

Outlaw Artists and the Urban Landscape: Does One Have to be Bad to Be Good?

by Teresa Paschke

There are several seemingly obvious connections between outlaws and artists: both have been mythologized through books, newspaper accounts, tabloid chronicles, talk show interviews, and movies depicting the positive and negative outcomes of their accomplishments; artists and outlaws alike tend to live according to their own rules; and outlaws, as well as some artists, tend to burn out early. These similarities are deeply rooted in public perception, self-awareness, and social and economic conditions.

“To the outlaws—to all of them:
the good and the bad, the ugly and
the pretty, the dead and the live”
—Edward Abby, *The Brave Cowboy*

The ideas that led to this essay stem from an invitation I received to participate on a university panel for a symposium on “Wildness, Wilderness, and the Creative Imagination.” The panel was titled, *The Artist as Outlaw*, and initially I was perplexed as to why I would be asked to speak on this subject. Granted, I’ve been a practicing visual artist for over 20 years, but outlaw? I have never considered myself an outlaw even though certain actions in my past could be construed as unlawful. This led to the fundamental question of whether the notion of outlawry was necessarily linked to unlawfulness or could it be instead a state of mind, a style, an attitude that reflects an ideology rooted in myth or popular culture? Furthermore, what is the connection, if any, between artists and outlaws in the first place? Do these two groups share a common mythology, and is public perception of either based in fact or fiction? Where do these perceptions differ and where do they coincide? What effect does this perception have on the relationship between artists and non-artists?

There are several seemingly obvious connections between outlaws and artists, and this essay presupposes that many similarities exist between them. I believe that these similarities are deeply rooted in public perception, self-awareness, and social and economic conditions. Both groups are generally seen as nonconformists, unwilling and perhaps even unable to adapt to societal norms and middle-class ideals; both are often seen as misfits within a society that expects (and often demands) conformity; both have been mythologized as clever/genius, heroic/audacious, self-reliant/unrestrained individuals in folk and popular culture; and both eventually modify their lifestyles in order to survive or prosper. The similarities I’d like to address here have very little to do with criminal activity or unlawful behavior, although there are some connections to be made on this level as well. Instead, I’d like to propose that a connection exists in part because of our desire for heroines, prodigies, and saviors. It’s difficult to know which comes first, our perception of them or the self-awareness the tortured genius or rebellious hero has of himself as mythological figure. And certainly, the reputation both groups have as “outsiders” has a great deal to do with the way each are sometimes forced live.

I could, in fact, compare my life as an artist to any number of disenfranchised groups—people of color, the homeless, the working poor—since my main thesis suggests a similarity in social and economic conditions, public perception and the notion that somehow artists (and outlaws) are “different,” living unconventional lifestyles outside the mainstream. One important difference, however, is that both artists and outlaws choose their path—it is self-induced, self-inflicted. In other words, both artists and outlaws know what they are getting into.

Numerous artists throughout history have been compared to outlaws. Some really were outlaws. Caravaggio, the 17th-century Italian painter whose history is known not only through his paintings but largely from “police reports, legal depositions, court transcripts...and contracts for commissions;”¹ William Burroughs, with his cult following and celebrity status remembered, in part, by the famous incident in Mexico which left his wife dead and the modern Viennese painter Egon Schiele, who was imprisoned 24 days “for displaying indecent imagery,”² are all

known, in part, because of their unlawful activity. Hip-hop musicians, graffiti artists, and some legendary country-western singer-songwriters reinforce the mythology of the artist as outlaw or social deviant, as do modern Hollywood portraits of Basquiat, Pollock, and van Gogh. The term outlaw is used here to differentiate between common criminals—certain House majority leaders and corporate executives, shoplifters and con artists—and those figures whose unlawful exploits have rewarded them with fame and folklore status. Historical accounts of their exploits vary widely, many embellished through oral tradition and dime store novels. So in the context of this essay, *outlaw* refers to the mythologized outlaw—lore and lyrics that surround characters such as Billy the Kid, Butch Cassidy, and Jesse James because, like the misconceptions surrounding the artist, a life based in fact is oftentimes unromantic and far less glamorous than one based in fiction.

