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Artists' Housing in Toronto: from Displacement to Replacement

The lack of housing constitutes a personal crisis for anyone affected, but for artists it poses particular problems. Artists, because of the nature of independent production, often must supply their own workshops, studios, and rehearsal spaces. Thus, when a working artist can't find a reasonable place to work and/or to live, it affects every aspect of his or her life.

The issue of housing in Toronto is, of course, part of the greater socio-economic crisis within the downtown core, which has seen the displacement of large numbers of people over the past ten years. Artists are as much affected by the housing crisis as all others who are economically and politically marginalized: single mothers, pensioners, ex-psychiatric patients, refugees, the unemployed, and the working poor. However, they experience their displacement in a different manner from these other disadvantaged groups, as it is directly related to their work, and consequently to their self-definition.

"The arts community" is, in practice, a series of amorphous groupings loosely constructed around particular media, aesthetic codes, shared histories, and personal and sexual friendships. Within the inner metropolitan city, the community is defined by the condition of working and living in a geographic area, and is as simple as recognizing others as fellow artists and being so acknowledged in return. Artists' commitment to a neighbourhood is a practical need to be close to certain cultural amenities—art supplies, cultural facilities, neighbourhood shops, a socially tolerant environment. But equally important is a commitment to the idea of the 20th-century urban metropole: the city itself.

The urban artist's local geography of the city tends to revolve around three major elements: 1) the points of production (the studio, the rehearsal hall, the editing room, etc.); 2) the public outlets or distribution-points (galleries, theatres, music halls, bookstores); 3) the social venues (bars, coffee-shops, restaurants). Especially for visual artists, the most essential is the location where work is produced: the studio.¹ The importance of a place—both physical and psychological—in which to

work and develop projects can't be over-emphasized.

What the vast majority of artists share is their low level of income. There are, by recent count, an estimated 12,213 people working in the arts in Toronto. After expenses, their average income from all sources—day-jobs, night-jobs and sale of artwork—is \$13,514. The average income directly from art production is \$1,561.² Therefore, the economic reality of working in the arts is that it is very poorly paid work. And artists do WORK: they produce objects, organize ideas, express themselves through words, pictures, sounds, movement. As well as its particular aesthetic and ideological ends, the making of art both *is* and *fulfills* a social function. It is part of the larger urban economy as a service industry and a cultural industry—although obviously any "industrial" employment that only pays \$1,500 a year is by definition outside the mainstream economy.

The issue of artists' housing and work-space needs has been around for years, but it wasn't until the mid-1980s, with the heightened real-estate boom in Toronto, that artists began to be displaced in large numbers. It was no longer a question of artists illegally living in zoned industrial space and the City unofficially turning a blind eye. The problem was impossible to ignore, and by July 1985 the Toronto Arts Council (T.A.C.), supported by the City, announced the formation of Toronto Art-space Inc. to seek ways of providing rental studios to artists in the downtown core. The artists' work-space (if

not the housing) crisis had become an official issue at City Hall.

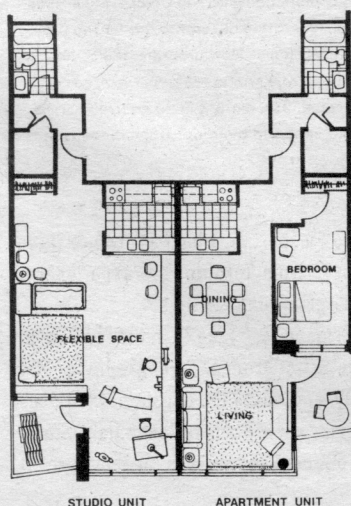
Since then, the problem of arts facilities has been surveyed, analyzed and number-crunched. First, the T.A.C. produced its mammoth report, *No Vacancy*; then, in the fall of 1989, the City established the Cultural Facilities Policy Working Group to develop policy and guidelines on artists' housing. Concurrently, the Housing Department has been surveying Toronto artists' housing and studio needs. Meanwhile, the Black Creek Foundation, a group of academics and artists, has spent years attempting to establish a work/live studio on Atlantic Avenue. This project, however, has recently been dropped due to the escalation in the cost of the building.

The only spaces that have come to fruition in the last five years are artist-initiated non-profit co-ops: Arcadia, on the waterfront; Beaver Hall, on McCaul St.; and Coxwell Artists' Co-op, on Coxwell Ave., and Lakeshore Village Artists' Co-op, in Etobicoke, both of which are under development. These co-ops were artist-organized, and are driven by a crisis mentality over the lack of affordable, secure housing and work-space in the city.

