Operationalizing the SoHo Effect: 
An Analysis of Affordable Artist Housing in Bridgeport, Connecticut

A Thesis Presented to the Faculty of the Columbia University 
Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of 
Master of Science in Urban Planning

Adviser: Robert Beauregard 
Reader: Laura Wolf-Powers

By: Charlie Stewart
Spring 2017
Figure 1 – Read’s Department Store, built in 1925 (top) and Read’s Artspace, modern day (bottom). 
Source: Jeff Snider (top) & Artspace Projects, Inc. (bottom)
“The ‘SoHo Effect’ (alludes to) the process by which New York City’s SoHo neighborhood transformed from a manufacturing district to a bohemian enclave to outdoor shopping mall. The artists who moved to the district in the 1960’s and 1970’s began revitalizing the neighborhood with their renovated studios and new galleries. In turn, these changes attracted capital, reinvestment, and new residents into the area, pushing up real estate values and rents, pushing out the artists, and transforming the neighborhood” (Currid, 2009, p. 371).

“The development of strategically positioned artist housing would appear to be part of this new policy arena – it is not just an effort to help artists, or just a means of housing a special needs population but, rather, a way of turning the space needs of artists into a development opportunity with potential benefits for neighborhoods and cities” (Strom, 2011, p. 370).

“All this is ultimately about finding ways to bring people with discretionary income downtown.” (Lavernoich Interview, 2017)
# Table of Contents

## Chapter One

Introduction .................................................................................................................................7  
Background & Literature Review ............................................................................................8  
Arts and Culture as an Economic Development Strategy ......................................................10  
Artist Housing .........................................................................................................................11  
Affordable Housing ..................................................................................................................14

## Chapter Two

Research Design .......................................................................................................................17  
Location ..................................................................................................................................19  
Methodology ............................................................................................................................22

## Chapter Three

Findings ....................................................................................................................................23  
Real Estate Development .........................................................................................................23  
Economic Development ...........................................................................................................27  
Placemaking .............................................................................................................................29  
Artists ......................................................................................................................................31  
Affordable Artist Housing Developer ....................................................................................35

## Chapter Four

Conclusion .................................................................................................................................36  
Recommendations ...................................................................................................................39

Bibliography .............................................................................................................................49  
Appendix 1: Interview Questions ...........................................................................................56
List of Figures

Figure 1 – Read’s Department Store, built in 1925 and Read’s Artspace, modern day

Figure 2 – Northern Warehouse, built in the early 1900’s and in modern day

Figure 3 – Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1936 and Westbeth Artist Housing in modern day

Figure 4 – The Schmidt Brewery in an undated photograph, Schmidt’s Artist Lofts in modern day, and an example of a Schmidt’s Artist Loft amenity, a rooftop patio with an indoor cooking range

Figure 5 – Map of downtown Bridgeport; Read’s Artspace is #9, referred to as “Sterling Market Lofts”

Figure 6 – Map of the study area from the 2007 master plan, “Reimagining Downtown Bridgeport”

Figure 7 – Bijou Theater in the early 1900’s and modern day, following historic rehabilitation by the Kuchma Corporation

Figure 8 – Selected works by artist and interview subject Emily Larned: “Surveying the Art-Going Public for their Opinions on Art”; “It is Best to Make the Best of the Worst”; the AMFAB logo

Figure 9 – Bridgeport Design Night Out event, with artist and interview subject Liz Squillace as a panelist.

Figure 10 - “Butterfly Dreaming” by Jodi Strmiska, a mural painted on a vacant downtown storefront

Figure 11 – Doorways in Read’s Artspace; residents are encouraged to express themselves in the building’s corridors and gallery

Figure 12 – Map of the Downtown North and South Historic Districts

Figure 13 – Aerial view of downtown Bridgeport with sites to implement temporary parks

Figure 14 - Close-up view of sites to implement temporary parks

Figure 15 - Zoning map of downtown Bridgeport
Abstract

Art is a creative expression, a form of transcendent communication, an act of defiance and a source of wonder, fascination, and beauty. Artists, the progenitors of these things, have historically clustered in neighborhoods that offer cheap rent and a prevalence of physical space. Their presence often resulted in some form of cultural commodification, rising rent, and the eventual displacement of the artists themselves. Affordable artist housing protects artists from displacement while simultaneously engendering economic development and cultural identity. It accomplishes these outcomes through public funding for affordable housing and often historic preservation. This thesis seeks to understand the impacts and limitations of affordable artist housing by analyzing the Read’s Artspace building in Bridgeport, Connecticut. It examines issues of gentrification, identity, economic development, and affordable housing through the lens of a city that has experienced decades of population loss and economic decline. Through case studies, a review of economic development, artist housing, and affordable housing literature, and interviews with stakeholders in the Bridgeport community, this thesis identifies the impacts of affordable artist housing and offers a critique of the enterprise itself, hopefully challenging our conventional wisdom and contributing to this emerging field of study.
Chapter One

Introduction

Do artists contribute to gentrifying neighborhoods? This question is straightforward but the dynamics surrounding the issue are quite the opposite. For example, how does one classify an “artist?” The nature and meaning of art has been philosophized for centuries, from Plato to Picasso. How is a “contribution” correlated, and how does one measure it? On to “gentrify,” a term shrouded in ambiguity. The “gentrifier” and “gentrified” are inextricably linked and yet often possess drastically different views. Finally, “neighborhoods.” This vague spatial reference points to an approximate location where people live, often with no definite boundaries, subject to change over time. This seemingly simple question defies a concise answer, and it lies at the base of questions about neighborhood change, fairness, and class. This question is the heart of this thesis.

These themes are inherently complex and often indefinable. Measuring the statistical degree to which a neighborhood has been gentrified is an exercise in futility. Guetzkow states, “Arts advocates and researchers have made a variety of ambitious claims about how the arts impact communities. These claims, however, are made problematic by the many complications involved in studying the arts” (p. 1). However, one must only stroll through the Lowertown neighborhood in St. Paul or SoHo in Manhattan to experience a neighborhood changed by an influx of artists. Artists affect the aesthetic of buildings, a neighborhood’s street life, and its commuting patterns. They impact local commerce as businesses adapt to meet new demand, and citywide economics as they produce and consume in place, creating an environment conducive to new development (Currid, 2009; Throsby, 1994). This cycle is enhanced by artist’s tendency to “cluster” to derive inspiration from peers and increase productivity (Markusen and Schrock, 2006 & Currid and Connolly, 2008). Artists are constrained by (or perhaps drawn to) large working spaces that can accommodate their various mediums and the tools and materials needed to produce them. This tendency has led artists to reinvent industrial and manufacturing buildings into lofts, and pioneer neighborhoods on the periphery of downtowns where such buildings exist.

Federal and local housing laws have sought to protect artists over the years, but Zukin (1982) and others have demonstrated that they often have the opposite effect, resulting in both their own displacement and the displacement of others. This presents a problem: artists have proven to be both adept agents of neighborhood change and its eventual victims. Affordable artist housing attempts to harness the transformative nature of artists while mitigating their displacement. In this way, it operationalizes the “SoHo Effect” for mutual citywide benefit by acting as a vehicle for affordable housing, economic development, historic preservation, and urban design. There is a dearth of research on
affordable artist housing, but an abundance of strategies for analyzing the effect of the broader usage of
art and culture as economic development (Strom, 2010).

This thesis will analyze the cultural and economic effects of affordable artist housing to allow
planners, economic development officials, and developers in shrinking cities to more effectively
understand its motivations and implications. It will critique its conceptual underpinnings and attempt to
determine whether it is successful in producing affordable housing, facilitating economic growth,
encouraging historic preservation, and creating cultural capital. This thesis will seek to understand the
motivations for affordable artist housing by asking whether government officials and developers pursue
artist housing because of its effect on communities (and the basis for doing so), because of its benefits
for a special-needs population (artists), because of its effect on the economy, or for other reasons.

I focused on Read’s Artspace in downtown Bridgeport, Connecticut, a former department store
built in 1925 and redeveloped into affordable artist housing in 2004 (see Figure 1). I first analyzed
literature in the disparate fields of arts and culture as economic development strategies, artist housing,
historic preservation, and affordable housing. Through case studies, I identified themes that connect each
field and contribute to our understanding of the motivation for, and effects of affordable artist housing. I
conducted interviews with artists, affordable artist housing developers, private developers, economic
development officials, politicians, and local planning officials to gain a qualitative understanding of the
issues. I analyzed secondary sources such as economic data and historical events to contextualize the
information gathered from the interview subjects.

Background & Literature Review

The story of the Northern Warehouse Artist’s Cooperative, one of the nation’s first affordable artist
housing developments, reveals the various effects of this type of development. The Lowertown
neighborhood in St. Paul, Minnesota was a bustling transportation hub in the late 1800’s. It was once
estimated that twenty-five percent of all railroad mileage across the United States passed through the
city’s warehouse district (Earhart, 1992). The fortunes of railroad magnates like James J. Hill grew with
the railroads and were exemplified in the massive, ornamented structures built alongside the tracks (Moe,
1997). In the ensuing decades, Lowertown suffered from disinvestment due to the decline of railroads,
improvements to roads and highways, and the abandonment of cities by shipping and manufacturing
companies in search of cheaper space in the hinterlands (Gadwa, 2010).

In the mid-1970’s, Mayor George Latimer attempted to reverse the fortunes of Lowertown through
tax subsidies, zoning regulation, and an economic development strategy built around arts and culture. In
1976, he secured a $10 million contribution from the McKnight Foundation to establish the Lowertown
Redevelopment Corporation (LRC), a quasi-governmental agency. The LRC secured the neighborhood’s inclusion on the National Register of Historic Places in 1983, it attracted the St. Paul Farmer’s Market to the neighborhood in the mid 1980’s, and it embraced affordable artist housing as a long-term economic development strategy, not merely “a transitional instrument to attract higher-end development.” (Moe, 1997) In the country’s first Low Income Housing Tax Credit (“LIHTC”) transaction for affordable artist housing in 1990, the newly formed non-profit developer Artspace completed an adaptive reuse of a factory building called the Northern Warehouse Artists’ Cooperative (see Figure 2). In addition to two other buildings by the same developer in the Lowertown neighborhood, Latimer’s efforts resulted in the creation of 116 affordable artist housing units.

From 1980 to 2000, the population of Lowertown grew 372% and the housing stock increased by 560%, far outpacing the growth of St. Paul (Gadwa, 2010). Inflation-adjusted rents in Lowertown increased by 52% as well. Today, the neighborhood is a bustling hive of activity that bears no resemblance to its former desolate, underutilized state. This story demonstrates the ability of affordable artist housing, in concert with requisite government subsidies, to effect change in neighborhoods. The relevant question for this thesis is what other changes take place? Population increases, historic preservation, and safer streets can be perceived as positive externalities, but rent increases and an erosion of neighborhood character are perhaps less so.

