Owner of import store has a vision for historic Minneapolis building

He’d like to create a collection of studios, ethnic shops and ethnic restaurants in downtown Minneapolis, and he’s looking to the city for help.

By Linda Mack
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Like a refugee from redevelopment, Ashu Kataria has once again packed up his Buddhas, sitars, saris, textiles, pottery, woodcarvings and books and found a new spot for his Khazana Indian art store in downtown Minneapolis. He hopes he can stay at his new location at the Handicraft Guild Building, and that he can persuade the city to help transform the historic structure into a destination for downtowners seeking an ethnic-arts mecca.

His last home was the Fiske Building at 11th St. and Nicollet Mall, where the Times Bar and Cafe and Jitters coffee shop drew a lively crowd until they and most of the other tenants moved out this spring. The building is about to be razed to make way for the controversial 32-story Target II office tower.

Now Kataria and his wife, Anju, have set up shop a block away in another charming, old and beleaguered structure, the Handicraft Guild Building, at 10th St. and Marquette Av. S.

Last year, after a passionate debate, the city designated the 1907 building and its 1914 addition as historic for their role as the birthplace of the city’s Arts and Crafts movement. Owner Margot Siegel has sued the city over the designation, which she says was arbitrary and prevents her from selling her property for its full value. The Minnesota Court of Appeals heard arguments in the case May 19 and is to render judgment within 90 days.

Kataria has a two-year lease from Siegel Properties. But he also has a plan that would finally give him a stable future — to make the Handicraft Guild a haven for small crafts-oriented businesses like the present tenants — violin makers, photographers and shops like his own and the Nairobi Shop, an African gallery that also moved from the Fiske Building.

SHOP continues on B5:
— City Council president said that the idea has appeal but that there is no obvious way to fund it.
Merchant has new idea for old building

He envisions what he calls the New Handicraft Guild Building as a collection of studios, ethnic craft shops and ethnic restaurants that would become a destination for convention-goers and downtown denizens. The shops and restaurants could spill out into the alley behind the two buildings.

“I see it as a craft center of Minneapolis. It could be Minnesota, Midwestern or a larger focus. It could include exhibitions and teaching,” and perhaps even a small gallery of a local museum, he said.

Like the original building, built for a guild of potters, textile artists and metalworkers, the place would help bring art to everyday life.

Keeping rents low

He presented his proposal to city officials in April. It asks for the city to buy the building from Siegel and add another $500,000 to approximately $1,275,000 of private investment to rehabilitate the building.

Kataria says it’s not likely to generate huge tax dollars. The idea is to keep rents affordable for small shop owners.

City Council President Jackie Cherryhomes said the idea has appeal but there is no obvious way to fund it.

“It sounds, it’s creative, it’s a good use of the building. How do we do that?” she asked. “We have more concerns for subsidies than we have available.”

The request has triggered a larger look at the Handicraft Building and other older low-rise commercial buildings in the south Nicoll Mall area, said Minneapolis Planning Director Chuck Ballentine. Rather than approaching each building on a crisis-by-crisis basis, the study will create a framework for future decisions in the area, he said. In the past two years Target’s plans to tear down low-rise buildings for its company headquarters have set off a heated development battle.

“Let’s have the council take a look at that area of the mall and see what they want it to look like and what they want to invest in it,” he said.

The study is likely to take at least the whole summer, said Phil Handy, senior project coordinator with the Minneapolis Community Development Agency. That means Kataria won’t get a response to his proposal any time soon. But he was pleased to hear that the city is looking at the larger issue.

“I’m so glad this has happened,” said Kataria, whose shop was in the Physicians & Surgeons building before landing at the Fiske. Many downtowns have designated areas for locally owned businesses, to ensure that the city retains the richness brought by individual entrepreneurs.

“For downtown it should be mandatory to have such an area, especially with such a large residential population. Small business is adaptable but needs stability,” he said.

Old and new trade

Khazana, named for the Hindu word for treasure, is a case in point. The main room is an inviting collection of rugs, fabrics, bronze figures, Indian instruments, leather purses, wood carvings, silver jewelry and beads.

In the basement, shelves of baskets, giant wood carvings, fabrics, pottery and antique items compete for space with the office, where Akshay Mehta, the store’s Internet operations manager, processes orders for Indian music and books from around the world. Mehta said book orders came in from Germany, Belgium, Iceland, Greece, Hong Kong and Malaysia in the past couple of weeks.

The Internet business in Indian music and books is fast surpassing the traditional retail part of the business. Kataria said since October Khazana has become one of the world’s largest online purveyors of Indian books. The store’s Web address is http://www.khazana.com.

The Internet business is combined with a crafts business that is conducted in centuries-old style. The Katarias travel to a different part of India each year and buy directly from craftspeople.

“They get 10 times as much from us as they would otherwise,” said Kataria. Folk ironwork pieces came from a metalworker they ran into at a craft fair in Delhi. “He made 40 to 50 pieces on one very hot day,” Kataria said. Fanciful masks and puppets are made by lepers whom Mother Teresa treated and organized to make crafts, he said.

Kataria said the Indian community in the Twin Cities, which he estimated at 10,000 families, forms the core of his business. The store sells tickets to local Indian music and dance events and serves as a downtown social hub for Indian culture.

“It’s just this mix of crafts, music, artists and food that he would like to bring to the revived Handicraft Guild Building.”

“Given the chance, I’d like to do that,” he says. “But without the plan the Handicraft Guild Building is not the place for us. There’s no traffic on Marquette. We have to create that reason for people to come.”
Indian statues are on display at the Khazana Indian store in the Handicraft Guild Building. The shop’s owner has asked the city to help turn the building into a haven for small ethnic craft shops and restaurants.

Star Tribune photo by Bruce Bisping