At this point, the existence of the problem is no longer up for debate. Yet long-term solutions to it after five years don't seem any closer, given the bureaucratic players, overlapping government responsibilities, the dismantling of federal and provincial programs for housing assistance, and the reality of artists' incomes. The issue of artists' work-space and housing needs has raised basic questions about the functionalist theory and practice of North American planning, in which industry and residential uses are strictly zoned and segregated.³

Beaver Hall Artists' Cooperative, 29 McCaul St., Toronto: typical studio and apartment unit layouts. Photo: courtesy, Oleson Worland Architects, Toronto.

Opened in February 1989, this 24-studio/apartment housing co-op (including 9 units for low-income families) was designed by Oleson Worland Architects and developed by Lantana Non-Profit Homes Corp. under the provincial Renterprise program. Photo: courtesy, Oleson Worland Architects, Toronto.



The City's Viewpoint

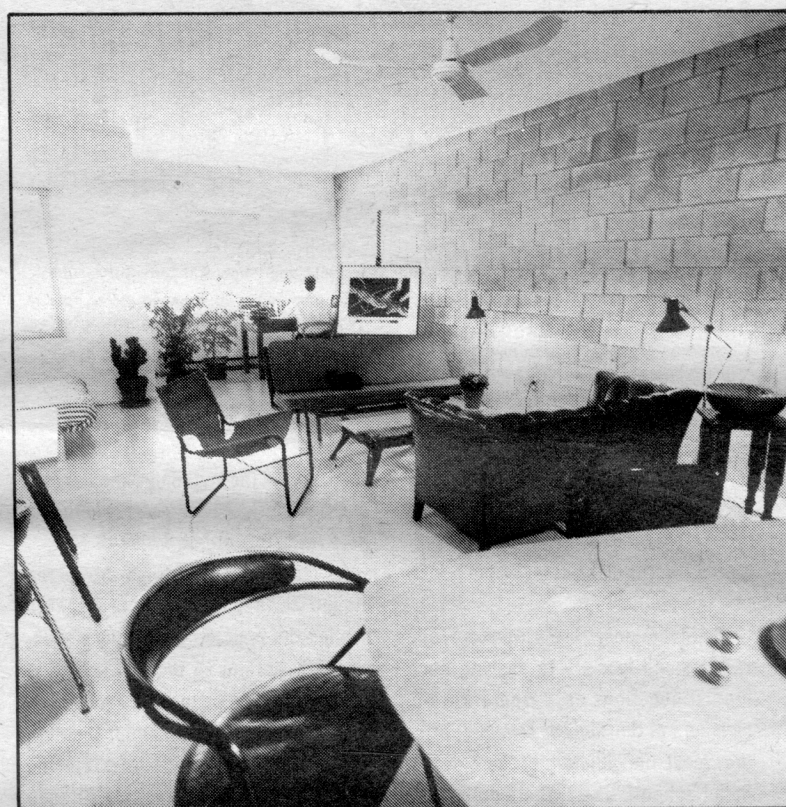
By the mid-1980s, individual artists and organizations started to experience a severe shortage of rental space in Toronto. The rapid redevelopment of the downtown core in the early '80s, and the often thoughtless and short-sighted urban policies in place, were forcing more and more artists to leave the city for the suburbs and exurbs. The more recent redevelopment of the Toronto lakeshore and harbour areas, and the disposal of the so-called Railway Lands just to the north, have been characterized by the usual mediocre planning, reinforcing the city's worst problems. The erection of the SkyDome has intensified the pressure in the urban core, culminating in massive traffic-congestion, inadequate parking and overcrowded public transit. These are predictable results of uncontrolled speculation and development.

Like so many of its North American counterparts, Toronto has also been experiencing the more generic process

week or next year. For the major cultural producers, the fringe experimental scene is the starting-point for essential new ideas and materials. The bars, the small performance-spaces and the basement studios are the breeding ground for local culture. Today's alternate theatre, such as Thomson Highway's play, *Drylips Oughta Move to Kapuskasing*, originally produced by Theatre Passe Muraille, is the new potential box-office hit of the Royal Alexandra Theatre.

With the disappearance of the experimental fringe, artists coming to the arts from outside Toronto or outside the realms of established power—the young, women, immigrants, persons of colour, and Native Canadians—are denied an entry point and are therefore lost to the city. On the other hand, the major cultural institutions and their staffs will probably stay in the downtown. They are established, they control their sites and properties, and their audiences are focused on the city core.

