

IDEAS

Downtown needs an infusion of artists

Affordable art studios and live-work spaces are great ways to rejuvenate neighborhoods. And the heart of Boston could use a creative spark.

By Miles Howard Updated February 29, 2024, 12:00 a.m.



HEATHER HOPP-BRUCE/GLOBE STAFF; GLOBE PHOTO; DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF; ADOBE

It's not every Boston alleyway in which you'll find two disembodied clown heads, and that's why a small crowd is gathered at the narrow passage between the Modern Theatre and the old Felt nightclub on Washington Street. I'm passing by on my way to the movies. The two heads — each the size of an “Indiana Jones” boulder — are balanced in midair between the buildings. The unspoken question from the onlookers is twofold: What is this, and where did it come from?

In fact, the clowns are the work of Toronto-based artist Max Streicher, one of several Canadian artists whose creations have been imported to downtown as part of the Downtown Boston Business Improvement District's (BID) “[Winteractive](#)” showcase. The goal is to bring more visitors back to Boston's core. Streicher's clown craniums (formally titled “Endgame: Nagg & Nell”) are a curious sight, and a fleeting one too: After April 14, the BID exhibits will be disassembled and sent off to cities elsewhere.



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But what if this didn't have to be temporary? What if public art displays and events — from local artists as well as visiting ones — could be a permanent feature of downtown Boston? Better yet, what if the artists creating and orchestrating these exhibits and activities could work and even live downtown?



A mural made by Rob "ProBlak" Gibbs in Dewey Square in 2022. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

Building permanently affordable artist studios or artist housing right in the heart of Boston might initially seem like a fool's hope, after years of white-hot commercial real estate changing hands in downtown Boston and artists being priced out of practically every neighborhood.

But today's shuttered storefronts, vacant offices, and thin crowds are clear signs of a neighborhood in decline — and in need of reimagining. And Boston artists have a history of bringing more people and commerce into formerly marginalized neighborhoods like Fort Point and the South End, with open studios and special events like the SoWa ArtWalk & Latin American Music Festival. All of these localized renaissances were possible because affordable housing or studio space for artists was available.

Creating these kinds of spaces in downtown Boston would be a feat in itself, but the real challenge would be making them permanently affordable, so artists who helped revitalize the neighborhood wouldn't be displaced once the real estate prices began rebounding, thanks in no small part to a resurgence fueled by their own work.

Jim Grace has pioneered a model for executing this tricky double act. As executive director of the Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston — which provides legal and business support to artists — Grace led the recent effort to [transform an old textile mill in Lowell](#) into what's now the Western Avenue studios. Over 350 artists are rooted there, in rent-stabilized live-work and work-only studios. The building is owned and run by the Arts & Business Council, which bought it in 2022 for \$20 million. This arrangement protects artists from the market and the whims of future landlords who may be looking to cash out. "It's a model of development, and it's about creating a cultural land trust," Grace says. "We have this robust history of [setting aside land for] beaches and forests and similar spaces for

recreation, but we do not have that history with places where artwork is created or rehearsed.” Today the council is replicating the model at a spot for artists and entrepreneurs known as [Creative Hub Worcester](#).



Artist Amy R. Roberts in her residence/studio with her artwork on display at the Western Avenue Studios in Lowell in 2022. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

For something like this cultural land trust model to work in downtown Boston — for an existing building to be converted into artist space — the owner of a property probably would have to help support such a transition in one way or another as “an extension of their legacy,” as Grace puts it. That’s what happened in Lowell, where the prior landlord of the Western Avenue building, real estate developer Karl Frey, originally transformed a defunct fabric mill into low-cost artist studio spaces. The complex flourished and became a hive of creativity for Lowell. And when Frey started thinking about selling the property, he wanted to find a buyer who would allow the artists to stay put. Eventually, Frey contributed money himself to the Arts & Business Council’s acquisition of the building.

In addition to mission-driven owners, artists and cities themselves can play pivotal roles in acquiring real estate. In 2022, artists who had rented work spaces at the Humphreys Street Studios in Dorchester were able to [purchase](#) the building themselves, with assistance from a supportive developer, New Atlantic Development, and the Mayor’s Office of Arts and Culture, which kicked in \$250,000 to help cover the acquisition costs.

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Local demand for artist space is front of mind for Kara Elliott-Ortega, Boston's chief of arts and culture, who sees the mayor's office as a crucial resource for artists looking to organize. "We're used to the idea that arts activities just happen organically," Elliott-Ortega says. "We want to move from that to thinking about how we're building a pipeline of space and making sure people can access that in a way that's supportive." For artists looking to collectively buy real estate, the city may be able to offer technical assistance on business planning, grants and financing opportunities, or legal support.

In theory, a group of artists supported by the city could buy a single floor's worth of space in a building near Downtown Crossing — a far less daunting prospect than buying the entire building. It would take an increase in fiscal support from the city, given downtown real estate prices and the limited budgets that most artists have to work with. But everyone could benefit from the deal.



The stair walker on Bromfield Street is part of the Winteractive exhibition in downtown Boston. DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

The morning after my encounter with the Downtown Boston BID's Winteractive exhibits, I hopped on the commuter rail to Lowell to witness Grace's work in action. I walked through flurrying snow to the Western Avenue Studios building, abuzz with visitors at noon on a Saturday. Neon paintings of mollusks and owls greeted me inside the Loading Dock Gallery. The maze of corridors, one of which is illustrated with birch trees and mushrooms, offered glimpses of artists toiling away and conversing animatedly in their studios. An hour later, reflecting on everything with a black pepper porter at the in-house beer bar, Navigation Brewing Company, I couldn't help imagining what it would be like if you could stumble upon such an eclectic, inviting ecosystem on your way from South Station or the Boston Public Garden. Or better yet, if you could live in one.

This article was updated on March 1 to correct the description of the Humphreys Street Studios in Dorchester.

Miles Howard is a freelance writer in Boston and the founder of the Walking City Trail. He publishes the weekly hiking newsletter [Mind the Moss](#).

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