

How Artists Can Fight Back Against Cities That Are Taking Advantage of Them

(Yes, That's What Cities Like Seattle Are Doing)

by JEN GRAVES



photos by Kelly O

ARTHOUSE IN BELLTOWN is an apartment building not priced for artists. Nicholas Nyland, who has a piece of art in a hallway on an upper floor, could never afford to live there. Studios rent for \$1,595 per month, two-bedrooms for \$3,440.

If aliens from outer space landed in Belltown right now, they would probably see the huge banner on the high-rise that says "ARTHOUSE" and expect the building to be a house of art. Silly aliens. Arthouse is one of downtown Seattle's new luxury apartment towers. Arthouse calls itself "Your canvas for a creative lifestyle," "A Palette of Everything Plus," and "A Masterpiece of Form and Function" where "murals by local artists mirror the soul of the neighborhood."

Nicholas Nyland is one of those local artists, and he calls his own mural at Arthouse "ammunition in the amenities war" raging across Amazon-driven downtown real estate. Rents at Arthouse are \$1,595 for a studio to \$3,440 for a two-bedroom.

"You have to come to terms with, are you selling out?" Nyland says.

His painting, along a stretch of white wall on an upper floor, is a washy maze in muted rainbow colors. It feels handmade yet tech-friendly.

"But then," Nyland adds, "if they want to have original artwork as opposed to hanging a bunch of posters in the corridors, I'm all for that."

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Nyland got the Arthouse commission through art consultant Stacie Feinstein, a quiet force behind the scenes of Seattle art and real estate. She scours the city to find developers and interior designers she can convince to buy local art rather than wallpaper. It's not a living for artists, but it's something, a tiny system functioning under gentrifying ground. Half the developers on Capitol Hill use interior designers from Dallas, Feinstein laments. And "the common Amazonian wants a flat-screen TV," not art. But she's not giving up, currently working to get neighborhood artists into the Angeline in Columbia City.

Nyland is a known quantity in Seattle art circles. He's shown across the city. Plenty of other local artists might say he's got it good. But even combining the occasional art sales with the salary of his full-time government day job, Nyland couldn't afford to live at Arthouse. Not that he minds—Belltown, where Arthouse is located, is one of those neighborhoods already lost to artists anyway, he says.

In the 1980s, Belltown was the center of Seattle art, until the glassed-off lobbies of new condos left the streets abandoned. (One of the chief components of a cultural neighborhood is the penetrability of its buildings.) The bulldozers then moved to nearby South Lake Union, Amazon-land, where artists and theaters and galleries were again pushed aside, along with everyone else without means. This process is called the SoHo Effect, since it happened in that neighborhood in New York City, dramatically, in the 1970s. Ever since, artists have been blamed—or credited—for assisting yuppification. They've been enlisted outright by government agencies and developers like Arthouse.

But research has never been able to cement the idea that artists *cause* gentrification. They're certainly not its beneficiaries. In today's hypercharged New York, artists are chased through neighborhoods at unprecedented speeds. In smaller, historically freakier San Francisco, the situation is sadder and more dire, with artists, arts nonprofits, and anybody else not making tech money fleeing to the East Bay and beyond.

A report earlier this year from Trulia tracked rents in tech-dominated cities and found they rose nearly twice as much as rents in the other 90 largest cities in the country. It was worst in San Francisco, where rents went up 12.3 percent in a year; Seattle ranked fourth-worst at 9.2 percent. Another report this year, by Polaris Pacific, revealed that the number of cash-only home sales in Seattle has doubled since 2008. Almost 20 percent of all Seattle home sales are cash.

Is it already too late for us? How can homogenization—economic, racial, and cultural—not become the future of this place?

And how can artists quit being the "useful fools" of the moneyed class, as the author Ben Davis describes them?

In 2012, a group of University of Pennsylvania researchers released a study on the social impact of the arts in three American cities: Philadelphia, Baltimore, and Seattle. They focused on "natural cultural districts," not the kinds plopped down from above, like Seattle Center or New York City's Lincoln Center. In Seattle, they found the postwar system of philanthropy and government investment in nonprofit arts to be disappearing. What's emerging instead is "a sector based on commercial and informal networked organizations, enterprises, and individuals that come together around time-limited projects." Often, these alliances and enterprises are new. Pop-up galleries. Landlords handing over empty storefronts to artists until market-rate renters materialize.

One-offs and fill-ins offer no solace to denizens of the pockets of weirdly creative activity—mini "natural cultural districts"—that are being permanently scattered as Seattle's significant stock of old buildings gets updated and converted. For years, the Wehl family owned the 1893 building at 1012 First Avenue downtown. It's probably best known as home to Taboo Video, that longtime Northwest purveyor of lingerie, toys, crops, whips, floggers. But above Taboo there's been a secret hive of artists and makers for years. Their entrance is around back, in the alley.

