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An Exploration of Artist Housing in Greater Boston, MA

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An Exploration of Artist Housing in Greater Boston

HONORS PROJECT

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SUBMITTED TO THE HONORS COLLEGE AT BOWLING
GREEN STATE UNIVERSITY IN PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF
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PREFACE

Walking through the streets of Boston, the city seems alive with art. With street performers on every corner of downtown, artists selling paintings, studios and street art, something surely catches the eye of each passerby. With the city's population expanding rapidly – over 10% in the last 7 years – many residents who once accounted for some areas of the city, which have been notoriously rougher area, are being priced out so that a younger population may enter the newly renovated neighborhoods on their way to one of the densest start-up capitals in the world.

Boston, and now its suburbs, are among the most recent fascination of young people for a variety of reasons, evident through population growth. Boston is one of the great educational hubs of the United States. With Greater Boston boasting educational institutions such as the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, Boston University, Northeastern and Harvard, a diverse and unique community of young adults find their way to this city.

Additionally, there has been an increase in job opportunities and companies which have based their headquarters near the already bustling city. Companies like Boeing, IBM, Bose and TripAdvisor have chosen to call this area home. Between the years 2010 and 2017, Census data reported Boston's population increase almost 10% – and that does not include the countless suburbs which have seen growth as well. Compared to another thriving metropolitan areas (such as New York City which only grew 5% in the same time frame) one can see that Boston rapidly gained residents in need of jobs, housing and recreation. Although such rapid expansions can bring about positive effects, such as a renewed youth population and economic growth, there are often less-desirable outcomes for longtime city residents.

This project aims to look at members of the current artist communities and analyze their personal experience as well as the impact of construction projects on their community. Factors such as increased population and inflation of housing prices can affect members of these communities in various ways, so it is important to understand the specific circumstances of each.

The city of Boston is full of art. However, multiple signs point to inconsistent support of art and its creators. The Boston Planning and Development website appears to provide initiatives which support lower income communities, such as those artists often belong to, and advocate for them to be taken care of as an integral part of the growing city. However, a closer look at the website revealed that they may not be providing as much support as they claim. With many discrepancies, dead links and therefore, an inability to communicate with community leadership, Boston may be at risk of losing its artists in the near future.

PROJECT APPROACH

Two winters ago, I took a personal trip to Boston and was thrilled with the amount of art I saw. Various neighborhoods were filled with murals and sculptures, street performers carried on in spite of the cold and countless shops sold local paintings. This inspired me to base my Honors Project around Boston and its art.

To do this, I applied and received a grant from my university which allowed me to travel to Boston and support myself for the summer. In that time, I was able to learn about the city and the artists who reside there. Without this opportunity, I would not have been able to communicate with the artists and really experience the city in the way that they are able to.

I began with a broader scope of art throughout the city, but gradually narrowed my focus to concentrate on artists' housing because of the interactions I had with local artists. Without prompt, they outlined for me how artists communities that had lived and worked for decades in

the city had been torn down to make way for newer structures. They seemed concerned and frankly, annoyed that this was happening. Art in Boston is a lovely “feel good” topic, but if we ignore what is happening to the people who make the art, there may not be any left to appreciate.

BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Because of Boston’s deeply rooted arts communities, artists who create the pieces are an integral part of the community. The Boston Planning and Development Agency became symbolic of the disingenuous support artists often receive. This creates an enormous contradiction between the perception of support and the reality of support provided to artists by the city. Without useful support, many artists struggle to maintain their craft in the city. A particularly challenging area for artists is housing.

Labeling of Artist Spaces

One very important distinction to make when discussing artist housing and its availability/affordability of it is the difference between live/work and work-only spaces. I was fortunate enough to speak with artists in both scenarios, and as one might imagine, their situations were extremely different. The main difference, as the name may suggest, is that tenants of a work-only spaces are not allowed to use their space for residential purposes. They may work at all hours in their studio but must live elsewhere. Conversely, live/work spaces allow artists to rent and occupy one space for both their living and studio needs.

The Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA)

According to their website, the Boston Planning and Development Agency (BPDA) prides itself on being a self-sustaining agency with a love for Boston that inspires them to make it an even better place to live, work, and connect. Its mission statement claims to “plan Boston’s future while respecting its past. By guiding physical, social, and economic change in Boston’s

neighborhoods.” The agency has various resources listed on their website and seem to offer a comprehensive collection of information, easily accessible to users. This was the first place I began my search for artists, specifically using their ArtistSpace campaign links. This program was developed to provide artists with a list of new and available spaces where they could both work and live. The agency website breaks down zoning laws, the history of artist spaces in Boston and even goes so far as to state the importance of an artist presence in the city. While the agency does seem to provide a wealth of information regarding these spaces, even including the qualifications needed to reside in these spaces and a well laid out “Frequently Asked Questions” section, the actual breakdown of artist spaces left me asking “Less Frequently Asked Questions”.

The BPDA stipulates that they do not control any aspect of these properties, though some of them (it does not specify which) were created out of the BPDA ArtistSpace initiative. The properties are listed as a courtesy to the owners and prospective occupants and therefore the website does not offer information on all artist spaces within the city. However, it does clarify that in order to live in these residences, artists must be registered as such with the city.

While reviewing the BPDA website, I was left with one overarching question concerning the agency’s role in artist housing – what is the ArtistSpace Initiative? Their website indicates that it is:

“particularly interested in projects which create spaces that are permanently dedicated to artists, are located in zones between industrial and residential neighborhoods in locations that do not support traditional family housing and offer live/work spaces or work-only spaces for rent and for purchase at a variety of prices.”

Again, this language seems very art-positive and supportive, but I questioned the legitimate effects of a program such as this.

