

Long pushed out when neighborhoods change, artists are fighting back, and getting help

By [Malcolm Gay](#) Globe Staff, Updated August 5, 2023, 2:59 p.m.



A model posed for artists during a live drawing session at Rocco Ricci's studio. Ricci, who has been in his studio for 15 years, will have to move elsewhere now that his building at 119 Braintree is being developed. JESSICA

RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

For more than 20 years, casting director Lisa Lobel has used her offices at 119 Braintree St. in Allston to connect local actors with a slew of area film and television productions, everything from Dunkin' ads to Academy Award-winning films.

Wayne Stratman uses his studio there to fabricate plasma light displays, trippy glass sculptures that have been featured in the likes of "Star Trek," while Rocco Ricci hosts live figure-drawing sessions in a space he's outfitted with Persian rugs, wood easels, and crystal chandeliers.



A view of 119 Braintree St. in Allston, where artists and arts-related business are being forced out to make way for a new development. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

With its low rents, ample space, and dedicated parking, 119 Braintree is just the sort of erstwhile light industrial building that has long attracted an eclectic mix of artists, musicians, and arts-related businesses. It is also, in the bruising calculus of today's real estate market, slated for demolition, yet another artistic enclave destined to become lab space and housing.

The building, which houses other businesses as well, is a prime example of the stubborn thicket of impediments that surfaces as acute needs for affordable housing and cultural space in Greater Boston run headlong into sky-high property values, a competitive field of private developers, and a hodgepodge of municipal rules. Despite a pledged relocation payment of \$1 million, tenants may have to disband as an arts community, a testament to the seemingly intractable nature of the problem.

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“Everyone was just stunned,” said Lobel, a co-owner of Boston Casting, describing her shock in 2020 when she learned she’d have to find new office space. “With all that was happening, and then they’re tearing the building down, we were like, ‘We don’t even know if we have a business anymore.’”



Members of the Art Stays Here Coalition (from left): Franklin Marval, Ami Bennitt, Cristina Todesco, and Ethan Dussault in front of 119 Braintree. JESSICA RINALDI/GLOBE STAFF

In the intervening years, however, an unlikely group of artists and activists known as the [Art Stays Here Coalition](#) has emerged to help combat

displacement. The small, all-volunteer group is part of a broader effort that includes policy makers, developers, advocacy groups, and others to confront a problem that by some estimates has caused more than 2 million square feet of cultural space to vanish over the years, as gentrification emptied studios and other venues across Fort Point, the South End, the Fenway, Cambridge, and beyond.

While developers craft arts-friendly deals and policy makers use the levers of government to assist, the Art Stays Here Coalition has notched some impressive wins. Last year, it helped [artists in Dorchester gain majority ownership of the building](#) where they once rented studio space. It later secured a temporary rehearsal space for hundreds of musicians uprooted when a developer bought the old Sound Museum building in Brighton. [The same developer recently gave the city a comparable building nearby](#), which will provide a permanent facility with affordable rehearsal studios for musicians.

But the calls keep flooding in: from artists in Somerville girding for change after a developer bought their building; musicians from Charlestown worried they may lose their rehearsal studios; and, of course, the roughly 40 current and former tenants of 119 Braintree.



The Ray Liriano Experience, including, from left, Jarrod West, Ray Liriano, and Gary Mendoza, rehearsed earlier this year at an interim rehearsal space in Dorchester that was set up to accommodate hundreds of musicians displaced after the closing of the Sound Museum. ERIN CLARK/GLOBE STAFF

Most of the requests come down to the same thing, said Ami Bennett, one of Art Stays Here's founding members: "Do you think you can help us?"

"You bet," she said. "We're going to take everything that we learned, we're going to join a bunch of people together, and we're going to try to help other people."

In recent years, the group has helped organize tenants associations at artists collectives across Greater Boston. Its members have attended community hearings, worked with artists, and met with landlords, developers, and elected officials, all while leveraging the power of social media and the press.

Kara Elliott-Ortega, Boston’s chief of arts and culture, said she’s never seen such an intense focus on combating artist displacement as there is today. “We’ve never had this much political interest and support for the arts across various levels,” she said.



