CAMILLE LEFEVRE
DECEMBER 15, 2015



ARTSPACE
MT. BAKER LOFTS
Photo:
Jordan Nicholson

Is affordable artist live/work housing the new normal?

CITIES ACROSS THE U.S., ONE OF THE MOST POTENT FORCES FOR URBAN RENEWAL IS THE INTREPID, RESOURCEFUL, INDEFATIGABLE ARTIST.

A building full of them, in fact. But for the artists, there isn't always a happy ending. In case you're unfamiliar with the story, it goes like this. In search of inexpensive spaces in which work, artists seek out underutilized buildings—often, old warehouses or other industrial structures in sketchy neighborhoods—with low rents, zero amenities, and lots of room to make messes and masterpieces. In exchange, they're left alone.

They set up the space so they can both live and work there, installing any plumbing and wiring they need. Their presence attracts more artists to the building; together, the artists attract outsiders into the neighborhood with events and open houses that showcase their art. They also take their art-making experiences out into the community. People begin to notice.

The neighborhood becomes a go-to hot spot of creativity and vitality. Restaurants, bars and coffee shops move in next door to feed and water the artists and the visitors, art collectors and other creatives who explore the area. Property values begin to rise. Eventually,

the artists are priced out of the community they helped create. So they find another run-down building in an iffy neighborhood and start again. The story even has a name: The SoHo Effect.

In the late-1980s, a new chapter was drafted when five organizations seeking to disrupt the narrative received a collaborative grant from the Apple Foundation to explore the possibilities of creating affordable live/work housing for artists. One of those organizations was Minneapolis-based Artspace. In 1986, Artspace had transformed itself from an advocacy organization to a non-profit real estate developer with the mission of creating and preserving affordable live/work housing for artists, so artists could stay in the neighborhoods they helped renew.

Artspace was the only one of the five organizations to not only survive, but also thrive. In 1990, the non-profit developer opened its first project: the Northern Warehouse Artists' Cooperative in the Lowertown neighborhood of downtown St. Paul, Minnesota. The project was the first to utilize the Low Income Housing Tax Credit to help finance affordable artist live/work housing. The project was also financed so that rents would remain permanently affordable.

In 1996, Artspace went statewide, completing the Washington Studios, affordable live/work housing for artists, in Duluth, Minnesota. Two years later, the organization completed its first national artist housing project: the Spinning Plate Artist Lofts in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania. By 2007, Artspace had developed 14 affordable artist live/work housing projects throughout United States, including Riverside Artist Lofts in Reno, Nevada; National Hotel Artist Lofts in Galveston, Texas; Switching Station Artist Lofts in Chicago; Tashiro Kaplan Artist Lofts in Seattle; and Mount Rainier Artist Lofts in Mt. Rainier, Maryland.

Since then, demand for such projects has only continued to grow. Across the country, in addition to new Artspace projects in New York City and throughout Colorado, other developers have been restoring former warehouses, breweries and sundry industrial structures into affordable artist live/work housing. In the Twin Cities, for example, the developer Dominium recently opened the A-Mill Artists Lofts, carved out of the former Pillsbury flourmill, in Minneapolis, and the Schmidt Artists Lofts, in the former Schmidt Brewery, in St. Paul.

> "Artists stabilize neighborhoods, add people on the street—a huge public safety factor—and bring in new businesses to cater to those artists and the visitors they attract"
>
> –Kelley Lindquist, Artspace President

In Phoenix, the Roosevelt Row Community Development Corporation is looking to create artist live/work units out of repurposed shipping containers "to ensure the people from a diversity of income levels are able to continue to live and work" in the Roosevelt Row Artists' District. In the Bronx, WHEDco and Blue Sea Development Corporation are finishing up the Bronx Commons, a mixed-use campus with a music center, affordable LEED-certified apartments for families, and live/work space for elder musicians.

In other parts of the country, affordable artist live/work housing is no longer a one- off. The opening of El Barrio's Artspace PS109 last year in Harlem, New York, inspired Mayor Bill de Blasio to announce a city initiative, part of the administration's broader affordable housing agenda, to build 1,500 new affordable live/work spaces for New York City artists by 2024—part of the city's overall plan to build or preserve 200,000 units of affordable housing over ten years.

In Colorado, hot on the heels of the state's first affordable artist live/work



ARTSPACE MT. BAKER LOFTS, Photo: William Wright



ARTSPACE MT. BAKER LOFTS, Photo: William Wright



EL BARRIO'S ARTSPACE
PS109
Photo: James Shanks

housing project, Artspace Loveland, Governor John Hickenlooper announced the first state-driven initiative in the U.S. for affordable housing for artists: Space to Create, Colorado. All of which begs the question: Is affordable artist live/work housing becoming a "new normal?" If so, why?

