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Individual Artists and the State of the State

What are we going to do about the state of New York State's economy? One strategy might be to make the state more attractive to artists. Experience tells us that the presence of working artists can radically transform a community. Countless neighborhoods in New York City, for example, as diverse as Soho and Tribeca in Manhattan, Long Island City in Queens, DUMBO and Williamsburg in Brooklyn have been re-imagined by the presence of working artists. Once derelict buildings have been brought back to life made vibrant by artists who use them for live/work space. Communities of working artists can fill a region with creative capital, becoming a magnet for shops, restaurants, small businesses, and, eventually more residents.

What are the possibilities at the state level? The question is by no means rhetorical. Many regions in New York State contain the same kind of old manufacturing infrastructure as many of the New York City neighborhoods that were so successfully transformed by residential working artists. As manufacturing dies in regions around New York or as once major public institutions close their doors, many times the architectural structures left behind with their high ceilings, big windows with lots of natural light and large interior spaces, make for ideal spaces for working artists.

Two outstanding examples are Art space in Buffalo and the Near West side in Syracuse, affiliated with Syracuse University. A statewide inventory of these structures might be a useful first step to determine which structures might be recyclable and turned into studio space for the visual arts, new media, film production, dance, performance space, music. A statewide offering of space in return for a modest investment or sweat equity might be enough incentive to attract artists to migrate from down state to upstate.

Making it attractive for artists to move into available unused state owned space might also help with another serious New York State problem and that is the state's current brain drain. According to a study conducted by the New York State Department of Economic Development and Cornell University, from 1995 to 2000, although upstate New York attracted a total of 235,000 young adults, the region also lost 303,000 young adults. This number is especially shocking, when you realize the record numbers of young people who come into the state to study at the state's extraordinary network of world class colleges and universities. Many of those students who come to New York are artists in training. What would make more of them stay in the state? The opportunity to live in the state with space to work would be a powerful attraction to stay after college.

But why take that risk now, you might ask? New York State is in deep economic distress. Already this year, \$800 million dollars was cut from the state's budget and next year that figure will surely be larger. Urban areas throughout the state are experiencing a seriously depressed economy. Economic growth in the state has slowed almost to a standstill. In times like these shouldn't the state of New York focus on the bare essentials like education, economic development, creating jobs?

Indeed, New York City was facing the same dilemma 30 years ago, when on the brink of bankruptcy, the city had to decide whether it would continue to provide funding for its cultural institutions. Utterly impoverished, the city decided that a key to the city's revival was the continued vitality of its cultural infrastructure. Partnering with a range of agencies in federal and state government from the department of labor, to Housing and Urban Development to state economic development, the city, its artists and its cultural institutions became a vital part of the effort to impact education, spur economic development and create new jobs. Can New York State afford to invest in attracting and retaining its most talented artists? The real question is: can New York State afford not to.

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