CAMILLE LEFEVRE
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KARA COX
Photo Courtesy
Wells Fargo

Funding, Policy, Persuasion, Need:

How artspace gets affordable artist live/work housing done

KARA AND ADAM COX WERE AT THEIR WITS END. "We've always lived in very small and uninspiring places due to our income level," says Kara Cox, a Minneapolis jewelry, fabric and accessories designer, "but our apartment felt as though it was literally falling down around us." After endlessly searching for a decent place to live with their small child, and unable to afford a separate art studio, they heard about a new live/work building just for artists, Artspace Jackson Flats, in Northeast Minneapolis.

One year later, and now with a second child, their lives have been transformed. "Our unit is so open, airy and filled with light, it lends itself to making art," says Adam Cox, an art teacher and painter. Adds Kara, "The physical space, with the nice big windows and tall ceilings, well I just walk in and feel as if the space is asking or even begging me to sit down and create something."

Completed in 2013, Jackson Flats is a four-story, 69,000-square-foot, 35-unit affordable rental housing project for artists and their families developed by Minneapolis-based Artspace in partnership with Northeast Community Development Corporation. The project is located in a neighborhood dotted with former factories and warehouses that have been converted to artist studios and creative businesses over the last 20 years. The building

has a playground outside, as well as gallery space for exhibitions, performances and events inside.

The Coxes leapt at the opportunity to live in Jackson Flats not only because of the physical space, "but also because of the goal of the building," Adam says, "which is about connectivity between residents, about creating community."

"We live and create here with like-minded people, where our daughter can drag people to her room during art openings to talk about her paintings," he explains. "She's growing up in a culture where this is what people do and it's normal; where people value her and themselves as artists. Living in Jackson Flats has made more things possible for us than we could have ever imagined. It's miraculous."

On Monday, May 18, Artspace hosts "Breaking Ground," the third annual event in which the nonprofit organization celebrates the community of 2,000+ artists it serves in 250 creative enterprises affiliated with its 37 completed projects in 24 cities across the United States. MSP actor Ansa Akyea, who lives in another Artspace project, the Tilsner Artists' Cooperative in the Lowertown neighborhood of St. Paul, with his two children and partner Seena Hodges, a theater marketing and development professional, is one of the hosts of "Breaking Ground."

The Tilsner was an historic but dilapidated Victorian-Romanesque warehouse that Artspace and its numerous St. Paul partners restored in 1993 into a thriving community for 60+ artists and their families. "The building reminds me of the Harlem Renaissance, when people in the spirit of art would come together and exchange ideas," Akyea says. He moved into the Tilsner, he adds, "because I loved the idea of being around people who are living and loving what they do."

Artspace's residential projects fill a critical niche in a city's ecosystem of affordable housing, particularly for artists, explains David Frank, director of economic policy and development for the City of Minneapolis. Across the country, artists are known for moving into low-income neighborhoods where they fix up houses and establish studios, and add vitality, vibrancy and commerce to the area, then get priced out.

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"It's a familiar pattern that gets repeated in communities all over the U.S.," Frank adds. Residences like the Tilsner and Jackson Flats "provide a place where artists can stay and preserve the creative aspects of their community as property values go up and rents get higher."

In MSP Artspace has completed four live/work rental residences, plus four single-family-owned homes as well as four non-residential arts buildings. In the Twin Cities, Frank says, "There's a wide range of resources available to developers incorporating affordable housing into their projects. Still, those developers and projects compete in funding rounds, so we can make sure public dollars are invested as wisely and efficiently as possible."

That's where many of the challenges to create artist-focused affordable housing enter in. "Even if a project will bring certain benefits to the city, making the case for more public resources to realize such projects can be challenging," Frank explains. "In some cities, these projects don't fit into neat funding categories. Where historic preservation, or historic preservation with new construction are involved, it can be very difficult to fit artist affordable housing into a regular-size funding bucket."



JACKSON FLATS IN NE MINNEAPOLIS, Photo By Urbanworks, Courtesy Artspace



ANSA AKYEA AND HIS FAMILY, Photo By Marc James, Courtesy Artspace



KARA AND ADAM COX, Photo Courtesy Wells Fargo

Specialized projects, unique funding

"Artspace projects are often financed in part with low-income housing tax credits," says Heidi Zimmer Kurtze, vice president of property development at Artspace. "Often our projects don't fit into the mold of how those funds are allocated, because they're not supportive housing, special needs housing or super cheap housing. Still, housing authorities and agencies are under a lot of pressure and want to use artist housing as a source of affordable housing and economic development."

"So in places like the Brookland neighborhood of Washington D.C., they made our project a demonstration project," she adds. Dance Place, which was already occupying one building, brought in Artspace to partner on the project. In addition to renovating Dance Place's studios and performance facilities, Brookland Artspace Lofts was constructed. Brookland includes 39 live/work units for artists and their families and a main-floor art gallery.

"In addition to the District of Columbia putting their tax credits into our project as a demonstration, we also used $3 million in TCAP stimulus funds in 2008, to fill the gap and make sure the project happened," Kurtze says. Other financial partners on Artspace projects might include a government entity or foundation. Another challenge: Funding sources always come with criteria attached.

"Some are about job creation," Kurtze explains. "Some are about cost per square foot and providing the lowest cost possible. Some don't care about commercial space, while others want to serve artists, and provide programming and build out costs for rehearsal and gallery spaces. We have to balance competing funding sources while making sure our projects meet all of the objectives, so we're able to comply long-term with those funding requirements."