The response of the private sector to



Beaver Hall Artists' Cooperative, 29 McCaul St., Toronto: typical unit interior. Photo: Doug Hall/In Camera Studios, courtesy, Oleson Worland Architects, Toronto.

Named after the Beaver Hall (Hill) Group of Montreal artists, formed in 1920, the co-op features high ceilings, large windows, and plans that function as open lofts or with partitions for more traditional layouts.

of gentrification, with the return from the suburbs to the downtown of the middle-class, and the restoration of existing houses in areas that, until recently, were predominantly working-class and immigrant communities. This has forced the former tenants, including artists, out of the inner residential neighbourhoods.

Unfortunately, the crisis of the individual artist also extends to the artist-run centres and organizations that are the seed-beds the experimental activity which is the source of cultural growth. As rents increase and leases expire, more and more organizations are operating with serious deficits, are being closed down, or forced out of their spaces and geographic communities.

Although many of these organizations are marginal, they provide the raw ideas and inspiration that translate into the television programs, the musical extravaganzas, and the art stars of next

the crisis can be seen in the proposal for development of a mixed-use tower across from Massey Hall called "The Arts Building." Garth Drabinsky and his consortium are attempting to take advantage of the value placed on cultural and heritage preservation by providing three or four floors of artists' studio- and work-spaces. This would enable the developer legally to evade inner-city height- and density-restrictions. The proposal is a good example of how genuine artists' needs are manipulated into potential profits for entre-

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preneurs who use the "positive imaging of the arts" in their own self-interest.

The public's perception of culture and the arts tends to be confined to mass cultural spectacles—the blockbuster exhibition, *The Phantom of the Opera*, the World's Fair and the Olympic Games—which are fuelled by the potential advertising revenue from television. The amount of money that has recently been earmarked for or spent on the "re-fined arts"—the Ballet/Opera House, the Art Gallery of Ontario expansion, the restored Winter Gardens and Pantages theatres, and the National

reclaimed warehouses were inexpensive, and the floors, windows, and ceilings were of generous proportions and adaptable to many uses, from painting or sculpture studios to dance or music rehearsal-space. Although lofts often have poor heating, are heat-traps in the summer, have no plumbing or kitchen facilities, and frequently retain the residue and pollutants of their earlier industrial tenants, their large open areas are highly flexible to a wide range of activities and sympathetic to the modern design-aesthetic. In the 1950s and '60s, warehouses and the loft life be-

and zoning protection, it is precisely their "illegality" that keeps lofts affordable. Yet there is no protection from eviction or the breaking of leases, and lofts often lack adequate fire-safety regulations and enforcement. Artists who are willing and able to put up with the precariousness created by the questionable legal status of the loft may continue to do so, but the forces of re-development and gentrification are gradually ruling this out as an option.

A few artists with professional salaries, or who have families who can assist with a down-payment, have been able to buy into small-scale loft/studios in legally renovated industrial buildings. These small factories, located in residential areas, were already used for so-called "non-conforming" purposes (usually a mixture of working-class residential housing and light industry), and it is a fairly straightforward procedure to obtain the appropriate mixed-use zoning needed for redevelopment.

The overall experience of New York artists has been that, once lofts were legalized and therefore on the open real-estate market, rents and prices skyrocketed and the artists could no longer afford to live in SoHo, the East Village, etc. Ironically, these artists had themselves forced out the former industrial tenants who had been unable to compete with residential real-estate prices in Manhattan.⁵

Vancouver has recently adopted a special zoning status for artists' live/work studios, with square-footage or percentage requirements, to ensure that spaces so designated will actually be occupied by working artists. It will be important to see if, over an extended period, special zoning status for artists' housing is a solution or whether it is merely the first step towards getting around industrial zoning-protection and upping the value of the land in and buildings in question, as has happened in New York City.⁶

The Artists' Viewpoint

Artists experience the economic boom of the city in a contradictory manner. They find that, as a direct consequence of the real-estate explosion, they can't afford to live and work in the areas of the city where they feel they belong—the very territory that they have had a stake in bringing to life.