Brickbottom Artist Association

The Brickbottom Artist Association was one of my most fruitful sources of information. The artists here were very receptive to my project and were eager to talk with me about their experiences. This was most likely because I had previously spoken with one of the founding members which gave me access to open studios and other events.

First established in 1987, Brickbottom is one of the few communities in the greater Boston area that allows residents to own their studios outright. It is considered a live/work space because residents are free to use their units as both their studio and their residence needs. Because each unit is individually-owned, they consider themselves to be a permanent fixture of the Somerville area. The association claims to have the oldest open studio showing in the Boston area and focuses their efforts on community outreach and art education (“BAA History and Mission”).

South End SOWA District

The South End of Boston was once seen as a booming metropolis for artists. This art district, SOWA – meaning South of Washington Street – is still active but is being rapidly imposed upon by an increasing number of developers. The second artist space I visited was an example of a rented work-only space. The tenants in this building paid rent to their landlord and were not allowed to reside in their studios. Because of this, community was harder to create and was therefore not as integral as it had been at Brickbottom. These tenants were not permanent residents and had to keep their studio and living arrangement separate.

Because the artists in this building were merely tenants, they interacted minimally. There was no established community and therefore, it was hard to compile any information concerning the building, landlord, or other tenants. However, I was able to meet with one resident who

showed me some areas of concern outside of their studio. A similar building just across the street was in the process of being gutted and turned into luxury condominiums as I visited. This may serve as foreshadowing for other buildings in the area and only subtracts from any sort of community feeling.

Causes of Negative Consequences for Artists

Many explanations have been given to explain why artists are being pushed out of their long-standing environments. Some cite the overabundance of open studios which leads to public boredom and disinterest (Reynolds). Others note the impact of the looming condominiums which seemed to sprout up on every corner and are often established on the site of “trendy” old artist buildings. Still others cite inflation and the rising cost of living in the Boston area, with artists unable to produce and sell enough work to make ends meet. Whatever the cause, it appears some artists are leading a much less vibrant life in Boston than they may have in earlier decades.

One explanation noted by many of the artists I spoke with is impending city development. Some refer to this process urban renewal, the process seems to be more along the line of a phenomenon called gentrification. This is extremely important because gentrification implies that the neighborhood is becoming more desirable to middle class, mostly white individuals while the poor and minority groups are driven out by rising costs of living. However, gentrification can be seen as beneficial to many who can reap the more beneficial outcomes of the process. Some artists who own property and have become financially stable are enticed by the renewed neighborhood, trendy shops and vibrant city life promised by these developments (POV). But for others, it means their dislocation and the loss of their community.

Boston City Development Program

The Green Line Extension (GLX) project will extend the current MBTA Green Line north from the Lechmere Station. The new line will service Somerville, Cambridge and Medford – suburbs of Boston. The Massachusetts government site claims that this extension will reduce automobile traffic and allow commuters a faster and more efficient commute (“Green Line Extension Project (GLX)”).

The city of Somerville’s website details the construction which is currently taking place for the implementation of this project. They list work times, road detours and additional resources concerning the project. As some Brickbottom residents mentioned, there was and continues to be construction seven days a week. There are instances where night-time construction is deemed necessary as well (“Green Line Extension”).

As the GLX does come within a stone’s throw of the Brickbottom community, many members expressed their concerns about the construction as well as future implications for the permanent results.

Another problem more directly related to the artist spaces within the capital city of Boston is the explosion of luxury condominium developers who have overtaken many old or abandoned spaces within the densely populated city.

While some go as far to claim that these countless, seemingly unaffordable units are being used by the elite to hide and store their money from the government (Rios), others blame lasting demand, lack of housing to please young professionals and an abundance of buyers for the influx of “luxury” apartments (Acitelli).

Reneé Loth from the Boston Globe asserts that the rise in housing cost is the effect of a rush to build new housing, regardless of price point. With the population of Boston increases at an average of 1.4% per year, housing is in desperate need. She also mentions that these

expensive apartments could help subsidize more affordable housing in the future. With the property taxes placed on these new renters and owners, neighborhoods receive funding which can lead to their development and overall betterment as well (Loth).

SUPPORTING DATA

Artist Housing Statistics

One major problem when analyzing artist housing is the lack of statistical data. While the planning commission does provide a list of what they consider to be available units, they do not keep track of how many there are, how many are occupied or the number of artists who are actually qualified and/or live in these spaces (BPDA). Without these statistics, it seems impossible to analyze the success or sustainability of artist housing in Boston. However, it is possible to examine Census data for those who list their occupation as artist. Artists in the Census data are underreported as it excludes those with other part or full-time jobs and those who do not claim artistry as their main profession.

The Census Bureau cites that 1.8% of Boston's population works in an art-related field, which is above the national average. Because of the city's reputation as an artists' city, one might expect greater support for artists housing. It is hard to quantify because there are discrepancies in the information provided by the city's webpages.

Based on numbers pieced together from the City of Boston housing webpage, there should be approximately 45 units of artist housing throughout the city ("Finding Space as an Artist in Boston"). Twenty of these are work only, leaving artist to find an additional residential space. The remaining 25 would serve as both work spaces as well as living quarters.

These numbers conflict with those given by the BPDA site which only lists 27 properties – both live/work and work-only – in the city. Even though the BPDA does not keep track of all

properties, artists who only access site are at an immediate disadvantage. These vague sets of information become thematic of the site as various related questions, such as how an “artist” is defined and how the properties are managed, are raised. Be it a lack of information, organization or planning, artists and researchers alike can be left with more questions than answers after viewing these sites and are forced to spend valuable time tracking down information.