Up the creaky stairs on a recent night, electronic-music producer Matt Fay is at his machines. Chris Boyer labors at the center of a neatly organized universe of tiny Lego parts, finally finishing the Lego animation movie he's been working on for four years. Bella Leary and Rosa Castaneda are sculpting a dripping, jet-black landscape. Dave Price's studio is a world of groovy furniture and velvet paintings. He's an interior designer who's been trying to find a public home for this significant archive of velvet paintings he found, perplexingly, in a basement at the Hawaii branch of Brigham Young University. Bumbershoot showed the paintings in 1999; how the Mormons came to own the come-hither nudes in the first place is a mystery to Price.

All those people have to leave. Five-year-old local development group Lake Union Partners bought the building in June, and to bring it up to code, will remake the interior.

"We're very excited for creative tenants to occupy the building after we're done with the improvements," says Joe Ferguson, one of the Lake Union Partners. But this is exactly the kind of language that upsets Price and others. Ferguson admits that any "creative tenants" will also have to pay market rate, in order for the renovation to pencil out. Lake Union Partners have used city incentives to include affordable housing on two residential projects, but this will be office space, and the "creative tenants" will be "maybe a marketing or architecture firm or someone who values the historic nature of the building but has the means to pay market rent... It's complicated," Ferguson admits.

"It's gonna be sad," says Castaneda, adding that the odds of relocating the whole hive as one are slim.

The biggest artist hive to disappear in Seattle in recent years was 619 Western. The state condemned the building full of artist studios in 2011, and Jane Richlovsky was one of the artists forced to move out. She responded by founding '57 Biscayne, a cluster of 13 artist studios just blocks away from the old 619 in Pioneer Square. She named it after a Joni Mitchell lyric from the 1974 song "Raised on Robbery":

We had a little money once

They were pushing through a four-lane highway

Government gave us three thousand dollars

You should have seen it fly away

First he bought a '57 Biscayne.

The government gave Richlovsky tens of thousands of dollars to cover the construction of the '57 Biscayne artist colony inside an existing building. She rents studios for \$1.60 to \$1.75 per square foot, which isn't as cheap as 619 Western was, but it's reasonable, because she was able to negotiate with the landlord using the state's construction money.

"Anybody who made a big drama about the Department of Transportation kicking us out was full of shit, because they actually saved our asses," Richlovsky says. For-profit developers offer no assistance. "If you act like a grown-up and say you have a business, there are all these resources to tap into, so I did that. Now I have a real lease, not a we-could-be-kicked-out-anytime lease." She subleases to the artists and has two more years on the original lease, with two five-year options to renew.

The latest alarm bell about gentrification in Seattle happened in Capitol Hill in 2008, when the Odd Fellows Hall on Pine Street was sold and revamped, dismantling an artists' colony that had been there since the 1980s. In response, city council members Nick Licata and Sally Clark convened a "Cultural Overlay District Advisory Committee," and it made two main recommendations: to establish official "Arts Districts," an idea Seattle floated, then abandoned, in the 1990s, and to create a new position at the city's Office of Arts & Culture. Matthew Richter was appointed Seattle's first cultural space liaison, and since then, the office has begun awarding significant annual Cultural Facilities Grants, creating new support structures, and measuring and classifying existing theaters, galleries, arts offices, rehearsal rooms, libraries, music clubs, museums, and cinemas—which add up to more than five million cultural square feet. (The full inventory is online.)

"Artists and arts spaces are the goose that lays the golden eggs of walkability and public safety and vibrancy and vitality that ultimately mean raised property values," Richter says. "Part of the fact that my position exists at all as an actual paid job in the city is protecting the goose."

In July, National Endowment for the Arts awarded Seattle a \$50,000 Our Town grant for cultural-space work in 2015 and 2016. Some of that work will be on the city's first Arts District, which will be central Capitol Hill, to be announced this fall. Arts Districts will get not just a name but a "tool kit" of support. Kiosks, banners, crosswalk paintings, pop-up spots, busking and plein-air painting, and maps to connect the nodes are all possibilities.

"The more you shine a light on something," Richter says, "the harder it is to displace."

Richter is also trying to make Arts Districts places that offer commercial and mixed-use developers incentives like LEED environmental certification does, but for culture. It will be called B.A.S.E. (Build ArtSpace) Certification. The concept is to reward what goes on *inside* the building, not just on its surface. For instance, developers are currently rewarded for preserving the brick facades of old buildings, the result being that you see these eerie freestanding facades all across Capitol Hill today, awaiting the bodies of new construction to fill in behind them. "If you preserve the facade, but it's 60 dollars per square foot inside, you'll still have a Quiznos, and Quiznos is what drives the character of the neighborhood," Richter says, "not whether the facade is brick."

