

THE ART OF REGENERATION

Urban Renewal through Cultural Activity

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Brickbottom Artists Co-operative, Boston

The aim of the project was to maintain the property for artists, so re-sale rights of individual units were limited to other artists, and a limited equity mechanism meant that re-sale rights for the building as a whole had a ceiling imposed to ensure that rents remained affordable for the life of the project.

Boston's large artist community was like many others in North American cities, in that as soon as people identified disused buildings in which to work, they would be evicted as a result of gentrification which had been partly triggered by their presence. The Fort Point Arts Community formed a co-operative to buy property to break this cycle, receiving a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts for a Design Demonstration Project—the first of its kind in the USA. With the grant they hired a planner as Director and quickly found a mill building in the Fort Point area of Boston, which was renowned for its historic mills. As an advocate for artist tenants, the co-op works with Boston City to develop policies which will ensure the continuing presence of artists in central Boston. The co-op also channels grants and sponsorship for artist's studio space, and there are now many examples of such workshops throughout the city.

A planning challenge

In 1987, a group of 100 artists formed a second co-op and, with the help of Fort Point Arts Community, purchased and refurbished Brickbottom Mill, a 250,000 sq. ft. warehouse complex in Somerville, Massachusetts. One of the objectives of this project was to enable artists to live and work in the same place, thus cutting transport costs to individuals. However, a city zoning policy prohibited people living in 'industrial' areas, even though the area was derelict and all industry defunct. The Mayor saw that the initiative's potential for revitalising the area and that the studio workshop space was in itself a cultural facility. He therefore changed the City's zoning policy by special permit to allow residential units to be included in the old warehouse building. The effect of this flexibility was not simply to allow a group of 100 artists to live and work in an hitherto derelict area, but to rejuvenate the area making it attractive to other businesses which have since moved into the area. Brickbottom Mill cost £1 million. Each artist contributed £650 as a deposit and selected a workshop space in a lottery. To raise the extra funds required to sponsor the refurbishment the artists chose 58 units as commercial residential apartments and pre-sold them (to non-artists on the whole). Proceeds from the sale of the apartments underwrote the artists' 91 artists' residential/studio units owned by the co-op, and secured bank loans.

Key issues

A responsive Mayor, seeing the potential for regeneration at no expense to the City, altered conventional planning regulations, benefiting the artists co-operative and the town. By underwriting their scheme through the private property market the artists have been able to secure their own futures and the development of their own practices.