Population Growth Statistics

The city of Boston has experienced a population jump of 10% in the last 7 years. During this time, housing prices in Boston rose 61% and prices in the nearby suburb of Somerville rose an astonishing 89% in the same period (Ganesh, et. al). These facts placed Boston in the middle of the pack in what is called the housing bubble watchlist. Ranked in the top twenty-five cities in the nation, there are certainly many cities in more direct danger of a housing crisis, however Boston resident and home-owner hopefuls should still be concerned (Ganesh, et. al).

Average Artist Income vs Housing Prices

According again to the Census data, those who consider themselves to be artists earn a mean income of \$56,400 annually. This may seem reasonable or even comfortable when considering just the numbers alone. However, with an average apartment cost of just over \$3,000 a month – excluding utilities – rent would account for about \$36,500, or two-thirds of an average artist’s income (“Average Rent in Boston”). In addition to rent, utilities on average take another \$250 per month and groceries for one average a monthly \$350. These baseline living expenses add up to \$7,200 which can be subtracted from the remaining income of just under \$20,000. This leaves approximately \$12,700 for parking and transportation expenses, home items, insurance, emergency funding, taxes and savings. Additionally, if the artist works and lives separately,

consider adding at least an additional \$12,000 a year for studio space (“The Cost of Living in Boston”). When the numbers are broken down, the income of a Boston artist doesn’t go very far.

Number of Dead and Broken Links

There are numerous inconsistencies and informational holes in the data for Boston area artists. There are discrepancies between the City of Boston’s website and their planning and development page which houses the affordable artist housing initiatives. The most easily accessible resource is the BPDA website for their ArtistSpace program which seeks to house artists in available spaces. However, the main issue with their site is centered around the lack of reliable contact information – and in most cases – the absence of a working web link at all. As an agency, they have chosen to provide this service to artists and property owners. Even though this is viewed as a courtesy to both parties, it is also unhelpful to both if the information is not current and functional.

METHODOLOGY

Because of the nature of my project, much of my findings were driven by serendipity. As I mentioned, I began with a very broad scope, but found in the long run that it really was more beneficial to my project and to the subjects I covered to narrow my focus. Because many aspects of the art community disagreed with my positive assumptions, it was important for me to examine aspects which I had previously taken for granted. I came to my find that much of artist support from the city of Boston was disorganized, dated and inconsistent. Frustrating as these aspects were, these findings were important because they led me to dig beneath the surface of this issue and truly comprehend the artists’ situations.

Lost Connections

As my project's focus was Boston area artists, it was extremely important to speak directly with members of this community. I attempted to contact all of the associations listed on the BPDA website. Because of the number of previously mentioned dead links and missing contact information, I was unable to reach out to a majority of the listed organizations. Even when I attempted to search for outside links and contacts, many of these places left little to be discovered.

For those who I was able to contact, few replied or acknowledged my message at all. I contacted organizations by phone, e-mail and, in one instance, even via Facebook message. However, many of my messages were never returned. Of the few who did respond, many artists were unwilling to meet with me. They cited mistrust of "journalists" and a busy schedule as reasons for their dismissal of my request.

In the short time I spent in Boston, I was able to conduct interviews from 10 artists living in two different communities. One response was from an artist renting her work-only space in the South End neighborhood of Boston. The others were from the Brickbottom community which consisted of privately owned live/work space condos.

The members of each community with whom I interacted were a self-selected group of people who chose to spend time and share their personal experiences with me. Although this approach only provided me with around 10 interviewees, it did give me access to those who were willing to share their story and who were often passionate about their work and their community.

The Interview

Because of the informal nature of many of these interviews, I gave the interviewee a set of prompt questions about their work and time in Boston or the surrounding area. Participants were encouraged to stay on-prompt and I prompted follow-ups as needed. These interviews were

audio and video recorded and well as transcribed according to the preference of the interviewee. Some artists felt comfortable only with audio recording and some preferred I dictate notes by hand. I followed their requests to make them as comfortable as possible in order to gather the most accurate and detailed information about their lives and experiences.

Interviews ranged in duration from thirty to ninety minutes, depending on the preference of the artist. In most cases, there was additional interactions before and after the interview between me and the artists. These were valuable experiences and helped to develop the character of the interviewees.

Audio, Visual, Written

As mentioned above, I aimed to capture the interview in three ways. However, in order to maintain a level of professionalism and comfort for my interviewees, all three were not always possible. Of the ten interviews I conducted, three were video recorded, eight (including the three videotaped) were audio recorded and two were solely written. Of those that were not exclusively written, I typed a transcript of the artist's responses in order to interpret and present the most accurate representation of our conversation. Each participant was notified and consented to the recording method(s) of their choice.

Snowball Connections

After my initial interview, I asked for leads to discover new interviewees. Unfortunately, because of my short time in the city, I was unable to follow all of the leads I was given. However, the majority of my interviews were derived from recommendations of other community members. This method of snowballing allowed me to weave an interconnected path of knowledge and experiences among a complexly connected network of individuals.

FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

Throughout these interviews, many of the same topics were discussed. The artists each had their own, distinct opinions concerning these topics, but many responses interlaced and supported each other. These intersections allowed for the creation of diverse, yet unified, perspectives on these topics for the artists of the greater Boston area. Emerging themes were based on the analyzation of responses from those interviewed. They were based on categories important to the artists and were not pre-determined. These themes of interest made themselves known many times over the course of the interviews and were supported by the artists' responses.

Emphasis on History

Boston area artists place a lot of emphasis on history because of the work and dedication needed to establish an artist's space. Artist 1 who was one of the founding members of Brickbottom Artists Association in Somerville, has lived in many artists spaces throughout the years. He witnessed first-hand the challenges that arose while planning their artist residence. He recalls a failed attempt which ultimately led to the establishment of the live/work space on its current site.

