

# San Francisco Chronicle

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Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Michelle Mansour, executive director of Root Division, faced the grim task of hunting for space in San Francisco's killer rental market. The arts group triumphed, finding a 13,000-square-foot space at 1131 Mission St.

## Priced out of the Mission, arts group finds a home

Deal gives boost to city's vision for character of Mid-Market

By J.K. Dineen

A year after it was driven out of the Mission District by escalating rents, the arts group Root Division has signed a deal to take over a 13,000-square-foot building on Mission Street near Mid-Market.

The organization will move into 1131 Mission St., a two-story stand-alone building at Seventh and Mission spacious enough to house 22 artist studios, multiple classrooms and exhibition spaces, a digital lab, and workshops. Root Division, founded in 2002, offers discounted studios for artists who, in exchange for the subsidized space, teach arts classes to school-age kids and adults.

"This time last year we were announcing the loss of our home, wondering where we would move in an increasingly intense real estate market," said Michelle Mansour, Root Division's executive director.

The deal comes as Mayor Ed Lee pushes to ensure that the arts are not squeezed out as the Mid-Market and Tenderloin neighborhoods



Brant Ward / The Chronicle

Artists Cayla Harris (left), Susa Cortez and Holly Coley help hang a picture by Megan Reed for an upcoming exhibition.

are being transformed by tech headquarters, new restaurants and luxury apartment towers. The effort has had mixed results. While a developer recently abandoned plans to include an arts center in a

large hotel and housing development at 950 Market St., about a dozen arts groups have either relocated to the area or expanded into new spaces: They include Women's Arts continues on A9

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# A feat in S.F.: Arts group finds space

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Audio Mission, CounterPulse theater and SF Camerawork.  
 “Root Division is the poster child for success in the face of challenges that artists and arts organizations have come up against in a rapidly changing city,” said Tom DeCaigny, San Francisco director of cultural affairs. “It’s certainly a very challenging real estate market, but there have been some nice wins lately.”

**Longtime home**

For a decade Root Division operated out of a 7,000-square-foot space at 3175 17th St., a building owned by the youth-focused nonprofit Seven Teepees. But as rents doubled in the neighborhood, Seven Teepees wanted to take advantage of the hot leasing market to generate money for its mission of providing after-school programs and career counseling.

“We were great partners for the entire time we were there, but they needed higher rent,” Mansour said. “We went around the negotiating table many, many times to find something that would work for us. But what they wanted and what we felt was feasible didn’t match up.”

Forty-two other nonprofits — 21 arts groups and 21 social services groups — have turned to the Nonprofit Displacement Mitigation Fund, a \$2 million pool of money that the city set aside to help groups stay in the city at a time of soaring rents and rampant speculation.

**Advice and support**

Of that group, 14 have received nonmonetary real estate and facilities advice. They include Artists’ Television Access, ArtSeed, Cartoon Art Museum, Center for Sex and Culture, Galeria de la Raza, SOMArts, StageWrite, and Theatre Flamenco of SF.

But the Root Division deal shows how gentrification can be unpredictable and occur building by building. For arts advocates, the key is to scour neighborhoods for off-the-radar buildings, underused spaces that are often owned by family trusts or benevolent owners not pushing to raise rents.

In the case of 1131 Mission St., Root Division beat out a competing offer because the building owner liked the group’s mission and wanted to support it, said Leiasa Beckham, senior real estate consultant with the Northern California Community Loan Fund, which is overseeing the miti-



Jessica Christian / The Chronicle

A large mural graces the wall of the Mission Street building that will be the new home of the nonprofit arts group Root Division.



Michael Macor / The Chronicle

Michelle Mansour, executive director of Root Division, tours the newly acquired space. The group’s old nonprofit landlord in the Mission raised the rent to support its community work.

gation fund.

Root Division has applied for money from the fund, and also got a \$75,000 arts grant from the city.

“For nonprofits, it’s about finding the right space that fits their mission and programming needs. Nonprofits need very long leases with predictable increases, in order to stabilize their operations,” she said. “Often owners are looking for stable organizations with a creative use.

Owners are often willing to work with nonprofits and are proud to see their property being used for a good cause.”

By this summer Root Division will have 25 new artists-in-residence who will fan out into schools across the city to teach classes. The Mission Street gallery and classrooms will be bursting with artwork and activity. Those who become part of Root Division’s program stay for up to two years before their space is

handed over to the next artists. Since its inception in 2002, Root Division has subsidized studios for over 130 artists and trained over 240 artists to teach classes. Its members have provided over 4,000 hours worth of free art classes to over 1,000 students.

**Nurturing resource**

“We think of it as a cross between an incubator and an artist-in-residence program,” Mansour said. “At the end of



Todd Trumbull / The Chronicle

two years we push them out of the nest.”

Mid-Market is more convenient to both downtown workers and artists based in the East Bay, she said. It will allow them to move into schools in neighborhoods like the Tenderloin, Hayes Valley and the Western Addition.

“Mid-Market is more visible. It’s more accessible. It’s more urban,” Mansour said. “Two years ago, we had a five-year plan to grow into a space this size. Getting displaced actually put us on an accelerated timeline.”

J.K. Dineen is a San Francisco Chronicle staff writer. E-mail: [jdineen@sfgate.com](mailto:jdineen@sfgate.com) Twitter: @sfdineen