

EDITORIAL

Dwindling space for creative artists deserves a new approach

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By [The Editorial Board](#) Updated September 1, 2025, 4:00 a.m.



Painter Sitka Gulergun, once a designer for Ralph Lauren, worked on a canvas at his then-recently opened art gallery in SoWa in April. His studio is in the gallery, so visitors can see him and chat while he's working. LANE TURNER/GLOBE STAFF

A Sunday stroll through Boston's SoWa district — home to dozens of artists' studios and galleries — is all anyone needs to see the impact the arts have on a neighborhood and its economy.

At [450 Harrison Avenue](#) thousands of would-be art buyers — from college students looking to brighten up a dorm room to serious collectors — are attracted to this haven of working studios and gallery space, operated by

the nonprofit [SoWa Artists Guild](#).

It's just one of a number of buildings owned and managed by a private developer, GTI Properties, whose founder, Mario Nicosia, decades ago saw the value arts can bring to a collection of old warehouse buildings.

But the artists who get to fill those spaces are the lucky ones. The sad fact is that dedicated spaces for the arts — studios, rehearsal space for musicians and dancers, performance spaces — are disappearing at an alarming rate. Property values rise, rents increase, and arts-related activities and venues are squeezed out.

In [Boston alone](#) officials estimate the city lost at least 100,000 square feet of cultural production space in the past decade. Other estimates for the Greater Boston region run to more than [2 million square feet](#). (Both estimates are from 2023, meaning the numbers could be worse now.)

Public officials have been able to respond to some of those losses — but only some.

A case in point: the odyssey of the venerable [Sound Museum](#), which for more than 20 years provided 24-hour practice, storage, and recording space for hundreds of musicians in part of a 140,000-square-foot building in Allston. In 2021 it was purchased for development as a life sciences campus.

The California developer agreed as part of its “community benefit” plan to offer another space to house the displaced musicians, and turned that property over to the city. This summer [the Mayor's Office of Arts and Culture announced](#), “This project would mark the first time in the office's history that a physical building is secured into perpetuity for arts, culture, and housing uses.”

But that's one property. There has to be a broader solution to an increasingly wide-ranging problem.

There is a better plan — or at least the start of one — in [legislation](#) being supported by [MASSCreative](#), a coalition of arts organizations, that would allow communities throughout the state to set up Creative Space Trust Funds and permit private owners to deed land or property which would carry a “creative space restriction.” It would work in much the same way the state has attempted to preserve diminishing [farmland](#), but in this case without the financial incentive of that program.

“The loss of creative work space didn't happen overnight,” MASSCreative's executive director, Emily Ruddock, told the editorial board, “and there's not going to be a silver bullet to solve it.”

But the legislation will help by providing for the first time a legally recognized definition of what constitutes “creative work space” and “presentation space.”

The legislation would also provide “municipalities and private property owners” a tool to preserve those spaces as a matter of right without the need for each and every one of them to have to file a Home Rule Petition with the Legislature.

“Let’s make it easier, faster for communities so they can move more quickly on these projects,” Ruddock said.

Like Somerville’s recent acquisition of the Armory, a once privately operated building that [since 2005](#) had housed largely arts-related organizations. When the owners signaled an interest in [swapping out the artists](#) in favor of a tech-based operation, the city used its eminent domain powers, paid out \$5 million, and now, some four years later, has a [master plan](#) for the arts-based property.

Boston and Somerville seem intent on doing the right thing, but each is pretty much going it alone — without the kind of template the Creative Space Act could provide, Ruddock maintains.

Sure, a state financial incentive for private owners to deed over space to the arts — modeled on agricultural land preservation efforts that [involve state funding for farmers who agree to keep land in agricultural use](#) — would certainly be a boon to the effort. But this bill doesn’t provide state funding. Likely because it is incremental — and doesn’t cost a dime — it has widespread, bipartisan support on Beacon Hill.

No matter what they’re saying in Washington these days, the creative arts aren’t a frill. And those who labor in those arts — and, yes, it is labor — deserve to know that the spaces that make that painting, that song, or that piece of pottery are protected and valued.

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