“One of the problems that came along was after they had a structural engineer look at the building. There might have been a tour, but (the engineer) said, ‘Don’t walk from this building – run.’ It was just not safe. It was not worth it. It was going to cost a lot of money. It was not considered a good investment. We said, well, does that mean we’re over?”

This was just one of the many roadblocks when attempting to find an affordable space for an artist community. However, after that work was done, many other artists formed strong attachments to the building as they first found it. Artist 2 had recently graduated from Harvard

University and was battling bouts of depression and financial struggles. She moved in 1988 and fell in love with the community for its rustic qualities.

“I loved that it was a big conventional space. It looked like other artist studios that I had worked in during college. The ones where you would walk down the hallways with your paint bucket and it was all unfinished, so it didn’t matter. In subsequent years, people who live here have wanted to carpet the halls and spruce it up. I kept saying, that isn’t an artist building! An artist’s building is a place where you walk down the halls with your dripping buckets!”

Additionally, a large majority of their pride comes from the implications that their space had on the surrounding area. Artist 3, another founding member, saw the effects of this community reach far beyond their walls.

“I think that other buildings after us learned from the way we ended up organizing the cooperative and how we organized learn from our mistakes on how to streamline the process to deal with the city ... The previous contractor went to develop a building in the South End as direct result and I think there was a lot of press about us and people became interested.”

Along those lines, artists spaces have notoriously thrived in less developed areas. The artists I spoke with prided themselves on rising up from their humble beginnings and expect future artists to adapt and follow in their paths – just as they did the artists before them. Artist 2 believes that artists in the past have not been hindered and shouldn’t in the future.

“The younger artists are either going to have to pile into group housing, or they’re going to have to move to a cheaper community and make it more amazing. That’s how we’ve adapted. That’s what happens with artists. They’ve always moved

where space was plentiful and cheap and then they put their talents to work. Like with our courtyard, it just became this amazing place and people decorated their apartments. They were able to turn it into something pretty spectacular. Property values rise because other people want to move to where the artists are and then the artists get priced out. It's a continuation of what has happened for a long time.”

Though this cycle of development, economic inflation and relocation has sustained decades of artists, but their security may be coming to an end in Boston and the surrounding communities. Nevertheless, the history and heritage of these artists remains a strong touchstone for the love of their communities and their hopes for the future.

Importance of a Strong Artist Community

In the Brickbottom community, it is immediately clear that community is one of the most important aspects to residents. However, in work-only spaces like the one I visited in the South End, artists rarely interact and only visit their spaces to do serious work. In cases like the South End, an overarching, inter-building community often is available for those who wish to participate.

Artist 4 has worked in the South End community for 13 years. She was originally drawn to Boston because of her perception of its vibrant arts community. Over a decade later, she still stands by her decision.

“The arts community in Boston is amazing and the artists are amazing. When I moved to Boston I was in graduate school at upstate New York and I just picked a city. I had no reason to move one place or another. I (chose) Boston primarily because there was a strong arts community. I saw that there was really strong

support for local photographers. They provide exhibitions for local artists and support for local artists. And it has all been true. I have found wonderful support, wonderful community.”

In other cases, the sense of community is more immediate, as it was for Artist 2 when she first visited her current live/work space.

“The first lobby exhibit when I walked into this building was a painting with some skulls and crossbones. I thought that was awesome that people were not in denial about death. At that time, I really loved “death-y” art because I was so obsessed with the idea of morality. I immediately felt that I wasn’t the only one... As a person who was very suicidal for a long time, now I’m not. A lot of it was because, well I exercise and eat right, but doing what I really love to do – even if it’s not fashionable, even if I’m not successful – it makes me feel loved in this community. And I love it back. I feel so lucky to be here.”

Similar to Artist 4 and Artist 2, Artist 3 has been exceptionally pleased with her community experience.

“I have to say, I have been really pleased with the way the building has stayed such an active community. We had a really good manager who dealt with a lot and he really got the community involved in the politics of the city. He was very good at keeping us attuned to all the politics and bringing the politicians here. We have a number of people with children in the schools, so he helped bring the schools here. There was a lot of community activism that really was beneficial to Somerville and so Somerville really responded it to us well.”

Surprisingly, there were a number of children who called Brickbottom their home. Artist 5 remembers growing up in this alternative setting and having a sense of community instilled in her from a young age.

“As children, we were made to feel welcome into the art world — our artwork had a way of finding itself into the gallery space and I remember that even as a young child, my neighbors during open studios would take my questions/comments/probing about their artwork seriously. I think growing up in this community also taught me how to weave art into my life on a daily basis, regardless of the career I ended up in. I’ve also learned to better communicate difficult scientific concepts through reporting back to my parents and community.”

Artist 3 believes that in her community, all can be made to feel welcome from the beginning and carry those feelings throughout their lives just as with the experiences of Artist 5.

“There is that feeling of cooperation that stays with the building and the new people seem to have embraced it. I think the cooperative element really influenced the social structure because we were used to having to work with each other.”

Artist 2 agrees with Artist 3 and cites the number of non-artist residents who still participate in community events despite their differences in professions. The two blend together to create one community.

“A lot of non-artists live here too, but we’re so lucky that they are art-positive, and everybody loves the fact that we have a lot of art-activity here. Some of these non-artists are the best supporters of the events we have. I also feel like some

people who moved in as non-artists have become artists because they were already making stuff.”

Artist 3 has similar opinions concerning the relationship between residents. She too sees a strong appreciation for the arts across the board.