Art, artists, and culture have emerged as economic development strategies for cities across the United States. This takes many forms, including arts-based curriculum in schools, public art, arts and cultural districts, and others. Over the past few decades, cities have harnessed these concepts in a variety of different ways to revitalize neighborhoods, adaptively reuse manufacturing buildings, and stimulate economic development. Affordable artist housing has emerged as one such vehicle for arts-based economic development, as it seeks to leverage the perceived transformative effect of artists for citywide benefit, often by siting the buildings in low income communities. Academics from a broad range of disciplines have studied arts and culture as economic development strategies and have attempted to draw conclusions on the degree to which art impacts communities (Borrup 2006; Grams & Warr 2003; Grodach 2010; Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007; Guetzkow 2002).

Due to the lack of unbiased scholarship on affordable artist housing (Strom, 2010), this literature review will focus on the use of art and culture as an economic development strategy, significant policies, case studies related to artist housing, and affordable housing. It will identify the nexus at which these fields meet and it will attempt to thread them together to further understand the motivation and potential effect that affordable artist housing might have on a community.
Arts and Culture as an Economic Development Strategy

Existing literature on art and culture as an economic development strategy has utilized a framework that generally measures, both qualitatively and quantitatively, the effect of art on the individual, the community, and the local economy (Guetzkow 2002). The arts have been perceived as a panacea of sorts for a variety of societal issues. Recent studies have shown that arts in the classroom have a positive effect on academic performance and discipline (Fiske 1999; Albert 1995), investment in arts and culture programs lead to perceptions of uniqueness and a sense of place (Borrup 2006; Grams & Warr 2003), and investment in arts districts and cultural institutions result in economic growth (Grodach 2010). This broad range of outcomes indicates that art and culture affect communities in a variety of ways, although those effects are difficult to attribute to any specific strategy.

Generating tax revenue, promoting tourism, stabilizing marginal neighborhoods, and attracting corporations to cities through cultural institutions, concert halls, museums, and arts districts has become a strategy for cities hoping to revitalize urban cores and reassert their competitiveness and uniqueness (Grodach & Loukaitou-Sideris, 2007). However, the rise of the “Creative Class” motivated planners and legislators to shift away from simply cultural consumption, towards cultural production (Florida, 2002; Strom, 2010). Artists play a special role in this shift as they are simultaneous consumers and producers. By nature, they complete a virtuous cycle by simply being; they create a creative environment, which is integral to the subsequent development of other industries, as Florida (2002) implies: “a broadly creative environment is critical for generating technological creativity and the commercial innovations and wealth that flow from it” (p. 21). In this sense, artist housing is an effective tool for economic development officials seeking to grow their “creative class.”

Figure 2 – Northern Warehouse, built in the early 1900’s (left) and in modern day (right), shown to the back left of the building in the foreground, Tilsner Artist Cooperative, also an Artspace development. Source: Minnesota Historical Society (www.mnhs.org) & alleyraven ©
Florida identifies this group in the following way, “the distinguishing characteristic of the creative class is that its members engage in work whose function is to ‘create meaningful new forms.’ The super-creative core of this new class includes scientists and engineers, university professors, poets and novelists, artists, entertainers, actors, designers, and architects, as well as the ‘thought leadership’ of modern society: non-fiction writers, editors, cultural figures, think-tank researchers, analysts, and other opinion-makers” (p.8). Research suggests that the conventional wisdom about art and culture as an economic development strategy is shifting away from large scale, institutional investment in cultural attractions, towards smaller, de-centralized place-based investment. Economic development officials have incentivized this investment to cluster, resulting in a cross-fertilization of other “creative” industries on a neighborhood level (Markusen and Schrock, 2006 & Currid and Connolly, 2008). Recent governmental funding initiatives aimed at promoting creative industries support this statement.

In 2003, the State of Michigan launched the Cool Cities Initiative, a program to attract “young knowledge workers” to cities throughout Michigan by making them more “attractive, vibrant, and diverse places to live.” The Cool Cities Initiative distributed 20 grants of up to $100,000. Program officials gathered information on what makes a city “cool” by talking to city and state advisory groups, conducting workshops with universities, and administering an online survey. Over 13,000 respondents listed the most important attributes of their preferred place to live as safe streets, affordability, and walkable streets. Arts and Culture ranked 16th on the list. Despite this relatively low ranking, a number of grants were issued to arts-based programs, including Dwelling Place, a non-profit housing developer in Grand Rapids, which used the funds as well as other government funding to develop 35 affordable artist housing units across seven historic buildings.

The city of Austin, Texas offers loan guarantees to private lenders that extend credit to “creative” businesses (Strom, 2010), while Providence, Rhode Island actively pursues artists to relocate to the city and offers sales tax breaks to artists settling in certain areas on income generated by their art (Schupbach, 2003). These policies indicate an effort to attract the broadly-defined “creative class” to cities in a general, while affordable artist housing is designed to attract investment to specific neighborhoods. This may be attributed to a precedent set by artist housing in New York City.

**Artist Housing**

Artists affect neighborhoods spatially, aesthetically, and economically. They “pioneer” otherwise underutilized areas of cities which can result in their eventual displacement (Zukin, 1982). One of the first and most famous examples of artists as a transformative agent for neighborhood change can be found in New York City (Strom, 2010). The SoHo neighborhood in lower Manhattan (“South of Houston”)
emerged as an enclave for artists in the early 1960’s out of the need to collaborate with other artists by “clustering,” and a demand for large and inexpensive living and working spaces.

This phenomenon, also known as the “SoHo effect,” did not happen in isolation. Light manufacturing declined in lower Manhattan in the 1960’s due to a variety of factors including a decreasing labor market, industrial agglomeration in other parts of the city, and a political climate that promoted the interests of the patrician elite and other landowners (Zukin, 1982). This demise created a glut of supply in manufacturing lofts: previously home to machinery, the spaces had tall ceilings and windows, wide plank wood floors, and cast iron facades fabricated on assembly lines that owners purchased inexpensively from trade magazines. They were aesthetically appealing to artists and fulfilled the need for space. The lofts of SoHo nurtured the Pop Art movement and artists such as Frank Stella and Andy Warhol, who embraced the concept of mass-producing art. Legislators became aware of artists living in these lofts, and passed laws to protect artist’s housing options and affordability standards, while simultaneously preserving the buildings themselves. In 1964, New York State legislators passed an amendment to the Multiple Dwelling Law (MDL) known as Article 7-B, entitling artists to rent manufacturing and commercial lofts for combined living and studio use (Zukin, 1982). The justification for this zoning change lay in mostly economic terms: the high cost of rent elsewhere in the city, the low incomes of artists, the artist’s need for large work spaces, and the implied social and economic value that cities derive from concentrations of artistic production. These terms are best exemplified in the text of Article 7-B: “The cultural life of cities…is enhanced by the residence…of large numbers of persons regularly engaged in the visual fine arts.” Artists organized and influenced the passage of this legislation, arguing partially on the basis that they were the “machines” taking the place of the actual manufacturing equipment, but not replacing the manufacturing ethos of the community. Warhol’s studio was named “The Factory,” and when asked why he had begun silk-screening prints onto single canvases, famously stated “The reason I’m painting this way is that I want to be a machine, and I feel that whatever I do and do machine-like is what I want to do.”

The so-called “SoHo Effect” has proliferated in cities and neighborhoods across the country due to the artist’s ability to create a cultural zeitgeist, attract more “creatives,” and spur investment (Currid, 2009). Art and cultural production possess qualities that are not merely economic, and are not found in other goods. They can be irrationally consumed and created, they are heterogeneous by nature, they are subject to creative and cultural whims, and are unpredictable in both inception and success on consumer markets (Currid, 2009; Throsby, 1994). This complex reality results in a place-based production and consumption model. Increasingly, non-traditional art forms such as film, fashion, and music are turned into commodities. This commodification extends to neighborhoods. Locations such as SoHo, Williamsburg, Harlem, Paris, Haight-Ashbury, and Hollywood represent a connection between artistic
production resulting from a particular place, and time. “People desire goods associated with a specific place because they want, at a distance, the place itself.” (Molotch, 1996, p. 229)

New York City gave rise to this phenomenon in 1968 by amending Article 7-B to include performing and creative artists. In 1971, another amendment made the classification as an artist more subjective; the criteria only required a need for space and a “commitment to the arts,” not professional competence or occupational definition. This subtle change opened the door to more rapid neighborhood change and gentrification. Residents with deep pockets and a loose affiliation to the arts began moving into SoHo and driving up rents. Zukin (1982) points to the democratization of art, the changing status of art and artists, an increasing ecological awareness and appreciation of small-scale construction and reuse, and New York City’s hegemonic position in artistic production in the 1960’s as explanations why neighborhood change followed artists in SoHo.

Westbeth Artist Housing, developed in the late 1960’s, is the earliest example of affordable artist housing in the country. Revolutionary for its time, Westbeth is a 384-unit, 13 building complex in West Village built for Bell Telephone Laboratories in 1898 (see Figure 3). Opened in 1970, Westbeth was jointly developed by the National Council on the Arts, an independent federal agency promoting arts and culture,
The project utilized subsidies from the Federal Housing Administration and was rezoned by the Department of City Planning. “City planners and advocates for the arts, as well as developers, preservationists, and tenant organizations all looked to Westbeth as a model not only for artist lofts but also for the future of urban economies,” to “provide a new way to revitalize postindustrial cities.” (Trask, 2015) The project, while perhaps too unique to be duplicated, nevertheless created a new typology for affordable housing and for utilizing the arts as an economic development tool.

Affordability has played a prominent role in artist housing. Artists found the underutilized industrial buildings of SoHo to be spacious, close to other artists, and most importantly cheap. Likewise, artist-residents of Northern Warehouse in Lowertown and Westbeth in New York City benefited greatly from government-sponsored affordability programs which protected them from rent increases and other market forces. Nevertheless, a review of affordable housing literature through the artist housing lens reveals a contradiction. While the motivation for projects like Northern Warehouse and Westbeth appears to be simply the delivery of affordable housing for artists, the driving force behind these developments are in fact the neighborhood and economic benefits they produce. This suggests that affordable housing is the nexus of economic development and artist housing.

**Affordable Housing**

Cities across the country develop affordable housing in a few distinct ways. They may have housing authorities that receive federal funds to build and manage public housing or they distribute federal or state funds to incentivize private developers to build affordable housing themselves. Some cities target specific neighborhoods or populations in need of housing assistance, such as teachers, public safety workers, and artists (Bloom 2008).

Marcuse (1995) and others have pointed out that although the primary objective of affordable housing is housing for low income residents, it has historically served a variety of secondary purposes aimed at advancing economic and social interests. Over the years, affordable housing has been used to create jobs during the Great Depression, stimulate the economy, and engender racial segregation through slum clearance (Marcuse, 1995 & Edson, 2011).