Both artists and outlaws have been mythologized through books, newspaper accounts, tabloid chronicles, talk show interviews, and movies depicting both the positive and negative outcomes of their accomplishments. Many of us are familiar with and captivated by the image of the artist as social outcast, estranged from society for possessing a tortured and depressed state of being, an alternative version of reality or misunderstood intentions. This stereotypical view serves to reinforce the myth—and sometimes the pocketbook—of the artist, living a life of outlawry. There exists the notion that artists must suffer for their craft; often this view stands as a requirement for artistic achievement and can sometimes catapult the artist's image from relative obscurity to one of greatness. Even Socrates was said to dismiss any poet “untouched by the madness of the muses,” while artist Edvard Munch declined treatment for his psychological condition out of fear that doing so “would destroy [his] art.”³ A rebellious disposition seems a requirement for both artists and outlaws and may be what helps to make both groups creative or clever. We admire and live vicariously through their rebellion in hopes of satiating our own desire for originality. Like artists, outlaws have been “seen to stand in opposition to certain established, oppressive economic and legal systems...”⁴ And, although most of us don't aspire to a life of crime, we can identify with the need to “stick it to the man.”

Artists and outlaws alike tend to live according to their own rules. They are often self-motivated loners living without the need for society's approval. We assume that, for practical reasons, outlaws are solitary figures; they're always on the move and living “off the grid,” free from the daily grind that includes both the literal and metaphoric baggage we, as non-outlaws, carry with us as we go about our lives. We mythologize their lives because they seem to live “on the edge” and we want to, too, without really having to give up anything. We want to be like Jack Burns, the brave cowboy in Edward Abbey's novel, whose life's possessions fit into a saddlebag: an iron skillet, a can of pork and beans, a tin of coffee. Or perhaps instead like Janos Lavin, the exiled painter in John Berger's novel, *A Painter of Our Time*, whose Parisian garret was simply furnished with “an old desk with the drawers missing...a dozen cups without handles...yellowed newspapers stacked on the floor...a broken bucket half filled with matches and cigarette stubs.” We envy the glamour of living “on the lam” and identify with those who, whether criminal or movie star, must dodge the intrusive gaze of “feds” or fans. Like the outlaw, the artist appears to live according to his or her own edict, a kind of romantic sovereignty afforded only to those who are willing to take risks challenge the status quo, blaze their own trail, or follow their own vision.

Outlaws, as well as some artists, tend to burn out early. An unfortunate consequence of the outlaw's lifestyle is that it's often short-lived. Outlaws die young. Billy the Kid was merely 22 when, in 1881, Pat Garrett shot him dead. Jesse James met his death one year later at the age of 35. He was shot in the back of the head while standing on a chair adjusting a picture on the wall—a picture that was, without doubt, etched in his mind for all eternity.⁵ For these men, death—by gunfire—was merely an occupational hazard. Similarly, studies have suggested that people in creative fields are two to three times more likely to suffer from mental illness—often leading to drug or alcohol addiction that can, in turn, lead to death—than those in non-creative fields.⁶ There have been many artists throughout history who've met early deaths that can be attributed, at least in part, to mental illness, drug addiction, or alcohol abuse. A combination of mental illness and addiction to absinthe cut short the life of Vincent van Gogh who, after a creative frenzy lasting nearly a decade, committed suicide at the age of 37. Jackson Pollock, the painter, died tragically behind the wheel in a drunk driving accident—he lived to be 44. Comedian John Bellushi died in 1982 from an accidental overdose at the age of 33. Social conditions can also take their toll, and have cut short the lives of artists such as Agon Schiele, who died during the flu epidemic of 1918 at the young age of 28, and Carravagio who, in 1610, reportedly died from malaria at the age of 39, although some speculate he was actually murdered.⁷

