Artists create ‘hip’ co-ops

By David J. Thompson

In hundreds of cities across the United States, artists have joined together to form co-operatives. Some artists formed co-operatives to sell their products, some to promote their artistry and some to create either commercial or residential space where they can work or live and, in some cases, also live where they work.

Some are known worldwide, such as Magnum, in New York City, a co-op of international photographers, while others are only known locally. What is most important is that the co-operative form of enterprise allows artists to obtain a community of peers and economic benefit.

On Magnum’s website (www.magnumphotos.com) it says: “Magnum was formed by four photographers — Robert Capa, Henri Cartier-Bresson, George Rodger and David ‘Chim’ Seymour — who had been very much scarred by the conflict (World War II) and were motivated both by a sense of relief that the world had somehow survived and the curiosity to see what was still there.”

The photos of Magnum members captured close up both the horrors of war and the victories of human effort. They captured and then shared the portraits of the famous and the infamous making history. By forming a co-operative, Magnum was able to win photographers a professional livelihood, better contracts with newspapers and publishers and a higher return on the sales from their library of 400,000 images. In 2008, Magnum’s 60 members are still the gold standard by which photographers are judged.

St. Paul, Minnesota, is a great example of how artists can renew a dying inner city. By the 1970s the old central part of St. Paul was a deteriorating neighbourhood full of huge unused grain warehouses left over from the turn of the century.

The multi story warehouses were too costly to demolish and the neighbourhood had become an inner city slum. There seemed to be no value to doing anything except to let the area die. However, there was one unique group that saw destiny and not death — artists.

A group was formed called Artery Co-op, set up the by laws, investment share, and rules for governance for the entire warehouse. A group of artists formed a co-operative, set up the by laws, investment share and rules for governance for the entire warehouse. Many types of artists live at Lowertown (painters, sculptors, photographers and potters).

Lowertown Lofts led the way for a revival of the area. Today, downtown St. Paul is one of the busiest art colonies in the US. The warehouses are full, the cafes busy and the galleries packed. The neighbourhood is one of the hippest for miles. People from all the twin cities of St. Paul and Minneapolis pour into the area for art festivals and weekend fun.

The Artery in Davis, California, is a good example of the most recognised form of artist’s co-operative in the US. The Artery has 63 members from different trades (ceramicists, painters, potters, sculptors, woodworkers, weavers, etc). It has operated a retail store in downtown Davis since 1974.

The bright attractive gallery revolves its displays to show the wares of the different members. Each member is featured in the main gallery on a rotating schedule. During the year, each member has to contribute time to the co-operative. The members can choose to work shifts; in the store, at events, to do office work, clean the store, handle advertising, etc . . . Each member has a $300 investment in shares, attends quarterly meetings and does their share of shifts. In return, the members receive rotating shelf space, an outlet for their products, public presentation of their work and income on their sales. If they displayed their works in private stores they would pay a much higher percentage commission on their sales. There are hundreds of this type of local artist’s co-operative in cities and towns across America.

Another type of artists co-operative is that organised by the Native American and Alaskan native populations. In areas where there is a large native population they have formed co-operatives to sell their artistry and to provide retail opportunities and generate employment.

One successful example is Dineh Co-operative in the Navajo Nation in Arizona which has created 740 jobs. Another is among the Inuit populations in Alaska. Since 1948, the Alaskan tribes have a highly organised distribution system through their own statewide organisation called Alaska Native Industries Co-operative Association (ANICA).

Sales of Native American crafts and jewellery are a major source of income in tourist areas. These Native American owned co-operatives are proven to keep more of the jobs and sales dollars in the hands of their people.

The Artery Co-op in California displays artists’ work