



LIVING (AND WORKING) ALOFT

A two-part look at New England's **LIVE/WORK COMMUNITIES**, past and present.

LOIS TARLOW & STEVE STARGER

PART 1: THE PAST

It was the "Elegant Age," a term former Museum of Fine Arts, Boston curator Trevor Fairbrother coined when writing about the esteemed Boston painters working at the turn of the last century. It was also a time when many artists needed studio space. A studio building erected at the corner of Tremont and Bromfield Streets, and occupied by artist luminaries like William Morris Hunt, Elihu Vedder, and John Enneking soon proved inadequate. Studios were small, with poor light. Artists

seeking affordable space found it in commercial buildings in that area and along Boylston Street near the Common.

Toward the end of the nineteenth century, the art scene shifted to Copley Square where the MFA and the Boston Public Library were located. In that vicinity, in the 1890s, three multi-use studio buildings were erected: St. Botolph at St. Botolph and Harcourt Streets, Grundmann on Clarendon, and Trinity Court on Dartmouth. Unfortunately none exists

today. The idea for the Fenway Studios came in the wake of a spectacular fire on November 11, 1904, that demolished the Harcourt Building. Artists escaped with their lives, but many, including William Paxton and Joseph DeCamp, lost their life's work. The Boston press chided civic leaders for considering housing the burned-out artists in converted, inadequate buildings.

Joining forces, members (some of them artists), of the St. Botolph Club and the Copley

Society sought submissions for designs for a live/work studio building that would fulfill four requirements for artists: north light, spacious rooms, convenient location, and affordability. The committee unanimously chose the architectural firm of Parker and Thomas. The intended site on Ipswich Street along the train route would preclude any future construction blocking the north light. Consequently, several prominent, socially connected businessmen, including George Cabot and Henry Parkman, created the Fenway Studios Trust which, in an astonishingly short three months, raised \$90,000 toward the construction of the building.

The project was completed with similar speed. Its rendering was published in January 1905, the papers filed in April, and some artists were moving in by October, even before it was finished in November 1905.

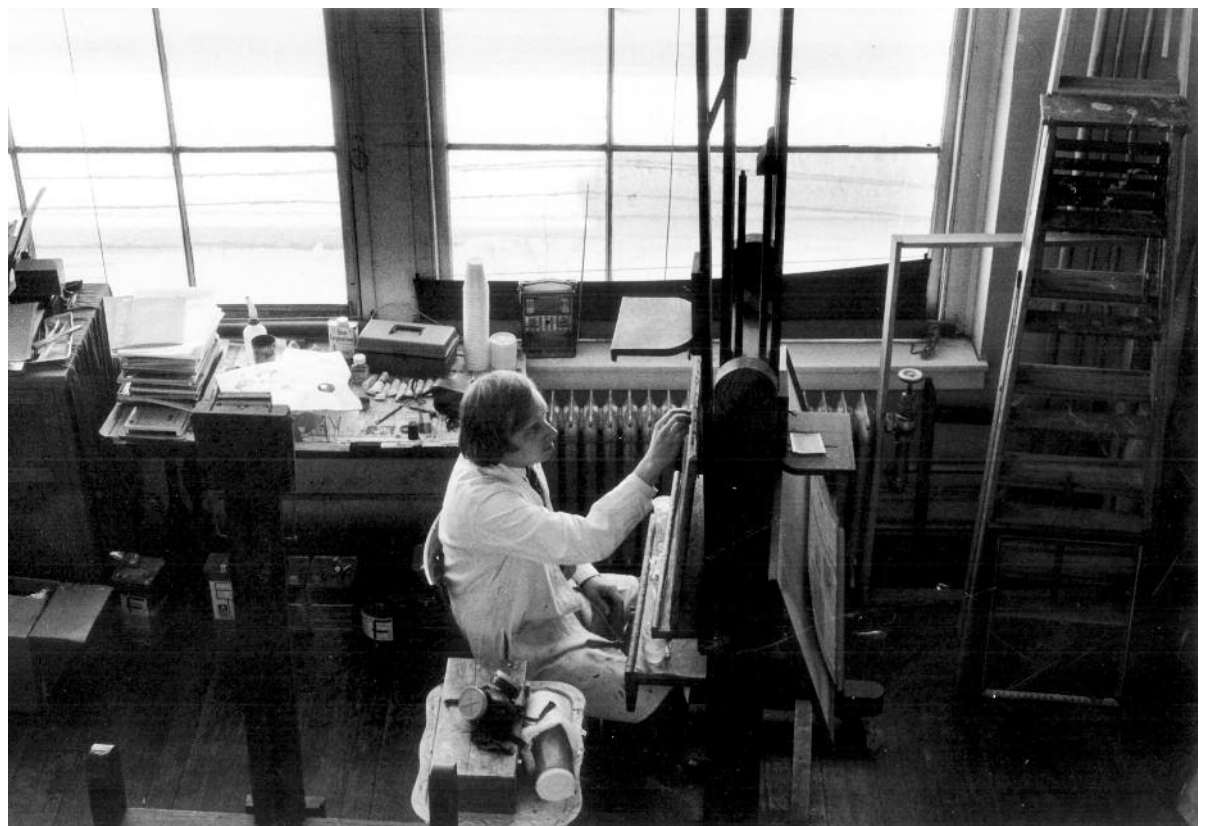
In the early years, eminent artists and teachers worked at Fenway Studios, including Edmund Tarbell, William Paxton, and Mary Bradish Titcomb, among others. After World War II, there was Gardner Cox and MIT's György Kepes. In 1974, with the building needing repairs, the occupants established Artists for the Preservation of Fenway Studios, and purchased it for \$175,000 cash plus \$200,000 in back taxes. It became a nonprofit artists' cooperative with monthly payments based on studio size.