Death isn't the only thing that changes the course of an artist's career. Artists often modify their lifestyle for practical reasons—self-preservation, family responsibilities, or both. Speaking from experience, the artist's bohemian lifestyle, as it's often referred, is difficult to sustain beyond one's 20s or early 30s. No one really wants to live, as I did, without hot water or sleep every night on a hide-a-bed once middle age sets in. As our incomes increase, so do our standards of living, and the luxuries we once were forced to live without, in order to afford paint or fabric or wood, quickly become necessities. Things often change when an artist begins to sell his or her work or, for a variety of personal reasons that include caring for children, health concerns, or the desire for a pension plan, give up being artists altogether to join the mainstream and inherit the ideals and lifestyle that go with it. Or they, like me, take university positions that, as a friend recently asserted, have become the modern-day patrons of the arts as the church once was. In my case, however, choosing to become an academic came as the result of being "relocated;" forced out of my warehouse studio for the sake of urban renewal. Graduate school seemed like a good thing to do with the relocation money I was offered.⁸

The artists represented in my story are commonly referred to as "emerging"—mostly young in both age and experience—compelled to follow a professional path not because it's a good way to make a living, but rather, in spite of it. These artists, of whom I was one, work without approval from society, are willing to exchange the comforts and security of the 9 to 5 world for freedom of expression in a medium of their choosing. They tend to be unskilled at most things outside of their art school training, often forced to take low-paying jobs with flexible hours, few benefits, and little stimulation. To make matters worse, art supplies are expensive, and emerging artists are often forced to decide between paying rent and putting the finishing touches on their current masterpiece. Emerging artists tend to gravitate, as I did, to architecture with large, open floor plans, high ceilings with few, if any, amenities, and low rent. Since most artists can't afford to pay two rents, they must choose between a good place to create their artwork and a good place to live. The truly passionate will choose the former by settling for a living space that is less than good, one that often exists in a low-rent neighborhood or district located on the outskirts of a more prosperous locale. For many artists, the trade-off for this is the freedom from constraints often posed by conventional jobs, living spaces, and lifestyles.

The story that follows is about a group of artists who, in 1985, set out in search of affordable studio space, a contemporary garret, where we could pursue our passions in the company of like-minded people free from nosy neighbors, nit-picking landlords, and high rent. Most of us were recent college graduates with low-paying jobs and looming financial-aid debt. What began for me as a four-month exile from conventional modes of living stretched into a seven-year journey—one that tested my self-esteem (an employer once threatened to fire me for not washing my hair on a daily basis) and my stamina (there were many sub-zero weekends when the furnace would go out only to be fired back up Monday morning when the landlord arrived for work) because I chose to live and work in a warehouse space that lacked the customary furnishings of water, private bathroom and kitchen, and where living was in violation of city building codes. This story is also about the transformative effect artists have on the neighborhoods they inhabit—a common story about urban renewal, gentrification, and the natural cycle of growth, decay, and rejuvenation within the urban landscape. For the sake of this story and my friends, I've chosen to change their names.



Berman Buckskin Building, 1989

Jennifer, Mike, Dave, and several others found what they were looking for when they came upon a sign offering “space for lease.” It was posted in the window of the Berman Buckskin building, a handsome five-story brick structure built in 1894, bordering the banks of the Mississippi River near downtown Minneapolis. They were able to negotiate, on a month-to-month basis, nearly the entire third floor and swiftly began to divide the space among themselves: square footage x the number of windows = the highest monthly rent. Pallets and other debris were removed and walls erected. With 2 x 4s, plasterboard and, in some cases, chicken wire, eight studios were built and quickly occupied.

Several months would pass before I’d join this interdisciplinary group of writers, performance and visual artists. For the next seven years, we would live and work on the third floor of the Berman Buckskin building, developing careers and fostering relationships through the creativity and camaraderie that evolved and matured there.

