



March 2008

## On the Road Again

**Side Street Projects unveils its new mobile offices, which are entirely self-sufficient and sustainable.**

By Brenda Rees

Photos by Lauren Kroiz

A new business model gaining ground in Pasadena suggests companies can be successful when they downsize — really downsize.

With rising rents and a volatile real estate market, some organizations — especially nonprofits — are struggling financially to hold onto offices and work spaces. But in the view of some visionaries in the local art community, the era of the brick-and-stone storefront may soon be over. Don't look for the answer in virtual offices; they say it's time to get nomadic and ditch the concrete façade.

Earlier this year, Side Street Projects, a local nonprofit that teaches the ropes of the art business to visual artists, unveiled its new executive headquarters in an empty lot near Fair Oaks and Orange Grove Boulevard, where a bail-bond building and taco stand once stood.

There, amid the rush of traffic and smell of nearby fast food restaurants, Side Street has plopped down two restored vintage travel trailers to serve as its central offices. A nearby “power plant on wheels” contains a satellite dish for Internet connectivity and 12 photovoltaic panels connected to an inverter and battery array. The system can deliver 3,600 watts of power at any moment.

This technology, along with cell phones, makes the organization 100 percent off the grid and self-sufficient, organizers say. “Other than that water spigot over there, we have pretty much everything we need,” says Jon Lapointe, the organization's creative director, noting the port-a-potty at the far end of the lot. “We can be mobile in a matter of minutes.”

In fact, says Lapointe, it took the crew only one hour and 20 minutes to move here in January from its last location outside the Armory Northwest. “We can exist in a 16-car parking space,” he says, adding that the only requirement is a clear southern exposure for the satellite and solar panels.

Side Street Projects was founded in 1992 by artists Karen Atkinson and Joe Luttrell. Since its inception, the group has served, on average, 300 artists a year; last year alone, it worked with 400. Side Street was originally housed in the 18th Street Art Complex in Santa Monica. Now, it's a far more portable group. “We used to joke that when we started, all we really needed was a parking lot and some mobile vehicles,” says Atkinson, who

has since handed off the directing reins. “I do think that the No. 1 problem for nonprofits is finding adequate space. Dealing with landlords and lease requirements can just kill some organizations. But that joke [we told in 1992] has turned into reality. It really can be done now — and it is.”

Indeed, Side Street has seen its share of addresses in its lifetime, including a Skid Row–adjacent section of downtown LA, a former plastics factory (the Armory Northwest) and an ex-nursery on Orange Grove Boulevard (the old Hortus locale). There’s no full-time need for large meeting rooms; the organization’s workshops and lectures are held at rented halls, warehouses and gallery spaces. Instead, it’s work as usual inside the smooth beech-and-walnut-finished walls of the 1953 Spartan Imperial Mansion, where phones ring, the internet connects and folders are filed. Originally designed by J.P. Getty for soldiers coming back from WWII, these aircraft-grade constructed trailers are enjoying a second bohemian life.

Still, this not-so-empty lot is not a permanent location: Side Street leases the land from the city and understands that one day developers will push the group on to its next encampment. Even so, the so-called “wandering office” model suits the organization just fine; members consider it a public art experiment and a way to reach out to the community they have been serving for many years.

So it’s not surprising that the artwork christening Side Street’s new entryway is also on wheels: a white, fiberglass limousine crafted by the Chicano artist Gilbert Luján (better known as “Magú”), which adorned the MTA Red Line station at Hollywood and Vine. Magú will work with community members and students to transform the limo into, as he puts it, “a cultural vehicle” that will be used in parades and other public events. “It will become a canvas for ideas,” he says, outlining how the car will be retooled inside and out to become a working vehicle.

At a recent open house for Side Street, Magú and fellow artists sketched designs on the limo as curious pedestrians and motorists looked on. “This kind of visibility is wonderful,” says Emily Hopkins, Side Street’s director of youth education. “We have people coming in here all the time wanting to know what we’re doing.”

Hopkins coordinates the goings-on of another vehicle on the premises – a colorfully decorated yellow school bus (a.k.a. the Woodworking Bus), which houses Alternative Routes, an art program for kids ages 5 through 11. More than 10,000 children have participated in wood-design workshops there, spreading out among the 10 workstations inside the bus. Hopkins is proud of the workstations’ antique wood drills (“We call them eggbeaters”) that have been used to make bookends, airplanes and even wooden cell phone replicas (“a very popular item these days”).

Chugging to public and private schools as well as community centers around Los Angeles County, the bus fits nicely into the “wandering office” model. In fact, Hopkins says the group hopes to create a similar youth art program for older students, which would involve a trailer equipped with advanced hand tools.

Side Street’s fluidity inspires artists it works with to aim for self-sufficiency in their own careers. Michael Markowsky is one of them. After attending a host of well-respected art schools for seven years– including Art Center College of Design in Pasadena – Markowsky was wary of filling out grant applications. “There was such a fear associated with them. Where do I start? How come they’re so long?” he asks.

Side Street’s four-weekend workshop paid off instantly for Markowsky, who soon won an individual grant from the City of Pasadena as well as a prestigious Robert Rauschenberg Award. He says he’s busier than ever. “Now, it’s exciting,” Markowsky says of his jump-started career. “I’m seeing the bigger picture. I feel like I have more confidence about what I what to do – and how to do it.”

Tending to the business side of their vocation can be hard for artists who “are often are anti-social by nature,” says Pasadena-based artist Victoria Hibbs, who has taken workshops and now volunteers for the group. “I admire Side Street’s trailers. By being mobile and self-sufficient, they are actually more stable. It’s a wonderful paradox we artists can appreciate.”

*To learn more about Side Street Projects, visit [www.sidestreet.org](http://www.sidestreet.org). Side Street offers free woodworking workshops for children on Saturdays. Call (626) 798-7774 for details.*