The first major piece of affordable housing legislation was the Federal Housing Administration (FHA), created in 1934 and organized under the Department of Housing and Urban Development (National Housing Act of 1934). The FHA initially insured single family mortgages, but amendments over the years expanded its reach into multifamily mortgages as well. In basic terms, it was essentially an insurance company focused on the proliferation of middle-class housing. In 1937, the United States
Housing Act created the statutory structure for public housing, much of it remaining in place today. Significantly, the preamble to the Act lists job creation as the primary purpose, followed by the secondary purpose of providing housing (U.S. Housing Act of 1937). Investment in affordable housing waned over the years. Among other motivations, the failure of public housing, evidenced in Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis and Cabrini-Green Homes in Chicago, fueled opposition to a federally sponsored supply-side solution to housing low-income residents. Innovations such as Low Income Housing Tax Credits (LIHTC) were developed to leverage private market involvement in the affordable housing industry by allocating credits against qualified projects to be sold on a secondary market. The HOME program aimed at block grants further subsidized projects, while Section 8 vouchers were a tenant subsidy that bridged the gap between incomes and rents (Edson, 2011).

In the wake of the 2008 housing crisis, lawmakers loosened regulation on the populations that could be allocated tax credit financing, specifically tenants “involved in artistic or literary activities” (Housing and Economic Recovery Act of 2008). Affordable artist housing developers across the country, previously threatened by Fair Housing Laws, were now explicitly authorized to utilize federal, state, and local housing subsidies in addition to contributions from private individuals and charitable organizations. The potential neighborhood and economic effects of this revision appear to have been vital to its passage, as the Democratic Senator from Washington Maria Cantwell went on record to support “innovative housing developments…that are being used as part of a larger redevelopment strategy to rebuild neighborhoods” (Orfield, 2016). Developers such as Minneapolis-based Artspace are at the forefront of this market, having refined a successful model that partners with local advocacy groups and establishes ongoing community outreach.¹ The organization ostensibly shields artists from displacement inherent to the “SoHo Effect” and has a multidimensional effect on surrounding neighborhoods, community programming, cultural perceptions, and urbanistic elements such as historic preservation and improved pedestrian experience.

The Research Center for Arts and Culture at Columbia University conducted a study of artists in several cities in the late 1990’s. This study found that the respondent group had an average income of $48,584, compared to a national average of $42,000 in 1999 (Jeffri, 1998). However, the median of this study was $25,000 which suggests that a number of high-earning artists may have skewed the average (Strom, 2010). Seventy-eight percent had obtained at least a college degree, and half of that group had obtained a postgraduate degree. Thirty-eight percent had written to elected officials. Interestingly, eighty-seven percent voted in national elections and seventy-eight percent voted in local or state elections. The 2014 U.S. Census Bureau congressional election turnout rate was forty-two percent, the lowest since

¹ From “The Art of Creative Placemaking: An Artspace Report”
1978 when the Census Bureau began asking (U.S. Census, 2015). This implies that artists are not among the neediest economically, but they have imputed value that warrants investment in their home and work environments, the benefits of which are expected to extend into their communities.

Figure 4 – The Schmidt Brewery in an undated photograph (top), Schmidt's Artist Lofts in modern day (middle), and an example of a Schmidt's Artist Loft amenity, a rooftop patio with an indoor cooking range (bottom). Source: www.schmidtartistlofts.com
The motivations for investment in affordable artist housing are complex and largely top down. Policymakers, landowners, and artists themselves stand to reap the greatest benefit, but the same cannot be said for non-artist low income residents, whose interests are largely overlooked in this type of development. Affordable artist housing is generally more expensive than traditional affordable housing, requiring more tax-payer subsidy and arguably serving a narrower population. Larger floorplans and taller ceilings, to accommodate the artist’s workspace, have become the standard. More lavish amenities such as yoga rooms, media centers, and rooftop patios with cooking ranges can also be found in certain projects, including a former brewery-turned-affordable artist housing development in Minneapolis called the Schmidt Artist Lofts (see Figure 4).

In this sense, affordable artist housing is not simply a vehicle for affordable housing, nor is it purely an economic development strategy. Rather, it occupies a shared space, a hybrid of the two policy realms and perhaps others, including historic preservation. By producing broad-based returns for housing, economic development, and planning officials, affordable housing becomes defensible on policy grounds in these categories and perhaps others.

Chapter Two

Research Design

Recent studies on the economic effect of art have relied on research methodologies including Census and economic data analysis, complex input-output models, hedonic demand theory analysis, surveys, and interviews with stakeholders in the housing, economic development, and real estate development industries (Americans for the Arts, 2012; Albert, 1995; Currid, 2007; Currid & Connolly, 2008; Fiske, 1999; Gadwa, 2010; Grams & Warr, 2003; Grodach, 2010; Strom, 2010). Much of the existing research has been conducted by consulting firms funded by affordable housing developers themselves, or by foundations that have donated to affordable artist housing projects (Gadwa, 2010). This dearth of critical analysis, as well as the compelling nature of the topic, are the primary motivations for this thesis.

This thesis will primarily focus on Read’s Artspace, a 61-unit affordable artist housing project with over fifteen years of operating history. The building is located in the heart of Bridgeport, Connecticut (see Figure 5), a shrinking city with a declining population and economic base. This thesis asks what effects a relatively small arts-based affordable housing project has in such a place, if any, and could other shrinking cities utilize and improve these strategies? The potential benefits are compelling, especially in cities spatially impacted by industry on a grand scale, such as Rochester, New York or Lowell,
Massachusetts. There is also an application to improve life safety in cities with strong real estate markets that price out artists. This was most apparent in the deadly fire in December 2016 at the illegal artist housing development known as “Ghost Ship” in Oakland, California. This thesis will rely on existing policies, literature, and data to understand the context, contributing factors, and various outcomes of Read’s Artspace. It will conduct interviews with the organizations and individuals directly involved in this field. Finally, it will analyze their responses to more comprehensively understand the motivations, as well as the consequences, for this type of development on various stakeholders.

Figure 5 – Map of downtown Bridgeport; Read’s Artspace is #9, referred to as “Sterling Market Lofts”
Source: Reimagining Downtown Bridgeport Master Plan, 2007
Location

The city of Bridgeport, Connecticut was a significant economic hub in the Northeast in the early 20th century. Situated just minutes away from wealthy enclaves such as Fairfield and Greenwich, Bridgeport is 60 miles from New York City and 150 miles from Boston. The city is accessible by port, railroad, and highway. This proximity and connectivity once drove the local economy. Bridgeport was home to a large manufacturing sector in the garment and textile industries as well as diverse companies such as the Remington Arms firearm company, Sikorsky Aircraft helicopter manufacturers, and native son P.T. Barnum’s circus troupe, Barnum & Bailey. The city has a 375-acre shorefront park designed by Frederick Law Olmstead along its southern shore. Beginning in the 1950’s, the economy of Bridgeport declined due to the effects of globalization and changing socioeconomic trends. Between 1960 and 2000, the population of Bridgeport shrunk by twelve percent and employment plummeted by forty-two percent (Slepski, 2000). In 1991, the city of Bridgeport declared bankruptcy.

Bridgeport is heavily reliant on property taxes to fund the city government. The city has a relatively small land mass of fifteen square miles, and its shrinking population has led to extreme measures to address budget shortfalls. “We’re totally dependent on property taxes to pay for government,” stated former Mayor Bill Finch (Sugarman, 2006). In 2014, the city of Bridgeport had the highest effective tax rate in the country (Frohlich & Hess, 2014). In 2015, the value of Bridgeport’s taxable property plummeted by $1 billion, to $6 billion. This led to a twenty-nine percent increase in property taxes in one year, an effort to address a $20 million budget deficit (Foderaro & Hussey, 2016).

City and state officials have attempted to boost the Bridgeport economy over the years with mixed results. Recent failed initiatives include a casino backed by Las Vegas magnate Steve Wynn and an amusement park proposed by Donald Trump. Successful initiatives came in the form of destination retail and sports stadium development. In the early 2000’s, the city contributed funds toward the development of the $19 million Harbor Yard stadium for the Bridgeport Bluefish minor league baseball team and the adjacent Webster Bank Arena, a ten-thousand seat multipurpose enclosed stadium (Bridgeport Master Plan, 2008). In 2015, the city of Bridgeport committed $31 million through tax increment bond financing to the Steelpointe Harbor waterfront development for the construction of a Bass Pro Shop (Bailey, 2014).

Two plans drafted in the late 2000’s created a vision for future development. In 2007 the Bridgeport Downtown Special Services District (DSSD), an organization consisting of mostly private landowners and corporate stakeholders in Bridgeport’s urban core, partnered with city and state officials to draft a strategic plan entitled “Re-imagining Downtown Bridgeport” (the “Downtown Plan”). Elements of this plan were incorporated into the subsequent citywide master plan completed in 2008. The Downtown Plan detailed a list of planning strategies to encourage economic development in the teardrop-
shaped urban core as well as the adjacent neighborhoods Steel Point and South End (see Figures 5 & 6).

The Downtown Plan is filled with hopeful rhetoric and ambitious strategies to attract young “creatives” downtown to bolster the office market. It relies on data which identifies a correlation between the size of the 25 – 34 age cohort and overall job growth. It calls them “hard-working,” “ambitious,” “new,” “innovative,” “entrepreneurial,” and capable of acting as a “magnet for other populations.” (p. 17). The Downtown Plan acknowledges the role of Bridgeport artists in offering “greater diversity and richness of urban design and public space” (p. 105) and boosting its “funky, hip vibe.” (p. 118) It portrays developers as the industrious risk-takers, and artists as a resource from which profit can be extracted like oil from a well: “Developers have acted on their own to tap this market…the downtown can gain much from this albeit small sector.” (p. 118) The Plan relies on “creatives” to pioneer downtown Bridgeport, “just as artists have pioneered neighborhoods like SoHo.” (p. 105) Only then will other demographics begin to move there. But downtown Bridgeport is limited by its existing population of about 1,000 residents, who are predominantly low income. “The local population and foot traffic of a center has a disproportionate impact on its retail mix and image…as more downtown developments come on line in the upcoming years, the community of more affluent young residents is expected to grow.” (p. 106)

Following the report, the Connecticut Economic and Community Development, the DSSD, and the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County partnered to form the CreateHereNow program to provide financial incentives for artistically-inclined entrepreneurs in order to fill vacant storefronts. Michael Moore, the CEO of the DSSD stated, “What we have here is a thriving community of artists and musicians. We are trying to leverage our assets and improve the downtown district” (Bissell, 2013). Former Mayor Bill Finch concurred: “Bridgeport’s artists and small business owners have been one of the driving forces of the success of our downtown neighborhood” (Ocasio, 2013).