Our Warehouse District neighborhood, once known as the Gateway District, was situated on the northern edge of downtown. Known decades earlier as Bridge Square, it had at one time contained all of downtown Minneapolis.⁹ By the early 1900s, the area experienced its first transformation and Bridge Square was re-established as Gateway Park. Between the mid-1800s through the Great Depression, this area was, quite literally, the gateway to Minneapolis. Gateway Park was the centerpiece of the district with its grassy lawn and stone pavilion on which was carved, “More than its heart, the city opens its arms to you.”¹⁰ The park served as a public square located between the Mississippi River—where St. Anthony Falls generated power for flour and saw mills located in the Warehouse District—and the grand Nicollet Hotel, located between Nicollet and Hennepin Avenues. The Nicollet Hotel provided upscale shopping, restaurants, and entertainment. At its peak in the 1920s, Nicollet Avenue was known as the “Fifth Avenue of the Northwest,” while one block west, Hennepin Avenue was famous for its lively entertainment.¹¹ The Gateway District originally encompassed roughly 25 blocks and became the city’s entertainment district with bars, burlesque houses, pawnshops, and hotels.¹² Hotels such as the Vendome, St. James, and Phoenix offered residence to seasonal migrant workers—miners, lumberjacks, mill workers, farmhands, and construction workers. At one point, the Gateway District was home to 3,500 residents.¹³ Living conditions in the hotels were minimal. Proprietors subdivided upper stories and erected makeshift walls, creating small rooms that sometimes numbered as many as 100 “units” per floor. Not surprisingly, they often failed to meet housing codes. The “cages,” appropriately named for the chicken wire used to seal the tops of each room—tacked on to deter theft—were sparsely furnished with a bed and sometimes a dresser.¹⁴ The men living in them furnished their own unauthorized hotplate, and girlie pin-ups.

Between 1930 and the 1950s, the area fell into severe decline and the Gateway’s reputation as skid row became cemented in the minds of citizens and city leaders. By the early ’60s, wrecking balls began to systematically demolish that reputation along with the buildings of the district. Residents were forced to relocate and businesses were forced out. The steel and glass of tomorrow replaced the brick and stone of yesterday.

The Berman Buckskin building was a cornerstone of the Gateway District. Originally owned by the Northrup King Seed Company and later by the Northwestern Drug Company, it was purchased by Morris and Nathan Berman in 1964. The family business, started in 1899, was originally located two blocks north at First Street and Third Avenue. There, they purchased and tanned pelts from trappers for their leather business. Throughout the '40s and '50s, both my father and grandfather, who were life-long trappers, sold animal skins to the Bermans. The company thrived and eventually expanded into moccasins, jackets, and other leather fashion goods.¹⁵ But by the mid-'80s, the company, like so many others, had moved most of its operations to the suburbs and used only the fourth and fifth floors of the building for storage and office space. The other three floors were rented as inexpensive studio and commercial space for artists and small businesses.

During the 1980s, the Warehouse District experienced a resurgence of activity. Artists began moving into the vacant buildings, attracted by the high ceilings, low rent, and absentee landlords. Artists became identified by the buildings they lived and worked in: the WeWa, the Harmony, the Skunkhouse, the Wilenski, the Berman. Along with the artists came art galleries, some of which were commercial enterprises while others were "alternative" nonprofits. It was the nonprofit galleries, such as Riflesport and No Name, which most of us supported. We attended all of the openings and showed our artwork when invited. Once a month the galleries hosted a "gallery crawl," a night when all of the galleries in the Warehouse District held exhibition openings. On those nights, the galleries would be bustling with suburbanites, wealthy art collectors, the media, and us. We did our part to reinforce the myth—with our paint-spattered clothes and tattered sneakers—of the "starving artist" standing in stark contrast to the gallery crowd dressed in feather-plumed hats, designer handbags, pointy-toed boots, and skinny ties. After all, it was our neighborhood and although we may not have had our artwork on display, our presence completed the portrait of a thriving art scene.

By 1986, there were 10 of us living and working on the third floor of the Berman Buckskin building.¹⁶ We were painters, poets, sculptors, and musicians. We were collectors and scavengers, risk-takers and pioneers, loners and lovers, inebriated by our collective creative energy. We lived with an acute awareness that, at any moment, our landlord, the fire marshal, or the city zoning inspectors might raid the place, discover we were living in violation of city building codes, and give us the boot. We'd have had no recourse even if we'd had leases, which we didn't.

The walls to my studio had been framed in by the time I rented the space. It took my dad and me approximately 20 sheets of plasterboard to cover the studs on the inside of my 600-square-foot studio. With scrap lumber, I constructed a small closet where I could hide clothes, personal items, and anything else that might suggest I lived there. Whenever I left my studio for any length of time, I'd lock the closet door in case the zoning inspectors appeared in my absence. Since I did pay rent under the auspices of a small business—my studio practice—it was perfectly reasonable to have tools and art supplies in plain sight but not socks, underwear, or toiletries. Like anyone living on the lam, my provisions needed to be stashed—out of reach and out of sight.

