

## **Industrial arts**

Fallon, Bill

Nothing dominates Yonkers' Nepperhan Avenue like the Alexander Smith Carpet Mills. Rising on the street's east flank, the mills are five contiguous buildings as massive as they are dour.

In the next few months, the 1871 facade - gritty, brooding and seemingly capable of withstanding a nuclear strike - is slated for an update with a cube-and-lattice entrance where now loading docks speak to heavy duty.

"You drive along here and it's a very mysterious building," said George Huang. "It's cryptic."

Huang, along with his brother Tony - principals in Manhattan-based The Heights Real Estate Co. -- bought two of the five building, 540 and 578 Nepperhan Ave., for \$12 million in 2005. They now control 150,000 square feet of space and are putting hammer and sheetrock to 10,000 square feet of new artist lofts. The new entry is part of the renovation, to be replicated with a rear cube-lattice entrance where the woebegone Saw Mill River snakes through the mills' parking lot.

"It's not very inviting," Huang said recently, surveying the mills' stark face of brick and steel-grated windows between Lake Avenue and Axminster Street. "The back is the front and the front is invisible. We're looking to change that."

Twenty-seven new lofts will spring from the current renovation. Twenty bathrooms will get makeovers.

Huang said Yonkers officials are enthusiastic about his plans.

The public is invited to check on the building's progress -and to peruse the art produced there during an open house May 17 and 18. Said Huang: "It will be a fun way to meet artists, see and buy art and to check out the architecture and history of this interesting building."

Historic plaques note the entire carpet mills complex is listed on the Federal Register of Historic Places. It was once the largest carpet manufacturing facility in the world. The Alexander Smith looms were co-opted during both world wars to supply the military with fabric. At full tilt in the war years, the mills employed 4,000 to 7,000.

The looms fell silent in 1953, an early victim of cheap overseas manufacturing, and the buildings became a warren of small- and medium-sized businesses - carpentry, auto parts, a towing and body-shop service - that kept the wrecking balls away. The nearly 289-foot-tall Alexander Smith power plant smokestack still stands.

There are 49 buildings in the carpet mills complex: some with prospering businesses of the sort that don't require a flashy storefront, some worthy of renovation, some too shabby to save and some given over to storage. The carpet mills represent the sort of space that cries out to many developers with the siren song of easy-to-manage, cheap-to-maintain storage space. But Huang was never tempted. "The YoHo element attracted me to this purchase," he said. It was the most interesting and charming part of the building. When I saw the artists and their community, I realized this was the future of the building and perhaps the scope of the entire complex."

The current work represents the fifth phase of renovation into artist lofts, a project begun by the previous owner, Allan Eisenkraft. When Huang bought the properties, there were 25 artists there, the results of Eisenkraft's YoHo efforts. Eisenkraft owned 540 and 578 Nepperhan Ave. for 27 years.

"I'm not only embracing Allan Eisenkraft's vision, I'm extending it," Huang said. After three years, 46 artists now work there in their own lofts.

Huang has staked \$400,000 to the new renovation and another \$6,000 toward an interactive YoHo Web site to promote activity there: [www.yohoartists.com](http://www.yohoartists.com).

His company is answering a need, Huang said. "We've had to turn away 20 to 25 artists who were pushed out of Chelsea and Dumbo," once arty and now expensive New York City neighborhoods. "The focus of YoHo 5" - the phase of renovation dating to phase 1 during Eisenkraft's tenure - "is to meet artists' demand for affordable starting units." Loft rents begin at \$350 per month and top out over \$1,000 per month.

Huang said the 16-foot ceilings and 6-by-8-foot windows are "big selling points" for artists.

"We represent one of, if not the largest concentrations of artists in southern Westchester," Huang said. "That momentum will only continue."

Artist Kathleen Spicer rents 500 square feet where she produces "a new form of pop art" - painted and laminated wood. She spoke while completing a piece for a Chicago police precinct.

"I love being here;" Spicer said. She works in her loft five days per week. "It's a very creative, open, noncompetitive environment. We're all pretty much in our rooms. When we run into each other, we take a moment to catch up with each other's lives."

Huang is tweaking that formula with the renovation by providing an artists lounge for socializing and face-to-face networking out of the hallways. "They're not just renting a space," he said of the artists. "They're joining a community."

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