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Firm transforms old factory into new artist facility

By [Brian Pedersen](#) August 10, 2012 at 12:20 PM

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Photo by Brian Pedersen

The owners of an Allentown building that dates back to the early 20th century are aiming to create space for working artists – and they're shooting for a mid-November opening.

Dubbed The Cigar Factory, the building will include working lofts, which would be strictly workspaces for artists; there would be three or four small retail spaces on the first floor, said property manager Gene DiPalma.

These retail spaces would have access from the street and from inside the building. Possible tenants include a coffee shop, a tax preparation business or an arts supply store.

North Star Construction Management Inc. of Allentown earned the contract for the \$1.3 million project. It will serve as general contractor for phase one. Allentown Heights Associates LLC of New York City owns the property and is redeveloping the former industrial site.

"It's a nice use of a building from the '20s," said DiPalma. The three-story building connected to the four-story structure is the original building, he added.

Including the basement, the entire building is 110,000 square feet, said DiPalma. The workspaces would not be living spaces, he added. Rents range from \$275 to \$600 per month, including utilities. The studios are open to any type of artist – from sculptors to portrait artists and even the Avon saleswoman or the flower arranger who needs storage space, said DiPalma.

"That all fits with the theme of the building," said DiPalma. "Commercial photographers, right now they are renting space in office buildings, paying \$1,000 to \$1,200."

About 19 people are already interested in renting space, said DiPalma.

The city of Allentown issued a building permit for the project and construction began on June 18.

Plans for the 707-715 North 4th St. building include the creation of 45 artist studios, a 3,000 square-foot community gallery, and renovations to all its industrial features.

Once construction is complete, artists would have exposed brick walls, bright lighting, and a highly functional, versatile space.

The Cigar Factory could also host regular community events, added DiPalma. The gallery on the first floor is where tenants can hold art shows, he said.

"We are also trying to keep the character of the building," said DiPalma.

To achieve this affect, some portions of the walls and rooms will not be painted.

To retain the original look and feel of the building, the owners will retain the first floor ceiling's "tobacco blowing tubes" that were used to transfer tobacco leaves when the cigar plant was operational.

The owners, who are also installing a new freight elevator, plan to renovate the first and fourth floors of the building during phase one. Currently, three commercial tenants, all apparel manufacturers, occupy the floors not currently being renovated.

About 25 workers from various companies are working at the site each day. Main tasks include electrical, framing and HVAC work.

"It will revitalize that area of town," said Andrew Miller, project manager for North Star. "It's nice to see how an old building is getting rejuvenated."

North Star is refinishing the floors and leaving a lot of the brick walls in place and only painting the drywall in the new partitions, said Miller.

The company is also working on the staircase in front for the new entrance.

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Brian Pedersen

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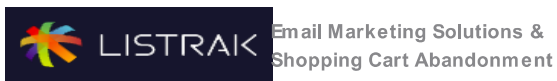
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