

LUXURY LOFTS COMING SOON

JEN: Two acrobats slip through the air like fish through water. The performance is aesthetically awesome, but it has a deeper message. They are dancing about urban renewal--specifically, about the residents who can't afford to keep up. Dark-suited realtors chase the dancers from a set of hoops to a trapeze and finally, to nets suspended from the ceiling. It's an elegant depiction of the dark side of revitalization.

Sharon Whitting says she and her partner Andrea Burkholder got the idea while walking around downtown DC.

SHARON: All we could see were cranes and scaffolding and debris. Because as you know this area is under massive upheaval right now; and for us, this was a really powerful metaphor---to think about displacement and what happens when progress happens too quickly.

JEN: Burkholder agrees.

ANDREA: Revitalization is what they talk about a lot. If you have a population that's been there all along, that's striving to succeed there, and then you boot them out--that's not necessarily revitalization.

JEN: Burkholder and Whitting have a personal stake in urban renewal.

ANDREA: I also own pilates studios, and I had one downtown, and that one got booted out because they're building a big class A building, so they kicked everybody out.

SHARON: We also have experiences as artists. We're always looking for rehearsal spaces that have very high ceilings and those are becoming fewer and far between as more and more developments are built. We rehearsed at Nation, and that property has just been sold and will be demolished to make way for the new baseball stadium. So we've lost our rehearsal space which was really critical to us.

JEN: DC realtor Warren Kluth might object to the shadowy portrayal of the realtor in LUXURY LOFTS COMING SOON! He agrees that the search for affordable housing is increasingly arduous, but he says that the local market is so robust that it couldn't be any other way.

WARREN: Our economy is so strong and our unemployment rate is so low that it happens fast here. It's strictly supply and demand. If there wasn't any demand for gentrification, it wouldn't happen.

JEN: Kluth explains that often revitalization helps the people that are traditionally viewed as being victimized by it.

WARREN: I've had plenty of clients that have sold the family home--all of a sudden it's worth 400,000 dollars when they paid 6. Literally.

JEN: The audience gasps as Burkholder drops off of the trapeze and hangs parallel to the floor. Her body is held up only by the feet of her partner. It's a stunning physical metaphor for the challenges of property ownership in a city swept by urban renewal. It also scares the living daylights out of the audience. One local DC resident, Chris Braum, reflects on sitting in the hot zone.

MAN: it's always sort of nerveracking---but being right underneath them--and feeling the direct consequences--I mean I actually looked around because I had to have my neck up--and looking around in the crowd, you could see other people with clenched teeth and smiles.

JEN: Burkholder and Whitting are wary of the wow-factor. They know that the novelty of their choreography can distract an audience from the deeper message.

SHARON: I think that's one of the things that makes aerial dance a little different from circus performance. So it's not about being a character, it's about being a human being. We try to use the tricks appropriately to communicate drama without losing sight of what we're trying to say.

JEN: Terrifying though it may be at times, Burkholder says that aerial artistry is well-suited to the subject of urban renewal.

ANDREA: Originally we looked at those cranes and we thought, how perfect, we're aerialists...hanging from one of these cranes, they lift and they pick and they drop. So that was our original image of what we would do.

JEN: Burkholder and Whitting are suspended, mid-air, in nets. They're climbing in them, entangling themselves, then dramatically freeing their limbs, swooping up and down as the score urges them on. When the realtors creep onto the stage, the women snatch up their nets and head skyward. The two pairs stare at each other. By now, the dancers have lost two homes. As the lights go down, there's no reason to think they haven't lost a third.

Jen Spyra for Intern Edition, in Washington