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Making Space for Artists That They Otherwise Couldn't Afford

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Ever since the Dutch arrived in Manhattan with their tools and trinkets, and the British followed not long after with redcoats and frigates, gentrification has been a fact of life in New York City. No doubt Walt Whitman took the ferry to Brooklyn for the cheaper rent, while Andy Warhol had to build four different Factory locations to keep up.

It seems life has rarely been harder for working artists in Manhattan. While galleries selling multimillion-dollar artworks still line Chelsea and the Upper East Side, the artists making them have largely decamped for other boroughs and beyond.

Yet just as certainly as New York's rents will rise, artists will find ways to work in the city that feeds their creativity. Fortunately for some of them, a few culturally inclined developers are discovering clever ways to make space for these painters, sculptors and others working in the visual arts.

601 Studios

How many empty basements, neglected boiler rooms and junk-filled storage spaces are scattered across New York? The principals of Sugar Hill Capital Partners began to ask themselves that when they first toured the warren of trash-strewn rooms beneath 3621 Broadway, a 47-unit prewar building they bought in spring 2013. Among the young developers, who share a penchant for art, an idea quickly formed.

"It was pretty easy for us to just throw it all out, paint everything white, maybe hang a little drywall so they could put up their work, and then we turned them loose," Jay Solomon, the firm's creative director, said on Wednesday at the building.

For going on three years, seven artists have occupied studios just beyond an AstroTurf-lined courtyard on West 149th Street, called 601 Studios for the property's side-street address.

"I spent my whole career moving north," said Fred Brathwaite, the pioneering graffiti artist and filmmaker better known as Fab 5 Freddy. "In the '80s, it was the Lower East Side, then Midtown in the '90s. Now, I'm back home, in the kind of space I never thought I'd find."

Mr. Brathwaite's studio, a capacious 1,000 square feet of white cement and pipes, lies beyond a series of twisting hallways and doors. Canvases scrawled with his distinctive tags against backgrounds of mini subway cars, boomboxes and tiny Campbell soup cans line the walls. There are also large black and bedazzled portraits from a



Fred Brathwaite, left, and Jenna Westra, below, in their studios. Artists are creating works for 50 West, above.



PHOTOGRAPHS BY TINA FINEBERG FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES

series featuring Jack Johnson, the heroic turn-of-the-century boxer, and Bumpy Johnson, the notorious Harlem gangster.

Adrian Kondratowicz, perhaps best known for creating polka-dot trash bags to beautify garbage day, occupies a space down the hall. He has had a studio in Harlem for the past decade, most recently at 142nd Street and Fifth Avenue. Last year, the landlord arrived and told all of the tenants they had to get out.

He is, for the first time, feeling secure in his studio. "The community is just great, in terms of mutual studio visits or just being here while the work is happening," he said.

An advantage to such a rough-

hewed space is that the landlord does not especially care what the tenants do to the building. Gustavo Prado, a sculptor who employs convex mirrors, among other media, in his work, has bolted a number of pieces to the large beams and pipes that run through his studio.

"I didn't even make that hole," he told Mr. Solomon, grinning. "It was there already."

Hercules Art Studio

"I just can't believe my good fortune," Jenna Westra said standing inside her TriBeCa studio, barely a year after earning an M.F.A. in photography from Hunter College. Large portraits of friends, models and

strangers striking angular, almost geometric poses hung on the walls.

These days, it really does take a good fortune to afford a loft in the neighborhood where artists thrived in the 1970s and '80s. For Ms. Westra and six other recent graduates, the monthly rent is a mere \$1 per square foot through the Hercules Art Studio Program's two-year residency.

Their patron is Andrea Woodner, a designer, artist and philanthropist. She owns 25 Park Place, where the studios are on the third floor. Her inspiration came last year at a symposium at which everyone was talking about complicated ways to keep artists in New York City.

"It's simple," Ms. Woodner

recalled thinking. "Just charge less rent — and I was in a position to do that."

When an electrical union's lease expired at 25 Park Place, Ms. Woodner teamed with Claire Weisz, an architect friend, to create Hercules there. Their research found there were less than 100 nonprofit studio spaces in the city.

To select the first group of residents, students from Columbia, Hunter and New York University were asked to apply, and then Ms. Woodner and some colleagues visited their thesis shows. Ms. Westra and six others, including two painters who got the end studios for their natural light, were chosen and moved in in March.

"I was in a shared space in New Jersey paying twice as much for half the space before I came here," said Ilaria Ortensi, an Italian artist who creates architectural sculptures and paintings.

Already the Herculeans' ambitions for their space have grown. They plan to host exhibitions for their contemporaries' work, as well as lectures, salons and the occasional dance party.

"We're so lucky to be here, so we want to share it," said Ofra Lapid, an artist from Tel Aviv and makes collages heavily inspired by its Bauhaus buildings.

Ms. Woodner agrees they should not be the only ones. Her ultimate goal is to demonstrate that studios can be a viable business for landlords, especially if the city and the state are willing to offer incentives like tax breaks that might offset foregone rent.

"There was no Plan B for these kids," Ms. Woodner said. "They were going to be artists, and they were going to be in New York. And we have to help them with that."

50 West Street

Being in proximity to other artists is not the only appeal of working in New York.

"I love being influenced by working-class people," Bahar Behbahani said last week inside a studio downtown. "That was never a problem in Iran, but once I came to America, I never get to do that, except with the cab-drivers."

Now she does it almost every day. Since September, Ms. Behbahani has been working out of the 15th floor of 40 Rector Street in Lower Manhattan — and a construction site a block south, 50 West Street.

She shares the space with three other artists, and the sales gallery for 50 West, a curvaceous 64-story condominium tower nearing completion off the Battery. Francis Greenberger, the developer, is a noted collector. "We wanted art that was of the building, not just decoration," said Jennie Lamensdorf, the in-house curator at Mr. Greenberger's firm, Time Equities.

While each artist is obliged to create a series of works of the new building — the ultimate in lobby art — they also have round-the-clock access to the studios, where they can work on any projects they desire.

Ms. Behbahani completed an entire series of new works while in residency, called Garden Coup, now on view at the Thomas Erben Gallery. So, too, did Hugo Bastidas and Paul Anthony Smith, who both focused on making portraits of the project's construction workers.

"I've never had so much space to work in before," Ms. Behbahani said, wearing a pair of paint-splattered Uggs.

Noa Charuvi, an Israeli artist living in Brooklyn, was the first to take up residency there, sharing the space with the tower's general contractor. Her art typically addresses the conflict in her native country, including paintings of bombed-out homes.

"My work is around ruins and rubble," Ms. Charuvi said. "This is a completely different subject matter, but the materials are the same, working in a construction pit."

Like Ms. Behbahani — who created large paintings that overlaid the penthouse floor plans with scenes of equally luxurious Persian gardens — Ms. Charuvi had hoped to work on other projects. But she quickly found herself so consumed with scenes of mud, muck and rebar that they became almost all she has painted since, even after her residency ended.

"I just couldn't stop," Ms. Charuvi said.

Now she does not have to. With the tower nearly finished, Ms. Charuvi has been invited back.