There's one more thing: Richter has begun collaborating with the Washington State online encyclopedia [HistoryLink.org](http://www.historylink.org) to find ways to document culturally historic spots in Arts Districts. For years, Richter had his coffee at the B&O Espresso on Capitol Hill, across the room from the playwright August Wilson. After a few years, Richter finally realized that Wilson had written Pulitzer Prize-winning works right there in that haunt. August Wilson died in 2005. The B&O, after more than 35 years, was recently knocked down for luxury housing. Nobody's marked the spot.

Capitol Hill is a bittersweet example. It was a die-hard creative center and a haven for weirdos, and now it's the best place to get a \$10 juice. The only option now is to stem the tide.

"Capitol Hill, to many people, is already gone," Richter says. He is definitely not one of those people, and the city program he's creating will

fight to preserve these places. But Capitol Hill is only the first Arts District. In the future, he says, the city will be "looking at South Park, Georgetown, Rainier Beach, Lake City—anywhere that's got an older building stock and a vibrant cultural scene."

To become an Arts District, someone from the neighborhood has to champion the idea to the city. In Capitol Hill, that was Capitol Hill Housing. Or, more precisely, Michael Seiwerath.

Seiwerath is executive director of Capitol Hill Housing, but anyone can tell you he's an arts man. He made his name as executive director at Northwest Film Forum, where he won a Stranger Genius Award for his contributions to film culture. He is now chair of Seattle Arts Commission, and he served on the county arts' 4Culture Real Estate Task Force. His chief role at CHH is to create and maintain space for people who can't pay market value for housing on Capitol Hill—regardless of whether they're artists. But his magnum opus brings the two pursuits together. It's a new building set to open this fall called 12th Avenue Arts, made possible by a mix of low-income housing incentives, loans, city and state support, and arts grants.

Streaked across the front of the building, six-foot-tall orange letters in Broadway marquee formation spell "12th Avenue Arts." Unlike at Arthouse, there is art in this house: The ground floor has two black-box theaters that will provide stable, long-term space for New Century Theatre Company, Strawberry Theatre Workshop, and Washington Ensemble Theatre. The first shows are scheduled for January 2015. On the floors above the theaters, there are 88 affordable apartments and offices and rehearsal spaces for cultural nonprofits including Three Dollar Bill Cinema and Seattle Academy of Arts and Sciences. The two restaurants at street level sell affordable Japanese noodles and Russian dumplings. The same expensive cuisine that's served at all the other new Capitol Hill restaurants was not invited.

The 12th Avenue Arts apartments are not for artists. (Artists may live there only if they qualify as low-income tenants along with everyone else.) This makes 12th Avenue Arts different from buildings by the national nonprofit developer Artspace—the Tashiro Kaplan in Pioneer Square is one—where tenants must qualify based on income and commitment to their art.

Unusual new alliances are required for art and artists to survive in cities today, simply because living in the city has become widely fashionable for the first time in generations. To create 12th Avenue Arts, Capitol Hill Housing first had to sell the police department on the idea of having its existing parking lot moved underground at the site. Artists will have to make new friends if they want to live in cities. As demand and prices only go up, small strains of artists are decamping to rural areas, but the trouble with that is, Seattle artist Nyland says, "You can't talk about art with the cows."

How can artists fight for cities? By joining forces with people artists might not have considered natural allies before: community activists working on non-art issues like civil rights, police brutality, affordable housing.

"If people are going to care about you, you have to care about them," says author Ben Davis. "You have to be plugged into those people."

Seattle's spectacularly bad, high-profile partnership of recent years—the marriage of Seattle Art Museum and the corrupt Washington Mutual bank in a real-estate deal that went down in flames along with the bank—may actually help to serve as a cautionary tale that galvanizes arts organizers here, and clarifies the terms of the debate. There's an increasing awareness, for instance, that artists aren't arts workers, they're worker-workers, relying on all kinds of non-art jobs to pay the bills. So few artists make money from selling their art to rich people that they're simply not part of the "art market" that defines the world of large institutions like SAM.

"SAM would probably love it if there were more tech millionaires who felt connected to the urban core, where the museum is, and who would join in to make it a more glamorous place and bolster connections to money, but do they still have the Kerry Killinger Gallery there?" Davis asks.

Yes, for all to see. Killinger was head of WaMu during the predatory period leading up to the 2008 crash. The Killinger Gallery is on the fourth floor.

"That," he says, "is the wages of art being connected to inequality." ★

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