In 1998, when a developer attempted to erect a forty-one-story skyscraper over the turnpike blocking the north light, the artists sought protection from the National Park Service, which unanimously designated the building a National Historic Landmark. Shortly after 1998, structural problems

became apparent. Enter Friends of the Fenway Studios, founded that year. This non-profit raised the money to re-point the building, replace the roof and lintels, repair the brickwork, and restore its admired Arts & Crafts façade. With additional funding, Brad Bellows Architects will soon conserve the historic, studio windows—triptychs with eighteen panes in each, framed by slender muntins. Unlike 1905, when Fenway Studios arose in what seems like time-lapse, restorations appear in slow motion.

As a National Landmark, Fenway will endure, be maintained, and hold Open Studios one weekend a year. When you visit 40 Ipswich Street, or speed by on the turnpike, bear in mind that it is the oldest, continually occupied building in this country designed to artists' specifications. ■

Lois Tarlow is an artist, writer, and teacher.



Opposite: Sidney Hurwitz in his studio at Fenway Studios. Photo: Bror Hultgren. Top: Fenway Studios, ca. 1910. Courtesy of the Boston Public Library. Above: Artist Peter Williams at work in Fenway Studios, ca. 1975. Courtesy of Brad Bellows.

PART 2: THE PRESENT

Boston's Fenway Studios are venerable and unique, as Lois Tarlow portrays. Their progeny, ubiquitous today, are abandoned factories-turned-artists' lofts and

England. Along the way, of course, painful lessons have been learned about gentrification and preventing artists' displacement. Looking forward, artists are empowered, as adaptive

contemporary styled collective live/work spaces, arisen and actively arising throughout New

