

Against All Odds, New York’s Artist Buildings Have Survived

Generations of creatives once flocked to the city seeking affordable rent. Now, despite skyrocketing real estate prices, some continue to carve out studio spaces of their own.

By M.H. Miller
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New York’s reputation as a beacon for artists was never inevitable. Only after World War II had destabilized Europe was the city able to usurp Paris as the commercial center of the art business. Veterans returning from abroad found a new diversity of college art programs and art schools thanks to the abundance of federal education grants made available by the G.I. Bill. The expansion of government-subsidized housing loans meant that cheap space was also easy to come by, as New York had a then-ample stock of residential and industrial buildings. In the following decades, which saw the birth of Abstract Expressionism, followed by Pop Art, followed by minimalism – all locally grown movements – the city also became the capital of what we now call the art world, a multibillion-dollar, mostly unregulated global economy of galleries, auction houses and fairs that has grown without interruption through wars, recessions and two pandemics.

No part of this system would function – or have any meaning at all – without the artists themselves. They’re the real reason New York and the art world are synonymous: Even now, when real estate prices have reached heights that would shock those postwar pioneers, artists still live here and, more important, they still work here. There are artists’ studios in pretty much every neighborhood of every borough, ingrained in the city’s architecture unlike anything else but bodegas and pizzerias. Beyond the fact of their ubiquity, there are no generalizations to be made about these spaces. One of the pleasures of covering art in New York is the ability to see firsthand the array of environments in which artists work: out of opulent homes or cramped and grungy rooms with no windows; out of converted office spaces or cavernous factories; in a sizable workshop or at a computer in the kitchen alcove of a studio apartment.

But the city has always romanticized artist-dominated buildings, the kinds of communal spaces in which every unit might be home to an artist’s studio (and sometimes, unofficially, their residences, too). With this in mind, we set out to document a sample of the artists’ buildings that currently exist in New York: a floor of the Brooklyn Army Terminal, a former military depot and supply base in Sunset Park; a shared space for photographers in Williamsburg, Brooklyn; a warehouse (and onetime textile factory) in Ridgewood, Queens; an office building above what used to be a Dunkin’ Donuts in Manhattan’s Financial District; and a loft in TriBeCa, a relic of the ‘60s and early ‘70s, before the area was zoned for residential occupation, when artists illegally took over abandoned manufacturing buildings. (The city had to mark stairwells and doorways with placards reading A.I.R., for “artist-in-residence,” so the fire

department would know to rescue them in case of an emergency.) In an almost unheard-of feat of perseverance, the same artist, Don Dudley, 93, has been working out of this loft since 1971.

What's featured here is not definitive, and perhaps not even fully representative of what it looks like to have an artistic space of one's own in the city. Artists can and will work anywhere and, like their work itself, they're limited only by the extent of their imaginations – and their finances. To have a studio at all, one has either to be able to afford to buy or have a gracious and understanding landlord, both rarities in the current real estate market. As of 2024, it's never been harder for artists to find a place to work. In Manhattan, average rent prices have risen 15 percent from their levels just before the Covid-19 shutdown, and things aren't much better in the other boroughs. (In Brooklyn and parts of Queens, rent is at least 10 to 15 percent higher than it was in March 2020.) So artists have had to create a kind of whisper network to withstand New York's unimpeachable forward march, which the art market has, ironically, enabled. Suitable spaces are passed down, sublet, shared in secret. Most of them are temporary fixes before an artist – who's grown out, or been priced out, of their space – has to move on.

But one thing is clear from the last 80 or so years of history: No matter how much the city changes, no matter how prohibitive it may seem, artists always make room for themselves. New York belongs to them.

87 Richardson Street



From left: the photographers Rasaan Wyzard, 35; Cheril Sanchez, 32; Guarionex Rodriguez Jr.; Courtney Sofiah Yates, 31; Keenan MacWilliam, 35; and Chad-Avery V. Hilliard, 28.

Credit Miranda Barnes

Location:

Williamsburg, Brooklyn.

Number of artists:

Six photographers, who go by the name Mycelia Collective and share equipment.

Building amenity:

Talea Beer Co., a craft brewery and taproom, is on the ground floor of the structure, which was built in 1930.

Guarionex Rodriguez Jr., 34, photographer (third from left), who pays \$800 a month to have a desk at the photography studio Liberty Studio that the others can use when they need to, say, scan something: "I'm the only photographer in the collective who can afford a space at the moment. So I opened up my studio to everyone. I've always gotten help. I've been helped a lot by my mentors, people older than me, with film and photography expenses because it does get very expensive. So it's always been my goal to help as many people as possible. I used to photo assist, and there was always a discrepancy between Black and brown [and white] assistants getting work; not a lot of P.O.C. photographers make it to the top [because of a lack of] resources. So this collective kind of started off with that intention: 'Can we help each other to get new jobs and to make our work better?' We have each other, no matter what the situation is, you know?"

17-17 Troutman Street

Location:

Ridgewood, Queens.

Number of artist-tenants:

About 90, who occupy studios in a mid-20th-century former textile factory.

