

# The Art Haus

By Ann Cipperly

**W**hile attending a reading of a play about their father, Henry Stern, in Abingdon, VA., a couple of years ago, Ginger and J. Stern discovered the Arts Depot, a former train depot that was converted into studios for artists. The depot left a lasting impression and reminded them of the studio their artist mother, Roslyn Stern, had created in the basement of their home in Opelika. It sparked a dream for Ginger and J. to build The Art Haus to honor their mother and provide a studio for artists.

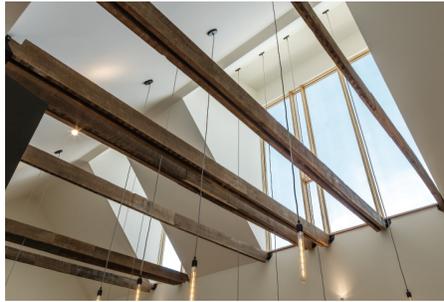


Roslyn Stern became the first art teacher for Opelika City Schools in 1969. She rotated with music teacher Julia Huling to offer art and music in a different school every day. Prior to joining the school system, she converted the basement at their home on Third Avenue into a studio for artists. Later, Roslyn was one of the founders the Opelika Arts Association, now the Arts Association of East Alabama.

Roslyn's husband, Henry Stern, came to Opelika with his family when he was 5 years old, escaping Adolf Hitler and the horror of the Holocaust. Henry and Roslyn became

Photos by Tristan Cairns





outstanding, beloved citizens. The life of Henry Stern has been remembered by Playwright Jim Harris, who spent his childhood between Opelika and McCook, Neb., in “We Will Meet Again,” which was presented in Abingdon.

After Henry and Roslyn passed away, their children, Ginger and J., took over the Henry J. Stern Family Foundation that their father founded. They began using the foundation to benefit the community in their parents’ memory.

One of their first projects was the Stern Dog Park in Opelika. While at the park one day last year, they noticed a church and fellowship hall across the street were for sale. They realized the location was ideal for their project to build The Art Haus, with the “Art” to honor their mother and the “Haus” for their father’s German heritage. As well as being across from the dog park, it is two blocks from where they grew up on Third Avenue.

Once they purchased the property, they contacted Behzad Nakhjavan, architect and former chair of the architecture program at Auburn University, to head the project.

“I was asked to envision an art community for advancement of the arts in memory of their mother and the Stern Family Foundation,” says Behzad. “The program was to include a collection of buildings accommodating artist studios, lodging, exhibition space, and an



exterior open air room for various community needs and artistic activities.”

Built in 1910 at 500 North Railroad Avenue, the house is pictured in a 1930s photo with a wraparound veranda. Families lived in the house for 49 or 50 years before it became the Cornerstone Missionary Baptist Church in 1987.

When the architect saw the building, he saw potential and admired two things about it, although it was in terrible condition. One thing that impressed him was the location on the edge of downtown Opelika and that the buildings together could be made into “a place,” rather than just a group of buildings. Once the courtyard was completed, he felt it would anchor the place.

“The building is on a crawlspace that had to be totally redone to have a solid foundation,” says Behzad. “The roof had to be totally reframed to maintain structural integrity, to meet building codes, and the exterior walls were to be wrapped and insulated.

“One of the requirements for art studio space is natural light, and there was not any,” he adds. “It was oppressive. The house had a flat ceiling with an attic, which was opened, and two north facing skylights installed to bring in natural light.”

The extra wood from the ceiling was turned into planks for the flooring. While the walls were left for displaying art, the two original windows remained.

“It was a shell of a building,” Behzad says. “Now, it has a new floor, ceiling and wall. The completion of The Art Haus in phase one included turning the 1,700 square foot building into two large 16 x 30 foot spaces for both production and exhibition of original art, as



well as a foyer, small kitchen, bathroom facility, laundry and storage.”

The design attempts to create a room outside just as beautiful as the rooms inside. He didn't want the back of the building to be seen as a backyard, such as with a home.

To create the exterior room, 15,000 bricks from Pepperell Mill were used for the courtyard and fireplace, which anchors the building. The

fireplace is the same height as the building. At the end of the courtyard is a two-foot wall, acting as both to define the courtyard and serve as a bench. Rows of trees on 5th Street provide the feeling of an exterior room.

The Art Haus and the courtyard were completed, and the first public event held in December. At the event, artists displayed their work, while families toured the building and



enjoyed lunch from local food truck Sword and Skillet in the courtyard in front of the fireplace.

In January, the second phase was completed with the renovation of the garage into two studios.

“The Art Haus is a place for artists to create,” says Ginger, “and to show their work if they want to rent the building and get the community involved. Part of the commitment of renting the studio at minimum cost is so the artists can give back to the community by teaching art classes. Artists will be required to offer a class once a quarter for the community.”

One side of The Art Haus was designed for someone to live and manage the compound. The director will schedule artists in the studios and shows. This is part of the long-term plan.

Phase three of the project will include renovating the house next door into five artists' studios that will be available to rent. This part of the project will open in the summer or fall of 2021.

“I think architecture has the power to inspire,” says Behzad, looking over the completed Art Haus. “The moment a building can uplift you, it is architecture not just a building. We want people to come here and be inspired, to be creative.”

The Sterns have formed a board of directors from all walks of life. The non-profit organization is dedicated to “recognizing, educating, supporting and enriching our community by partnering with local and regional artists.” It houses a working studio space and gallery exhibits for artists to create and display their work; it also provides many educational opportunities.

As artists fill the studios and classes are offered, Ginger and J. have honored their mother's love of art and continue the work she started when they were children living on Third Avenue in Opelika.

Additional information on The Art Haus can be found on the web page at [www.opelikaarthaus.com](http://www.opelikaarthaus.com) and Facebook Opelika Art Haus.

Our vision is to create working studio space, gallery exhibits and educational opportunities for those who love and appreciate the arts.

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