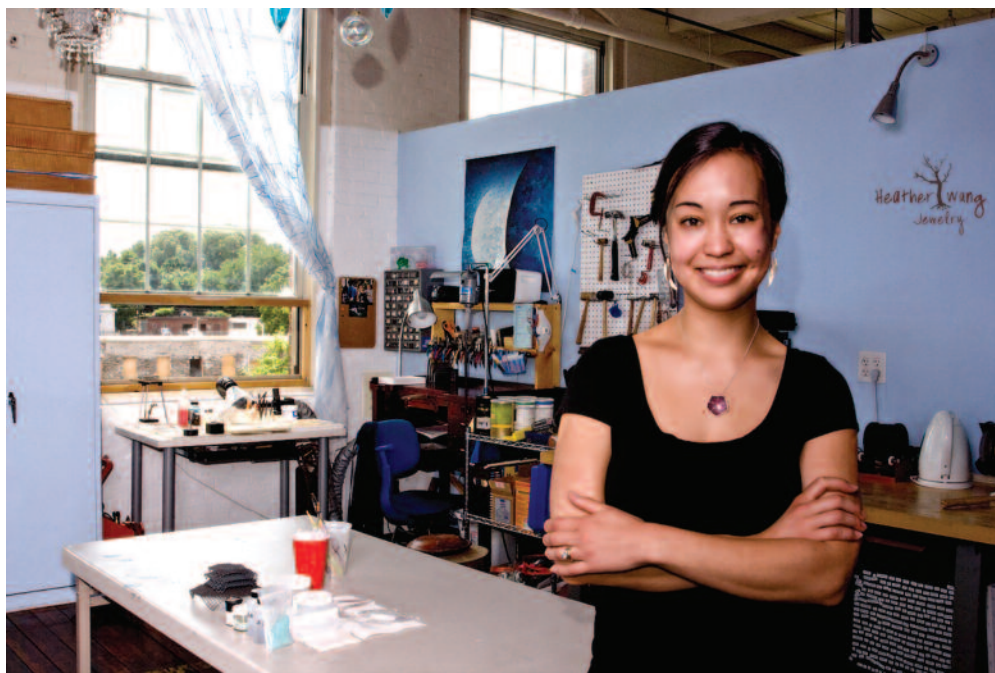
re-use has become a promising economic engine for cities within each state. Together with fresh building campaigns, there appears to be renewed meaning and momentum in the expression, "creative capital."

An overview of several contemporary initiatives ought to begin with Lowell, Massachusetts. A promotional brochure for its Western Avenue Lofts, scheduled to open for occupancy this month, champions the complex as a place of "maximum freedom, creativity, and community" for artists. Western Avenue Lofts is the second phase of a massive development designed to give artists an affordable place to live and work. Its first phase, Western Avenue Studios, built in 2005 as a work-only space, is expected to comprise an impressive 200 or more studios by the end of the year.

The Western Avenue developments are not unique. Determined artists have been teaming with developers and sponsors region-wide to build cost-effective residences and work spaces, either from the ground up or more frequently by transforming aging, decaying industrial buildings into live/work places. Facilities such as Brickbottom Artists Association in Somerville, Massachusetts, Hope Artiste Village in Pawtucket, Rhode Island, AS220 in Providence, and Cottage Street Studios in Easthampton, Massachusetts, are inspiring evidence of the potential for successful conjoining of artists and commerce. A recent report from the Boston Center for the Arts outlines an ambitious blueprint for additional new artists' spaces to be built at the BCA, aimed at making artists' surroundings as pleasing, accessible, and efficient as possible.

The key notion uniting all of these endeavors is a pragmatic sense of community, creating spaces that are centered around artists and their needs, according to Maxine Farkas, an artist and one of the original renters at Western Avenue Studios who still is a tenant there. "Lowell had been courting artists for a while," Farkas explains, but plans always "went from artist work space to luxury artist lofts. That's not the case now." The developer of Western Avenue Studios started out by turning one floor of a building into thirty-three studios. The spaces quickly sold out, Farkas says, and eventually, 145 more studios were built, covering six floors of the complex. "These facilities are basically artist-driven, with developer money," Farkas notes.