Another of the major contradictions that artists face in their banishment from the inner city is that they are the victims of a lifestyle they have been minor yet active players in establishing.⁷ Yuppie gentrification directly affecting those areas of Toronto where artists have been living and working for the last 15 years is partially due to the attractiveness of the public venues that artists have been instrumental in creating. However, unlike New York, where artists have been called "the storm-troopers of gentrification," directly or indirectly responsible for evicting the last surviving small-scale industries and lower-income tenants they employed, the re-entry of the middle class into downtown Toronto is due to a much wider urban social phenomenon.

Artists have come to expect this pre-

carious lifestyle: finding a place to rent, either legal or illegal, scrounging the materials and scraping together the money to renovate to make the place suitable for working and living in, and facing continual threats to tenure from redevelopment or resale. In Toronto, 40% of artists surveyed have moved their work-space in the last two years.

One of the things that the recent Toronto survey on artists' housing has demonstrated is the variety of needs to be addressed. Artists, dancers, musicians and producers are not a single homogenous grouping, they differ in how they work and in their ideas of where and how they want to live. The artists who are interested in shared living and working spaces are, by and large, under 30 and by no means represent a majority of their peers. But it is precisely the idea of sharing such a space that falls outside the regular framework of how the city is presently organized by zoning. Furthermore, as these artists become more aware of the environmental hazards of their own work and the industrial pollutants in many loft buildings, their interest in—and romanticization of—reclaimed loft spaces has somewhat diminished. Yet, whether you want shared working and living space or separate work-space, the problem remains. The above-cited survey estimated that no fewer than 3,430 artists' work-spaces are currently needed in Toronto.

How this problem evolves in the day-to-day reality of the city is that young artists are unable to find space and establish themselves in proximity to arts institutions and the local arts community. The more mature artists, especially those with children, are being forced out of the city completely. Areas like Prince Edward County and towns

is hard to imagine Toronto without the visual artists, writers, actors, dancers, singers, musicians, filmmakers and video artists who have given it so much of its vitality and vibrancy.

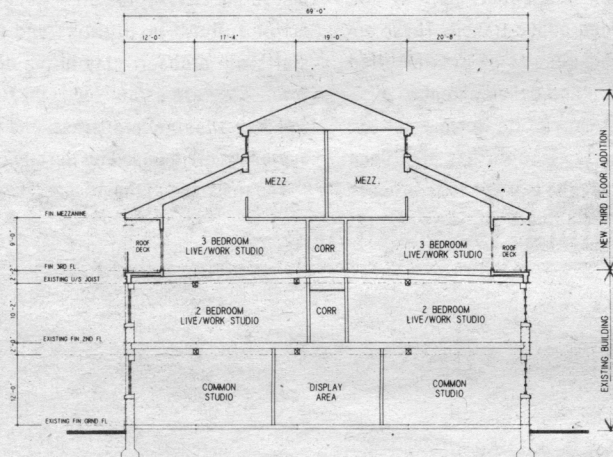
Although artists face the same housing crisis as that which confronts other people with limited incomes in the inner city, they are among the most skilled and able, socially and politically, to organize to obtain the accommodation they require. Artists and their cohorts, with the aid of organizations like the Artists' Housing and Workspace Coalition, can lobby, clarify needs, and support a wide range of work- and housing opportunities. Individual initiatives, like the Lakeshore Village and Coxwell Artists' co-ops, the Studio Retirement Home, the Ataratiri development (which may include a proportion of artists' live/work-space), and Artscape's various projects, are all specific responses to the crisis. But for a long-term solution to the problem as it effects their ability to live and work in the inner city, artists will have to organize, concerted challenging short-sighted housing policies, fighting for the liberalization of the Building Code and the capping of real-estate prices, and pushing the system to meet the real needs of real people.

The need that artists have repeatedly expressed is for "a safe and clean space, in an urban setting with stable and affordable rent": hardly an outrageous demand. But it remains to be seen whether Toronto, with all its claims to possessing international status, can grapple with threats to its cultural integrity. Cities need artists, performers and creators as much as artists, performers and creators need cities, and if Toronto could solve the problem of supplying them with adequate and affordable accommodation, it really could boast of being "world-class."

