



Bell Artspace Campus. ©Michael Palumbo

An Exceptional Model: The Bell Artspace Campus

By Greg Handberg

A New Orleans second line parade—led by the Free Agents Brass Band and including masked Mardi Gras Indians from the Washitaw Nation and Creole Wild West tribes—looped and twisted their way through a crowd of hundreds. The Roots of Music, a youth marching band, kicked off the music performances on the lawn; while the Bell All Stars, a brass band comprised of Bell School alumni, took to one of two stages for an exclusive, one-night-only performance. Kids—and even adults—stopped in their tracks, entranced by puppeteer Sierra Kay. Three visual art exhibits spanned three buildings, all put together by local curators; while a Miami Art Basel-featured performance artist regaled crowds on the lawn. A nationally known muralist spent hours capturing the scene.

Most the multi-disciplinary artists presenting their skills that April day are residents of the newly minted Bell Artspace Campus in the historic Tremé

neighborhood of New Orleans. A decade in development, festivities celebrated the Grand Opening of the revitalized site.

Five extraordinary buildings had anchored the neighborhood for more than a century but sat abandoned since Hurricane Katrina—until Artspace and partners committed to the campus and transformed the three largest. Nonprofits like Junebug Productions, a theater company that presents work exploring inequities that impact the African American community, found their home with below-market-rate commercial space. Nearly 80 units of affordable live/work housing for low-to moderate-income artists and their families were created, with myriad local Tremé artists moving in. Residents such as social practice artist Journey Allen and her two sons, who had secretly been living in her art studio for the past four months, found space to be a family. Today, the once vacant site is an arts hub.



While incredibly special in its own right, the Bell Artspace Campus is just one of some 50 real estate developments that Artspace has spearheaded across the country over the course of 30 years—with even more projects in the capital pipeline.



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Catalyzing Healthy Communities

Founded in 1979, Artspace is a nonprofit organization whose mission is to create, foster, and preserve affordable and sustainable space for artists and arts organizations. All of Artspace's properties, including both historic renovations and new construction, are designed to provide stability to low-income, vulnerable, and/or culturally distinct creative communities: artists and their families who face marginalization and cycles of displacement as unintended consequences of positive changes they inspire in their neighborhoods.

Artspace buildings not only benefit the families who reside within them but are also recognized as catalytic places that support healthy communities anchored in existing community assets. Artspace also owns and operates its buildings in perpetuity to ensure that they remain high quality and permanently affordable for the artists, their families, and arts and cultural organizations who add so much to their communities.

The 1990 opening of the Northern Warehouse Artist Lofts in Saint Paul, Minnesota, was Artspace's first real estate development project—

and also the first in the nation to use Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) for artist housing. The Northern offers 52 affordable live/work units for artists and their families on its upper four floors, while the lower two provide space for a gallery, nonprofit arts organizations, a coffeehouse, and other creative businesses. A precursor to the Bell campus, this six-story historic property was also a stimulus for the economic and cultural growth of a struggling neighborhood. It proved to be a replicable model that launched Artspace's real estate portfolio.

To create these arts spaces, Artspace works with communities to identify creative sector needs, including marginalized arts groups. Often invited in, Artspace's process begins with a preliminary feasibility study in which the Artspace team conducts outreach and gathers information by meeting with artists, local funders, businesses, civic leaders, and stakeholders; and holds public meetings to solicit feedback. The team typically then returns to launch an online arts market study, which quantifies the overall demand for arts and creative spaces. Once the data is in, Artspace is able to develop a vision for an arts and cultural facility that will serve the specific needs of the community it is working in. This most often includes live/work housing for artists and their families, in addition to commercial space for creative businesses.



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Artspace then begins a three-phased predevelopment process which includes identifying and purchasing a site, working with an



architect on the design, deepening community connections and forming cultural partnerships, and developing budgets. To finance a project, Artspace applies for tax credits and other resources, bringing together a variety of public and private dollars including social impact investments and more traditional debt and equity models. All of these steps lead to construction and, ultimately, lease-up of a new arts space like the Northern or the Bell School—both indicative of Artspace’s organizational commitment to providing long-term, sustainable, and affordable artist housing.



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The Bell School project provides 79 units of affordable live/work space for low-income individuals and their families; 45,000 square feet of community green space to be shared by the entire community; and 10,000 square feet of affordable nonprofit space that allows opportunity-creating arts and community

programming. The funding package for this project represents a typical structure, including Program-Related Investments (PRIs) from the Ford Foundation; a blend of Historic and Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC); and conventional philanthropy including capital grants and gifts made by funders: The Kresge Foundation, the Stavros Niarchos Foundation, Gibbs Construction, ArtPlace America, The Greater New Orleans Foundation, and JPMorgan Chase Foundation.

Collectively, Artspace properties provide include more than 1,500 live/work units; serve nearly 500 creative commercial tenants; give back more than \$3 million in rent subsidies; and host hundreds of arts events with thousands of visitors in areas both rural and urban.

While Artspace and partners have made much progress in supporting America’s cultural communities, there still remains a big need, with much work ahead. The Artspace team is excited to discover where we will be invited next, and looks forward to continuing to learn from and build with community partners and artists coast to coast.

Greg Handberg is Artspace’s Senior Vice President of Properties. Handberg has served Artspace since 1999, with a current focus on the stewardship of Artspace’s ever-growing portfolio of real estate owned. He holds an M.S. degree in Real Estate Finance from the University of Wisconsin-Madison, and lectures nationally and internationally on arts facility development and real estate finance.