Bridgeport has been home to an active art community since the early 1990’s. Artists tended to work on the outskirts of the city, in repurposed buildings formerly occupied by manufacturing companies. 305 Knowlton is a gallery and artist studio business located in a tool and die manufacturing building built in 1895, the Armstrong Manufacturing Company's former headquarters.\(^2\) The American Fabrics Arts Building has housed 27 artists since 1992 in a former lace manufacturing building built in 1909.\(^3\) Nest Arts Factory is home to 32 artists in the Cricket Hosiery Company's former headquarters on the west side of Bridgeport.\(^4\)

\(^2\) From the 305 Knowlton website, www.305knowlton.com
\(^3\) From the American Fabrics Arts Building website, www.amfabarts.com
\(^4\) From the Nest Arts Factory website, www.nestartsfactory.com
The place-based economic development strategies in the Downtown Plan aimed at “creative” industries are predicated on the foundation created by Read’s Artspace. Elected officials promoted subsidized artist housing in the late 1990’s by redeveloping Read’s department store, a landmark building located in downtown Bridgeport once touted as “the finest department store between New York and Boston.” Headquartered in Bridgeport, the company closed its flagship location in 1981 and the building remained shuttered until 2004 when Artspace, the prominent affordable artist housing developer, officially re-opened the project as 61 live-work studios across five stories and over 121,000 square feet. Through a variety of public funds and charitable donations, the public-private development team raised $14 million towards the redevelopment. Read’s Artspace was embraced from the outset, with “wholehearted support
of the mayor’s office and the city council, the business community, area philanthropic organizations, artists, and grass roots organizations” (Doniger, 2001).

Artists were used by the city of Bridgeport as agents of economic development. The city leveraged a group “rich in cultural capital but poor in economic capital” to manufacture revitalization downtown (Cameron & Coaffee, 2005, p. 40). It relied on real estate developers to foment a market after that point, a process that Zukin refers to as “the commodification and private consumption of [the] artistic milieu” (Zukin, 1982, p. 78). After Read’s Artspace opened in 2004, there was talk of a downtown renaissance. New development plans were submitted, restaurants and retail businesses opened, and the population grew. Setbacks were expected, and indeed they occurred. In 1999, with the help of a $2.5 million in state and city funds, The Playhouse on the Green (formerly The Polka Dot Theater) re-opened its doors (Burgeson, 2011). The Bijou Theater, also located in a historic building in downtown Bridgeport, reopened in 2009 after a lengthy dormant period. By 2016, both theaters had gone out of business.

**Methodology**

This thesis questions the underlying assumptions upon which the concept of affordable artist housing is premised. It asks whether government officials pursue affordable artist housing because of its effect on communities, benefits for a special-needs population (artists), effect on the economy, or for other reasons? It will ask what are the consequences for the city’s economic development, the neighborhood, artist residents, and non-artist residents? What is the perception of affordable artist housing among affordable housing advocacy groups, and what is the practical effect on the housing stock? Finally, it will ask whether affordable artist housing has improved the lives of artist-residents, and whether it has made an impact on other low income residents?

This thesis relies on primary data in the form of interviews with artist-residents at Read’s Artspace, local Bridgeport artists, officials from Artspace, local Bridgeport developers, economic development and planning officials in Bridgeport, and the CEO of the Downtown Special Services District (Interview questions can be found in Appendix 1). Once collected, this data will be organized and arranged so that the questions posed in the first paragraph can be addressed with respect to Bridgeport. This research design and methodology was approved by the Columbia University Institutional Review Board on December 28, 2016.

The Findings section will be presented as a series of interviews with individuals intimately familiar with the development and impact of Read’s Artspace on downtown Bridgeport. I engaged with these specific individuals because my research suggested that they had the most salient knowledge of either Read’s Artspace, the urban core, the city of Bridgeport, the local art scene, or a combination of all of
these elements. I acknowledge that this method of analysis may exclude groups that were influential in this project’s development or individuals uniquely qualified to comment on its impact. It also values personal experience and opinions over quantitative metrics. This was a deliberate decision. There are many quantitative studies on the impacts of art-based economic development, but very few, to the best of my knowledge, that deal directly with one affordable artist housing development and the people responsible for its creation. Focusing on the people is the most effective way to tell the story of downtown Bridgeport after the development of Read’s Artspace. In this sense, the following narrative describes one version of this story.

One benefit of focusing on an unheralded city like Bridgeport has been the enthusiasm and openness with which its businesspeople, civil servants, business owners, and artists approach citywide improvement. The following individuals are familiar with Read’s Artspace on many different levels. They are the official that negotiated the deal for the city, the developer that is deeply invested in downtown Bridgeport, the artists and business owners around whom the city plans for its future, the politicians, the advocates, and the residents of Bridgeport, Connecticut. Their responses represented either their personal beliefs, the beliefs of the organization for which they work, or both; they are at once honest, cautious, hopeful, guarded, and contradictory. I set out with a series of structured interview questions, but the conversation often became a free-form discussion of issues facing downtown Bridgeport and the city on a macro level. I found my interview subjects to be extremely well-informed and knowledgeable. No one turned down my request for an interview.

Chapter Three

Findings

I have organized my findings around four themes essential to affordable artist housing: Real Estate Development, Economic Development, Placemaking, and Artists. To this, I have added a final section (entitled Artspace) concerned solely with the affordable artist housing developer responsible for Read’s Artspace. Due to limitations in data collection, it is structured as a series of comments rather than a full section.

REAL ESTATE DEVELOPMENT

My first interview took place on January 10th, 2017 with Phil Kuchma, a lifelong Bridgeport resident and owner of Kuchma Corporation, a prominent local real estate development firm. Kuchma is one of the
largest landowners in downtown Bridgeport and is well known among businesspeople, politicians, and artists. He purchased his first building in 1976 and now owns eleven downtown properties, three of which are mixed-use and have been developed in the past five years. He is perhaps best known for developing Bijou Square, a $29.6 million, two-phase project involving the historic rehabilitation of two existing buildings and the construction of a third new building. One of the structures renovated was the Bijou Theatre itself, which opened in 1910 as a 540-seat silent movie house on the first floor and a ballroom and dance studio on the second and third floors (see Figure 7). The renovated buildings now contain a 202-seat theater for movies, performances, and events, as well as office and retail space on the street level. In 2012, Bijou Square won the nationwide J. Timothy Anderson Award for “Best Historic Rehabilitation Involving New Construction,” awarded by the National Housing and Rehabilitation Association. Bijou Square is located directly across the street from Read’s Artspace.

Phil Kuchma is affable, articulate, and he possesses a range of facts and anecdotes about downtown Bridgeport that inspires confidence, no doubt an asset in his day-to-day business dealings. He speaks of Bridgeport pragmatically, acknowledging the city’s assets, including its strategic location between Boston and New York City, and its diverse transportation nodes including highway, railway, and ferry. He also points out the city’s position between pockets of extreme affluence in Fairfield, Greenwich, and Stamford. But he is quick to point out the city’s drawbacks: it is surrounded by wealth and yet it possesses none. It suffers from the bad reputation that older, industrial cities often have. Visions of vacant warehouses and an empty downtown haunt his description. But in his words, this reputation is “not based in facts, but rather in hearsay.” Kuchma believes that building up downtown Bridgeport will attract the wealth that hovers around the city but hasn’t yet committed to invest.

Kuchma was involved in the development of Read’s Artspace from the very beginning. He was a board member of the Bridgeport Economic Development Corporation (BEDCO), a public-private partnership between the city, the Bridgeport Regional Business Council, and the business community. BEDCO negotiated to deal between the city and the developer, Artspace Projects, Inc (Artspace). As part of the negotiations, Artspace presented their plan before a board consisting of government officials and business leaders, including Mr. Kuchma.

In his assessment, during the late 1990’s there were only “about a dozen” occupied apartments downtown. This statistic is striking, given the fact that Bridgeport is Connecticut’s most populous city with nearly 150,000 residents. Read’s was the first project to bring housing downtown at any scale. He called affordable artist housing “a natural thing to do” and “a logical and important first step” which “created momentum towards a mixed-use downtown.” While Mr. Kuchma’s opinion naturally aligns with the literature on art as economic development, his justification is perhaps less academic. “There is something wonderful about art, and those without artistic talent are fascinated by it.” He mentioned the importance
of attracting and retaining “creatives,” whom he classified as “architects, designers, artists, and web designers.” Mr. Kuchma’s belief in the power of the arts also led him to work with Chashama, a nonprofit organization that promotes the arts by creating temporary studio and gallery spaces. Bridgeport is one of only two locations where they work outside of New York City. Mr. Kuchma has provided one of his vacant storefronts in his Bijou Square development for use as a temporary gallery space. Chashama’s founder is Anita Durst, daughter of Douglas Durst, the president of the Durst Organization, and one of the wealthiest real estate families in New York City.

Although Mr. Kuchma views Read’s Artspace as a net positive for downtown Bridgeport, he is critical of the developer and the ongoing operation of the building. He recounted Artspace’s initial presentation to the economic development board in which they promised “a visitor-friendly development with a first floor occupied with live-work units and a vibrant storefront.” Unfortunately, in his opinion, this has not come to pass. He believes that Read’s Artspace offers very little interaction with the public. He pointed out that the gallery and common space are open to the public infrequently, on a quarterly basis. He also believes that Artspace has also tested the limits of its commitment to affordable artist housing. Mr. Kuchma estimates that only sixty or seventy percent of residents are practicing artists. He is also ambivalent about the residents role in the local economy. Low income residents don’t have much disposable income. This makes their buying power, especially which regard to downtown retail, relatively weak. However, Mr. Kuchma believes that the community finds value in artists, and as a result there is inherent value in their existence.

Our conversation ended on more tangible, macro-level critiques of Bridgeport and hopes for its future. He explained that downtown is small, with an urban core of six blocks by six blocks. This small size, and the presence of multiple parcels of undeveloped land, creates an opportunity for developers to assemble land and influence the market more easily. However, the city must do a better job of reorienting people’s thinking about downtowns. “Think of downtown as a place you’re going, like a mall or movie theater,” he explains. Only then will visitors park their cars and explore. Of course, this framework of the downtown as a “destination” is challenged by the ring of highways that encircle downtown and inhibit pedestrian activity. The absence of an “anchor” institution is also a challenge. Kuchma unfavorably compared Bridgeport to Hartford, with its state capitol, and New Haven, with Yale University. But Kuchma is bullish about the city’s appetite for development and attitude in business dealings. He described local

---

5 Not coincidentally, he collects rent from Antinozzi Associates, an architecture firm whose offices are located in the Bijou Square development, as well as B:Hive, a co-working space also leasing space at Bijou Square whose subtenants include creative strategists, tech firms, graphic designers, web designers, stylists, nutritionists, and other job titles incorporating the word “creative”
politicians and economic development officials as “absolutely” conducive and accommodating of development, “but (there are) not enough people to meet the opportunity on a city level.”

Figure 7 – Bijou Theater in the early 1900’s (top) and modern day (bottom) following historic rehabilitation by the Kuchma Corporation
Source: www.thetravelempire.com & The Connecticut Post

The lack of personnel to meet development demand doesn’t seem to be stopping local government officials from advancing plans to redevelop downtown Bridgeport. I spoke to Elizabeth
Torres, the CEO of the Bridgeport Neighborhood Trust (BNT), on February 10th, 2017. The BNT is a non-profit affordable housing developer that uses a “block-by-block” approach to development which seeks to “transform communities” in the Bridgeport metro area. She described a recent roundtable meeting organized by Mayor Joseph Ganim in which twenty of the top local developers discussed strategies for improving downtown. According to Torres, a majority of the conversation was focused on attracting “creatives” and artists downtown. The BNT has no plans to develop affordable artist housing, but Torres is supportive of Reads Artspace in broad terms and is receptive to the arts in general. Echoing Phil Kuchma, she believes that artists are “wired differently,” and they “approach problems and business differently.”

ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Ed Lavernoich is one of the economic development officials to whom Phil Kuchma alluded. Lavernoich is the Interim Director of the Office of Planning and Economic Development (OPED), and has worked in public sector economic development, mostly in Bridgeport, for his entire career. He has served on the BEDCO Board for over twenty years and has spent 26 years at OPED, previously serving as the Interim Director on two separate occasions. He is also a former Board Member of the Steel Point Infrastructure Improvement District, current Treasurer and former Loan Committee Chairman of the Community Capital Fund, and former Executive Director of the Bridgeport Redevelopment Agency.

Ed Lavernoich began our conversation by noting that he and Phil Kuchma had met the previous night to discuss Read’s Artspace. Lavernoich was the Executive Director at BEDCO in the late 1990’s, around the time that Artspace became interested in Bridgeport. The President of BEDCO at the time was Bill Finch, who would become the Mayor of Bridgeport from 2007 through 2015. BEDCO had drafted a downtown redevelopment plan, and it had begun acquiring properties through eminent domain. Affordable artist housing was not part of the plan and, as Ed explained, BEDCO only became aware of the organization through a group of local residents who coaxed Artspace into visiting the city. At that time, Artspace was involved in negotiations with the city of Norwalk to acquire and redevelop a lock factory built in 1856 into affordable artist housing. Instead, that building became “distinctive creative office…combining modern design with industrial past.”

Mr. Lavernoich led the negotiations with Artspace on behalf of the city. After its site visit, Artspace abandoned Norwalk and shifted its focus to Bridgeport. The city prepared their offering, which included sale of the Read’s building for one dollar and the adjacent land parcel as a parking lot with a 99-year

---

6 From the Spinnaker Real Estate Partners, LLC website, [http://spinrep.com/portfolio/the-lock-building/](http://spinrep.com/portfolio/the-lock-building/)
ground lease for $1 per year. Both properties had been acquired through tax foreclosure. The city committed a 15-year tax exemption to the project as well as discretionary Community Development Block Grants funds. The Connecticut Housing and Finance Authority and a variety of local and national charitable foundations also contributed enough funds to meet the $14.1 million development budget. When I asked about Artspace’s equity contribution in a subsequent email, Mr. Lavernoich stated, “I don’t believe they brought any significant equity (capital, financial) to the project.”

In retrospect, Mr. Lavernoich is not overly positive about the negotiations. Artspace “had us over a barrel,” he said, possibly alluding to the developer’s low capital contribution, the loss of potential tax revenue, the beneficial terms on the adjacent parking lot, or a combination of these elements. He is ambivalent about the project’s impact on downtown and the local economy. When asked to elaborate, he stated that there was “no doubt that Read’s was a big deal, and most of the artist-residents are net contributors.” However, he qualifies this final point by stating that “because it’s a LIHTC project, you’re not bringing back people with a great deal of buying power.” “It would be great to have people downtown with high incomes…all this is ultimately about finding ways to bring people with discretionary income downtown.”

His concerns about Artspace partly mirror those of Phil Kuchma. He is skeptical that the majority of Read’s Artspace residents are artists, and he is concerned that Artspace has not made this data available to the city. Back in the late 1990’s when Artspace was negotiating with BEDCO, they assured the city that the screening process for artists would be vigorous, “but it hasn’t turned out to be,” because he believes that non-artists have become a force on the tenant board that screens other applicants. Like Kuchma, he is critical of the gallery’s operating hours. He would like to see the dark, tinted windows on the retail storefront changed, and he would like to address these concerns with Artspace, but he believes they have “lost enthusiasm for this project.” His attempts to meaningfully engage with the landlord haven’t been successful. When asked what improvements he would like to see, he listed replacing the tinted windows, providing details on the tenancy of both artist-residents and retail tenants, offering the gallery to the community for events, and establishing a new point of contact in Artspace’s corporate office with whom he can engage in meaningful conversations.

“I don’t know if Read’s was an enormous catalyst for downtown housing,” he said. Development was starting to emerge around the time the deal was complete and other projects at various stages of development “probably would’ve happened whether Artspace was there or not.” Ultimately, the city has “no appetite for another Artspace project.” But market rate residential development is more than welcome. Adopting Kuchma’s supply-side economic perspective, Lavernoich assured me, “if quality residential projects are created downtown, we can fill it up.”
I asked Ed Lavernoich how the community interacts with Read’s. “I don’t know if the community thinks about them,” he responded. Lavernoich believes that the community thought Artspace would make more of an effort to engage and interact with them.

My conversation with Denese Taylor-Moye confirmed Lavernoich’s suspicion. She is a lifelong Bridgeport resident and the Councilperson for the 131st District since 2008. The 131st District encompasses downtown and portions of the South End and West End neighborhoods. South End is separated from downtown on its northern border by I-95, while the West End is cut off from downtown by Route 8 to the east. In 2006, the Connecticut Center for Economic Analysis at the University of Connecticut ranked neighborhoods in Bridgeport across a variety of social and economic metrics. The West End neighborhood was ranked eleventh out of twelfth place in terms of quality of life due to high crime rates and low levels of educational performance.

When I asked Ms. Taylor-Moye about the biggest challenges facing her District, she identified a lack of school funding, loss of industry and jobs, and flooding. “Growth and development is needed in all parts of the city” she stated. When I asked about her experience with Read’s, she responded by saying she had none. They have never reached out for assistance or invitations to visit the building, and their main point of contact was the head of the downtown business improvement district. Plus, her constituents rarely visit downtown because of a lack of shopping. “Information doesn’t travel outside downtown…if you asked someone on Park Avenue about it, they wouldn’t know anything.” Park Avenue is two blocks from downtown.

Despite her constituency’s lack of experience with Read’s Artspace, she is quick to endorse the project and its potential. “There is a need for a project like Read’s in any city,” she stated. She thanked me for “starting a dialogue” and promised to reach out to Read’s Artspace to chat about their concerns and discuss ways that she could be of service.

PLACEMAKING

Michael Moore is the Chief Executive Officer of the Downtown Special Services District, and as Ms. Taylor-Moye mentioned, he serves as Read’s main point of contact. The DSSD is funded primarily by downtown businesses owners through a special tax assessment. The remaining funds, equal to one quarter of the annual budget, come from fundraising efforts to the local business community by Mr. Moore. At the most basic level, the DSSD is involved in maintenance, public safety, and beautification activities in Bridgeport’s urban core. It cleans curbs, power wash graffiti, operate a hanging flower basket program, fund and coordinate nighttime security patrols, and are currently installing surveillance cameras throughout downtown. Moore is a champion for the downtown business community. He pointed out some
of the business district’s highlights: a daytime population of 8,000, a strong banking presence, and a train station located right in the urban core. Housatonic Community College is home to 5,600 students and faculty, while significant employers include People’s United Bank with over 2,100 employees and the City of Bridgeport with 1,200.

The DSSD is heavily involved in “placemaking” as it attempts to position Bridgeport as a destination for arts, culture, and the creative economy. Mr. Moore cited the South by Southwest festival’s ability to create a cultural zeitgeist for the city of Austin as an inspiration. He intends to achieve this for Bridgeport by highlighting local artist “clusters” and coordinating with them to “activate open space” through performance art and farmers markets. He hopes to leverage the success of the Bridgeport Arts Trail, an annual multi-day event showcasing local artists, through partnerships and monthly events. The DSSD is in the process of establishing an arts planning council to coordinate the different visions. I asked about the Bridgeport Art and Cultural Council (BACC), an organization established in 2010 “to strengthen Bridgeport’s cultural sector’s capacity with leadership, funding, and marketing to advance the City’s quality of life and prosperity.”\(^7\) The BACC was funded by a variety of charitable organizations as well as city funds, and it administered the Mayor’s Neighborhood Arts & Heritage Grant. Mr. Moore replied that the BACC no longer existed, and added, “over several beers I’ll explain why.”

“In the fabric of downtown Bridgeport, the project is very important,” Mr. Moore stated, referring to Read’s Artspace. He believes that residential development is leading the downtown revitalization, although there is a distinct need for more market-rate housing, preferably built with a mix of historic and contemporary design elements. With this, Mr. Moore pointed out a selling point that is hidden in plain sight: Bridgeport’s stock of vacant, historic structures. In his estimation, these buildings give Bridgeport an architectural design theme, and developers, such as Phil Kuchma, who are mixing historic aspects with contemporary, are “making cool spaces.” Mr. Moore shares many of the same views as Phil Kuchma and Ed Lavernoich. He acknowledges Bridgeport’s poor reputation, he regrets that Artspace’s corporate leadership is no longer engaged with the downtown, and he identifies the absence of a downtown anchor as a real problem. But he views downtown Bridgeport in a much larger context, equating the Hartford-to-Stamford corridor to a fledgling Silicon Valley, citing similar levels of patents and intellectual property generated in both areas. He would like to get Bridgeport into that conversation, and incorporating the University of Bridgeport (UB) into the downtown is a “huge part of that.” The DSSD is actively engaging with engineers at UB and is trying to build a programmatic relationship with the University. UB recently created a master plan which uses planning measures to more effectively connect the campus to the downtown, thereby creating an anchor to supply and replenish the city with young knowledge workers.

\(^7\) From the BACC website, [http://bridgeportarts.org/about/](http://bridgeportarts.org/about/).
ARTISTS

Artists are an essential element of Read’s Artspace, the revitalization of Bridgeport, and arts-based economic development in general. Numerous cities have staked their future on the promise of artists and their broadly-defined outgrowth, “creatives.” Artists are a valuable commodity for cities.

Emily Larned is one such artist (see Figure 8). Larned is a self-published artist that specializes in letterpress and “publishing as an art practice.” Her work has been collected and exhibited by over 65 public institutions including the Tate, Getty, Smithsonian, and the Chicago Museum of Contemporary Art. She is currently the Chair of Graphic Design at the Shintaro Akatsu School of Design at the University of Bridgeport. A resident of Bridgeport since 2005, Larned maintains a studio at the American Fabrics Building (AMFAB).

A Connecticut native, Ms. Larned moved to Bridgeport “because of the abundance of industrial space.” At the time, she was commuting approximately 20 miles to New Haven to finish her graduate studies at Yale University. She applied for residency at Read’s Artspace, but did not income qualify. Nevertheless, she viewed Read’s as “something that brought people to the city.” That objective hasn’t been achieved, in her opinion. She characterizes the downtown as “pretty abandoned.” She explained that Bridgeport “feels cut off” in the sense that its proximity to New York City has stunted its cultural growth, inhibiting the development of a unique culture or identity. People go to New York “for something real and interesting” under the false pretense that Bridgeport is neither; Bridgeport is viewed as a bedroom community rather than a place of its own. Her point is that Bridgeport is all of these things: real, interesting, capable of developing and nurturing its own cultural identity. She pointed out organizations such as Bridgeport Generation Now and Design Night Out that are changing this perception through public engagement and grassroots events (see Figure 9). But downtown needs more events “to bring people together,” like open studios and artist showcases. She acknowledged that Read’s Artspace hosted events in the past, but hasn’t been active in recent years apart from opening the first-floor gallery during the Bridgeport Art Trail.