Artists as economic engines

"Just look at our demographic data," says Margaret Hunt, director of Colorado Creative Industries and Space to Create CO., in response. "The creative sector is the largest economic sector in Colorado." Her definition of "creative," she adds, includes not only "what we traditionally think of as the arts, but also architecture, graphic design, culinary arts, design arts, film, video production, writing, publishing, tv and radio."

"Even during the recession, the creative sector showed steady two-percent growth in Colorado and nationally," Hunt continues. "Millennials are moving to Colorado for outdoor recreation, our incredible music scene and our vibrant creative ecosystem. If artists and creatives can't afford to live here, then we have a problem." The presence of artists and other creatives, she adds, is an economic engine in both urban and rural communities.

"We recognize that creatives benefit when they're co-located together, so we need to create an infrastructure that supports them and helps them thrive," Hunt says. "At the same time, we believe that where there is a strong arts and creative presence in a community, those communities ride out economic recessions better and have healthier economies, because they're not relying on a specific industry."



Tashiro Kaplan Artist Lofts/ Tashiro Arts Building, Photo: Artspace

> We see affordable artist live/work housing as an economic development strategy. Healthy communities have a healthy arts sector."
>
> –Margaret Hunt, director of Colorado Creative Industries and Space to Create CO.

In other words, she continues, "We see affordable artist live/work housing as an economic development strategy. Healthy communities have a healthy arts sector."

While a number of projects are in the works throughout Denver, Space to Create will focus on small rural and mountain towns. "Our goal is to do a project in each region of the state, for a total of nine projects, in the next four years," Hunt explains. Those projects will include affordable artist live/work housing, as well as affordable commercial spaces such as galleries, theaters and community spaces.

In Seattle, Artspace's Tashiro Kaplan Artist Lofts had a "transformational impact" on the historic Pioneer Square neighborhood, says Jim Kelley, executive director, 4Culture, which offices in the building. When the project opened in 2004, "all of a sudden 50 artists and their families were living in the building, there were galleries and other related businesses on the ground floor, and the First Thursday Art Walk gravitated over here."

"Artists stabilize neighborhoods, add people on the street—a huge public safety factor—and bring in new businesses to cater to those artists and the visitors they attract," Kelley adds. Artspace has completed two additional projects in Seattle—

Artspace Hiawatha Lofts in a low-income area, and Artspace Mount Baker Lofts next to a light-rail station. "There's growing awareness nationally of the ways in which artists make neighborhoods vibrant," Kelley says. "I credit Artspace with starting the trend."

Untangling "a rat's nest" of funding

When Artspace began looking for ways to create affordable artist live/work housing, the organization had to learn how to make the projects financially feasible. "It was a lot of trial and error," recalls Catherine Jordan, former board chair of Artspace, "a real rat's nest of trying to figure out how to put the dollars together. We looked at existing funding streams and discovered how to apply them to artists. We figured out how to attract the tax increment financing, and city and county funding. We were on the cutting edge of fitting this thing out."

When an IRS audit pointed out that Artspace's artist-preference policy violated the tax credit law, because the buildings weren't available for general public use, Artspace and its supporters successfully lobbied to revise the housing law. In 2008, the new law included a clarification allowing preferences for tenants involved in "artistic or literary activities." Today, being an artist remains the only occupation specifically singled out in the law.

"What's so fascinating is that Artspace, using policies and interventions developed by the affordable housing community over the last 30 years, has created artist housing and community space across the country; spaces in which to create, view and consume art," says Jamie Bennett, executive director, ArtPlace America. Meanwhile, "cities and developers have gotten a lot



EL BARRIO'S ARTSPACE PS109, Photo: James Shanks



ARTSPACE LOVELAND ARTS CAMPUS, Photo: Tom Hacker

better at recognizing the value artists bring to communities." And more cities and developers are getting on board.

"One thing we talk about a lot at ArtPlace is that artists are the one asset that's present in every community," Bennett continues. "Not every community has a waterfront, public transportation, a university. But every community has people who sing and dance and tell stories. Developers are recognizing that artists are also the people in a neighborhood who need an affordable home and are part of a healthy vibrant community."

The new normal?

In Colorado, Hunt's organization recently completed a survey of 20 creative districts in the state. The survey asked about topics and issues of most concern in the coming year. "Affordability of Housing and Workspace for Artists" was at the top. And Colorado is stepping up.

In addition to the Artspace lofts in Loveland, three artist live/work projects are in pre-development in Pueblo, Lakewood and Denver. Five additional communities are consulting with Artspace directly. And the Space to Create initiative, on which Artspace is lead consultant, is underway in Trinidad.

"If all of these projects pencil out based on demand and financial analysis, we could have as many 19 projects initiated in Colorado in the next four years," Hunt says. "Is affordable live/work space for artists a new normal? It is in Colorado!"

Camille LeFevre is managing editor of *The Line*.

This story is part of a national series about the arts, housing, and community transformation, supported by Artspace.
Learn more at artspace.org