OPENING OF BROOKLAND ARTSPACE LOFTS IN D.C., Courtesy Artspace

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>
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Honoring and serving our artist populations

One project currently facing significant funding challenges is South Main Artspace Lofts in Memphis, Tennessee. The former warehouse is located in a low-density area of the city well known for its strong musical and cultural heritage, and world-class visual and performing arts. The Memphis College of Art's Nesin Graduate School and the National Civil Rights Museum are nearby.

"A sense of artist expression and artistic identity is fundamental to being a Memphian," says Kerry Hayes, a former assistant to the mayor, and founder and principal of Key Public Strategies, a public policy and communications consulting firm for city builders. "It's critical that we find ways to continue celebrating that and make it part of our economy."

As Memphis was "clawing our way out of the recession," Hayes explains, Artspace, its city partners and such collaborators as the National Endowment for the Arts, Hyde Family Foundation and ArtsMemphis began planning the South Main project, which would insert a new level of artistic vibrancy into an area known for tourism.

Recently, however, a package of tax credits that would have allowed the project to move ahead was denied. Meanwhile, the area has been attracting condo developers and boutique shops, "and the fear of gentrification is real," Hayes says. "The need to honor, respect, accommodate and serve our artist population by preserving affordability in a booming neighborhood is even more critical now. So we had to regroup."

The partners are currently seeking philanthropic support, while helping to organize the Memphis artistic community "to take a stand and voice their concerns about what they want, need and contribute to the region," Hayes says. A fundamental component of enlightening policy makers and city planners about the importance and role of affordable artist housing is anticipating and answering their questions, adds Jalal Greene. He worked on the Brookland Artspace Lofts, Mount Rainier Artist Lofts in Maryland, and currently heads the housing division in Montgomery County, Washington, D.C., which is in the planning stages for an Artspace project in Silver Spring, Maryland.

Those questions include: "Are there really that many low-income artists to warrant the project? Is there a market for this?" Greene says. "Artspace is great at conducting the surveys and demonstrating the need. There's an educational process that happens with politicians and policy makers throughout the process of planning, designing, funding and constructing a new project, in order to garner support and make adjustments to the technical criteria to quality for financial support."

Purposeful, humane housing in New York City

Perhaps Artspace's most high-profile public policy achievement to date was New York City Mayor Bill de Blasio's announcement, in his 2015 State of the City address, that affordable housing was his "number one priority for 2015" — and that his first initiative was creating 1,500 new affordable live/work spaces for New York City artists by 2024, starting with El Barrio's Artspace PS109 in East Harlem.



EL BARRIO'S ARTSPACE PS109 IN NEW YORK, Courtesy Artspace



FAMILY IN PS109 IN NEW YORK, Photo By James Shanks, Courtesy Artspace

PS109 is a formerly abandoned, five-story public school building transformed into 89 units of affordable live/work housing for artists and their families. The building also includes 10,000 square feet of space for arts organizations and a 3,000-square-foot gallery for the tenants. The project was constructed with capital funding through the city's Department of Housing Preservation and Development along with a $3 million annual commitment from the Department of Cultural Affairs and an additional $3 million from private foundations.

"The project is important to New York City for several reasons," says Pedro Julio Serrano, deputy press secretary for the New York City Council. "As rental prices continue to skyrocket in New York City, projects like these help artists remain in our neighborhoods. Artists not only enrich our communities and help preserve neighborhood identity, but also help drive our local economies."

Monica Williams is one of the artists thriving in PS109. Last year, while embroiled in producing six projects for organizations like the Brooklyn Academy of Music, Apollo Theater and Trinity Center — to stay financially afloat and pay her rent — she heard about PS109 from a friend. But she almost didn't apply. "I was busy every minute," she recalls. "But I knew my landlord was getting ready to raise my rent again. So I took the time to fill out the application and it changed my life."

Williams has transformed her once-constant hustle — "going from gig to gig to gig, taking on projects that I enjoyed but weren't necessarily my passion, because the cost of living was so much more than I could afford" — into an innovative project aptly titled #LoveHustle. A multicity, international, artist-led conversation, #LoveHustle is a performative project that focuses on balancing love for family and art.

"Now I'm putting more of my money into my art as opposed to my rent," Williams says. Moreover, PS109 is "a purposeful environment built for artists from scratch," she explains. "When the music stops, the dance is over and the curtain closes, artists too want to live a humane life. There was so much effort put into making PS109 a welcoming, inspiring space for working artists. If you're an artist, parent, sibling, partner, you can wear all those hats and not have to do so much coat switching."

Camille LeFevre is managing editor of *The Line*.

This story is the first in a national series about the arts, housing, and community transformation, supported by Artspace.

In addition to Ansa Akyea, "Breaking Ground" will also be hosted by Springboard for the Arts executive director Laura Zabel. Event performers include Chicago blues phenomenon Ivy Ford (Artspace resident artist) and the Ivy Ford Band; Nuyorican Poetry Movement founder and spoken word artist Papoleto Melendez (Artspace resident artist) and the DLS Onyx Step Team. In addition to the performances, the evening will include the presentation of the Artspace Artist Awards, honoring three resident artists and one arts supporter who have shown a commitment to advancing the arts and enriching their communities. Tickets & Livestream link: www.artspace.org/breakingground