



January 14, 2020

Memo

RE: Follow-up Mass Cultural Council Artist Workspace Meetings

Dear Colleague:

On behalf of the Massachusetts Cultural Council I would like to thank you for your continued interest in artist/creative workspaces in Massachusetts. We just wrapped up a series of regional meetings in 2019 and this memo is a follow-up to summarize the discussions. We also conducted a concurrent survey and the input from the survey is folded into this summary.

Meeting attendees represented a cross section of creative workspace owners, and operators, municipalities, real estate developers, artists, funders and planners. The discussions covered a lot of territory and hopefully this summary can serve, in part, as a guide to how we move forward as a field to stabilize and support artist workspaces.

Seven artist workspace meetings:

1. Essex County Community Foundation, Danvers (January 17)
2. Co+ Creative Center, New Bedford (March 14)
3. Northampton Community Arts Trust, Northampton (May 22)
4. Tyler Street Lab, Pittsfield (June 26)
5. Worcester Pop-Up, Worcester (September 11)
6. The Dance Complex, Cambridge (November 5)
7. Harwich Cultural Center, Harwich (December 10)

The meetings followed a relatively unscripted format and were guided by asking, what was working, what was not working and what additional resources were needed to support artist workspaces. This input coupled with the online survey gave us a much broader understanding of common themes and regional perspectives.

The following summary is categorized across these common themes and fell into the general areas of:

- *Financial Resources*
- *Municipal Perspectives*
- *Working with Consultants, Developers and Landlords*
- *Community Partnerships*
- *Observations and Suggestions*

Financial Resources

- Participants in various regions were somewhat puzzled by the complexities of **tax credit financing** and when it is appropriate for artist workspace projects. Some form of technical assistance or a tax credit workshop would be helpful.
- If we follow the example of the other large artist work/live buildings in the state (most of them **limited equity coops**) we would need to identify banks that finance this share-based type of ownership structure. Examples of Articles of Incorporation and By-Laws would also help understanding the governance structure.
- Along the same lines, if individuals decide **pool their equity to buy real estate** and create a condominium or cooperative, there will be a need for pre-development financing/funding that can give the project the best chance of success. This could be a good use of public and/or philanthropic funds and understanding models used in affordable housing presents a vetted structure to determine feasibility.
- The Cultural Facilities Fund and Collaborative Workspace Program have supported segments of the artist workspace efforts, but there are still significant gaps. More flexibility and additional financial products are needed. For example, **immediate access to capital** when an opportunity arises and access to planning funds for outside of the nonprofit structure. It was asked **why the state funds are only available to nonprofits?** CFF doesn't extend to unincorporated groups of individuals with arts missions. Could fiscal sponsorship for smaller start-ups be allowable?
- In the written survey numerous responses focused on needing **financial assistance for operating and maintenance costs**--as well as rent subsidy--could this be made available to stabilize art centers and workspaces.
- Those that have taken on a real estate project outside of a nonprofit structure stated **navigating the development process is daunting**. Therefore, having access to expertise in financing, historic tax credits, capital campaigns, working with developers, contracts, insurance, etc. would give a distinct advantage to these community-based efforts. Any of these steps in the development process are significant hurdles for the uninitiated, and most community-based individuals who take this on are learning as they go.
- It was puzzling why there isn't a **pool of significant capital** (beyond Mass Cultural Council and MassDevelopment grants) and expertise to support cultural development.
- It was stated that those working to create artist workspaces in town-owned properties had the benefit of a "patient" timeline and this was the only reason some artist workspaces have a chance. If this were in the market, **"we would never have had enough time** to do the groundwork to position our project before a developer came into the mix."

- One of the issues in Gateway Cities is to make the **upper floors in mill buildings code compliant**, but it takes capital and often the investment is more than the value of the building. How can we bridge this difference?

Municipal Perspectives

- Municipalities were curious about how other towns and cities created **arts overlay districts** that incentivize creative space development and/or artist workspace preservation in their zoning. They asked if there could be resources for someone to consult who understands the language of overlays and could draft zoning language that could be used in other communities. It was observed that it is important to have artist workspaces articulated in zoning documents, “if it is not in the plan it will be harder getting political back up in the future.”
- It was suggested that more insight be provided, and best practices shared, about the **adaptive reuse of schools** as artist workspaces given the success of a number of these type of workspaces across the state.
- It was recognized that additional municipal staff, particularly someone who could provide **real estate technical assistance** would be a great benefit. Municipal staff expressed a desire to be able to offer financial assistance to mission-driven community development of artist workspaces.
- Some municipalities were beginning to generate a list of current artist **workspaces that will likely face threats** and start to strategize to get in front of it.
- It was recognized in many locations that development is coming to tipping point, there needs to be **incentives for municipalities to maintain artist spaces**.
- In numerous municipalities there is an **interdepartmental review process** for real estate development, where a proponent can submit a preliminary plan. It was recommended this opportunity be taken advantage of, that is to get planner and building commissioner on the same page. It costs nothing and is a great first step.
- In some communities it appears the time is right to educate policy makers and municipal staff about a new frontier which is the **need for live-work spaces**.