Ms. Larned also pointed out the issue of race, an otherwise unspoken element of the revitalization of downtown Bridgeport. She noted the vibrancy of the African-American art scene, specifically graffiti art, but lamented that these artists don’t have much interaction with artists of other mediums throughout the city. Moreover, she noted that Bridgeport is a “historically African-American city,” but she was not aware of any black artists living in Read’s Artspace. In a subsequent email, Emily pointed to the Crown Heights neighborhood in Brooklyn as an aspiration for Bridgeport. It had achieved an equilibrium of “post-industrial, artist buildings, recent immigrants, established Black businesses, and young trendy
businesses for the so-called creative class.” She was careful to note that Crown Heights was likely dealing with issues surrounding gentrification and displacement, and she implied that Bridgeport would happily accept the overflow, stating “in Bridgeport right now: there is room for everyone!! Plenty of vacancies for that coffee shop without displacing the nail salon.”

Liz Squillace is addressing the issue of vacant storefronts by participating in the CreateHereNow program, the state and city funded initiative to fill vacant storefront with artists, and Chashama, the Durst Organization program that creates temporary gallery spaces. Liz Squillace is a painter, screenprinter, muralist, and owner of Paradox Ink which is “devoted to promoting positive change in the environment by bringing art to public places.” Paradox Ink is located on the second floor of the Bridgeport Arcade Mall, and it was established in 2013 through funding by the CreateHereNow program. Neighboring businesses on the second floor of the Arcade Mall include other design-based “creative” enterprises such as Weaving Workshop (owned and operated by fellow Read’s Artspace resident-artist and Fashion Institute of Technology graduate Ruben Marroquin), architecture and design firm Archicord, the supply company Artist & Craftsman, and creative branding firm BPT Creates. The ground floor of the retail development, the stores which demand the highest rents, are mostly vacant.

Liz Squillace is a resident of Read’s Artspace, where she has lived for nine years. A native of nearby Trumbull, Squillace earned a degree from the Rhode Island School of Design in 1999 and moved to Greenwich. She rented a studio in Stamford during that time, but it was converted to condominiums, and she was displaced. Ms. Squillace found Read’s Artspace after researching affordable live/work

Figure 8 – Selected works by Emily Larned: “Surveying the Art-Going Public for their Opinions on Art” (left); “It is Best to Make the Best of the Worst” (center); the American Fabrics Building logo (right).
Source: www.emilylamed.com; www.amfabarts.com
studios. She completed an online application which included income verification, submitted a portfolio of her work, and conducted an in-person interview with a group of artist-residents before being offered a unit in the building. She is now a member of the interview committee, comprised entirely of artist-residents, which conducts approximately three to six interviews per year. Regarding resident turnover, Ms. Squillace stated “a lot of people have been there since the beginning.”

According to Liz Squillace, Artspace has a good, if limited, relationship with the residents of Read’s Artspace. A third-party management company called Millennium acts as the artist-resident’s first point of contact, and they are directly involved with the building maintenance and operations. A representative from Artspace occasionally attends the resident committee meetings, which acts as a sounding board for resident concerns, but Artspace has limited interaction with the interview committee or the gallery committee which manages the first-floor gallery.

Figure 9 – Bridgeport Design Night Out event in Bridgeport, with artist Liz Squillace featured as a panelist. The organization “is an event series that takes a creative theme and explores how great design is transforming that theme in Connecticut. All with an open bar, food, music, networking, friend-making, and fun!”
Source: www.dnoct.com
Ms. Squillace struck a hopeful tone when discussing the local art community, and the prospects for downtown. “(There are) so many talented people in the building,” referring to the residents of Read’s Artspace specifically. “The painters are very prolific,” as well as the photographers, musicians, craftspeople, and poets that make up the remainder of the building residents. She estimates that eighty percent of residents are practicing artists. However, “people don’t really know about us,” she said, echoing a sentiments of Ed Lavernoich and Denese Taylor-Moye, because Read’s Artspace “is not well publicized.” Like Michael Moore, she laments the disbanding of the Bridgeport Arts and Cultural Council, an outgrowth of Read’s Artspace when it first opened. Grass roots involvement has stepped into the void left by the BACC, led by local artist studios like the Nest, AMFAB, 64 Knowlton, and Read’s Artspace. Ms. Squillace tried to organize and host “open studio” events at Read’s Artspace, and seven other artist-residents agreed to participate. Participation dwindled over time and no events have occurred recently. “It would be nice if there was some sort of arts alliance,” Ms. Squillace concluded.

JodiAnn Strmiska has also addressed storefront vacancy downtown through participation in the Main Street Murals Project, a public art project aimed at beautifying empty retail storefronts. Established in 2011, the program was funded by OPED and the DSSD. Her mural, entitled “Butterfly Dreaming,” alludes to the creative process and the transformation of ideas to reality (see Figure 10). She is a resident of Read’s Artspace and has lived in Bridgeport since 2004. Ms. Strmiska and I were unable to conduct an interview due to scheduling issues, so we exchanged a series of emails. Due to the lack of substantial

Figure 10 – Low resolution screenshot of “Butterfly Dreaming” by Jodi Strmiska, a mural painted on a vacant downtown storefront  
*Source: Screenshot from Google Images*
discussion, I did not garner much insight regarding Read’s Artspace specifically. Her perspective on the Bridgeport political climate, however, is unique. She described a “long history of political cronyism, coupled with mob influence.” She recalled feeling hopeful that Read’s Artspace and the 2007 Downtown Master Plan would lead to revitalization, but they were “doomed to fail because of lack of healthy infrastructure” and because of an exodus of government officials “discouraged and frustrated by the corruption and graft which makes it impossible to gain traction and create anything of lasting value here.” It is possible that she is referring, in part, to the conviction and subsequent reelection of Mayor Joseph Ganim. Her opinion could also be the “hearsay” that Phil Kuchma described, baseless claims that inflict reputational damage to the city. It is unclear to what degree either stance is true.

AFFORDABLE ARTIST HOUSING DEVELOPER

Although Ariel Garcia, a Project Manager at Artspace Projects, Inc., did not work on the initial development of Read’s Artspace, he is familiar with the building and with the city of Bridgeport through his close working relationship with Will Law, the Chief Operating Officer. Garcia is focused on Artspace’s portfolio of properties in the Northeast.

Ariel Garcia has a blunt and unabashed perspective on Read’s Artspace and the city of Bridgeport. He spoke in generalities, describing Read’s Artspace as a potential “catalyst” for downtown that ultimately “hasn’t changed much.” He pointed out the building’s prime location downtown, in a city with excellent transportation and proximity to New York City. Like Ms. Larned’s opinion that proximity to New York City was an obstacle to success, Mr. Garcia believes that Stamford is drawing economic and cultural resources away from Bridgeport. Garcia also alluded to local politicians that are either unable or unwilling to take the necessary steps to revitalize the downtown. He described a government that was “relying on developers to (create) change for them” and a development community encountering “quite a bit of hesitation to invest.” Downtown Bridgeport suffered because of this impasse. It is “difficult to attract people” downtown. “Other cities have amenities, Bridgeport doesn’t necessarily have that.” He alluded to racial tension among artist-residents at the outset, but those tensions appear to have subsided. “People are starting to interact better,” he stated. “Cities are dynamic,” he said, “if you put an artist in these cities, that alone won’t change anything.”

Mayor Ganim was convicted in 2003 on 16 of 22 counts including racketeering, extortion, racketeering conspiracy and bribery, mail fraud, and filing a false tax return (Von Zielbauer, 2003). He was reelected in 2015.
Chapter Five

Conclusion

Do artists contribute to gentrifying neighborhoods? I return to the question first posed at the outset of this thesis. It would seem as though the very concept of affordable artist housing rests upon a bifurcated form of this assumption: the myth of the artist being one element, and the promise being the other.

The myth of artists is perhaps best understood by referring back to the case studies in St. Paul and New York City. Lowertown and SoHo point to the alchemic ability of artists. Images of street art, lofts, and vibrant artist communities with the likes of Robert Rauschenberg and Andy Warhol romanticize our memory, while expensive condominiums and luxury retail define our modern perception of these places. This process is partially explained through abstract and indefinable logic. Phil Kuchma, Elizabeth Torres, and Michael Moore identified the transformative and almost mystical qualities of artists, which they and the city hope to monetize and harness into urban revitalization. To them, artists are “wonderful” and “wired differently.” Data suggests this is true, in a sense. Like low income individuals, artists are granted income-based protection from the real estate market. But unlike their counterparts, artists have higher levels of educational attainment, they increase cultural capital, and are more likely to be politically active in their communities (Jeffri, 1998).

These traits were true of the artists that I interviewed, as they proved to be highly educated and involved in community and citywide programs. This understanding, combined with economic development reliant on the “creative class,” leads to affordable artist housing which protects artists from displacement and leverages their creativity over a sustained period of time. Cities have responded by investing heavily in affordable artist housing. Ambitions of economic development and urban revitalization are placed on affordable artist housing, far outweighing the discussions surrounding “normal” affordable housing developments. The myth of artists’ ability to change a place, and their ostensible history of having done so, drive these aspirations and compels governments to contribute public funds to their development.

The promise of artists translates to a perceived return on investment in both the physical asset and its creation of “off-budget returns” in economic development, affordable housing, historic preservation, and revitalization (Sagalyn, 1997, p. 1968). In other words, if the myth is the emotional connection, the promise is the dollars and cents. In Bridgeport and other cities of similar size and economic climate such as Rochester, New York, or Lowell, Massachusetts, the threat of gentrification is not the negative force that impacts wealthy cities, making formerly low income neighborhoods
unaffordable or opening the floodgates for millennials and artisanal retail shops. Progressing away from vacant industrial buildings and empty downtowns in these cities is ostensibly a welcome sign for all to see. Affordable artist housing is one strategy in an economic development official’s toolkit to combat urban decline. Indeed, artists are a valuable part of any community. But for those interview subjects familiar with Read’s Artspace, the building itself seemed to carry more significance than a “normal” affordable housing development, or even a market-rate building. It was simultaneously referred to as economic development, affordable housing, historic preservation, and revitalization. In this sense, it was an amalgamation of modernist and neotraditional ideals, a “rational engineering of…social life in order to improve the human condition” through “mixed uses that may include craft workshops but continue to exclude factories, and development of arts-related facilities, festive retailing, and entertainment venues.” With the benefit of posterity, affordable artist housing addressed the shortfalls of top-down social engineering by “mitigating the discomforts of the industrial city…to improve the circumstances of those most disadvantaged by it” (Fainstein, 2004, p. 7). This is both its genius and its competitive advantage. It appeals to cities keen on making targeted investments in neighborhoods. Not only can affordable artist housing developers appeal to the aspirations of city officials by selling the myth of artists, they can appeal to their rationality by selling the promise as well.