“It’s a range of people so there are a bunch who are not artists per se, but they're interested in the arts. Then there's a range of artists, musicians and architects or designers. There's a lot of variety and when people move in, they seem to be looking for the community, that seems to be one of the things they see about the building that they like.”

As she mentioned previously, Artist 3 also believes that this feeling of community is reinforced by the structure of their building. The residents of Brickbottom meet regularly and take preventative measures to protect their homes.

One final aspect which makes the community so important to resident artists is the relationships that form as a result of these buildings. For example, Artist 1 met his wife at a development meeting for Brickbottom. They ultimately bought, lived and worked in a studio together there. Artist 3 also claims to have made strong, lasting friendships.

“I have some of my best friendships from the original group. I mean, it was a pain in the butt and you didn't always agree with everyone, but on the other hand, I have all these friendships through it that are really enduring. I also have relationships with people, collegial relationships, and it's like a community - it's like a small neighborhood and it has that small neighborhood feel. You feel like you can ask somebody questions about (themselves) and you feel like you can you know.”

For artists whose residences are not as overtly communal, a sense of belonging can still thrive. As Artist 4 explains, some artists prefer to work on their own and focus on their craft instead of maintaining relationships with their neighbors. If artists in these settings do wish to find a deeper sense of community, there are external options available for them as well.

“Well there’s no established community here. There’s nothing to participate in. There’s a building down the street and they’ve created a guild, so they have a lot of really strict rules and regulations they have to follow. But that’s just for that building. In the South End there is a large group called the United South End Artists [USEA]. USEA are the people who produce the annual open studios. So, with USEA, any artist in the south end can become a member. You are included in the publicity for the South End Open Studios. As far as this building goes, there are hundreds of individual independent artists that rent space to come in and do their work. They are very serious. A lot of the other artists buildings in Boston are very communal, but this building people just come in and the work. They are really serious artists. They aren’t renting a space here to be social – they are renting a space to work.”

There are various types of communities to welcome the diverse population of artists in the Boston area. No matter how involved an artist prefers to be, they can find support inside and out of their studio spaces.

Rising Cost of Space

Many artists are unable to continue working in the city of Boston due to rising costs for both residential and studio spaces. These artists are then forced to move to suburbs or nearby

towns and take their art with them. Although some individuals have managed to maintain an affordable space, city development projects threaten rising costs in the future.

Artist 4 has observed communities that have attempted to survive the rising costs. However, she does account for the fact that these buildings often cost more than her current space and would be out of her financial reach at this point.

“I mean, I think Brickbottom is phenomenal, Vernon street is amazing. All of the buildings that exist are amazing. But they cost a lot more than this building...To buy a building now, I know I couldn’t do it. I don’t have thousands of dollars to chip in on a down payment on a three-million-dollar property.”

Artist 1, who has owned his studio space for over 30 years, recalls the changes he has witnessed with the rising cost of space in that time.

“We paid \$3 a square foot for space (at my old studio) and there was an ad on the door there yesterday that had \$3 million for that same space on our floor.”

Though costs may seem unaffordable now, the cost of a studio 30 years ago was still even out of reach for many young artists. As Artist 2 recalls, she had a difficult time trying to obtain her current space at Brickbottom.

“(The manager) kind of convinced my parents to invest in a place here and back then, (units) were about 99 thousand dollars. It depended on the size of the unit, but they were all unfinished concrete spaces with bottom-of-the-line kitchen cabinets and bathroom fixtures.”

Regardless of previous affordability of units, the artists I interviewed could all agree that the current market for space is far exceeding their incomes. This might bode well for those who own

their properties, but as Artist 2 mentions, as her property value increases, her ability to move plummets.

“For me, because I don’t want to move, the property values going up is not a good thing. Even if I want to sell, I’ll have to buy something that is just as expensive also. I just want to sit still and be here. I just always assumed it was a good thing if property values went up. But it doesn’t really mean you’re rich. To me, it’s a double-edged sword.”

Artist 3, who has dedicated her space solely for work, has seen the negative effects of artists being displaced from their studios.

“The artist studios there that are going to be demolished. It's changing. Those artists are going to be kicked out. It's the same thing again. The same thing happening in the same place. I suppose it's all part of the same there has been an ongoing... It is sad that it’s so dangerous to rent (because of the rising prices). We are very fortunate, but we really went through a lot of trouble and most people wouldn't go through that much trouble. In fact, a lot of people dropped out during the process because it was so difficult and arduous.”

Similarly, Artist 4 has witnessed a scene which remarkably mirrors the current housing climate of Boston. She can reflect on what happened in other situations but asserts that Boston doesn’t have to face the same fate.

“A more recent example is SoHo. That was all buildings like this and then they came in and fancied everything up and made it unaffordable and all the artists moved out. I know so many people who have left Boston for living and studio

space. It's just impossible. The only reason I have a studio space here was because the rent was and is just insanely inexpensive”

Artist 3 has also experienced this housing phenomenon and believes it could be contained. For Boston, she blames the lack of affordable spaces on an oversight by the city.

“I think the problem in general in all cities is that they haven't really addressed low income housing in general. Somerville has done more than most, but in a lot of cases, it just hasn't been addressed. It is inadequate, and they know it... If you own (a building), you should be allocating a certain amount to lower-income residents. But if the rules are not in place when you start (developing) ... I think everybody should know better!”

Artist 4 works in a rented space in the South End but does not have a lease with her landlord. She is allowed to remain in her space and pay rent every month. The majority of artists in her building have the same agreement, but because of their relationship with the owner, are not worried about the security of their spaces.

“We're just here! We pay every month, we call if things are broken and they fix it. We're tenants at will, essentially. The problem with that is, that the owner can just decide to sell the building at any moment. As opposed to us having to see out our leases.”

