

# Leather design artisan Heather Hambrecht has turned the once dreary confines of an ancient Fredonia bank building into a studio that inspires exuberant creativity

She calls her handbags vessels, her necklaces fractals and her body wraps cocoons.

Funky names for elaborate and funky creations is how organic-leather design guru Heather Hambrecht gives personality to her already unique handmade products.

But why stop there?

In February she bought a vacant, dingy and needy building in downtown Fredonia, putting it through a massive rehab. The result is a voila moment when you open the door and see her new bright and immaculate studio.

When you give a building as much personality as this, it certainly needs a name.

“Just two more shows until I can pay for ‘Fred,’” said Hambrecht, referring to her new home that once was the Fredonia State Bank, as she prepared to load up her van for a Labor Day art show in Illinois.

She’s got 13 events under her belt this year — one for pretty much every weekend since late May. When you’re in demand like Hambrecht is, it’s go, go, go, show, show, show.

“It’s been a busy year, that’s for sure. I’m doing more than ever,” she said. “Between the remodel and the shows, it’s been a whirlwind. But I don’t believe in carrying any debt, so a girl’s got to do what a girl’s got to do.”

It’s a philosophy of pureness and simplicity that Hambrecht applies to all things in her life, but more on that later.

First, the building.

Built in 1912 and located at 507 Fredonia Ave., it most recently housed an attorney’s office.

Learning about its history was a fun first step for Hambrecht when she bought it.

“Next door was the general store, and across the street were the hotel and horse stables,” she said. “There wasn’t much here. In those days, the night life around here was in Waubeka, so people went back and forth.”

What was the clinching feature regarding her decision to buy the building?

“It still has the old bank vault in it, which I think is awesome,” she said.

The main floor is a place of focus, holding nothing more than a work station in a corner with the bare necessities of a sewing machine and mallet needed for applying hardware, some leather-hanging racks, and a handful of manikin torsos spread about waiting to don her creations.

No couches or dining area, just open work space. It’s in the cold, dark fieldstone basement where any so-called comforts exist.

“It had to be somewhere I could both live and work,” Hambrecht said. “But the studio space is most important. I need to be able to get up in the middle of the night and work on an idea at that very moment.”

It’s a far cry from the life she led in downtown Milwaukee, where for years she shared a loft with 15 other artists who were part of a nonprofit group she created.

“I was looking for breathing room, some tranquility and the ambience of a rural, small-town setting,” Hambrecht said. “I really lucked out. When I got it, it was nasty, but I had a vision for the space I needed and this matched it.”

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Enter Scott Szczerbinski, owner of Fredonia's S&S Remodeling, to bring that vision to reality. Together, the two embarked upon a massive overhaul that has lasted more than two months. "He's a rock star," Hambrecht said of Szczerbinski.

Szczerbinski was intrigued with the novelty of the project.

"It's interesting to see how buildings were built back in those early days," he said.

He also appreciated Hambrecht's creative approach.

"She has pretty cool ideas, and I like that," he said. "She wanted to use recycled material and she went out and found it all. I was impressed.

"She even found some old airplane wings she wanted to use to cover up things like the venting. She clearly wants an industrial look."

And some head room. At 6-foot-2 inches tall, Hambrecht had a problem with the eight-foot ceiling on the main floor. A study of the room indicated open horizons were above, and after the removal of two tiers of false ceilings a 14-foot open concept was reached.

"We knew they were there, we just had to get to them," Szczerbinski said.

New electric and plumbing followed, as did the installation of a back door and the re-configuring of the winding staircase leading down into the basement.

Also, all the windows were frosted over, leaving a mysterious and almost suspicious feel from the outside.

Was it done to protect her trade secrets?

"No, not at all," she said with a laugh. "It's simply good for heat reduction. The upstairs got as hot as an oven and I don't want air conditioning. I want to live off the grid as much as possible." And beyond the savings they bring by her avoiding the purchase of window treatments, Hambrecht discovered the frosted windows hold in the light produced by overhead lights from within. As a result, the finely detailed efforts needed on her projects are aided by intense illumination.

"They make the place a light box," Hambrecht said. "I can see everything so clearly."

At night, the frosted windows offer up a mood she likes.

"When emergency vehicles come down Fredonia Avenue I get a very nice red glow that filters through. It's an ambience all its own," she said.

More work in the form of practical needs lies ahead, Hambrecht said, as she plans to have her driveway repaved and a deck and detached garage built in the back yard.

After that, more attention will go back toward the studio during the winter months.

"It's not showroom ready and I don't want to rush things, but I would like it to come together to the point where I can hold open houses for clients hopefully by spring," she said.

Her basement living quarters are an afterthought, although she did recently install a washer and dryer, but otherwise a single burner allows for cooking and a small projection TV for entertainment.

Hambrecht's outlook on the value of multi-functionality is particularly evident when you consider she uses filing cabinets, instead of a non-dual-use barrier, to frame off a single mattress in the basement's corner.

"My creations are the same way — they are designed for function," she said. "A backpack becomes a messenger bag when you throw it over one shoulder. My items are to be worn in multiple directions and I like my living space to be the same."

The sparse and simple existence certainly fits her personality, but Hambrecht scoffs at the notion of her being a minimalist.

"You should see some of the places I go and the leathers I buy," she said. "I am not a

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minimalist.”

And Hambrecht said her business, which has existed 12 years, is thriving. For eight years, her items have been featured in the Milwaukee Museum’s Gallery Store.

Her website, [www.\(h\(om\)ethreads.com](http://www.(h(om)ethreads.com), presents the variety of her creations, all of which can be customized. Beyond her signature handbag line, they include accessories such as leather belts and décor items including leather pillowettes.

The next few months will be key for her as she eyes the annual high-profile One-of-a-Kind holiday show at Chicago’s Merchandise Mart, where more than 600 vendors will showcase their wares. It takes place in December.

“It truly is one of a kind,” Hambrecht said. “It’s the king.”

She’s proud of the fact she has been able to stick with her principles and doesn’t see herself in competition with high-end producers who appeal to a mass market.

“I don’t believe in the designer-label, made-in-China concept,” Hambrecht said. “My bags are made unique to each individual who carries them.”

And now Fredonia has a building that you can call Fred that has been custom-designed to not only serve Hambrecht but give the downtown a shot of pride.

“This was definitely a face lift,” Szczerbinski said. “I’m sure the community is happy we did what we did.”