

Artists have hope, now that part of brewery will be theirs

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No one jumped for joy, shouted from the rooftop or popped open champagne. "It wasn't like the sun suddenly appeared from behind the clouds" said

resident. Instead, the artists who live and work at the Brew House — a former brewery on the South Side that contains 25 raw living spaces and studios for artists — breathed a sigh of relief when they learned that, after seven years of struggle, they'd finally get to buy part of the city-owned building.

Their reaction was muted because they didn't win a total victory — one of the brewery's two buildings will be sold to a local developer. What's more, they had trouble believing their fight was over, because getting to that point had been so hard.

"I don't think we'll believe it until we see the signed sales agreement," said Kathryn Sitter, a

longtime Brew House resident.

Still, City Council's December vote to split the brewery between two feuding parties alleviated the artists' fear that their home would be sold to someone who might ask them to leave.

"For all these years, we've been having to say to new people, 'We want you to commit to the vision for this building but you can only have a month-to-month lease because we don't know what will happen,'" said resident Timothy Pisano.

Artists began moving into one of the brewery's buildings soon after the beer moved out — in 1972, when the Duquesne Brewery shut down. They were lured there by the cavernous spaces and thick walls, but few developers wanted to revamp the landmark at South 21st and Mary streets because of asbestos and the high cost of remodeling the two quirky buildings, which are linked by an elevated walkway.

As years went by, the artists — whom the city



Darrell Sapp/Post-Gazette

They're getting half: Brew House artists stand across 21st Street from the old brewery, from left: Suz Pisano, Steve Murdock, Colleen Black, Rob Long, Chris Craychee and Carin Mincemoyer.

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allowed to live there on the condition they make gradual code improvements such as putting in fire alarms — formed a tight, albeit sometimes fractured community that remained intact even as the brewery's landlords changed. The second building remained, and still is, vacant.

When the city seized the property in 1992 from a delinquent taxpayer, the artists thought *they* could buy it.

But like the brewery's giant, outdoor clock that has been stuck at 6:30 for years, their dream has been stalled since 1993, the year developer Michael Milan outbid the artists on the property at a city auction. City Council declined to sell to Milan, fearing that an outright, non-negotiated sale could mean the end of artists in the Brew House. Milan promptly sued.

He lost in court and also lost an appeal. Meanwhile, the artists were get-

ting antsy, unable to raise funds for their plans because they didn't own the building.

After Milan's third appeal was refused by the State Supreme Court in 1996, he was invited by the city to sit down with the artists and negotiate a deal.

"It was clear that, unless we compromised, one side or another would be litigating the matter," said David Toal, the artists' attorney. Milan's attorney, Edwin J. Strassburger, agreed with that assessment.

Late last year, a deal was reached in which each side will pay \$35,000 for their building. Pending approval by the planning commission, the sales are expected to be completed this summer.

Some artists are disappointed that the Brew House Association didn't hold out for both buildings, especially since Milan's building — the vacant one — features the large, broken clock

that is visible from across the Monongahela River. Artists say it would have provided good public art opportunities.

Others say the loss of the other building may be a blessing.

"I'd say I'm 10 percent disappointed but 90 percent relieved," Sitter said. "It would have been great [to own both buildings], but man, it would have been a lot more work."

The Brew House Association intends to continue running its first-floor gallery, Brew House SPACE 101, and encouraging artists who don't live there to join the association. The large space currently used by the Industrial Arts Co-op will be turned into a performance space. Pittsburgh Opera intends to stage a small production of "Carmen" there this year.

The association also wants to develop more studios and classrooms, given that 60 percent of the building is empty.

They're also thinking of raising the rent, which ranges from about \$125 to \$530 a month.

But there's also an ethos to be protected, now that the Brew House is poised for growth. Residents want to retain the gritty feel of the place, the spontaneous performances, the unusual artistic activities, the feeling of community.

"A big question for us is, how can we not institutionalize the life out of this place?" said Joe Vaughan, president of the association.

Michael Milan Jr., spokesman for the Milan family, declined to reveal his father's plans for the brewery, adding that he'll discuss them after the closing. But the artists have already appealed to foundations to help fund their goals.

"You have to dream big," Sitter said.

Which you can do when you've got a secure place to sleep.