As she does feel confident in her building's owner, she can remain in Boston free from worry. However, she recognizes that this is sadly not the case for all renters in the area.

“I can't even express enough gratitude toward this building. Have other artists told you how much they pay for space? For this room, and you can see how big it

is, I pay under \$500 a month. It's unheard of. No one will tell you that. You know developers have a whole different set of priorities.”

Artist 4 and Artist 3 both blame the lack of affordable spaces on developers and lack on intervention by the city.

Challenges of Working as an Artist

One of the biggest challenges to artists is the lack of affordable studio spaces. However, there are additional issues with which artists are faced. These issues are often made worse by the lack of stable, reliable and affordable housing. As Artist 4 perfectly states, three main factors challenge artists, especially in the Boston area.

“Everybody is just struggling. Artist need space, time and funding to survive. It's very hard to find the intersection of those three things especially when there is no space that the funding you have can create, so you do extra work outside of your field which is time, to make more money to get the space that you can't afford, that you can't work in because you don't have any time, because you're doing outside jobs!”

Artist 2 has experienced the need to have external work first hand. Though she did overcome the prejudice of her parents by hosting a financially successful open-studio, she stresses the importance of sufficient funding. However, she does not view her outside work as a distraction, but rather as an enabler for her creativity.

“My parents, who were against me being an artist, came to open studios and people would come up to them and say, “Oh! You must be so proud!” and they would see me collecting people's money and transacting with them. They felt a little more comfortable that I would be able to support myself. Although, I do

have to say that I have a part time job in a hospital and I also have a singing job in a church. I don't just live off my paintings. It helps a lot, but I do want to put out a disclaimer. I recommend to all young artists that they get an easy-going part time job that gives them benefits and retirement and all that stuff. It helps to pay the bills. I can't create when I'm freaking out! If you're in a panic about money, who is going to be able to relax and make art?"

Although Artist 4 does see a tragic cycle of artists balancing time and money, she understands the importance of a studio space. Fortunately, she entered the market at a time when her means could cover her space which helped her strike a balance with her work and income.

"I first got to this building because I prefer a studio outside my home. Some of the materials I work with are not super healthy, I usually wear a respirator. So, I just looked on message boards and asked around. There used to be a public message board at the museum school, which is now merged with Tufts. That became sign-in only for students and alumni."

As Artist 4 mentioned, the avenue through which she found her current space is no longer available to the public. These evolutions make it much more difficult for independent artists to fulfill their studio needs. Even when artists can find affordable spaces, sometimes the benefits are outweighed by the negatives — as Artist 3 discovered.

"Well, it was in a long kind of shed like building in Brookside Ave which then ended up getting developed. There was a rumor that something was going to happen, but I wasn't being kicked out eminently. There wasn't any heat and the fact that I had to walk down a cold hallway in the winter, it just restricted the amount of work time I could spend there. The rent was low but considering that I

lost a lot of work time, it wasn't really worth it. I really needed to work in dependable space.”

When artists do land in sustainable workable spaces, there is always a concern over the intentions of the owners if the space is a rental. As Artist 4 details, they can have ulterior motives for housing artists which leads to their involuntary commercialization.

“There’s not a commercial aspect or a social aspect to this building like there is in the building (down the street). Over there, those artists are required by the management company to be open for every single first Friday. There’s a big commerce aspect that building that we just don’t have. We’re only publicly open once a year for public studios.”

Artist 4 also recognized that as visual artists, she and her colleagues have access to more spaces than other artists might be able to find. Although many visual artists are experiencing struggles, many performance artists are in a worse situation.

“They have even more struggle than we have in many ways because they need spaces that they can practice in and performance spaces. That's a whole other type of problem. We need workspaces but if I had a whole band in here playing it would be impossible! You hear it through the entire building.”

Artist 2 cites one final struggle separate from issues of finance and time – the input of others. As a student, she was told what and how to paint. However, she was able to overcome claims that she would never be “famous” or “popular” and instead learned how to create art that would fulfill her own passions.

“I love (my neighbor’s) work. It is so beautiful, but not trendy. I think about that all the time. Because it goes against all what my teachers taught me. I just don’t

give a crap about being famous or rich. I put out a lot of work because I love to do it and it somehow contributes to my sense of identity. It's very nourishing to myself and it makes me want to live.”

Finding a community to nurture her passions has made a lasting impact on her quality of life and her artistic abilities.

City Planning and Development

Because of the impending city developments that are taking place all around the Boston area, many artists have been affected by construction. Although there are some positive effects of urban renewal projects, many of the artists I spoke with believe that the negatives outweigh the positives. Artist 4 weighs the outcomes as she as experienced them.

“Well, urban renewal is really a glass half full approach. The city looks a lot nicer, it has fancier people in it, but everybody else leaves. This is the way arts communities have worked for thousands of years.”

Artist 3 has also seen this cycle take place and could see its reemergence in many of Boston's communities.

“It's been happening forever. Even though there has been a movement towards incorporating lower income housing, what went out of the window was rent control in a lot of communities. Losing rent control really made a big difference because now everyone needs to own.”

Artist 4 attributes these problems to developers who seem out of touch and removed from the priorities of many communities. This leads to an exponential list of problems, especially for artists.

“I do not think (the developers) care. You can’t take back your culture if you can’t afford it. I think it’s a lot of people in tech (buying the apartments). I think Boston is really building up at the tech industry and innovation district, but a lot of artists here, a lot of the venues where artist show, don’t show local artists. The museums barely show local artists. You can look at the websites and see past shows and see how many artists were local. Very few.”

Artist 4 has also experienced the developers, who are under no obligation to accommodate lower income units, and the problems they can bring to a community.

