

# Albany Street building houses creative businesses

Art and craft mingle at an Albany Street address

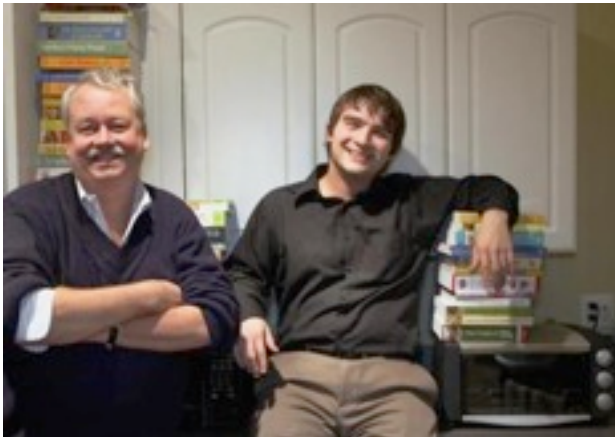
By **Kathleen Pierce** | GLOBE CORRESPONDENT    DECEMBER 05, 2011



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

**Randall Levere runs Erba Cycles.**

It's not anchored by MIT the way Kendall Square is. It doesn't have sweeping views of Boston Harbor, like the Seaport. But this shopworn mill building hard off Interstate 93, on the edge of the South End, is something of a small innovation district of its own.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

**Bruce Shaw (left) and Adam Salomone of the Harvard Common Press.**

Like many aging structures in this warehouse neighborhood, 535 Albany St. is a relic of another age. Amid a warren of start-ups and industrial lofts, it hosts a bamboo bike maker, a respected artist, and a corporate architect, innovators in a variety of fields.

“This building has fostered a lot of my success,” said David McMahon, seated in the loft-turned-headquarters of his firm, McMahon Architects.

Seeking an alternative from a hemmed-in corporate office environment, McMahon launched the business in the former mill 15 years ago. The location, in the heart of the city, has placed rich resources at his fingertips. Take art, for example; if corporate clients need to enliven their office, McMahon takes them up a single flight to art consultant Elizabeth Erdreich-White’s gallery. Or if he knows a restaurateur looking to soundproof dining rooms, he’ll send them to European wall upholsterer Bruno Jouenne of Soft Walls Associates, only a few steps away.



WENDY MAEDA/GLOBE STAFF

Among the tenants of 535 Albany St., “there’s a mutual respect and collaboration that’s really nice,” said McMahon.

Industrial buildings humming with independent businesses used to rule Fort Port Channel and the Leather District, but are becoming rare. “There’s been a large reduction in this kind of space,” said Bonnie Gossels, whose family has operated the building, which dates to 1896, for decades. Gossels has lost track of how many business are in the building, because some are subleasing. But of the ones she does know, she said, “They are the 99 percent. This is not just a job for these people; it’s their life’s work.”

From his fifth-floor office, with stunning views of the financial district, Bruce Shaw, president of the Harvard Common Press, a cookbook publisher, produces 12 to 15 titles a year. He has occupied the sprawling space, lined with books and colorful Mexican rugs, since 1984, and said it would be cost-prohibitive in other neighborhoods. Gossels “could probably be charging three times more rent in this day and age,” said Shaw.



**Fiandaca's designer clothing.**

PAT GREENHOUSE/GLOBE STAFF

Like most tenants, he appreciates the quirks that come with the lower rent and funky space. When the tiny passenger elevator with French doors was out of service for a year, he took the freight.

“It’s part of being in the building,” he said.

His company’s inviting quarters — with a homey kitchen, couches, and refurbished floors — may not have attracted employees, but it hasn’t hurt. “People who work at the Harvard Common Press love the space,” Shaw said. “They have three times as much work space as they would somewhere else.”

It’s a mix of working businesses, without the glitz of a technology district, or a more exclusive neighborhood. “The people that come through this building are not the people you meet in the Back Bay,” said Christine Needham, of the brand-identity agency Proverb.

Yet with its propped-open door, mood lighting, ambient music, and chic lighting, her small firm is in space that incubates creativity.



SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

**Randall Levere of Erba Cycles took a trial ride on one of his bicycles made from hemp and bamboo on the fourth-floor studio of his business at 535 Albany St.**

The building reminds Needham of “New York 20 years ago. It’s emblematic of those raw spaces down on Ludlow and Suffolk” that, as a design student, she frequented in her 20s. “There’s a friendliness and grittiness to it all.”

The South Boston waterfront and Kendall Square may be grabbing all the business district headlines, but there are plans in the works to increase this neighborhood’s profile, said city officials.



The area is “primed for growth,” Mayor Thomas M. Menino wrote in an e-mail. Changes to zoning rules to make the area more business-friendly are up for debate in the new year, which “will help build on that, encouraging entrepreneurs to invest, attracting new jobs, and developing the neighborhood into a vibrant commercial district,” he wrote.

Randi Lathrop, deputy director of community planning at the Boston Redevelopment Authority, said the unique hive of energy at 535 Albany St. is a key “job creator” that will attract more start-ups to the emerging business district between Harrison and Albany streets.



**Cookbooks published by the Harvard Common Press, which produces 12 to 15 titles a year from its offices in the South End.**

That could help Randall Levere, who turns imported bamboo and hemp into renewable bicycles in a fourth-floor studio. As the one-man team behind Erba Cycles, the former bike racer from Maine said “being in close proximity to other artists, people who have created a less traveled path,” has helped his 18-month old business.

“I’m very supportive of people who are willing to start up a business and get it going,” said landlord Gossels. “We are very lucky with the people who have chosen to work there. We are very lucky.”