Most recent incarnation:

For years, Troutman was a place where artists lived illegally. A handrail in one of the stairways doubled at the time as an enormous bong that required two people to work it – one at the bottom of the stairs to light it, another at the top to inhale. This feature was destroyed sometime between 2007 and '09, when the building transitioned away from residential spaces.

Nick Doyle, 40, textile and mixed-media sculptor (bottom left), who rents a 1,200-square-foot studio for \$3,000 a month: "When I first moved to New York in 2006, I knew a bunch of people who'd built these weird shantytown lofts in this building. Part of living in New York is figuring out how to make do with very little. Becoming an artist is watching everyone in your life give up on you. This isn't really something you do for the money; you're lucky if you can get it. Honestly, it's the best studio I've ever had. My last studio was so poorly insulated that in the winter the concrete floor would freeze. I could only be in there for a couple of hours at a time."

64 Fulton Street

Location:

Financial District, Manhattan.

Number of artist-tenants:

About 20, alongside various nonprofits, religious organizations and a branch of Midtown Comics.

Claim to fame:

It's the same building – constructed in 1900 – where Cindy Sherman supposedly created a number of the photographs for "Untitled Film Stills" (1977-80).

Rachel Rossin, 35, multimedia artist (bottom left), who also runs an exhibition space in the former Dunkin' Donuts on the building's ground floor called Dunkunsthalle: "I first moved [to the building] in 2016. The landlord is just a special, honest person. He likes artists and nonprofits and religious organizations; I'd go to the Buddhist temple on the fifth floor on Sundays. [Robert] Rauschenberg and [Cy] Twombly supposedly worked out of this building, although we can't verify that. We do know that Charlie Ahearn, Jane Dickson, Cindy Sherman and Richard Prince [worked here]. It's my favorite neighborhood to be depressed in because there're so many charming surprises. Artists in New York are like a pervasive, positive mold. There's a little pocket of us now in FiDi because of the financial collapse during Covid. There'll always be some sort of air gap that happens in New York City, and artists fill it. Thank God."

Brooklyn Army Terminal







Clockwise, from top left: Vandana Jain, 49, weaver; Crys Yin, 42, multidisciplinary artist; Matt Keegan, 47, interdisciplinary artist; William Villalongo, 48, painter and mixed-media artist; Carrie Moyer; and Sreshta Rit Premnath, 44, installation artist.

Credit Miranda Barnes

Location:

Sunset Park, Brooklyn.

Number of artist-tenants:

About 120, who lease their spaces through a nonprofit called ArtBuilt, which rents 50,000 square feet of the complex – completed in 1919 – directly from the City of New York, the building’s owner.

Most unexpected neighbor in the building:

One of the operating centers for New York’s 311 department.

Carrie Moyer, 63, painter, writer and co-director of studio art at Hunter College (bottom left),

who rents a 1,200-square-foot space for \$3,200 a month: “The terminal is [several] blocks long, and the studios are a very small portion on the seventh floor. My wife and I have been here since the beginning [in 2018]. I’d been all over the place: I had a studio near the [Brooklyn] Navy Yard. I had a studio on Lorimer in Williamsburg next to [Kellogg’s] diner. I started out using my living room in the East Village. [At the Brooklyn Army Terminal] it’s like everybody is looking out for each other, instead of having a singular relationship with a landlord, whoever that is. A few years ago we had a big flood, and many of us pitched in to clear water. It feels like some place you want to take care of. Of course, there are things that break, but it’s a conversation. Not like, ‘I’m waiting for you to fix this [expletive] leak.’”

70 Thomas Street

Location:

TriBeCa, Manhattan.

Number of artist-tenants:

Two. For decades, beginning in the 1970s, the late 19th-century building was made up of five A.I.R. lofts, all occupied by artists. Now the married artists Don Dudley and Shirley Irons, who own the building's top floor, are the only ones left. (The Odeon restaurant is next door.) Irons described the rest of the current tenants as "pretty much rich people."

Strangest object in the studio:

Dudley, who supported himself for many years as an art handler with his own shipping company, lost the tip of his right index finger in a crating accident; it's preserved in their freezer.

Don Dudley, 93, abstract painter and sculptor: "I ran into [the Pop artist] Jim Rosenquist outside of his loft on Broome Street in 1969. He was loading up a truck and moving his whole studio down to Florida. He said, 'You want [the loft]?' And I said, 'Sure! How much?' It was \$200 a month, and that sounded just right. A few years later, the guy who owned the building said, 'We're gonna raise your rent.' To \$250 a month. So I got on my bicycle and just kept riding around downtown until I found someplace empty. This building was a five-story former twine and cordage warehouse. The landlord wanted \$1,000 a month for the whole thing, \$200 a floor. I took the top two floors, some friends took the floors below and we had the whole building for \$1,000 a month. This was 1971.

Things were fine until the landlord sold the building to some Iranians; it came in a bundle with a bunch of other buildings in TriBeCa. The new owners now wanted \$1,000 a floor. But they couldn't get rid of us and finally just abandoned the building. They'd bought a dozen buildings, and I guess they figured they could just let this one go. The city took it over for lack of tax payment in the early '80s, then sold it back to us for \$100,000 – or \$20,000 a floor. We had a great lawyer."