“I think it is like what happened down at the seaport. They got permission (to build) before anyone could do anything about it. In general, they weren’t held accountable because the city wanted money, they wanted the development money. They made deals and sometimes the deals are in place already and there’s not too much to be done.”

For Artist 2 and the other residents of Brickbottom, one project in particular has kept them awake at night – both figuratively and literally.

“I guess it has its negatives. Like I said, it will price people out. But I feel like the people who live on the ends of the building are going to lose a lot of privacy. Still, you go to places in Manhattan and there’s not a lot of privacy because they the train right in their face. Places in Beacon Hill also, you can feel the whole apartment shake because of the Red Line. And those are still very expensive and very desirable. I just feel like it will be a bit more urban than it is now. I do feel really bad for the people whose apartments are going to be shaken from morning until night.”

Unluckily for them, other renovation projects have begun as a result of the GLX which has made land in the area rise in value.

“Well, we already have enough noise with the factory across the street from us that was formerly AllSafe Archives, then IronMountain, and is now trying to sell. They spent a lot of time dismantling these metal shelves and it seemed that I was always trying to sleep when they were doing this. It was pretty ridiculous.”

Boston residents did have some hope when a new Arts Commissioner took the spotlight some months ago. However, as Artist 4 came to realize, she may have been more talk than action.

“(The commissioner) came in with a lot of promises and a lot of engagement with the arts community, but then didn’t follow through with creating affordable studio space. She started a grant program, she started programs for very specific types of artists. They are for artists who engage with the community in their arts project and a lot of public art. So, if you’re not that kind of artist, there’s no resources for you. So, this is something I’m very interested in.”

Even when artists can find space, they are often in danger of losing it again. Individuals have remained vigilant through city developments and projects and – perhaps with a bit of good fortune – have kept their spaces as a result.

Neighborhood Impact

For some artists, the neighborhood surrounding their studios can greatly influence accessibility, community and resources. These effects can be both positive and negative, but directly impacts the artists and the resources they have available. In the case of Artist 2 and the

artists of Brickbottom, their isolated location has saved them the trouble of dealing with the changing world outside.

“I feel like we’re in a really isolated spot. There are no other residents on this block. It’s all little factories and auto repair places. I really do like when things are neat and tidy and pretty. But (the surrounding neighborhood) does make a part of me cry. It’s hard to say because it’s kind of soul crushingly ugly, but I love it.”

Artist 5, who grew up at Brickbottom, visits frequently. She has witnessed the negative aspects that arise from the building’s isolated location and the state of the neighborhood as Artist 2 has described it.

“At times, it can be difficult to see the impact of Brick Bottom on the surrounding neighborhood. For the amount of enrichment that Brick Bottom and its artists bring to Somerville, the city doesn’t give a lot back. The Brick Bottom area in Somerville is the least developed, and we’re still fighting with the city for basic accommodations, like sidewalks. The lack of a surrounding residential area can at times make us feel like an alienated community from the surrounding neighborhoods. While the gallery has open hours during the week, there’s effectively no foot traffic in the area.”

However, Artist 4, who owns a studio space at Brickbottom, sees their isolation as a product of their defense against projects that would compromise the existence of their community. This especially include the GLX.

“Focusing some of the activism, we’ve had to sort of be active the whole time (we have lived here) because ... things are always happening that affect our building. Certainly, the Greenline has been something we’ve been fighting. I was on the

board for four years to do that when it was first starting and when we first hired the lawyer. All those things involve lots of us.”

Artist 2 views the GLX as a perk to her workspace, even if the construction can be earsplitting at times.

“Having the Green Line in is going to make this area way more desirable. I assumed that all of the gentrification will follow – wherever the development is, it follows on a major transportation project. I guess it has its negatives.”

In the city of Boston, there are also concerns about the outside communities encroaching on artist spaces. But as Artist 4 asserts, there are many artists who are ready and willing to fight back. She has personally faced significant indifference from her community about artist issues and has chosen to take matters into her own hands.

“The building down the road, there’s a couple of artists who are extremely active in fighting the gentrification in the name of the arts. This giant building that’s going to be there is taking up two city blocks. They’ve been working with (the developers) to create some kind of artist space. They always say you can’t fight the city. I’ve been trying for years, I mean I’ve gone to every meeting, I participate in every survey, I’ve met with (the arts commissioner). We met with a couple of state representatives, we met with city council, with the head of zoning. We got a lot of promises, and we followed up and nothing happened. Do the artists in these buildings overall participate in all of these options? No, but many of them do. I would say there’s a lot. Because the artists in this building have been active Boston artists for decades, they’re just naturally in favor of preserving artists space.”

Artist 3 also believes the city could be doing more to help artists. As mentioned previously, the area is home to a number of esteemed educational institutions. She has studied their assets and sees a large portion of them go unused when they could be benefitting artists.

“I was so dismayed about Northeastern is because I was thinking that if the city could give the university some kickback on providing artist housing, it would be a tremendous. Even if it was stipulated that the artist give certain amount of time or something or in return or for lower rents, that it would be a boon to their community and the creative community in general. Artists bring alternative ideas and impetus to the greater community.”

For better or worse, the overarching conclusion from the artists I spoke with is that the community could be doing more to support their artists. Projects like transit expansion or building development may seem to help on a surface level, but most often these ventures are a double-edged sword to residents.

Future Concerns

Although the members of the artist communities I spoke to are concerned for the present, this concern also reaches into the future. With property costs quickly increasing and population growth matching, the current concerns can only deepen without a major intervention from the city. As Artist 2 discusses, she is worried for artists who will come after her.