Read’s Artspace has shown, however, that affordable artist housing does not guarantee gentrification. How then can we understand the failure of the myth and the promise of artists? Harkening back to Plato, perhaps the earliest philosopher of art, elucidates this paradigm. Let us first assume that affordable artist housing is an art form. The visible creative expression of its residents (evident in Figure 11) and the unique architecture of the buildings themselves support this claim. Plato believed art was a manifestation of mimetic behavior. Mimetics, a broadly defined concept debated over centuries, has been described as “the faculty to copy, imitate, make models…drawing on the character and power of the original, to the point whereby the representation may even assume that character and that power” (Taussig, 1993, p. xiii). Plato viewed art as an inferior imitation of the forms from which it was derived: it was an imitation of a perceived reality, which itself imitated a phenomenon. In this sense, it was thrice removed from its essence. Let us now assume that Fainstein’s framework regarding diversity in planning applies to Read’s Artspace. Her “accusations of inauthenticity, of being a simulacrum rather than the real thing” holds true. This is not to say that Bridgeport is inauthentic, in fact far from it. But the “rational engineering” of “arts-related facilities” has indeed produced both mimesis and a simulacrum: affordable artist housing posing as economic development, affordable housing, historic preservation, revitalization, renewal, and progress. But it has not produced these things to any great extent. My interview subjects saw Read’s Artspace authentically, as a “net positive” for downtown Bridgeport, a story of public-private cooperation in a city clawing back from years of decline. But they did not talk of a downtown renaissance
that did not exist, for they live this experience. “I don’t know if Read’s was an enormous catalyst for downtown housing,” said Ed Lavernoich. In the case of Read’s Artspace, the failure of the myth and the promise of artists has manifested itself in ambivalence.

What impacts, then, has affordable artist housing had on downtown Bridgeport? It has attracted the “creative class,” for one. Bridgeport has cultivated an emerging social, cultural, and business network of creative individuals, in addition to the sixty-one artist-residents of Read’s Artspace. Developers like Phil Kuchma are making places that attract clusters of “creatives,” Mayor Joseph Ganim is conducting roundtables focused on attracting them, and the city’s comprehensive master plan was developed around their myth and promise. These efforts appear to be working to some degree. “Creative” businesses like Antinozzi Associates, B:Hive, and The Bananaland are based downtown. Events such as Design Night Out and the Bridgeport Art Trail are fostering this community, and government-sponsored programs such as CreateHereNow have shown success in encouraging entrepreneurship. But, apart from Read’s Artspace, the extent to which these individuals involved in the creative economy actually live downtown is unclear. Moreover, it was apparent in my interviews that the goal of attracting “creatives” was to ultimately entice wealthy individuals to follow. This is a departure from Florida’s theory of the “creative class,” which holds that they have inherent wealth and are themselves upwardly mobile, the “wealthy individuals” to whom Mr. Lavernoich and Mr. Kuchma referred.

Figure 11 – Doorways in Read’s Artspace; residents are encouraged to express themselves in the building’s corridors and gallery
*Source: Photograph by Author*
Bridgeport's departure from the Richard Florida school of economic development is most apparent in its adherence to conventional economic development initiatives rather than those designed to attract the “creative class.” Transportation connectivity was listed as one of the city’s greatest assets by Mr. Kuchma, Lavernoich, and Moore. But Florida states that “creative centers are not thriving due to traditional economic reasons such as access to natural resources or transportation routes. Nor are they thriving because their local governments have gone bankrupt in the process of giving tax breaks and other incentives to lure businesses” (Florida, 2003, p. 9) The Harbor Yard stadium and Bass Pro Shops come to mind. Florida goes on to state “the physical attractions that most cities focus on – sports stadiums, freeways, urban malls, and tourism-and-entertainment districts that resemble theme parks – are irrelevant, insufficient, or actually unattractive to many creative-class people.” Bridgeport appears to be creating these types of experiences and nurturing an openness to diversity. However, the city’s reliance on traditional capital-intensive economic development may affect its ability to attract the “creative class” in the long term. Both compete for limited funds and seem to be diametrically opposed, as evidenced in this passage.

**Recommendations**

Despite its many challenges, there is hope in downtown Bridgeport. My research has revealed an emerging artist community that is resourceful, organized, and influential. The economic development and real estate communities are experienced and committed to working collaboratively. “Placemaking” efforts are focused on rehabilitating the city’s image while simultaneously leveraging its existing assets. These stakeholders have vested interests in the success of downtown, and provide a solid foundation for future progress.

Despite this thesis’ specific focus on Read’s Artspace, it is apparent that the relatively small size of Bridgeport’s urban core and its complex, entrenched challenges demand interconnected solutions. The following recommendations seek to improve public welfare, advance economic development, and simultaneously protect and grow the property tax base. They are intended for all downtown stakeholders including politicians, economic development officials, real estate developers, artists, and residents. I propose (1) changing the political and strategic framework around economic development to deemphasize capital intensive projects, (2) improving public-private partnerships through the city’s use of “accountability mechanisms,” (3) acknowledging physical features and adopting measures to address them, (4) leveraging anchor institutions, and (5) re-establishing a citywide arts council.
My first recommendation is concerned with the economic development strategies that city officials have employed in recent years. These efforts were detailed in Chapter Two and deconstructed previously in this section to reveal their incongruity, namely that heavy investment in sports and entertainment-based development fails to attract the “creative class” upon which the city’s downtown plan is predicated. This strategy has garnered some positive results and the city’s ability to execute projects such as Harbor Yards is notable. However, Bridgeport faces a budget deficit and an eroding property tax base resulting from years of disinvestment. A significant shift must therefore occur in the way city officials view downtown revitalization efforts. Read’s Artspace proved that a single project will not lead to revitalization. Acknowledging these factors and dedicating its limited resources and organizational capacity towards community-based interventions would diffuse impacts throughout downtown, and elsewhere in the city. These concerns were addressed by Phil Kuchma, who lauded the economic development department with praise but noted that there were “not enough people to meet the opportunity on a city level.” Partially, this could be accomplished by adopting a strategy employed by other distressed cities, which avoids “large, high-risk, deeply subsidized, ostensibly catalytic projects with narrowly focused gains,” that have “low potential for improving the quality of life for city residents” (Beauregard, 2013, p. 239). Adopting such a strategy, a moratorium of sorts, would ensure that capital and organizational resources are made available for targeted, less expensive interventions that utilize an incremental block-by-block approach.

My second recommendation is for the city of Bridgeport to incorporate “accountability mechanisms” into its future contracts with outside parties (Weber, 2002). The ambivalence that Bridgeport officials and businesspeople shared towards Artspace indicated they were unhappy with certain operational aspects of Read’s Artspace, as well as the project’s overall impact on the downtown economy. This ambivalence is ostensibly amplified by the city’s investment in the project; the city contributed funds, organizational resources, a tax abatement, and the building itself, while the developer contributed organizational resources but no equity. The deal did not appear to require ongoing reporting from Artspace, nor any adjustors to allow the city to recover part of its investment in the event of unmet performance benchmarks.

Therefore, I recommend that Bridgeport adopt ‘accountability mechanisms’ to shift its transactional framework form “gift giving” to one of “output-based exchanges” (Weber, 2002, p. 46). By specifying performance standards and establishing penalties for noncompliance, third parties dealing with the city will be compelled to negotiate contracts with realistic outcomes that promote the public’s welfare, rather than simply seeking, for example, the largest possible subsidy (Weber, 2002). Accountability mechanisms could take the form of local hiring and purchasing requirements, job creation goals, minimum wage levels, upward or downward timing adjusters, or ongoing disclosure requirements. Economic development is a highly inefficient market, and incentives often reward behavior that would...
have taken place without any subsidy (Weber, 2002). There is no clear consensus on whether the existence of accountability mechanisms translates into greater performance, and merely cutting taxes and offering subsidies does not guarantee net job growth or enhanced property values (Weber, 2002). Nevertheless, incorporating accountability mechanisms into future contracts would provide Bridgeport with opportunities to address critical issues over time, rather than solely at the outset.

My third recommendation involves a set of strategies for addressing the physical features of downtown Bridgeport. These include (1) facilitating the use of historic tax credits to preserve historic building stock, (2) “greening” the city through temporary and permanent parks, and (3) modifying parking requirements to encourage development.

The first part of this strategy is facilitating the use of historic and brownfield tax credits to rehabilitate historic buildings. Downtown Bridgeport has a significant stock of buildings listed on the National Register of Historic Places (NRHP) (see Figure 12), as well as two neighborhoods designated as historic districts in 1987 by the NRHP: Downtown North Historic District and Downtown South Historic District. Combined, these districts consist of 47 acres containing 112 historically significant commercial and civic buildings.9 Over the last decade, the city has benefited from federal and statewide tax credit programs, receiving over $57 million from federal historic tax credits alone.10 To a lesser extent, brownfield tax credits are being used in Bridgeport to provide funding in exchange for remediating environmentally contaminated areas. These sources are vitally important to finance projects in distressed downtowns like Bridgeport, especially when confronting what Artspace’s Ariel Garcia categorized as a reluctance on behalf of institutional capital to invest.

Historic tax credits are beneficial for cities because developers generally work with a syndicator to sell the credits to offset an investor’s tax basis, rather than apply them against the development project’s taxes. Historic tax credits are beneficial in this sense because they provide a source of equity which might otherwise have been filled with city subsidy. Encouraging the use of credits could also theoretically allow the city to protect its discretionary funds and continue to grow its property tax base. A bill to raise the annual cap on tax credits for the rehabilitation of historic structures from $31 million to $60 million is currently making its way through legislative review in Hartford.

Recent downtown developments have preserved and adaptively reused these buildings, and have utilized historic and brownfield tax credits in some capacity. Just a few blocks northeast of Read’s Artspace, the Harral Security Wheeler (HSW) building combined and preserved three buildings built in

9 From the July 20, 1987 National Parks Service admission of the Bridgeport Downtown North and South Historic Districts onto the National Register of Historic Places.
1904 and 1905. The eight-story project consists of nearly 80,000 square feet across 70 market rate rental residential units, with 10,000 square feet of retail on the ground floor. The project was completed in the summer of 2016 and is fetching rents for a studio at $1,200 per month. This project was awarded a $4 million grant from the State’s Competitive Housing Assistance for Multifamily Properties (CHAMP) fund, as well as over $1 million in brownfield tax credits. The city contributed a 10-year tax reduction.

Figure 12 – Map of the Downtown North and South Historic Districts
Source: National Register of Historic Places
This example suggests there is a viable market for historic rehabilitation projects in downtown Bridgeport. However, the applications for these programs are highly complex and time-consuming. Smaller development firms, community development corporations, and non-profit developers may avoid pursuing historic tax credits for these reasons. The city of Bridgeport should therefore provide resources for organizations willing to pursue these credits to leverage a program proven to preserve historic structures, provide housing and retail, and encourage economic development while preserving the tax base. These resources could take the form of ongoing human capital to partner with organizations to complete these applications, consultation and document review, or partnering with a developer and contributing vacant buildings from its property rolls to the partnership.

