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Urban Pioneer

Kelley Lindquist '71 transforms communities through art

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Kelley Lindquist is the consummate connector. As president of Artspace, he has shown how investment in the arts can result in fundamental societal change. From offices in Minneapolis, Los Angeles, New Orleans, New York, Seattle and Washington, D.C., Artspace manages nearly 2,000 live/work units for artists and their families as well as millions of square feet of non-residential space for creative enterprises. This year marks Lindquist's 28th with the organization, and by all appearances, he's just getting warmed up.

COVER STORY

KELLEY LINDQUIST '71

ART GIVES BACK

Written by Lori L. Ferguson
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A University of Minnesota graduate, Lindquist started his career overseeing personnel issues and P&L statements for JB Hudson Stores throughout the Midwest. In 1983, he joined the staff of Minneapolis's famed Guthrie Theater, advancing to senior director of facilities and operations. By age 33, Lindquist was ready to take on a new challenge and make his mark. "I was at a time in my life when I wanted to strike out on my own," he recalls. "I wanted to work with a nonprofit and further develop my leadership skills, and it felt like the right time to make a move." Lindquist was familiar with Artspace — at that time a young advocacy organization dedicated to championing affordable space for artists — because he had visited the organization with a friend in need of studio space. So when the previous director left, Lindquist jumped at the opportunity to take on the job.

"The first two or three years were super painful," Lindquist readily confesses. "I had no idea how hard it would be to transform Artspace from an advocacy organization into a nonprofit real estate developer — and it was really hard. Traditional real estate developers usually start with money in hand to invest. Artspace had no money. As I recall, the annual budget my first year was $28,000."

A PASSION FOR PROBLEM SOLVING

Lindquist quickly concluded that Artspace needed to move from talking to doing. He immediately secured board members with real estate development skills and began positioning Artspace as an entity that could solve the very real challenges facing artists and arts organizations — being forced from communities by rising costs driven by the very same revitalization that their presence had initially prompted — while at the same time dealing with related agendas, from economic development and housing to creative placemaking and historic preservation.

In 1990, Lindquist and his team saw their dreams become reality with Artspace's first official project: the Northern Warehouse Artists' Cooperative in St. Paul. The building was both Lindquist's proving ground and a harbinger of things to come. "The Northern Warehouse project was so hard that we thought it would be the only one," Lindquist candidly observes. "It was a huge undertaking — we started with a 120,000 square foot building that had a collapsed roof — and the project took us three and a half years to complete." Artspace achieved its aims by leveraging existing assets: low-income artists who were psychologically invested in the community; a group of motivated nonprofits; and a generously sized, though considerably underutilized, historic warehouse and environs. The organization had also pioneered a new means of project funding, using low-income housing tax credits to create affordable housing for artists and their families. "We were the first group in the nation to try this approach," Lindquist explains. "No one in the U.S. had ever used this powerful tool in this way, but we were forging new paths with the state to see what they would allow. And in the end, we had a tremendous space that was owned by Artspace and would always be preserved as affordable live/work space for the artists who were essential to the community's revitalization."

Completed at a cost of $5.6 million, the previously dilapidated six-story building was transformed into a vibrant space containing 52 affordable live/work units for artists and their families together with office, studio and commercial space for commercial artists, nonprofit arts organizations and neighborhood businesses, including a coffeehouse and art gallery. Lindquist and his team learned a lot about securing funds, cultivating relationships and solving the multitude of problems that such an enormous undertaking naturally involved, and as their expertise and experience grew, so, too, did Artspace's roster of successful projects.

"CREATING PERMANENTLY AFFORDABLE LIVE/WORK SPACES FOR ARTISTS AND ARTS ORGANIZATIONS WITHIN A COMMUNITY HAS A POWERFUL RIPPLE EFFECT."

In the mid-1990s, Artspace added non-residential initiatives to the mix, starting with the development of the Traffic Zone Center for Visual Art, an historic bakery in the Minneapolis Warehouse District that Artspace repurposed into 24 studios for mid-career artists. As Lindquist and his team continued to rack up successes close to home, calls for intervention began to come from communities outside of Minnesota.

"In 1999, officials from Chicago invited Artspace to consider taking on an artist live/work project in the Garfield Park neighborhood," Lindquist recalls. "Then Mayor Daley was familiar with our work in Minnesota and wanted to capitalize on our knowledge and experience. He was eager to affect change on the West Side and didn't want to lose valuable time waiting for local organizations to learn the lessons we'd already grasped." In the intervening years, many other cities have followed suit, and today Artspace has 37 projects in operation across the U.S., from California to Connecticut, with another 11 currently in development.

A TRUST IN THE TRANSFORMATION PROCESS

In the two decades since the Northern project, Lindquist has seen his early efforts yield great dividends, not only for Artspace itself, but also for artists who seek to remain in, and give back to, the communities they have helped to transform. By creating permanently affordable sites for artists and arts organizations, Artspace has moved the ball down the field in terms of the way communities understand the impact the arts can have on the safety and livability of an area. "During my nearly 30 years with Artspace, there has been a sea change in the way that the arts are viewed by members of a community," he asserts. "It used to be that only one in 10 officials we spoke to would understand the potential impact that working artists can have on a neighborhood, but that's totally changed. Now people can witness firsthand the ramifications of giving artists a stable climate in which to live and work. Residents and business owners learn to respect and embrace the artists, and in turn these new relationships generate a sense of joy that permeates the community."



