



MOVING OUT

How to know when you need a studio away from home

by Robbi Eklow

My husband and I had a four-bedroom house in the Chicago suburbs for thirty years. My quilting took up a good portion of the space: quilt and fabric storage was in my daughter's room, books in our bedroom, sewing machines and more fabric in my "dry" studio, and my longarm in the basement. I also dyed fabric in the basement. It worked well for us; we each had our own space, mine up and down the stairs and his in the family room and kitchen.

At one point, I looked at a commercial space to move my longarm and quilt stuff. I thought a studio would provide a good place to have people come over and quilt. But I realized that I preferred to be at home in the winter or when it was dark. I didn't think I'd use the studio space enough to justify the rent and the additional internet, electricity, water, and heat bills.

Several years ago, we began researching a move to Omaha, Nebraska, to be near our daughter's family. We'd sell the house, rent an apartment, and figure out what we wanted to do. I didn't want to get rid of all my quilting stuff, especially my full-sized longarm. My friend, Frances Alford, recommended a visit to the Hot Shops Art Center. I stopped in while apartment hunting

in Omaha and found that it felt like home. The Hot Shops building manager told me to keep in touch because studios rented fast. One day, I was offered a studio big enough to accommodate my longarm. The longarm was moved out of my basement and into my new studio.

The Hot Shops Art Center is a special place. It is named after the glass studio, metal foundry, iron forge, and ceramics studio which make up the "hot" core of the facility. These studios are located in a one-story building. Two additional buildings—one three-story structure and one four-story building—are creative spaces for painters, jewelers, tinkerers, an architect, and more. There are about eighty artists in the center. The smallest studios are about 100 square feet; mine is 700 square feet.

The building is open to the public during the day, but artists can be in their studios whenever they want. When artists are there, they usually leave their doors open for visitors. Students tour the center and event rooms are available for weddings, meetings, and other activities, whose attendees often tour the building. If I am on a deadline, at work on my longarm, or just feel antisocial, I can

lock my door and hang a sign that states that I am on a deadline.

Collaboration and education are important in this building, so I've arranged my studio keeping that in mind. There is a window from the hallway into my room, and my longarm is parked in front of it so that visitors can peer in and see a quilt in progress and watch me stitch. Finished quilts hang on the wall opposite the window for visitors to view. My dyed fabrics are arranged on shelves next to my working wall. I left one quadrant mostly open, which is nice if a group comes in, and I enjoy the empty visual space.

Sometimes I do feel like a goldfish, so I moved a stack of storage drawers to provide a "hidden" space so that I can eat lunch in private. Because visitors have started to look in my storage drawers, I keep sharp objects out of the way.

Being surrounded by other artists is great. I can ask someone else their opinion on a quilt and get an answer that is purely artistic, instead of being informed by the quilt police. Once I showed someone my quilt in progress and commented that I could now see a design element I should change, but that it would be a lot of work. He



Robbi Eklow's 700-square-foot studio at The Hot Shops Art Center in Omaha, Nebraska.

said something about being an artist who is willing to put in the effort; he was right, so I made the change.

We sometimes borrow tools or supplies from each other. When someone asks me for a scissors, they have to tell me what they are cutting and I pick out the correct implement for them. Other artists have helped me dismantle and repair the longarm.

On the other hand, I'm easily distracted, and it took a while to learn that I can work while someone else visits with me. I can't talk and longarm, but I can talk and bury threads. I even keep sodas in a refrigerator to lure other artists. If I want to take a break, I can wander around and see someone else. In general, though, if I am at my studio, I get quilt work done, and if I'm at home, I get distracted. I don't keep a desktop computer at the studio, but I have a laptop I can bring when I need a computer to create art.

The Hot Shops Art Center is part of a former industrial area that is being revitalized. I have a concrete floor, so I put down area rugs to cover most of it. I have beautiful exposed brick on two walls, and a beautiful wood ceiling. I have hung bulletin boards to create a working wall that is 10 x

12 feet, and another that is 15 feet wide. I use the larger wall to display quilts, but I can clear it for photography or to use the quilts for a lecture. In the winter, my studio can become very warm, as the building's steam pipes pass through it first. I decided on those warm winter days to wear summer clothes and pretend I'm on vacation.

My studio is my second place. I usually go there to work on a quilt, but sometimes I just go to get out of the house, to socialize with other artists, or to let my husband have some space. I also have a small studio in our apartment, where I can watch television and work on small projects. During the pandemic, my Hot Shops space was a saving grace. The building was closed to the public, but artists could go in, work, and socialize a bit too. We usually wore masks and stood far apart. I didn't let very many people in my studio, as I didn't want to wear a mask all day.

At one point during the pandemic, one of the other artists texted me that she was part of a pop-up art gallery that was going to be up only that night. Six artists showed their work and I had a chance to converse with each one. It was a very special evening and there was a brief thunderstorm

in the middle of it. In all the years I lived in Chicago, I'd never been to an opening like this. I wasn't part of the art community in Chicago, but here in Omaha I am part of the community and feel comfortable. The same energy isn't present in my home studio. When I walk into the Hot Shops, a switch turns on in my brain and I am in a more creative mode.

When should you look for studio space outside your home? Here are some suggestions:

- Your quilt stuff won't fit in its allotted space in your home and your family refuses to give up their bedrooms for fabric storage.
- Family members take your scissors to open soup cans.
- You are easily distracted by other activities at home, such as email, loading the dishwasher, checking Facebook, etc.
- The dog/cat/toddler keeps playing with your fat quarters.
- Family members don't respect a closed door.
- Family members think it's funny to sneak up on you while you are listening to music and free-motion quilting.

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Alisa Banks, *half*, 2014

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- If you have to listen to your partner tapping their fingers on the kitchen counter one more time ...
- You need an outside space to teach.

Before moving, consider these factors:

- Can you afford the rent and additional costs if you aren't selling your work or using the space to teach? Will you have to sign a lease?
- If you do need to teach or sell your work, is this a good venue for that?
- Do you feel safe in the space? Will you want to work there in the evenings?
- Can you control access to your space? My studio is in an art center where tours sometimes come through when I'm not there. I'm comfortable with that; I just keep valuables put away or at home.
- Do you need to work in solitude? I'm comfortable with people coming in. I'm good at answering questions about my work. People sometimes think it is a shop, so I explain that it's my place to create art and that I do that for myself, not really to create goods for sale.
- If rent isn't an issue, consider if it's worth the effort to move all of your stuff. Consider that you might need a second set of your favorite tools, one for a home studio and one for an offsite studio.

In the end, I'm delighted to be at the Hot Shops Art Center. It was a good decision for me, and even if we move to larger living quarters, I would still want to be there. ■

Robbi Eklow is a SAQA Juried Artist member residing in Omaha, Nebraska. You can see her work at www.robbieklow.com.

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