“I do worry about how young people going to live here and how are artists going to survive. I would definitely never be able to live here if I was paying rent. I feel badly for people like my younger self who do not own any property.”

She is worried for future artists, her faith in the Brickbottom community remains steadfast. Their ownership of each unit does not put them at the mercy of an outside owner and ensures that the building cannot be sold without the consent of every tenant.

“I’ll say we will never close because we are all private owners of these condominiums. But I will say that I wonder about when the current artists who live here and those who are permanent residents die off, will there be young people who are artists who can afford \$625,000 condos? Even as a 51-year-old, I couldn’t. There’s no way. As a young artist without fame, I don’t know how that’s going to work. This kind of thing it does make me wonder if I come back in 50 years and look at this building and community, I don’t know what would happen.”

Artist 3, who also owns her studio in Brickbottom does see the coming changes. However, she also sees the need for artists to work with local government and legislators if they hope for any change.

“That’s what always happens. The artists bring in and come first and make it appealing and then it gradually changes. It seems like Tufts, BU, Harvard have huge amounts of real estate, so it seems like these buildings are located could provide initiative to provide artists housing, to keep artists in the city to keep it going, but that’s a long haul, you know, that means like, you know, working with legislators.”

Artist 4, on the other hand, sees her community’s development as the latest step in a reoccurring cycle. Not to say that she agrees with the changes, but she has witnessed these events before and knows where they will most likely lead.

“I think it’s the latest place this is happening. Fort Point is really the example you want to use. Everything that’s happening in the South End happened at Fort Point 15 or 20 years ago. Exact same thing. Except that in Fort Point, the artist community was so strong that groups of artists did get together to purchase buildings as groups.”

In spite of her bleak predictions for the area, she suspects that the future of her building is in good hands for the time being.

“We’re going to stay here as long as possible. We’re very confident and very lucky that the family who owns this building is very committed to the arts. And we benefit from that. I actually saw the owner at the arts camp my kids go to. I think that is something that is a passion for their family and this is how they’re showing support. It’s so unusual – so many people when they support the arts just write a check to the ballet, which is great because they need money. Or they write a check to an arts organization because organizations that support the arts are very important. There are very few people who will support the arts by directly supporting working artists. In the sense that they provide affordable studio space. Based on other artists I know and where they work, this is the last building of its kind... Artists started to move studios back into their homes.”

Although Artist 4 feels secure for now, there are many negative side effects for the communities where artists have not been so lucky. The irony of the developments sets in when the population who made the areas enjoyable is forced or bought out.

“It's very interesting because the reason that people want to live in this neighborhood is because of the funky arts neighborhood, but there will be no

artists here when they're living here. So, I think the art in Boston, as in so many other cities, has a culture, you know, come to our cultural city... You know what happens when all the artists move away? It's a pretty uncreative city. It's not a city with expression and with uniqueness... The artists leave, and I think a very valuable aspect of the city goes with it.”

For now, the artists I spoke with seem to be secure in their studio spaces. Through their own proactivity, they have assured that their spaces will not be taken from them in the near future. However, with external factors such as the city, there may only be so much they can do to prevent these spaces falling victim to urban renewal projects in the future.

DATA ANALYSIS AND DISCUSSION

Even though the artists I interviewed lived and/or worked in the same general area, their experiences shared many commonalities in spite of the differences in their environments. Mainly, artists in both Boston and Somerville had opportunities to participate in a supportive artists community. The main distinguishing factor between the two is the accessibility of these communities. For those living and working in the same space, an internal community was readily available. For those who only worked in their studio, communities existed outside of the artist buildings. The lack of an internal community in these situations required artists seeking these communal aspects to look elsewhere. Through various avenues, artists in a variety of environments can experience the social atmosphere that a shared artist community creates.

Even though many of these artists did not interact with each other on a regular basis, many of them shared similar concerns and points of interest. These reoccurring themes were important to understand these problems through the societal lens of this population of artists. Their main concerns often centered around future developments and the security of their spaces.

With growing city populations, resources that these artists once had access to now need to be shared with new residents.

As presented by JB, these artists need three fundamental items to be successful – time, space and resources. With these elements already in high demand, artists can struggle to effectively budget for them. With rising costs tied to population growth, these conditions are only worsening. PL does mention the need for a secondary job, but even those positions can be difficult for artists to find. If an artist does secure a part time position, it often will not offer benefits and only marginally bolster their income.

The overarching question that remains throughout each of these topics is whether or not artists will be able to survive in this constantly evolving city. Projects like luxury condos, urban renewal initiatives and transportation expansions do not seem to be slowing down, and artists may not be able to resist these pressures for much longer. As they stretch themselves thinner and thinner financially and mentally, some aspect will have to give. With the funding opportunities for and increased interest in new housing and renovated neighborhoods, these artists will be facing roadblocks much larger than in previous years.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Because I was only able to stay in Boston for eight weeks, there were many places I couldn't visit and perspectives I was unable to gain. I understood that I would not be able to solve the issues facing artists based on the information I collected, but rather that I would be able to gain a small amount of insight into their world.

Future researchers will hopefully be able to examine the data I collected – mainly the lack of reliable information concerning artists spaces – to find an underlying problem for the lack of affordable artist housing and studios. The problem, as I found it, was not that artists want to

leave the city, but rather that they are forced to leave because 1) their property is taken from them by development companies 2) affordable studio and residential spaces are unavailable or 3) the lack of support from the city makes it so they cannot afford to sustain their other needs of time and resources.

As the property values continue to rise and the population continues to grow, it becomes more and more difficult for Boston area artists to sustain their craft. With help from local governments and city officials, these artist communities can be saved. However, someone must act before it is too late and the artists have been sent out of the city.

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