer Paul Taylor had become Crosstown Arts’ first musical resident just weeks before the foursome performed. Raised in Memphis’ most legendary recording spots, Taylor had casually started recording bands in his residency studio, the size of a small living room. When he told Miner that much of it “sounds way better than it has a right to,” he learned of plans for a full studio — to record not only other residents, but anyone who wants to use it. For free.

He now runs it — and some of his recordings may be released soon on the label Crosstown is forming. The studio’s about to expand, too. It’s a good place to cut demos or craft arrangements, without competing against established studios.

Luther Dickinson, Soul Coughing founder Mike Doughty and several local bands have already used it. Taylor says he hopes to main-

tain the vibe of a creative workspace rather than build a glass barriered control room with glaring red “record” light, both of which can stifle artists. Another aspect that helps creativity: not stressing about cost.

Miner eventually would like to offer supportive licensing and publishing arrangements; maybe they’ll press vinyl, too. A donated collection of 30,000 records will become a sound library, and a terrestrial public radio station going into a space serendipitously installed in another of Miner’s “build it and they will come” moments. “If anything cool is happening,” says Thompson, “it’s happening there.”

Like most Memphians, Taylor was intrigued when he heard about Crosstown Arts, but he admits he never imagined it would reach the scale it already has. “Now, a lot of the thinking I do is taking the long historical view of things that we’re doing now; what are they gonna mean in 10 years or 50 years? In a hundred years?”

“I really have the feeling now that I’m on the ground floor of something that is shaping up to be a huge part of Memphis history, and be incredibly good for the city in ways that nobody could have predicted,” says Taylor. “Possibly least of all, the people who founded it.”★