

## OUT WITH THE OLD, IN WITH RENEWAL

**The proposed sale of a building at Washington Avenue and Tucker Boulevard has Amitin's Bookstore and other funky tenants wondering whether they have a role in this high-rent renaissance**

BY D.J. WILSON

Maybe the transition between abandoned, decaying, bankrupt buildings and trendy, prefabricated, expensive stores, restaurants and lofts has a magic moment of balance between the commercial and the creative, when character can coexist with capitalism.

That moment is likely brief and tenuous. For the long-heralded, not-much-arrived-yet renewal in the art-loft-and-nightclub stretch of Washington Avenue on the western fringe of downtown, the moment may have passed without notice. All Janese Henry knows is, she's packing her bags. After renting the space at 1215 Washington Ave. to house Cummel's Cafe and Coffeehouse for five years, she was given 60 days by prospective buyer Kevin McGowan to leave the premises.

"Kevin McGowan sat me down and informed me that not only had he bought the building and he was giving me 60 days' notice, he really only had to give me 30 but he was giving me 60," says the 43-year-old Henry, adding that rent for her 5,000-square-foot space would quadruple to \$15 per square foot. "After about a half-an-hour of begging and trying to figure out another way around it and options and alternatives, it finally became really clear to me and I said, 'You're telling me you've already signed a lease with somebody, then.' He has some high-dollar white-tablecloth restaurant that's going to come in."

Henry says she recently spent \$16,000 on improvements to the property, thinking she'd be staying awhile. She's a "little angry," she says, that she ended up paying to fix the plumbing for a new tenant.

Henry has found a new home for her cafe, about four blocks west at 1627 Washington Ave., the building being rehabbed by Washington University with its art-school alumni in mind. Henry will move Cummel's to that building, which also contains 40 lofts and a ground-floor gallery, even though the space is somewhat smaller than Cummel's Cafe's current home. But she's happy she found a home for her "performance and art" cafe, which features an open-mike night and impromptu entertainment by young performers willing to sing or play for a free lunch.

Others along the first block west of Tucker may not be so fortunate. There's Earle's Corner, where shoes can be bought or repaired. And there's Gus's Fashions

and Shoes, a mecca for urban stylemeisters, where the customers' real and affected outrageousness is trumped only by owner Gus Torregrossa's own.

Perhaps the most irreplaceable merchant — after all, even with his winter inventory, Torregrossa can pack up his Reebok, Saucony and Starter paraphernalia and move — is Amitin's Bookstore. The store holds tens of thousands of used books — up front, in the backroom, in the basement. If the sale of the building goes down as expected in mid-September and the rent goes up, owner Larry Amitin doesn't have much of a choice.

"I would probably liquidate a lot of books and maybe move what I could, or simply go out of business completely. It's a very expensive move," says Amitin.

For Amitin, this urban-renewal drill is getting old. He moved to his current location in 1989 after being forced to vacate 711 Washington Ave. when the convention center was built. (His father started the business in the 1920s.) Amitin says he's met Kevin McGowan and his brothers, who expect to close on the building in the next two weeks.

"They've shopped and bought books here," Amitin says. "They seem to be giving me positive indicators that they like books and like bookstores. But until I hear what their position on this is, I can't comment on it. I would certainly hope they would do something to provide for tenants like myself so we can continue to be here."

"I would hope they would say something like 'Hey, look, Larry, we see your store as an institution, some sort of a historical landmark. If you do this, we'll help you in some way to stay here for a long time to come.' Cities need places like us, because we serve a lot of people on different levels and in different walks of life. It's a good place to have. We give people books who can't even afford them. You can't walk into a Barnes & Noble and say, 'Can I have a free book?' But if I get a kid who's hungry and he comes into my store, I say, 'Here, take the book — sometime you'll come back and buy something.' We always try to treat people with respect, all kinds of people."

But for now, the 46-year-old Amitin says everything is "very mysterious," and that "a lot of merchants are very upset about it," not knowing what the sale means for them.

But for Kevin McGowan, there's no mystery here. McGowan and his four brothers, who hail from Houston, say the whole Washington Avenue district is caught up in redevelopment fever, pushing acquisition costs and rents higher and higher.

The Weiss-Newman Building — where Cummel's, Amitin's and Gus's rent space — is selling for about \$2 million, McGowan says. "To renovate it — you can do the math — it's another \$50 a square foot. This thing is well over \$10 million, this building. Even just on an acquisition level — it's a 240,000-square-foot building — it's about \$9 a square

foot. When we first started down there a year ago, they were going for \$2 a square foot (to buy). That building there is costing us a little more than \$20,000 just to pay the mortgage."

"What's happening is, the developers are coming in; we're buying these buildings; the people aren't selling them for \$100,000 or \$200,000, they're selling them for \$2 million," McGowan says. "The only way you can pay for these buildings now is to rehab them. You got to go out and borrow \$10 million. And you've got to charge \$6-\$15 a square foot just to break even, or you go under."

The McGowan brothers — Kevin McGowan says the brothers already control 40 percent of the developable space on Washington between Ninth and 18th streets — plan to put 120 loft apartments in the Weiss-Newman Building. They plan to close on the sale later this month.

Henry, even though she's moving just four blocks west, says the McGowan brothers appear to be bringing "Houston prices to St. Louis." She sees what they are doing, in buying several buildings between Fourth and 18th streets, as nothing less than the "demise" of Washington Avenue as people have known it.

ents' home near downtown at Eighth and Cole streets 62 years ago, says that if he has to move, he'll try to stay downtown.

In many ways, like Amitin's, "Gus's" is an institution too. Called on a Friday afternoon and asked what's hot at his store, Gus snaps back, "Everything is hot in my store. I got Sheriff Jim Murphy in here buying some stuff." Torregrossa says Murphy, sheriff for the city, was buying a couple of Rams jackets. Though he keeps referring to the McGowan brothers as the "McGulley" brothers, Torregrossa says they "have a heart and they're the nicest people you want to meet." It's clear he doesn't want to move. It's also clear that his store's image and clientele probably wouldn't appear in any artist's rendering in a development plan.

What happens to Amitin's may be more than symbolic. Joel Garreau, author of *Edge City: Life on the New Frontier*, describes used bookstores as canaries in the urban coal mine. When they are forced to close or move, it's a sign that the neighborhood has become too self-conscious or greedy. But Amitin says that if he's forced out, he won't go quietly.

"I'll be very vociferous, because I believe in my product. It's not just a



Janese Henry, owner of Cummel's Cafe and Coffeehouse.

"My impression from him is that all the tenants on the first floor, all the ones in the storefronts, are all going to go, because he's going to change everyone's rent structure. Who's going to pay those kind of prices and make any money?" Henry asks, then surmises that the push will be on to bring in national chains of stores and eateries. "I guess that means it's going to turn into just another copy of another street."

Torregrossa, who was born in his par-

money thing with me, it's a humanitarian thing," says Amitin, who is also a claims adjuster.

"I'd like to see some changes in the city. I think there's a lot more at stake than just who's going to make the next buck," Amitin says. I would like them to start thinking in terms of the general good and making it feasible so tenants like myself could have affordable rents to continue here."