

THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

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HOMES

The Artsy Southern Town That Wants to Be the Next Portland

Former milltown Greenville, S.C., has been rejuvenated by a thriving cultural scene; average home prices have risen over 20% in the past three years

By Nancy Keates

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Keith Grace, a mixed-media painter, and his wife, Shari, a graphic artist and stained-glass sculptor, came from Rockford, Ill. Renowned printmaker Kent Ambler and his wife, Peggy, came from Roswell, N.M. And Yuri Tsuzuki, a sculptor and painter, relocated from Bogota, Colombia.

All of these artists—and hundreds of others—have chosen to live in Greenville, S.C., a Southern city of about 68,000 people that once called itself the Textile Capital of the World. Today, the vibrant arts scene is revitalizing the city itself, attracting other artists, young professionals and families wanting a fun, affordable place to live.

“We came looking for artists,” says Mr. Ambler, who is 47. He and his wife wanted to live somewhere warm, but California was too expensive and they didn’t think Florida was a good fit for his artwork. When a teaching job opened, they moved in 2000 to Seneca, S.C., about 30 miles west of Greenville, and bought a 1,800-square-foot studio for \$88,000, selling it seven years later for \$210,000.

In October 2000, Mr. Ambler began showing his work in a Greenville gallery and started looking for homes nearby. He paid \$410,000 for a 4,000-square-foot, four-bedroom, 4½-bath, ranch-style house on 12 acres in 2009 in a neighborhood called Paris Mountain that’s about a five-minute drive from downtown. Built in the 1960s, it was structurally sound but needed slight renovations.

Artists Who Made Greenville Home

Inside the homes and studios of artists who relocated to Greenville, S.C., because of its vibrant arts scene.



Renowned printmaker Kent Ambler moved to Greenville, S.C., in 2009. A wood shop behind his new studio, which holds the hundreds of blocks used for his prints, is reached by a path next to a wall printing on which he spray painted his signature design of running dogs. DANIELLE PAUL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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He furnished it with pieces he made in his shop along with Midcentury Modern furniture found on eBay and estate sales and blanketed walls and shelves with art made by friends. This past year Mr. Ambler finished building a new 1,600-square-foot art studio out of what was a garage, spending about \$120,000 on it along with \$30,000 for the construction of a koi pond and landscaping work.

In 2014, artist Yuri Tsuzuki, who is 42, moved back to Greenville, where she had grown up. Her decision was based, in part, on how much the city had changed.

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Back in the '70s, Greenville had become a rundown old mill town. Dozens of companies that once operated there closed down when textile manufacturing shifted overseas, leading to blight and high unemployment.

But in the 1980s, other types of manufacturing started to emerge. In 1988 French tire company Michelin relocated its North American headquarters there. In the 1990s, BMW opened a factory in nearby Spartanburg, S.C., where it now makes 1,400 vehicles a

day. Swiss-based ABB and German-based Bosch also have operations nearby.

The artsy vibe took root in 2005 with an annual, three-day festival called Artisphere, says Alan Ethridge, executive director of Greenville's Metropolitan Arts Council, which now has an annual budget of \$2 million. An annual open studio that included 48 artists 10 years ago now has 144 artists. The three-year-old Greenville Center for Creative Arts, housed in an old textile mill, has raised almost \$2 million and has more than 45 instructors now.

The campaign to make Greenville into a cool city—the next Portland, Ore.—began in 2012 and is centered around the catchphrase “Yeah, that,” as in yes, the Greenville in South Carolina as opposed to some 36 other towns named Greenville across the United States. The city has a 32-acre park with the Reedy River and a waterfall in its center. The roughly 22-mile GHS Swamp Rabbit Trail—created from an abandoned railway bed—also cuts through downtown.

Ms. Tsuzuki bought her childhood home from her father for \$200,000 15 years earlier, but had resisted living there full time, choosing instead to live in Bogota.

Since moving to Greenville full time, her traditional neighborhood has seen families from all over the world move in. The changing landscape gave Ms. Tsuzuki the confidence to build a contemporary steel-and-glass studio and guesthouse on her property because she knew it wouldn't upset the neighbors. The \$180,000 project included converting what was a garage, adding a second story and creating a work



Mr. Ambler, a printmaker, has two presses in his studio. **PHOTO: DANIELLE PAUL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL**



Artist Yuri Tsuzuki moved back to Greenville, where she had grown up, in 2014. PHOTO: DANIELLE PAUL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

space. The yard of the 4,225-square-foot main house is dotted with her metal sculptures, many in primary colors, and one of her signature butterfly sculpture installations.

What makes Greenville different is that many of the newly arrived artists are already established—not stereotypically young and starving. Because of that, the newcomers are buying high-end homes and building studios.

Keith and Shari Grace, both 57, had lived in Rockford their whole lives and raised their kids there. They discovered Greenville by participating in Artisphere. In 2016, they bought a 4,000-square-foot, five-bedroom, four-bath contemporary house for \$417,000 and spent another \$100,000 to fix it up, turning one large room into Mr. Grace’s studio and one into a workroom for Ms. Grace.

“We are Midwesterners,” says Mr. Grace. “The South was never on our radar.”



Ms. Tsuzuki, a sculptor and painter, converted the garage into her studio. **PHOTO:** DANIELLE PAUL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

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The influx of artists has come hand-in-hand with rising home prices. Since 2015, the average price of a home sold year to date has grown 21%, while the



Keith Grace, a mixed-media painter, in his studio at his Greenville house. PHOTO: DANIELLE PAUL FOR THE WALL STREET JOURNAL

number of homes priced \$1 million and over has almost tripled during that time, according to the Greater Greenville Multiple Listing Service. “There’s an extreme lack of inventory,” says Coldwell Banker Caine real-estate agent Virginia Hayes. She says bidding wars have meant a \$300,000 house might now be a fixer-upper.

In fact, Mr. and Ms. Grace are getting into the real-estate scene: Last December they bought a five-bedroom, four-bathroom, 4,200-square-foot house nearby for \$300,000

and fixed it up, putting it back on the market, priced at \$649,000. “Artists can flip houses, too,” says Ms. Grace.

The Bidding Wars of Greenville

If there’s one thing Greenville real-estate agents agree on it’s that a strong market has led to a severe lack of inventory. According to the Greenville Multiple Listing Service, 36% of all homes on the market are brand new or not yet built. Bidding wars are rampant.

“Agents are trying to keep listings in house in their own offices before others hear about them,” says Lisa DeLuca Alexander, owner of Del-co Realty Group. And, she adds, “Buyers have to come in over asking” price.

Still, prices are nowhere near the levels of cities like San Francisco and Boston. Currently on the market is a three-bedroom, three-bathroom, 2,395-square-foot Colonial with a wraparound deck on a quarter-acre, listed for \$283,000. The most expensive house currently listed is a five-bedroom, nine-bathroom, 12,558-square-foot stone mansion. Built in 1998, the home sits on 6 acres and includes a pool. The asking price is \$6.75 million. A 8,500-square-foot traditional home built in the 1920s is listed for \$3.5 million.

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