

# An Exploration of Artist Spaces in Greater Boston

Claire Morrow - Bowling Green State University

Margaret Weinberger, PhD - Faculty Advisor

## Abstract

Boston is a city of magnificent art among many other things. Population Growth of 10% in the last 7 years (compared to NYC at 5% in the same time) is attributed to increased interest in educational institutions, job availability and relocation of “up and coming” businesses and companies. Suburb growth is forced to absorb what Boston proper cannot contain.

This project aimed to observe members of current artist communities in Boston and analyze their personal experiences as well as the impact of urban renewal on their community. Factors such as increased population and inflation of housing prices can affect members of these communities in various ways, so it is important to understand the specific circumstances of each.

## Scholarly Question & Statement of Significance

How are Boston's artist communities being impacted by rising housing costs, rapid population growth and ongoing city construction projects?

This project is significant because it documents a segment of society at a crucial point in their timeline. Artists in Boston are faced with the choice between adaptation or relocation and the implications that come with each. Through their own experiences, these artists have shed light on many issues which impact the population of Boston.

## Methods

**Setting:** New England, inner city and suburbs

**Design:** Ethnographic and Biographical interview-based data collection recorded in print, audio, video and photographs

**Procedures:** Collection of housing and income based data, qualitative data of city projects and artist housing initiatives (or lack thereof), Observation of and Participation in Artist Communities, Interviews of Artists in these communities, Record of Audio, Video and Photo Elements

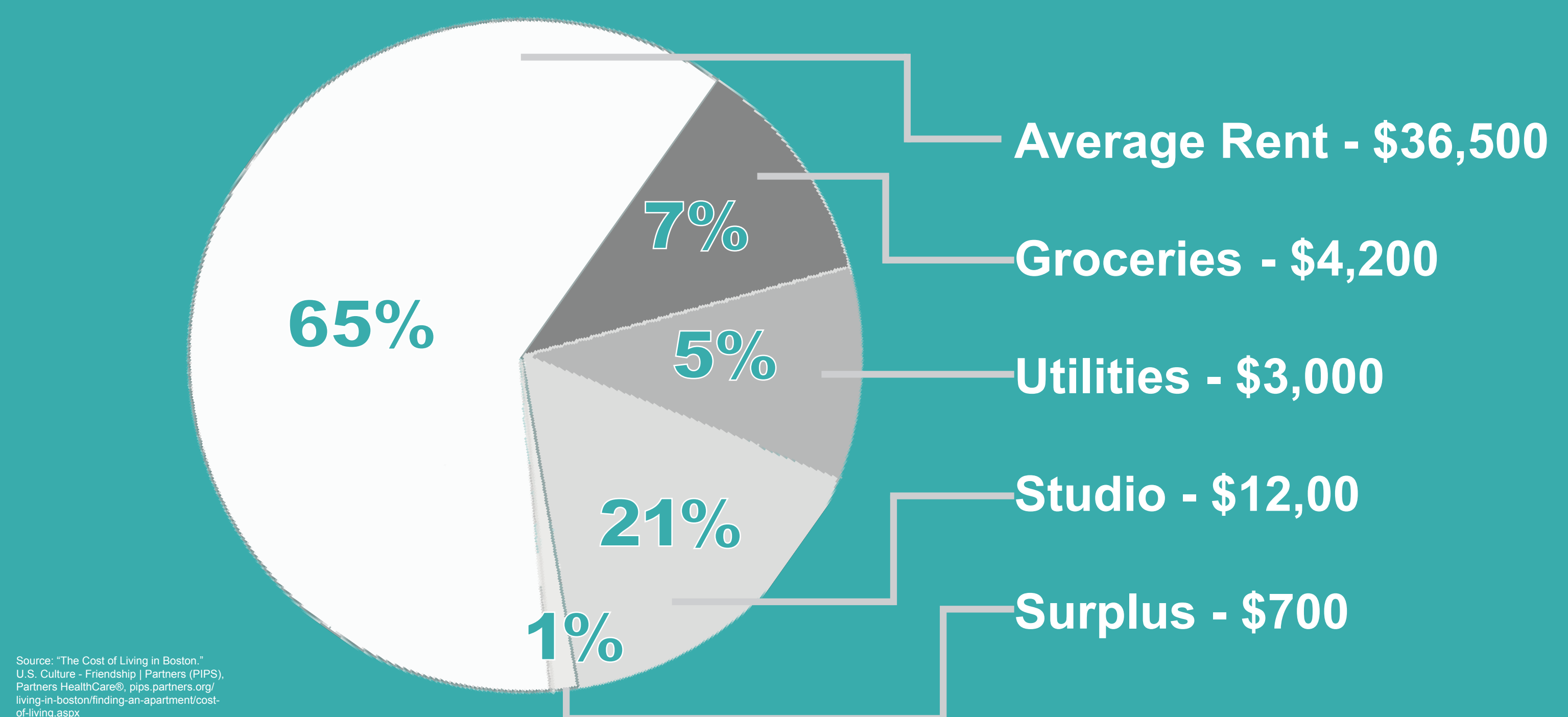
**Participants:** Members of the Brickbottom Artists Association (BAA), Independent Artists in Boston, Wareham St. Studios

## The Interview (Methods cont.)

Participants were asked 10 questions in a loosely structured interview. Questions pertained to their experiences in the Artist Communities and Spaces as well as their experiences living and working in or around Boston. Participants were encouraged to follow up with additional information or add anything they felt had been important to their experiences or the experiences of their communities.

