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## CREATIVITY CONNECTS

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### Online Platforms Are Not Enough. Artists Need Affordable Space.

by Caroline Woolard – Artist, Teacher, Organizer

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In 2008, a bunch of friends and I built out and managed a studio space in Brooklyn. We signed a five-year lease with a three-year option, and hoped for the best. We wanted to make our work and to innovate. This meant taking risks and failing often, and we needed low overhead (low rent) to make this possible.

When I realized that over eight years we would pay our landlord \$960,000 for a dilapidated 8,000 square-foot studio space that we had built out with our own money and sweat equity, only to be kicked out and priced out of our neighborhood, not eligible for commercial loans to purchase a building of our own, I became obsessed with affordable, equitable ownership models.

But let's back up. There are more creative people in our nation than doctors, lawyers and police officers combined — if we organized, we'd be larger than the US military! Even if our bank accounts evaporated overnight, we would still have skills to share with one another. Think about it like this: the next time you think about applying for a grant, take the 40 hours you were about to spend on a grant you likely won't get, and use it to work on someone else's project, and let them work on yours. This way, you will get a grant, but it will be one of mutual respect rather than institutional visibility.

#### Building a Creative Commonwealth

Since co-founding and co-directing [OurGoods.org](#) and [TradeSchool.coop](#) in 2008 to enable exactly this kind of resource sharing, I've seen how sharing economy platforms build resilience and mutual aid (for those of us on the privileged side of the digital divide). I've also seen that online platforms are not enough. We need affordable space, so that we can take risks and fail. And where will we meet to swap or share goods and services without spaces? Ensuring affordable space is the only way creative innovation can occur. And so I started thinking: How might we as artists utilize the strengths of a networked information era to cooperatively finance, acquire, and manage space? **What can artists do to help ensure affordable space and reduce displacement?**

The following suggestions were co-authored by my dear friends Stephen Korns and Susan Jahoda as part of a collaborative project called [New York City, To Be Determined](#).

Why can't artists stay put? Because short term leases end and rents go up. Why doesn't Loft Law keep neighborhoods affordable? Because Loft Law buildings don't require future affordability, so units are sold on the open market, driving real estate prices up for everyone. Why don't organizers for affordable space see arts graduates as partners? Because arts graduates haven't demonstrated an ability to organize and contribute to existing movements for affordable space. How might artists stay put? What can artists contribute?

#### 1. RESIST

- Arts graduates (people with BFAs, MFAs, and PhDs) can refuse to be represented as "pioneering" in "empty" neighborhoods. Instead, they can form alliances with artists who are long time residents, but may not have formal degrees or have typically understood "artistic lifestyles," forming and supporting **Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts**.

## CREATIVITY CONNECTS: TRENDS AND CONDITIONS AFFECTING U.S. ARTISTS



by CENTER FOR CULTURAL INNOVATION  
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Bright spots by state ▼

#### PROCESS

To develop the report, NEA and CCI staff undertook extensive information-gathering and analysis over the past year. This included conducting 65 in-depth interviews, convening ten roundtables across the country, reviewing more than 300 documents, gathering 30 field experts to review the initial findings, and commissioning 18 essays written by leaders in the field.

- National interviews and participants in experts convening**
- Ten roundtables** of 10-12 people doing innovative work in the arts, hosted by state arts agencies, in Santa Fe, NM; Des Moines, IA; Los Angeles, CA; Omaha, NE; Minneapolis, MN; Boston, MA; Atlanta, GA; Pittsburgh, PA; Lexington, KY; Helena, MT—roundtables began in October 2015 and ended in March 2016



supporting **Naturally Occurring Cultural Districts**.

- Artists can resist offers for short term exhibitions in neighborhoods and storefronts awaiting redevelopment. Artists can speak out against developer-led gentrification where planners and developers profit from our resourcefulness, creativity, investment, and labor.
- Artists can urge elected officials and government agencies to require developers to make permanent, truly affordable housing and commercial space, rather than giving tax breaks to developers whose “affordable” units in their market-rate projects are not affordable to the majority of neighborhood residents and only remain “affordable” for a limited period of time.
- Artists can stop accepting rising rents and evictions in isolation, joining and creating a rotating credit and savings associations (**susus**), anti-eviction networks, and tenant unions.

## 2. SUPPORT

- Artists can join existing coalitions for affordable housing for all, and collectively demand that the city preserve, create, and support both truly affordable housing and commercial space, like the Association for Neighborhood and Housing Development's **inclusionary zoning** campaign.
- Artists can stand behind the **policy brief of the Naturally Occurring Cultural District** to support culture's contribution to a just and equitable city for all.
- Artists can support community land trusts to take property of the speculative market forever and benefit all low-income people with groups like the **New York City Community Land Initiative** and the **New York City Real Estate Investment Cooperative** .

## 3. CREATE

- Artists who make art about housing or real estate can connect audiences and achieve press coverage of long-term initiatives for affordable housing.
- Artists with social, cultural, and financial power can urge wealthy art collectors and philanthropists to consider land-based philanthropy, donating land and buildings to community land trusts.
- Artists' groups can connect their work to long-term struggles directly by starting capital campaigns that allocate a percentage of all money raised and all press opportunities to the larger movement for affordable space.

As an artist, you are one in a sea of millions of artists in this country. Being one of so many might seem like competition for your art career (although I would argue it offers more possibilities for resource sharing and collaboration!), but it's good news for your ability to make social change. You and other artists and educators form a voting bloc. You can join anti-eviction networks and efforts for radical reimagining of land ownership and urban spatial politics. Artists have done this in the past, and artists can do it again.

For example, **The New York City Real Estate Cooperative** (NYCREIC), is a tangible opportunity for change.

Inspired partially by the Cooper Square Committee's success in using a community land trust to establish permanently affordable low income housing and commercial space, NYCREIC seeks to leverage relatively small investments (as low as \$10) made by a large group of people to secure permanently affordable space for civic, small business, and cultural use. It aims to make long-term, stabilizing, and transformative investments in real estate for the benefit of member-owners and their communities.

NYCREIC will:

- Assist communities in raising the capital they need to purchase property
- Work with community-based organizations to plan and implement their real estate development projects
- Support local community activism to ensure that the city emphasizes affordable, community-controlled commercial space in its land use decisions

Artists will benefit from the NYCREIC and other land trusts, but not because they are set aside as a special interest group from other low income people who share their needs. By building a cooperative, we are educating, empowering and shaping a powerful group of New Yorkers, including artists, who say: Development without displacement is possible.

*Thanks*

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