Kelley Lindquist '71

Creating permanently affordable live/work spaces for artists and arts organizations within a community has a powerful ripple effect, Lindquist continues, and perhaps nowhere is this more evident than in Lowertown St. Paul, where Artspace has played a fundamental role in neighborhood revitalization initiatives. "There are approximately 40 buildings in Lowertown. When Artspace first began transforming the Northern Warehouse, 20 of these structures were empty and underutilized. The neighborhood was dirty, seedy and unsafe. City officials simply didn't perceive it as a neighborhood they wanted to invest in. Now, Lowertown is the fastest growing neighborhood in St. Paul and again and again is voted as the best place to live."

With the completion of the Northern Warehouse and

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Tilsner Artists’ Cooperative projects, the neighborhood gained enough critical mass to start attracting new businesses. Then the city started investing, and for-profit developers started investing, launching a juggernaut of interest that has resulted in neighborhood population growth of nearly 400 percent since the early 1980s. “The artists were essentially urban pioneers, catalysts for positive development throughout the community,” Lindquist says. “By providing affordable live/work space, Artspace created a place for artists and their families, which in turn lowered crime and boosted commercial development. And in 2011, we refinanced the Northern, thereby ensuring that the building will remain affordable for another 30 years without any need for annual philanthropic support.”

The breadth and depth of the artists and arts organizations bolstered by Artspace’s initiatives is equally dazzling. Artists work in a plethora of disciplines, from dance, digital media, and printmaking to photography, theatre arts and film. For example, Swiss born, Ghanaian-American actor Ansa Akyea, winner of the 2013 Minnesota Playwright Center’s Many Voices Fellowship, makes his home in Minneapolis’s Tilsner Artists’ Cooperative, while fashion and portrait photographer Carlos David, whose images have been

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featured in publications in the U.S., Mexico and Europe, works from El Barrio's Artspace PS109, a 19th century former public school building in East Harlem. In every instance, the artists and their families bring a vibrancy and vitality to their communities that would otherwise be lacking.

AN EYE TO THE FUTURE

Artspace's many groundbreaking initiatives have not gone unnoticed by the larger community. The organization has been the recipient of many prestigious awards, including the National Trust for Historic Preservation's Honor Award for contributing to the revitalization of inner-city communities and the University of Illinois at Chicago's Best Practices in Affordable Housing award. Its initiatives have also received plaudits from such public figures as former U.S. Senator Hillary Rodham Clinton and National Endowment for the Arts Chair Rocco Landesman.

Lindquist himself has emerged as a thought leader on the role of the arts in our society, speaking and consulting frequently both at home and abroad on the role of artists and art facilities in the push for urban revitalization. But he is not resting on his laurels. "Artspace is by far the largest of the national arts developers," he observes. "We're a standard bearer, but there is much to be done and many opportunities yet to explore. We now own and operate nearly 40 facilities, and when we visit a city to discuss a potential new project, we get a warm reception. We're a proven entity with a successful track record to share. This is not to say that we never get any pushback from communities — sometimes we do. But we've been doing this a long time now, and we understand that every neighborhood is different and has its own rich, fully developed cultures and concerns."

The key to Artspace's recurring success, Lindquist asserts, is that the organization listens extremely carefully to every constituency with which it interacts. "Our work is very community-based; when we start a project in a new city or neighborhood, we spend a lot of time getting to know the residents and working to build alliances with leaders at city and state levels. We're patient and we follow through on our promises, and that builds trust."

Time and again, Lindquist and his team have witnessed the transformative power of the arts in a community, and he only sees the trend continuing. "I think that Artspace still has a big role to play. I can even envision it evolving into a governmental role. I can also see Artspace eventually doing work outside the U.S."

In light of current global trends, Lindquist suggests that Artspace's first international projects are likely to be sited in Mexico, Costa Rica or other Central American countries. "Our recent work in El Paso, Texas, and other towns along the Mexican border has taught us a great deal about working with these culturally rich Spanish-speaking countries, and we feel that we would most likely be very welcome in these communities. I've travelled all over the globe, and no one is doing what we're doing," Lindquist says. "It's more common to see work space being created; creating live/work space is monumentally hard, but we've figured it out, and we have lots to share."

Lindquist's work is based on a deep commitment to building better communities with the arts."We're showing communities that supporting creativity offers a solid return on investment. Artists can play a valuable role in helping to solve a community's problems. I have a feeling that this trend toward realizing the socio-economic power of the arts will continue to grow stronger. Artists are proving to be a galvanizing force in communities across the country, and officials at all levels of government are noticing and spreading the good word. The more you celebrate art, the more art gives back."

Lori L. Ferguson (writerloriferguson.com) is a freelance writer based in New Hampshire. She enjoys writing on lifestyle and human interest topics as well as all things artistic.