## Housing Costs & Salary Breakdown

**Artist Total Income - \$56,400**



## Findings

Throughout the interviews, many of the same topics were brought up by the artists. They each had their own, distinct opinions concerning their communities, surrounding cities and urban renewal projects, but many responses interlaced with and supported each other. These intersections allowed for the creation of diverse, yet unified, perspectives on these topics for the artists of the greater Boston area. Emerging themes were based on the analysis of responses from those interviewed. They were based on categories important to the artists and were not pre-determined. These themes of interest made themselves known many times over the course of the interviews and were supported by the artists' responses.



### Emphasis on History

Boston area artists place strong emphasis on history because of the work and dedication needed to establish an artists' space. One of the founding members of Brickbottom Artists Association in Somerville, lived in many artists' spaces throughout the years. He witnessed first-hand the challenges that arose while planning their artist residence. Additionally, a large majority of the artists' pride stems from the implications that their space had on the surrounding area. Many artists saw the effects of their community reach far beyond their walls.



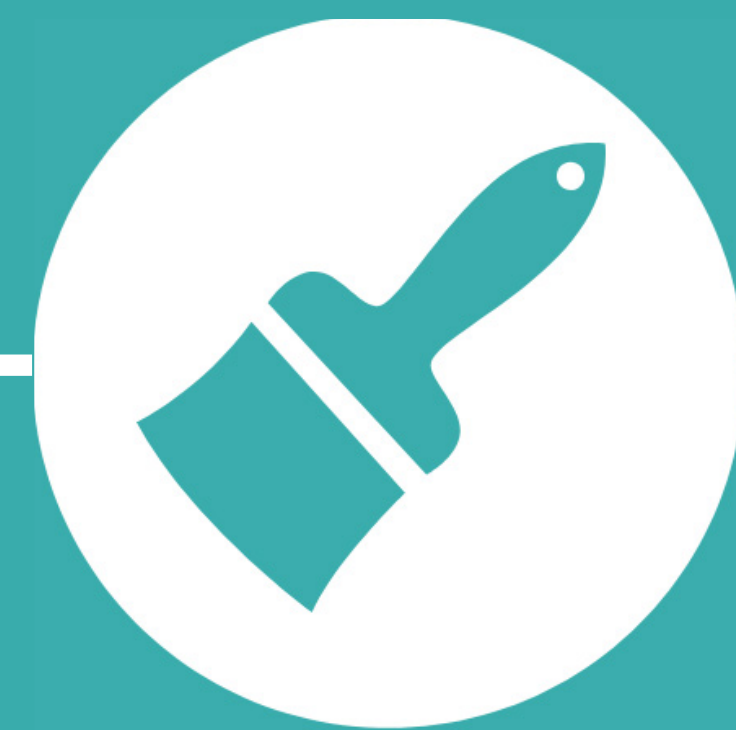
### Importance of a Strong Artist Community

At BAA, it was immediately clear that community was one of the most important aspects to residents. However, in work-only spaces like the one documented in the South End, artists rarely interact and only visit their spaces to seriously work. In cases like the South End, an overarching, community based group often is available for those who wish to participate.



### Rising Cost of Space

Many artists find themselves unable to continue working in the city of Boston due to rising costs for both residential and studio spaces. These artists are then forced to move to suburbs or nearby towns and take their art with them. Although some individuals have managed to hold on to affordable spaces, city development projects threaten rising costs in the future. Though current costs may seem out of reach, the cost of a studio 30 years ago was still even out of reach for many young artists.



### Challenges Working as an Artist

Besides affordability, there are additional issues with which artists are faced. These issues are often made worse by the lack of stable, reliable and affordable housing. As one artist stated, three main factors challenge artists, especially in the Boston area. "Artist need space, time and funding to survive. It's very hard to find the intersection of those three things especially when there is no space that the funding you have can create."



### Neighborhood Impact

For some artists, the neighborhood surrounding their studios can greatly influence accessibility, community and resources. These effects can be both positive and negative, but have direct impacts on artists and the resources they have available. In the case of the artists of Brickbottom, their isolated location has saved them the trouble of dealing with the changing world outside.

## Conclusion

The problem, as I found it, was not that artists want to leave the city, but rather that they are forced to leave because 1) their property is taken from them by development companies, 2) affordable studio and residential spaces are unavailable, or 3) the lack of support from the city makes it so they cannot afford to sustain their other needs of time and resources.

As the property values continue to rise and the population continues to grow, it becomes more and more difficult for Boston area artists to sustain their craft. With help from local governments and city officials, these artist communities can be saved. However, someone must act before it is too late and the artists have been sent out of the city.

## Future Directions

Because I was only able to stay in Boston for eight weeks, there were many places I could not visit and perspectives I was unable to gain. I understood that I would not be able to solve the issues facing artists based on the information I collected, but rather that I would be able to gain a small amount of insight into their world.

Future researchers will be able to examine the data I collected – mainly the lack of reliable information concerning artists spaces – to find an underlying problem causing the lack of affordable artist housing and studios.