Renowned art school finds new South Philadelphia home by following the light

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The Bok in South Philadelphia.
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Studio Incamminati, a renowned art school established nearly 20 years ago, will move from its longtime home in the Callowhill neighborhood of the city to the Bok in South Philadelphia this summer.

The school for contemporary realist art signed a 10-year lease on 18,000 square feet at the building and will become Bok's largest tenant. Incamminati will occupy the entire seventh floor of the building, a feature that played a part in the ultimate selection of Bok for its new location.

While tenants often look at access to public transit, nearby amenities and other attributes when evaluating a space, Incamminati sought out "light, light and light," said Dan Thompson, dean of fine arts at the school. It was paramount a new location for the school have as much unobstructed north light as possible.

Incamminati comes out of a tradition where "idyllic north light" is an integral part of its teaching and study. Typically, north light doesn't lend itself to an urban environment because of building and other structures that can cast shadows or limit the amount of available light during the day.

For two years, the school looked at several buildings in Philadelphia for a new location and had at one point zeroed in on the Nelson building at 222 Walnut St. in Old City. It was north facing and elevated and the school at one point contemplated buying the building. The 30,000-square-foot building would also have enabled it to expand its sculpture program. In the end, the school determined the Nelson building wasn't a fit, Thompson said.

"They looked all over the place and they were looking for the right light and they didn't want to take less than what they had in mind," he said.

Students painting at Studio Incamminatir
STUDIO INCAMMINATI

The school it is currently located in 15,000 square feet at 340 N. 12th St., where it has been for 18 years. In that time, it has moved to different floors to capture more north facing light. It also has several pockets scattered throughout the building. "It's disjointed space," said James A. Savoie, president of the school.

When it revisited Bok and the space on the seventh floor that has expansive windows facing the north and were also unobstructed by anything nearby, the school was convinced it found the right spot.

"Second and Walnut would have been lovely but when you go down to South Philadelphia and see this incredible neighborhood exploding and space that is thriving with artists, there is such an incredible vibe," Savoie said.

Lindsey Scannapieco's Scout Ltd. bought the former Edward W. Bok Vocational School at 1901 S. 9th St. in July 2015 and set about transforming the vacant, eight-story, 338,000-square-foot building into a creative community. The eighth floor is where it has an outdoor space. The lease with Incamminati brings Bok to 75% leased with a mix of tenants ranging from architects, wholesale bakeries, jewelers, textile designers and florists to a tattoo artist and furniture maker.

"It's been an adventure," Scannapieco said. "We knew it was a big project and would have its challenges but it's been rewarding. On a whole, the tenants are a great group of people doing a lot of interesting things and that has been instrumental in making it a great building."

The lease with Incamminati continues the theme of building a creative community and in a building formerly used as an educational facility. "They are the perfect big tenant," Scannapieco said. "They will work really well with all of the other artists, manufacturers and entrepreneurs. I think the space will be quite magical."

Surrender Dorothy by Studio Incamminati instructor Natalie Italiano
STUDIO INCAMMINATI

Incamminati has enlisted Stantec to design the new space with a series of rooms that will be north facing. The school will have access to a roof terrace that will provide another opportunity for natural outdoor light with which the students to work. It will also have the ability to convert a former greenhouse for the artists to use and have classically illuminated spaces that will foster teaching of traditional skills that it doesn't have in its current space.

Incamminati was established in 2002 and currently has 50 students ranging in ages 18 to 70. It "reflects the belief of its founder and first artistic director, Nelson Shanks, that future generations should be imbued with the same philosophy and techniques of contemporary realism that made him such a great artist," according to a December 2019 article in Fine Art Connoisseur

The Italian word "incamminati" means "moving forward" and the school is one of the few accredited by the National Association of Schools of Art & Design. While it has visiting faculty, instructors are professional working artists many of whom maintain studios on site.

The school is leveraging a $1 million gift from Betty Wold Johnson to help sustain its new location. "We exist in a world where art schools are closing," Thompson said. "We want to proudly represent Philadelphia and its cultural community."

The school is scheduled to move this August.

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