Brickbottom Artists Association was born in the early '80s, when a 100 artist-organiza-



Top: Heather Wang in her studio at Western Avenue Studios. Above: Western Avenue Studios under renovation. Photo: John Wren.

tion formed to search for a stable, reasonably priced living and work environment. They eventually purchased an abandoned A&P cannery and bakery along the Cambridge-Somerville border for about \$5.2 million and transformed the rundown buildings into some 160 live/work condos, making it among the largest of such developments in the country. The project took about two years, according to artist Debra Weisberg, one of the original Brickbottom founders and still a tenant. Weisberg says the facility “was good for me as a working artist. My group of neighbors was a true cooperative. We had each others’ backs.”

Hope Artiste Village, a 600,000-square-foot former candy factory, began its life more than a century ago. In 2005, the U-shaped building was redeveloped as a combination commercial and residential project. The first artist to move into the building was Gail Ahlers, owner of Gail Ahlers Design. Ahlers says that “one of the things that made Hope [Artiste Village] attractive was its [commitment to] purpose. No one was going to kick you out.”

“This space enhances what I do,” stresses April Gramolini, who lives in Providence’s award-winning AS220. As though describing a temporary artist’s residency, she says, “I feel more productive being around other artists. I can bounce ideas off others.” AS220 sprawls across three pridefully redeveloped historic buildings in downtown Providence. Known for its comprehensive cultivation of community engagement, AS220 also sponsors a youth arts program and rents out an extensive array of both work and live/work spaces. “What you put in, you get back,” emphasizes Susan Clausen, AS220 property manager.

Yet another relic of New England’s manufacturing history has been resurrected afresh by artists in Easthampton. Cottage Street Studios last year celebrated the twenty-fifth anniversary of its Open Studios at its huge former factory at One Cottage Street, long closed. The complex now houses eighty artists.

One Cottage Street is a nonprofit, all-volunteer venture, explains Annie Steiner, one of its tenants and a coordinator at Cottage Street Studios. Beyond the sheer work and determination required of all such ventures, “It requires a lot of cooperation from everyone to make it happen.” Today’s renewed spirit of community and cohesion seems to guarantee stability and growth in the all-important live/work sector. ■

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Debra Weisberg in her studio at Brickbottom Studios.

COMMITTED TO COMMUNITY:

WESTERN AVENUE STUDIOS AND LOFTS

KRIS WILTON

In Lowell, Massachusetts, artists have built their own community, gradually converting a reclaimed industrial complex into a place where artists can work, show, and, now, live.

In the late 1990s, Lowell, seeking to repurpose vacant buildings downtown, courted creatives, ultimately establishing an arts district, but failing to deliver promised live/work spaces for artists, as trendy loft living found a wider appeal.

The city tried again in 2004, suggesting that the owner of a 250,000-square-foot industrial complex quickly losing manufacturing tenants try artist studios. In summer 2005, thirty-one studios opened; by November, the nascent community had launched the monthly First Saturday event that would serve both for marketing and recruiting. “People come to First Saturday Open Studios, they look around, and then they’re at my door, wanting to get on a waiting list,” says Maxine Farkas, an early tenant and now director of Western Avenue Studios. “There’s a hunger.”

In fact, they’ve hardly kept up with demand. The complex now houses more than 200 studios, priced around a third to half of Boston rates. Artists commute from as far as Maine, as much for the company as for the affordable space. “You become part of the community,” Farkas says. Doors are regularly left open; artists share their time, feedback, and special knowledge; and work is shown in the cooperative Loading Dock Gallery, opened in 2008.

May will bring the opening of fifty live/work spaces available only to artists. Twenty-five feet wide and 30 to 66 deep, the Western Avenue Lofts have been furnished with “the simplest of finishes, to keep the rents as affordable as possible and to leave all the creativity and personality of how you live” to the residents, according to the space’s website. “We believe in the freedom to tailor your own space, to make yourself comfortable and productive in a community of like-minded, inspiring peers.”

Community is already flourishing in the lofts, with movie nights, progressive dinner parties, and community gardens all in the planning stages. “For a lot of people it’s something they lost when they left art school,” says Farkas. “They’ve found it again, and they’re holding on for dear life.”