

Party in a War Zone?

The failing National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum wants to sell its building to be used as a private event space. The catch is that taxpayers paid for it.

By Deanna Isaacs

March 9, 2007

SOMETIMES YOU CAN'T tell when you're stepping onto a battlefield. Last week a sign at the empty lobby desk of the National Vietnam Veterans Art Museum, where the posted admission fee is \$10, read "Please ring bell for assistance." Beyond it, the galleries were dark. The elevator wasn't working, the roof was leaking, and a sign had been taped over a fresh black wound in a wall: "Mold, do not touch." The museum is understaffed, and although there's a lot of deeply felt work on the walls, its programming is mostly MIA. At press time, its board was preparing to rent part of the building to a private business, which has plans to turn it into a party space. The lease includes an option to buy the entire building, donated to the museum by the city a decade ago. Rent would be credited toward the purchase price, and the purchase option could be exercised after the Near South TIF expires, when the city's \$1.7 million investment would no longer have to be paid back. What a deal! Community organizations are up in arms.

The NVVAM has been struggling since fortune, in the person of Mayor Daley, smiled upon it. The museum grew from a 1981 exhibit by veterans, but it didn't have a permanent home until the city gave it one in 1996: an abandoned Swiss Foods factory at 18th and Indiana, between two pristine historic residences, Clarke House and Glessner House. The city threw in a \$1 million grant and a \$400,000 loan to get the place going. But by 1999, after the museum's three key founders had a falling-out, half the artists were taking legal action to get their work back. Those founders are no longer active, but the question they debated—how broad the museum's focus should be—remains. Burdened by maintenance costs, operated by volunteers and just one full-time employee, and unable to consistently attract the public, the NVVAM has sunk ever deeper in debt.

According to board chair Matt Keepman, in recent years attendance has been a paltry 13,000 annually. He says that operating expenses for 2005 (the most recent year for which information was available) were \$336,000 and that the museum lost \$27,000 that year; accumulated liabilities amounted to \$885,000. Keepman blames shortfalls on a vacuum in past leadership and the burdens of property ownership. He says an arts consultant told the board that only 11 percent of organizations with budgets its size own their buildings, and Keepman suspects none owns the 30,000 square feet the NVVAM does. It's a great space, he says, but it hasn't had the "organizational infrastructure" to sustain it. In 2006 the board couldn't manage to mount its usual fund-raiser and had to borrow more money to keep the doors open.

Keepman says the building has been appraised at between \$2.5 and \$3.5 million. After the museum solicited bids on it, he says, "we signed a letter of intent with Marc Curtis," owner of the Black Orchid nightclub. "We're looking to do a seven-year lease, where he'd use our space in the evenings, with an option to buy." If the deal goes through, it would give the museum operating money: "We'd be able to hire an executive director, start to build [staff] infrastructure." And when

the seven years are up? "At the end of 2013, the agreement with the city expires," Keepman says. "We no longer have to abide by the provisions [to devote 75 percent of the building to art]. We've talked with Marc about carving out a space for us, or we could take the proceeds from the sale" and look elsewhere. "I still contend that the mission of this museum does not support a 30,000-square-foot space."

In an apparent effort to facilitate the deal, the museum has tried to get rid of its sole tenant, Cafe Society, a restaurant flanking the lobby. Owner Jorge Armando Afanador has been there since 2001, has eight more years on his lease, and pays \$1,910 per month. He doesn't want to leave. He says the board gave him an eviction notice in December for being late with the rent even though he's always paid on time and they owe him about \$5,000 for janitorial work. After he hired an attorney, he says, "they offered us \$12,000 to leave immediately." He claims his business is worth \$175,000. Bottom line, he says, is that "when the Black Orchid went to see my space, they loved it, so they want me out. Now [the board is] treating me like a king, because they finally see that this Latino without sombrero has the capability of getting a good lawyer, has the understanding of an elephant, and will not take shit from anybody."

In the last few months Afanador has shared his predicament with members of the Prairie District Neighborhood Alliance. PDNA president Tina Feldstein says local residents are alarmed because negotiations are proceeding without their knowledge or input, despite the fact that "the building was made possible by TIF money, given by the city for a museum. We don't have a problem with change, but since we paid for it, we don't want the use to be changed without even asking the neighbors." She says that potentially more beneficial uses, such as a private elementary school, haven't been considered, and she wonders about issues like parking. "There's tax money involved—we feel they should be held accountable." PDNA member Jeffery Ayersman says that the lease-sale is "just a complicated legal maneuver to get around the agreement" between the city and the museum. Under its terms, he says, the city has the right in these circumstances to take the building back. If Black Orchid's lease-with-option deal goes through, it in effect "gets the benefit of a loan with no interest, and a chance to develop its business in a building being taxed at \$1,400 per year as a nonprofit."

Last week the museum's art committee met to talk about what show to mount for Memorial Day, one of the two most important days on their calendar. They tabled a decision on whether the permanent collection should be expanded (and the museum's name changed) to include work by veterans who served in places besides Vietnam. But they agreed to let Iraq vet (and committee member) Aaron Hughes solicit videos shot in Iraq for a future installation. Hughes will also mount an Iraq war vets' oral history event at the museum on Veterans Day weekend—the only other time each year that the museum can count on the public looking its way.

Out of the Garret

The Poetry Foundation announced this week that it's "taken the first step in building a national home for poetry here in Chicago." The foundation is buying land at 720 N. Dearborn for \$6.7 million and expects to open a new headquarters there in January 2010; the call is going out for an architect. The building will include offices for the foundation and *Poetry* magazine, a library, and a multipurpose public space