Working with Consultants, Developers, Landlords

- It was asked if a document could be made available that provided tips and suggestions for **how to write and RFQ** for a consultant.

- Given the complexity of building code, some artist buildings requested assistance from **code consultants** who were well-versed in reuse as artist workspaces. Not all architects are created equal for this type of work and determining the right consultant is important.
- It was asked if a **centralized list** of consultants and architects who have experience with artist workspaces be made available.
- It was requested that some guidance and **tips for how to talk to developers** be provided.
- Given that artist workspace challenges are being reviewed by a wide range of stakeholders, it was requested that a document be created that highlighted the **success factors for a real estate deal**; what does a perfect alignment of need, politics and finance look like?
- Where there are existing artist buildings with supportive landlords, how do we step in and **incentivize not to sell to developers**—could there be an emergency fund for this purpose?

Community Partnerships

- It was suggested that a **network be created** for everyone doing this work. Having a forum to vet challenges that arise in the creation of or operation of spaces would be helpful. It was also recognized that a network can more easily mobilize in terms of advocacy efforts in times of crisis. It was mentioned that a network was what was missing in Lowell at the start of the artist space development.
- Working to intentionally **include underserved communities** was at the forefront of the discussion in many meetings. There needs to be a focus specifically on diverse and lower income communities and make spaces welcome to them. Community organizing and outreach was viewed as essential to have full and equitable representation of all artist communities in Massachusetts.
- The need for **affordable housing** was recognized in all regions so artists can live in the places where they create and present their work. The stability factor is critical to encourage participation in workspaces as well as in the cities and towns they are located.
- The idea of **sharing a space** or leasing part of a campus with other organizations was mentioned on multiple occasions to mitigate risk of displacement for smaller organizations and to help larger organizations meet the rising costs of operating.
- For those **working on a specific project**, it was expressed that having a real estate development expert who can offer coaching and provide hands on training to a cohort group would add immense value.

- One project proponent articulated that **meeting with the City's creative economy staff** person first with her business plan was key to getting things moving on the right track.
- In some communities **it can take a long time to get buy-in** for a project. Be prepared to encounter some members of the community who may not have heard of the "creative economy" and therefore individual meetings with elected officials to educate and build trust is necessary. Initially it is very frustrating but can pay off in the long-term by easing the process of securing zoning and regulatory approvals down the road.
- Along the same lines it was stated repeatedly that the process of working in a community is **all about building trust**, and not about fancy brochures.

Observations and Suggestions:

- It was requested that examples of **artist space surveys** be provided that can be adapted to any town or city across the state.
- There needs to be an **outward facing marketing effort** that promotes the benefits of artist work and live spaces—backed up with specific demographics and surveys—that outlines the need, and to get that information in front of developers.
- The challenge of **fire safety and ADA compliance** and funding was discussed regarding the upper floors of older mill buildings. It was suggested that MassHousing might be approached about funding sprinklers/safety projects.
- It was asked if the Mass Cultural Council share examples of **successful mixed use/artist spaces**. What do the business plans look like?
- It was brought up quite often that Massachusetts could benefit from **a creative space development entity** (like a cultural CDC, or an entity like CAST in the San Francisco Bay Area, BARCO in Baltimore, and the Creative Land Trust in London) that is able to respond quickly to acquisition and development challenges and can be called when both opportunities and threats arise.
- It was recognized that there are a lot of challenges to artist workspace projects including leases (private leases and leases with the National Parks Service) – it would be great to have **a network for guidance** on these topics.
- Interest was expressed about **how to go about owning a space** and what are the steps in the process.
- **Cultivating a pool of individual donors** to support communities with grassroots initiatives and workspaces.

- Looking to Mass Cultural Council to provide **technical assistance to municipalities** to help buildings meet code requirements for artists.
- It is important that making the transition from **non-code compliant spaces** to safe spaces without artist displacement.
- The need to help current owners of artist workspaces design **a succession plan** was highlighted and there should be a blueprint with a series of options for a current owner to realize a financial gain while giving the artists a toolkit to consider the option of buying the property either as a collective or recruiting a mission-based developer to take over the property and maintain its artist use and focus.
- It would it be helpful to have a resource where interested parties **can ask questions** about how to take on these projects.
- It was requested that the Mass Cultural Council **draft a support letter** to help propel projects– not necessarily funding--but a support letter, that highlights the merits, challenges and benefits of creative spaces. This document can be presented to town officials so those taking a project under consideration can envision the desired result.

Thank you for your participation in this effort. Please don't hesitate to contact us if there is anything we missed from the meetings or if there are additional topics you would like us to take into consideration. Jay.paget@art.state.ma.us

The Mass Cultural Council's current artist space resources can be accessed at the following links: [Spacefinder MA](#), [Creative Space Classifieds](#), [Guide for Developing and Artist Space](#), [Cultural Facilities Fund](#).

Thank you.