Our studios took advantage of the natural light from windows facing south and west. Since there were no windows on the east or north sides of the building, we created a community area—a place to store or discard unwanted "stuff." We called it the "Common Space" and at any given time one could find furniture; leather; car, bicycle, or motorcycle parts; clothing; art supplies; artwork that didn't quite come out right; any number of useful household items; and more leather. There was even a stainless-steel gurney that one of us wheeled home. The incredible thing about the Common Space was that inventory changed regularly so that new and useful items were discovered daily. The Common Space was the one place we'd let our guards down—perhaps naively—leaving sofas, hide-a-beds, and cookware in plain sight. We reasoned that, since none of us claimed ownership to our mountain of detritus—a mountain our landlord saw regularly yet abided by a "don't ask, don't tell" policy—we couldn't be exposed to the possibility of eviction since there would be no proof it was used, by us, for domestic purposes.

The fourth and fifth floors of the Berman were wired with silent alarms. Quite often, vandals or drunks, attempting to jimmy the windows after climbing the fire escape, would trip these alarms late at night. Those of us on the third floor would be aroused from work or sleep by the hurrying footsteps of armed security guards hired to protect the place. From what, we were never sure. As far as we knew, the fourth and fifth floors contained only moccasins: hundreds of pairs in their original boxes, neatly stacked, floor to ceiling, according to size and style. We surmised that Sander, Morris Berman's son and our landlord, had a secret stash up there, something valuable enough to

require such impressive security measures. Not wanting to be discovered by anyone remotely “official” and especially those with guns, we’d hunker down and keep out of sight until the guards would leave, satisfied the building was secure. We, too, often passed by those fifth floor windows via the fire escape that led up to our rooftop patio. We’d have to scale the final 20 feet on a vertical ladder—steel bars imbedded into the brick exterior. Upon reaching the top, we’d hoist ourselves, along with whatever else we’d brought, over the ledge to the flat tar landing, where we’d have front row seats to Fourth of July fireworks displays and downtown parades. Getting up there sober was always much easier than getting down after a few beers. We’d hang on tight and try not to look down at the ground five stories below.

The basement, accessible only by a freight elevator, had several dark and dank rooms, one of which was a bank-style vault complete with reinforced walls and steel door. Another room housed a huge, obsolete, coal-burning furnace, while others contained hundreds of scraps of leather and vinyl shoe soles used for making moccasins. There were also many miscellaneous leather items—key chains and coin purses—left over from the retail leather store that once occupied a corner on the first floor.¹⁷

My studio space, for \$150 a month, afforded me 12-foot ceilings, two large windows framed by century-old red brick, and hardwood floors, grimy from decades of coal dust, tannery chemicals, and general wear. Seeds, left over from the Northrup King Seed Company, could be found wedged between the floorboards and piled on top of rafters. They attracted a variety of wildlife that included mice and pigeons, forcing me to keep a “Daisy” BB gun handy (I found an old movie poster in the Common Space, pinned it up, and used it for target practice). The inner core of the Berman Buckskin building was made mostly of wood—from the wooden-planked floors and ceilings to the 6” x 6” pine beams—and because it was zoned for commercial use rather than for living, the threat of fire was always a consideration. Since my studio didn’t have direct access to a fire escape—or water for that matter—I carefully knotted, with the help of a former cowboy experienced in securing saddles to horses, a heavy manila rope to my radiator. The rope, given to me by my father specifically for this purpose, was just long enough to reach ground level in the event that I’d need to make an emergency exit in the middle of the night. Rent included heat, electricity, and water—located in a two-stool public bathroom on the opposite end of the building—not a drop of which was hot. The bathroom faucet, from which I filled gallon jugs, produced only cold water because my landlord was too cheap to buy a water heater and believed the cold water would deter us from living in our studios. Obviously, it didn’t. But without hot water, bathing became a formality. For several years, I made the 12-block trek to the YWCA where, for around \$30 a month, I had access to their public showers. Friends who lived in conventional apartments would let me shower at their places. Friends’ parents would give me gift “coupons” for Christmas or my birthday that I could redeem at their homes in the suburbs for a bath, a place to do laundry, and a home-cooked meal. Those of us living in the warehouse took advantage of the hospitality of family members or lovers who lived nearby because, like many outlaws, we relied on the generosity and support of our friends and admirers in order to get by. Strangers even offered their help. Once, late at night while gathering materials for a project I was working on, two strangers noticed me picking cigarette butts out of the gutter and placing them into a garbage bag I was carrying. Thinking I was desperate, they crossed the street and offered me a few bucks—which I thankfully declined.¹⁸