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Endnotes

1. See Daniel Buren, "The Function of the Studio", *October*, no. 10 (1979): 51-58.
2. *Housing and Workspace Needs of Toronto's Artists and Artisans*, prepared by Social Data Research Ltd. for the City of Toronto Housing Department, April 1990: tables 3.2.2 to 3.2.4.b.
3. "Integration of Urban Housing and Industry": report prepared by Mertins Architects for the Architecture and Urban Design Division, City of Toronto Planning and Development Department, 1989.
4. Labour Council of Metropolitan Toronto, "Toronto Must Avoid Becoming 'A Tale of Two Cities': A Labour Council policy paper dealing with industrial lands and housing", November 1989.
5. See Rosalyn Deutsche and Cara Gendel Ryan, "The Fine Art of Gentrification", *October*, no. 32 (1984): 91-111.
6. *Lofts: Balancing the Inequalities* (New York: New York City Planning Commission, February 1981).
7. See Sharon Zukin, *Loft Living: Culture and Capital in Urban Change* (London: Radius, 1988; originally published in by The John Hopkins University Press, 1982), *passim*.



Coxwell Artists' Co-operative, 419 Coxwell Ave., Toronto: typical section through Zone 1.

Designed by Robert Murphy, Architect Inc., and developed by the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT) under the pro-

vincial Homes Now and Federal-Provincial programs, the co-op is scheduled to open in 1991. Occupying a renovated factory warehouse rezoned for residential use, it will consist of 30 units (80% rent-geared-to-income, 20% market-rate).

Ballet School—make it appear that culture is doing well and is an integral part of the rhetoric of Toronto, the self-styled "world-class city" of the boosters and politicians.

However, only rarely does anyone raise, much less try to answer, such crucial questions as, "Where will the members of the *corps de ballet* live after they leave the cloisters of the National Ballet School?", or, "Where do the artists who were selected to produce public sculpture for the SkyDome live?"—Toronto rents having risen some 138% between 1983 and 1988. Not that there is anything intrinsically or morally wrong with the mass spectacle and its star performers; it's just that the spectacle masks the realities of where and how creative work originates and how local culture is produced. This obscures the reality of who generates cultural activity, who subsidizes it, and then who makes the profit.

The Question of Lofts

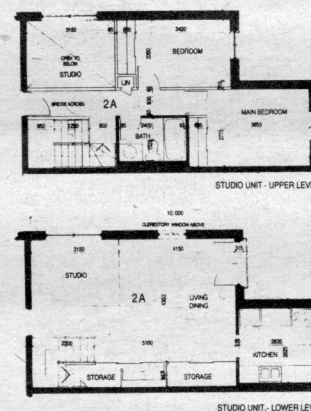
The penchant of artists for living in reclaimed loft buildings developed after World War II, most notably in New York City. With the growth of the suburbs, downtown industries were induced to move out of the urban core into the vast industrial parks on the outskirts of most cities, where the bulk of the workers now lived. Their departure left behind a large surplus of under-utilized turn-of-the-century industrial buildings in the city core.

For artists and their associates, the

came part of the mythology and baggage of the modernist *avant-garde*, whether in New York, Toronto or Sydney.

As most such buildings are zoned industrial, they are therefore illegal to live in, although there is rarely a problem with working in them. The City of Toronto, pushed by the NDP caucus and prodded by the Metro Labour Council, has tenaciously fought to retain the industrial zoning, attempting to keep light industry, especially the garment and printing industry, in the city centre. City staff, quite genuinely not wanting to act as housing policemen, have kept the policy in theory while in practice avoided taking legal action against artists living illegally in their studios. The Metro Labour Council's recent adoption of a new zoning policy stating that, "if an industrial area is to be re-zoned, the first priority should be given to the development of artists' studio/residences or for affordable housing",⁴ will allow for a more strategic response to the question in the future.

Many artists and civic politicians have attempted to remedy the problem of artists' housing by advocating the wholesale legalization of these live-in studio spaces in industrial areas. Although it seems like a simple, straightforward solution, it offers no long-term solutions, as it would then place loft spaces on the general market, where they would be subject to the cost-escalation that has affected other desirable residential spaces in the downtown core. Without adequate rent-controls



Lakeshore Village Artists' Co-operative, Etobicoke, Ontario: studio unit, upper and lower levels. Photo: courtesy, Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto.

Designed by Allen Ensslen Barrett Architects and developed by the Daniels Group in conjunction with the Co-operative Housing Federation of Toronto, under the provincial Homes Now program, the co-op will consist of 92 units (65% rent-geared-to-income, 35% market-rate) on five floors in four separate buildings when it opens in the spring of 1992.

like Flesherton, which are two to three hours from Toronto, are experiencing a large influx of artists.

This in turn results in the removal of the artist from the geography of the city, and raises the question: what does it mean when a city loses its cultural producers and its own local culture? It