Working with tenants at Humphreys Street Studios, the Art Stays Here Coalition helped artists secure majority ownership of the Dorchester building where they once rented studio space. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

It’s a new moment of hope for a region that has traditionally relied heavily on so-called benevolent landlords — property owners willing to rent at below-market rates — to provide affordable studio space to artists. But those owners (or their heirs) inevitably sell, private developers move in, and artists move out, disrupting careers in the scramble for new space.

“It’s devastating,” said coalition member Ethan Dussault, a sound engineer whose business, New Alliance Audio, has been uprooted twice over the past two decades. “It takes years to bounce back.”

Amid such a backdrop, the coalition’s first successful campaign, a years-long effort to help artists at Humphreys Street Studios secure their Dorchester building, seems all the more remarkable. Ultimately, the coalition helped craft an inventive, \$2.8 million deal between developers, the city, and nonprofit funders last year that delivered majority ownership to the building’s artists.

As the coalition was working on the Humphreys Street deal, word began circulating that a vast rehearsal space known as the Sound Museum would have to vacate its Brighton digs to make way for a planned life-sciences center.

The coalition soon took up the cause, negotiating a lease at another building in Dorchester to provide temporary rehearsal space for hundreds of displaced musicians. Meanwhile, Bennitt says the coalition pressed the developer, IQHQ, to provide zero net loss of rehearsal space in Brighton. Following negotiations with the city, IQHQ ultimately transferred ownership of an \$18 million property to the City of Boston. The deal, unprecedented in size, ensures there will be affordable rehearsal space in Brighton in perpetuity.



Musician and producer Chelsea Ellsworth worked in her studio at the Sound Museum in Brighton in 2022 before it closed. JOHN TLUMACKI/GLOBE STAFF

Impressive as they are, the recent successes remain anomalous, the result of unique factors not easily reproducible.

At Humphreys Street, artists were already using the building. City Hall managed to contribute \$1.7 million to make the deal work, funding made possible in part by Boston's dwindling American Rescue Plan reserves. Critically, the broader agreement also included a vacant lot that will offer 21 units of affordable housing, which sweetened the deal considerably with housing subsidies.

"If that weren't there, the project probably wouldn't have been possible," said Bill Madsen Hardy of New Atlantic Development, which guided the deal and is

developing the adjacent lot.

Similarly, IQHQ set a high bar when the deep-pocketed developer signed over the \$18 million building to the city, a precedent few smaller firms would be able to match.

It points to the limitations of operating case by case, said Bennett, who also works as communications director for the city's [Age Strong Commission](#).

“Doing it piecemeal is never-ending, it’s exhausting, and it’s also not preventing the cycle from continuing,” she said. “Without policies and protections, it will keep happening.”

At City Hall, Elliott-Ortega’s office now has a team of four working on cultural planning, with a major focus on artist displacement. It’s also working to implement new policies, including a zoning rule that would require many new projects to create below-market cultural space or pay into a cultural space fund.

Meanwhile, the Metropolitan Area Planning Council is working with Boston, Cambridge, and Somerville to coordinate arts and culture policy across the three cities, while also building a map of arts-related spaces in the region.

“Planning staff doesn’t have any way of knowing whether there’s existing arts and creative uses happening on a parcel that is going to be developed,” said MAPC’s director of arts and culture, Annis Sengupta. With the map, a “municipality will be able to become aware of it before the house is on fire, so to speak.”

Several groups have also worked on a recently filed bill in the State House that

would enable cities and towns to create trust funds to preserve and construct creative spaces.

“This is a step of many steps,” said Emily Ruddock, executive director of the arts advocacy group MASSCreative.

But the biggest impediment to raising municipal arts funds remains a constitutional provision that strictly limits cities’ ability to raise new taxes without state approval.

“The tax issue is the biggest issue,” said Elliott-Ortega, who added that many cities across the country don’t face that hurdle. “The idea that we need to go to the state in order to create a dedicated arts funding source is deeply problematic.”

In the meantime, the Arts Stays Here Coalition has pressed ahead with its work at 119 Braintree, which Bennett describes as a successful campaign dimmed by market hurdles and bureaucratic obstacles.