My studio had west-facing windows. Across the street was a parking lot for which I was grateful as it gave me an unobstructed view of the downtown skyline—the Norwest Tower, the IDS Center, and the once-grand Nicollet Hotel. My studio was comfortable. Besides being a great space to work in, it had a TV, a sofa that also served as my bed, and a kitchen area I built that was equipped with toaster oven and hot plate. The minimal living conditions were remarkably similar to the skid row “cages” of an earlier generation. The only real inconvenience—besides the water issue—was having to smuggle out loads of dirty laundry and smuggle in bags of groceries. Everyone on the third floor pitched in to pay for the telephone we all shared—something inconceivable in this age of cell phones and text messaging.

One late autumn day in 1993, I came home to discover an eviction notice taped to my door. Every door had one. The building had been sold as part of an eight-acre parcel, to the Minneapolis Community Development Association (MCDA) and was scheduled for demolition.¹⁹ The MCDA offered to pay our relocation expenses and gave us three months to surrender our studios. They would, in turn, sell the property to make way for a new Federal Reserve Bank headquarters. Environmental groups, historic preservation groups, and artists protested the deal. Several buildings were to be demolished even though many of them were listed on the National Register of

Historic Places. The Berman Buckskin building was at the center of the historic preservation controversy. Temporary restraining orders and emergency stays were denied, and the courts ultimately ruled in favor of yet another round of urban renewal. Five buildings in all would be demolished, but not until they were documented through photographs, narratives, and a few measured drawings. Today those documents are part of the Historic American Building Survey and Historic American Engineering Record, with copies housed in both the Library of Congress and the Minnesota Historical Society.

By this time, most of us were ready to move on. After seven years, it was time. We weren't getting any younger and living in the warehouse wasn't getting any easier. Visions of private bathrooms and fully furnished kitchens lured us into relinquishing any opposition we may have once had. We couldn't save the Berman Buckskin building any more than we could stop time, so we moved on. Jennifer took an editing job and bought a two-story house in South Minneapolis where she continues to write fiction. Her house has three bathrooms. Mike moved to Iowa to care for his family's farm. He makes sculpture in a renovated shed behind the house. Dave rented another studio space a few blocks from where the Berman stood, although I've heard he'll have to move soon because the rent's gotten too high.

Berman Buckskin demolition, 1994

We had barely moved out when demolition crews came by and installed fencing around the property. Like the men of the Gateway who, in the early '60s, watched as their homes and neighborhood fell to ruins, we all gathered around one last time to witness the wrecking ball deliver the first of many debilitating blows that would, in little time, leave our former studios a mere pile of rubble. The most painful blow came as the cranes reached the belly of the third floor. With one good whack, the contents of our Common Space spilled out like the guts of a freshly harvested buck, its entrails left behind for onlookers and curiosity seekers.

The entire neighborhood was changing fast. Buildings that had once provided inexpensive studio space for artists were being bought up and turned into expensive lofts for the upper-middle class. Multi-million dollar condos were being built only a few blocks away and the galleries and bars that had once catered to artists were being replaced by law firms and sports bars. The "gallery crowd" of years past wanted what we had—an unconventional lifestyle surrounded by creativity—in hopes

of satiating their desire for originality and self-expression.²⁰ Many artists, who had called the Warehouse District home, began fleeing north across the river in search of new spaces—warehouse buildings such as the California and Crown Iron that offered high ceilings, low rent, and absentee landlords.

