Parker Hall—aging warehouse or art studio?

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Upon entering the confines of Parker Hall, a visitor's first impression is that of an abandoned building—one is greeted by an old, stained bulletin board, the sole occupant of which is a "help wanted" flyer from the 1930s. The flyer is protected by a pane of broken glass.

Further inside, nearly every square foot of the walls and ceilings in the two-story structure is covered with flaking and peeling paint, occasionally punctuated by palm-sized swatches of missing plaster that have fallen away to reveal the brickwork underneath. Rickety bannisters, dirty and painted-over windows and a generally unkempt appearance complete the picture.

Welcome to the art studio at USL.

Parker Hall, located on the corner of Lewis Street and UPA Drive across from the ROTC building, is where many USL art and architecture students are introduced to the university classroom. Drawing, sculpting, and metalworking are taught in the same classrooms that have given birth to rumors of lead-based paint and asbestos slowly poisoning aspiring young artists.

The only person who can fully document the asbestos question and other Parker Hall problems is Mike Bridges, director of the university's Physical Plant. However, after several weeks' worth of attempts were made by The Vermilion to contact him, Bridges refused to be interviewed.

Strangely enough, despite the less-than-inspiring conditions at Parker Hall, most people who work and study there do not seem to be worried.

In response to the questions about asbestos poisoning, Gil Carner, a drawing instructor who holds classes in Parker, said, "The asbestos is the old hard kind. Not dangerous, but very stable. It's not a problem."

Irma Istre, a USL librarian who takes drawing classes in Parker, said that she heard that there was lead-based paint on the flaking walls, but added that she wasn't in a position to swear to it.

Aside from the question of hazardous materials, Carner said that the general conditions around Parker are standard for fine arts departments.

"Art departments always have old buildings. I like really grungy buildings for studios."

His students seem to agree.

"The conditions don't bother me," said Lauren Bombet, an architecture freshman. "I wouldn't like the walls painted white or everything fixed perfectly. Parker is one of the reasons that I chose USL."

"This is my first class in Parker," said Istre. "It's kind of primitive, but it's OK. It's really tricky trying to comment on the conditions because artists make sense out of mess. Engineering, architecture or interior design students might have a problem, but art students don't."

Bombet, though worried that the building might be condemned, thought that it made the perfect studio.

"We have lots of freedom," she said. "We don't need to be quiet, and we can even play the radio. That's part of a studio. The environment has a lot to do with our work. Even though students and teachers don't have any major problems with Parker, they still would like to see some improvements. Their main complaint is that Parker could be better lit."

"The windows should be cleaned so that we could get better light," concurred Istre.

Bombet also agreed, saying that the studios could use better lighting and more windows. While Carner listed proper lighting as one of the most important aspects of a good studio, he said that even the fluorescent lighting installed since he last taught in Parker hasn't diminished the grimness of the studios.

Carner also added that the tiny bathroom rooms are not equipped with enough sinks.

"We need sinks to clean brushes," he said.

Both Carner and Istre thought that the air conditioning could be improved.

"He (Carner) comes in early to turn on the air conditioner to cool off the class room for us. Then he has to turn it off because it makes so much noise," said Istre.

"The building has great potential," she said, adding that the building could use a good cleaning. "I would like to see it painted in colors other than industrial gray or brown. Maybe the same colors, but different hues."

Bombet felt that, most importantly, artists should have a place to themselves where they can create.