The development team, which is planning a mixed-use project that will include lab space and 74 units of affordable housing, has agreed to give \$1 million to help uprooted artists relocate.

Bennett said the Boston planning and development agency has also agreed to identify additional funding to assist with displacement costs, potentially bringing the total to \$2.4 million. In an email, a BPDA spokesperson said the agency was committed “to prioritize mitigation funding for artist displacement.”

Either way, it may be too little, too late, said Bennett. Tenants don’t have have a

fixed move-out date, and there's no set timeline to deliver the funds. What's more, some tenants may seek individual payouts, further diminishing the collective relocation pool. The money must also be spent in Boston, where the group has yet to find anything in its price range.

“In what world does a \$2.4 million win turn into: These guys have nowhere to go?” she said. “When you're preserving what you have, \$2.4 million is through the roof. But when you're trying to go somewhere else, it's not enough.”

She added that the needs for cultural space and affordable housing don't have to be in competition.

“Housing is a million times more important, but it already has advocacy, it already has policy,” she said. “Why can't the conversation be, ‘Yeah, of course, affordable housing, but what are we going to do about the artists?’ ”

In an email, developer David Bracken noted that the owner of 119 Braintree, the Blank family, has long supported artists, hosting Allston open studios and offering tenants reduced rents.

“After surveys, extensive outreach, and conversations to determine artist interest and goals, the overwhelming response from the artists was that there was no desire for artist space in the new proposed development,” said Bracken, who estimated there were only 15 artist-tenants remaining in the building, all on month-to-month leases. He added the new development would “help alleviate pressures of the housing crisis felt across the city.”

Other developers, however, are combining art and cultural space with affordable

housing, a scalable solution fueled by subsidies and tax credits.



A rendering of the Channelside development planned for the Fort Point neighborhood of Boston. RELATED BEAL

In Fort Point, once home to an estimated 900 artists across 30 buildings, developer Related Beal is planning approximately 50 affordable artist live-work units as part of the larger Channelside project, which will include shared artist workspace, a public art program, and a 1,000-seat amphitheater on the Fort Point Channel.

Raber Umphenour, a filmmaker who worked with others to successfully preserve

Fort Point's Midway Artist Studios as an artist-owned building in 2014, was one of numerous signatories to a letter offering arts-related suggestions on the project.

“What was unique about Channelside is that we had a developer who was excited about seeing what was possible for the cultural district, but I think they also understood that it would create a really dynamic environment for them to be operating in commercially,” he said, noting there's some 70 acres of undeveloped land in the neighborhood. “I think this is going to be something we're going to see replicated [in Fort Point] but even more broadly, in other projects in the city.”

Across town in Nubian Square, DREAM Development, a development firm with an architecture arm, DREAM Collaborative, is working with New Atlantic to erect 72 units of affordable housing, more than half of which will prioritize artists.



From left, Bill Madsen Hardy, Brian Goldson, both of New Atlantic Development, and Gregory Minott (right) of DREAM Development, talked while on the construction site of a building by the New Atlantic/DREAM Collaborative Development Team in Nubian Square. VINCENT ALBAN FOR THE BOSTON GLOBE

The project, one of several arts-related developments on tap for the neighborhood, will not offer individual workspaces. But it will have a shared 4,000-square-foot maker space with power tools and other instruments. It will also lease a retail space well below market to Jean Appolon Expressions, a Boston-area Haitian dance company.

“We see this as a model where we can do this and it’s not going to displace folks,” said Gregory Minott, managing principal at DREAM Development. “We were able to structure it in such a way that the tax credits are also paying for the common area, which we’ve dedicated to an arts-related use.”

Similarly, the Arts & Business Council of Greater Boston is seeking to create a real estate investment fund to purchase, preserve, and develop buildings with artist studio space. The nonprofit [bought a vast complex in Lowell](#) last year, but so far has not purchased anything in pricier Boston.

“The answer’s money,” said Jim Grace, the group’s executive director. “What’s the question?”



Artist Andrea Seek gathered her materials at a live drawing session at Rocco Ricci's studio at 119 Braintree.
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