Many communities, including Minneapolis, have realized that it's profitable to have artists move into neighborhoods that would otherwise be left to neglect. Arts organizations and individual artists generate substantial economic activity. According to the city's Web site, during the past 10 years, Minneapolis has invested over \$100 million in the arts economy by proactively integrating the arts into overall city planning—developing "arts districts," providing financial support to both emerging and professional artists, and promoting the traditional arts of immigrant populations. A wise investment according to a study by Americans for the Arts, who found that, in 2001, nonprofit arts organizations contributed \$269 million to the city's economy.

Other cities have followed suit. Three years ago, Des Moines launched a public art initiative in an all-but-forgotten part of the city known as East Village. *The Storefront Public Art Project* provided artists with empty storefronts to transform into public art installations that ranged from political statements to historical reflections. The initiative proved successful and today the East Village is experiencing a Renaissance of sorts. It has become one of the fastest-growing parts of downtown, providing loft-style living, upscale boutiques, and trendy restaurants for the citizens of Des Moines.



In many communities, there seems to be a changing attitude among community leaders that suggests greater tolerance and respect for creative people and the work that they produce. Creativity—intellectual property, products and services—has proven to be an asset as well as an indicator of economic health for many communities. “Cultural districts” are popping up everywhere in an effort to establish a region’s “innovation habitat.”²¹ For communities, this habitat or environment can mean revitalized neighborhoods, enhanced economic opportunities, increased tourism, and an improved quality of life. For artists, it can mean an increase in resources—grants, educational programs, community programs, and commercial or nonprofit galleries—to produce, display, and distribute their work as well as greater access to the kinds of living/working environments that suit their needs.

However, there could be a negative side to the growing interest by governments to promote “creative capital.”²² A recent report, published by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices, proposes that “governors can position their states to use the arts effectively...by harnessing the power of the arts and culture as tools that unite communities...” On the surface, this statement seems harmless enough, even positive. I would argue, however, that the language used could be mistaken as an affront to the rebellious ideals we, as a society, have come to expect from our artists. By “harnessing” art’s potential, by creating or *organizing* an environment that fosters creative activity through “leveraging human capital and cultural resources [in order] to generate economic vitality,”²³ do we risk losing the very thing we value? Is it possible to fit the square peg of nonconformity into the round hole of mainstream ideology? One of the reasons why our situation in the Berman Buckskin building worked so well was because we had relatively no interference from agencies trying to create an artificial environment. We were free to create an environment that worked for us—one that suited our individual and collective needs. Sure, many of us wished that someone would open a coffee shop on our block, a laundry mat, or a real grocery store—commercial ventures that would fulfill our basic needs. Unfortunately, our presence instead led to an influx of activity within the Warehouse District that in turn, distinguished our neighborhood as a kind of entertainment destination supported by sports bars and trendy (read expensive) restaurants. The challenge for governments interested in promoting creative activity in their communities will be to recognize the fine line between assistance and interference—knowing when to give up control and limit the desire to organize and regulate.

Thirteen years have passed and a Federal Reserve Bank building sits where the Berman Buckskin once did. Not a trace of the original building remains. Five bronze plaques have been installed in a pedestrian walkway on the site to commemorate its rich history.²⁴ That was their compromise—part of the deal for acquiring such valuable property and destroying the cornerstone of what was once the Gateway District, Minneapolis’ birthplace. Prosperity follows progress, and so the former Warehouse District is now home to million-dollar condos, sports bars, and upscale hotels (and, according to the Federal Reserve’s Web site, is home to artist’s studios as well). Unfortunately, the artists have moved out—most of them, anyway. They’ve moved on—like the outlaws of the Old West, forced to keep moving, staying one step ahead of the law—to cheaper rents on the outskirts of some other neighborhood. Unfortunately, those neighborhoods too, in due time, will become desirable and developers will come knocking.

Notes

1 Francine Prose, *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles*, (New York: HarperCollins, 2005), 14.

2 A brief documentary on artist Agon Schiele aired on *Sunday Morning*, CBS, Sunday, January 29, 2006.

3 See Ilana Stanger, *Still Crazy After All These Years*, 2006, New York Foundation for the Arts, 2006, <http://www.nyfa.org/level4.asp?id=177&fid=1&sid=51&tid=169> (accessed November 26, 2007).