The second part of the strategy to address the physical features of downtown Bridgeport involves interventions on the underutilized, unimproved parcels of city-owned land (see Figures 13 and 14). I recommend a citywide effort to “green” these parcels by converting them into temporary parks. These parks could be converted into development sites in the future as a market builds up around them, but are envisioned as interim solutions. These parks could be programmed by a newly re-established citywide arts council or by the Downtown Special Services District in the interim. This effort would reestablish Bridgeport’s nickname, “Park City,” once given to the city in recognition of its extensive public park system. This rebranding effort could be coupled with a design competition for an entire park or simply a park feature, issued to noteworthy firms in the region and along the East Coast or beyond. A similar effort was undertaken in 2011 on a vacant parcel of land owned by the city located on the corner of Gold and Main Streets. The “Gold & Main” park was a temporary installation that included a mural of P.T. Barnum, as well as landscaping and seating.
Figure 13 – Aerial view of downtown Bridgeport with sites to implement temporary parks
Source: Google Maps
My final strategy to address the physical features of Bridgeport involves a zoning text amendment that reduces parking requirements for residential uses in Downtown Village Districts (DVD) (see Figure 15). Current DVD zoning requires 0.5 parking spaces for every dwelling unit, plus ten percent for visitors.11 This requirement is rational but unnecessary given the conditions that exist downtown. I recommend reducing the .5 parking requirement to .25 within the city center or removing the parking

11 From the 2010 Bridgeport Zoning & Subdivision Regulations
requirement in exchange for a payment in lieu of parking, which could contribute towards the city’s subsidy coffers.

The justification for this recommendation is partially based on downtown’s transportation connectivity. Read’s Artspace, located at the heart of downtown, has a Walk Score of 90 out of 100.\textsuperscript{12} The Metro-North station is located within short walking distance of virtually any location downtown, and the prevalence of ride-sharing apps such as Uber and Lyft further reduce the need to own and park a car downtown. According to a 2011 study of downtown public parking spaces, morning occupancy topped out at 64%, while afternoon and evening occupancy at its highest was 67%.\textsuperscript{13} This implies that there is

\textsuperscript{12} From Walk Score: \url{https://www.walkscore.com/score/1042-broad-st-bridgeport-ct-06604}
\textsuperscript{13} From the 2011 Downtown Bridgeport Parking Study conducted by the Greater Bridgeport Regional Planning Agency
adequate and readily available public parking downtown and concerns related to parking are based on perception. Development costs are also a consideration. Including parking to meet zoning requirements increases development costs, which are then transferred to the end user. The recently completed Harral Security Wheeler building is an instructive. The building has no parking, despite being a market-rate project intended for residents with higher incomes. Two lessons can be learned from this development: the parking requirement was waived by city planners, and the developer concluded that it could achieve market rents without offering parking. This last point is either an endorsement of the existing transportation options downtown, or an implication that a viable supply of parking already exists downtown and therefore no additional supply was necessary.

My fourth recommendation is the establishment of a Bridgeport anchor institution alliance. An organization in nearby Hartford, Connecticut, may provide a model for collaboration among anchor institutions such as Housatonic Community College (HCC), the University of Bridgeport (UB), St. Vincent’s Medical Center. The Southside Institutions Neighborhood Alliance (SINA), created in 1978, is a partnership between Connecticut Children’s Medical Center, Hartford Hospital, and Trinity College. SINA is part of a broader nationwide effort to leverage anchor institutions, organizations rooted in their localities with the resources to address education, economic, and public health issues in their communities. SINA is funded by its partner members, charitable foundations, private sector donors, and city, state, and federal agencies. It provides public health and nutrition seminars, scholarships, strategies for community activism, urban beautification, and affordable housing development for the residents of South Hartford. It also provides incentives to grow financial and community equity through the Homeownership Incentive Program (HIP), which provides financial incentives to employees of the three partner members to purchase a home in Hartford. SINA completed “The Learning Corridor” in 2000. Financed partially through state and municipal bonds, this $120 million development was built on a formerly blighted and contaminated site. The Learning Corridor is a 16-acre campus home to four magnet schools, a Boys & Girls Club, affordable housing, and an art gallery with community and performance spaces (see Figure 16). Forming an anchor alliance would strengthen HCC, UB, and St. Vincent’s Medical Center and impact local hiring, stimulate the economy, and align anchor institutions interests around a stronger downtown.

My fifth and final recommendation for Bridgeport and its artist community is the re-establishment of a unified arts council to advocate, plan, and direct efforts would increase the art community’s profile and elevate Bridgeport along with it. The St. Paul Art Collective (SPAC) can serve as a model. SPAC was founded in 1977, the same year the Northern Warehouse affordable artist housing project opened. The organization began with the mission of protecting artists from displacement, but grew into a citywide advocate for the artists, event organizer, and gallery owner and operator. The Bridgeport Arts and Cultural
Council (BACC) initially performed these functions, but its disbandment left a void and the ambiguity surrounding these events suggest that its demise was not publicized and not necessarily positive. Partnering with a local arts organization is a crucial aspect of Artspace’s business strategy, as Ariel Garcia pointed out in my interview. This partnership begins at the pre-development phase, continues through the building completion, and lasts long after artist-residents have moved in and the building is operating. This practice ensures that Artspace has a connection to residents and activists who can not only facilitate certain aspects of the development process, but also incorporate the building and its residents into the local arts community after completion. Bridgeport suffered from the mismanagement and ultimate disbandment of the BACC and the absence of such an organization perhaps explains Artspace’s ambivalence towards Bridgeport. However, efforts to revive it appear to be underway. Both Emily Larned and Liz Squillace expressed a desire for a unified organization to emerge from a seemingly fragmented group of organizations performing similar functions. Michael Moore, the CEO of the Downtown Special Service District, alluded to this effort as well. The DSSD appears poised to assume leadership functions, at least at the outset, based solely on its fundraising capabilities. With capital, it could leverage the connections and experience of both the Bridgeport Arts Trail and the Cultural Alliance of Fairfield County. From there, a mutual re-engagement with Artspace could repair the frayed relationship and ensure a unified voice for arts-based organizations.

What does the future hold for downtown Bridgeport? Certainly, no one solution will solve downtown Bridgeport’s problems, many of which are systemic and have compounded over decades. “Wicked problems,” those with broad societal implications and which lack consensus, are inherently ambiguous. “The information needed to understand the problem depends upon one's idea for solving it. That is to say: in order to describe a wicked-problem in sufficient detail, one has to develop an exhaustive inventory of all conceivable solutions ahead of time” (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 166). This mode of problem-solving demands creativity. “In such fields of ill-defined problems and hence ill-definable solutions, the set of feasible plans of action relies on realistic judgment, the capability to appraise "exotic" ideas and on the amount of trust and credibility between planner and clientele that will lead to the conclusion, "OK let's try that" (Rittel & Webber, 1973, p. 164). Solving Bridgeport’s problems, like those of Rochester and Lowell, require unique and “exotic” multilateral collaboration between planners, economic development officials, real estate developers, politicians, and artists. Affordable artist housing is proof that this creativity and collaboration is possible. Time will tell whether it translates to a strong and resilient downtown Bridgeport.
Bibliography


Garcia, Ariel. (February 27, 2017). Personal Interview.


Kuchma, Phil. (January 10, 2017). Personal Interview.


Marmol, Jennifer. (March 21, 2017). Meeting in Bridgeport, CT.


Moore, Michael. (February 14, 2017). Personal Interview.


New York State Multiple Dwelling Law. Article 7-B. Joint Living-Work Quarters for Artists, or General Residential Occupancy of Loft, Commercial, or Manufacturing Buildings.


Taylor-Moye, Denese. (February 1, 2017). Personal Interview.


Appendix 1: Interview Questions

Local Developer
1. Are you familiar with the Read’s Artspace project? Yes / No
   If Yes, continue to the next question. If No, the interview is over.
2. Please describe your experience working in Bridgeport
3. What type of projects does your firm develop / what is your strategy?
4. Please describe some of the changes you’ve seen in the city over the past fifteen years, specifically downtown.
5. Please describe your experience working with city planning and economic development officials
6. Do you support the city’s planning efforts with regard to the “Re-Imagining Downtown Bridgeport” plan or the 2008 master plan?
7. What, if any, effect did this project have on the downtown, and the city as a whole?
8. What effect did it have on the local economy?
9. What effect did it have on local pricing and cost of living?
10. How was the project received by the public?

Affordable Housing Developer
1. Are you familiar with affordable artist housing? Yes / No
   If Yes, proceed to the next question. If No, the interview is over.
2. Please describe your organization’s mission, or its statement of purpose.
3. Please describe your job responsibilities
4. What are the biggest challenges facing low income residents in Bridgeport with regard to housing?
5. Do you support affordable housing for artists in this neighborhood/city?
6. Why?

Economic Development Official
1. Are you familiar with affordable artist housing? Yes / No
   If Yes, proceed to the next question. If No, the interview is over.
2. What is your knowledge of, or experience with affordable artist housing?
3. Does your office consider affordable artist housing to be an economic development strategy?
4. How so?
5. For what reason(s) did, or would, your office pursue affordable artist housing?
6. What subsidies did your office provide for affordable artist housing?
7. How many have you subsidized?
8. Is your office pursuing other affordable artist housing projects?

**Artist-Resident**
1. How did you become aware of affordable artist housing?
2. Why did you apply for it?
3. How long have you been living in Read’s Artspace?
4. Please describe your medium / your artwork.
5. Please describe your studio space requirements.
6. Do you enjoy living in Read’s Artspace? **Yes / No**
7. Why?
8. How has living in Read’s Artspace affected your career?
9. Have you worked with fellow artist-residents on a community project?
10. Please describe the application and interview process for becoming an artist-resident.
11. Please describe the ways, if any, this neighborhood has changed over the past five / ten years.
12. What role did artists play in that change?
13. Please select the level of education that pertains to you: High School / College / Graduate School / PhD / Other
14. What percentage of your income is derived from your artwork?
15. Are you active in local politics? If so, how?
16. Are you active in community arts programs?
17. Do you perform volunteer work? If so, for what organization?

**Affordable Artist Housing Developer**
1. Please describe your organization’s mission, or its statement of purpose.
2. Please describe your job responsibilities
3. Please describe your experience working in affordable artist housing
4. What are the biggest challenges in developing affordable artist housing?
5. Please describe your process for evaluating a potential affordable artist housing project. What are some of your considerations or requirements?
6. How do you evaluate the demand for artist housing?
7. Please describe the type and amount of funding that your most recent project required. How many units did the project feature?
8. Please describe any efforts undertaken by you personally or your firm in raising capital from charitable organizations.

9. Please describe the application and interview process for artist-residents.

10. If you had to categorize affordable artist housing as affordable housing, economic development, historic preservation, or some other category, what would it be?

11. What effects do affordable artist housing have on the communities in which you develop?

12. How does it affect a neighborhood, from an urbanistic and design standpoint?

13. How does it affect a neighborhood from a preservation standpoint, specifically in the case of Read’s Artspace (or another project)?

14. How do you envision the future of affordable artist housing?