4 Richard Meyer, *Outlaw Representation: Censorship and Homosexuality in Twentieth-Century American Art* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2002), 97.

5 According to Penny Arnold, office manager for the Jesse James Home, the actual picture Jesse James was straightening or dusting when he was gunned down may have been a picture that says “May God Bless our Home,” similar to the one currently hanging in the museum. Or, it might’ve been a picture of a racehorse. Ms. Arnold states, “It’s one of the many mysteries we don’t know the exact answer to.”

- 6 See Stanger, *Still Crazy After All These Years* , 2006.
- 7 See Prose, *Caravaggio: Painter of Miracles*, 2005, 1 and 145.
- 8 The Minneapolis Community Development Agency (MCDA) assisted everyone in the Berman Buckskin Building with finding new “comparable” studio space. The MCDA agreed to reimburse us for building materials we’d used to construct our studios; pay for moving expenses; and pay two years’ rent at a new location minus the amount we would’ve paid at the Berman.
- 9 See Joseph Hart, *Down & Out: The Life and Death of Minneapolis’s Skid Row* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002).
- 10 See <http://lileks.com/mppls/gateway/parkbldg/pb4.html> (accessed November 26, 2007).
- 11 See *Sheldon Aubut’s Minneapolis History*, <http://www.cityhistory.us/minneapolis> (accessed November 26, 2007).
- 12 Hart, *Down & Out*, 3.
- 13 Hart, *Down & Out*, 26.
- 14 Hart, *Down & Out*, 11.
- 15 See Winegar, “Bye Bye Berman: Artists dispersed by closing of scarce studio space,” 1993.
- 16 There were nine studio spaces and one office located on the third floor. Eight of those studios were located behind a set of double yellow doors that could be locked, thereby separating them from the ninth studio and office. At any given time, the number of occupants in those eight studios ranged from eight to ten. Some artists moved in and stayed only a year or two while others took on roommates for brief periods. Most of us, however, stayed between four and seven years.
- 17 In 1979, the Berman Buckskin retail leather business was sold to W.R. Grace; Lyle Berman remained president and CEO of the company. In 1988, the company was sold to the Melville Corporation and became Wilson’s The Leather Experts (see http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lyle_Berman). A small discount retail outlet remained on the first floor of the Berman Buckskin building until 1988 while the rest of the retail operations moved to shopping malls located throughout the Twin Cities area.
- 18 “Cigarette Armor” was completed in 1990 and contained more than 600 cigarette butts that were glued to a cotton T-shirt. It was featured in the *100 T-shirt Show* at the Wilenski Arts during the same year.
- 19 See Winegar, “Bye Bye Berman: Artists dispersed by closing of scarce studio space,” 1993.
- 20 Loft style living has been romanticized in recent years in movies such as *Flash Dance* and *RENT*. The raw warehouse studios portrayed in these films may appear accurate but is actually quite different—in price and subsequent amenities—than those that are zoned for living space.
- 21 See Allan Ulrich, “The Buck Stops Here”, 2003. Ulrich cites the nine-page report published by the National Governors Association Center for Best Practices in which governments are urged to consider “contributing to a region’s ‘innovation habitat,’ by simultaneously improving regional quality of live...and permitting new forms of knowledge-intensive production to flourish.”
- 22 The term “creative capital” refers to intellectual property, products and services that are the result of creative activity/work in disciplines that include among others the visual arts, performing arts, architecture, fashion, and design.
- 23 Ulrich, “The Buck Stops Here”, 19.
- 24 The plaza walkway of the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis—completed in 1998—displays five bronze

interpretive sculptures that trace the history of the Mississippi riverfront. Designed by Helmuth, Obata and Kassabaum, St. Louis, the bronze sculptures were fabricated by Gruppo Inc., Minneapolis. The fifth sculpture in the series titled "Transformations" includes the dates 1965–1995. It mentions the "removal" of five of the six buildings that once occupied the site, but fails to mention the Berman Buckskin by name.

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