

# ALLIANCE LETTER

Volume 25, Number 2  
Summer 2009

Boston Preservation Alliance

## Preservation and Boston's Creative Economy

Over the past decade, Boston has seen an unprecedented number of historic properties converted to arts-oriented uses, artist live/work space and studios, theatres and performance venues. There is undoubtedly an intangible, but real, synergy between the city's eclectic mix of architecture and its creativity.

The Alliance's executive director sat down with three of Boston's leading thinkers on the city's art and design communities to ask them about the relationship that they see between Boston's historic built environment and its creative economy.

**Beate Becker** is founding director of the Design Industry Group of Massa-

chusetts, which brings together design industries across disciplines, including advertising, industrial design, fashion design, landscape, interior, and architecture in Massachusetts to help them think and act like an economic sector. She has been working in the field of cultural economic development, in Boston and around the world, for over thirteen years.

**Susan Hartnett** has been active in the local arts community for over thirty years. She served as the director of the Boston Center for the Arts and was the city's director of arts, tourism, and special events. She spent twelve years in the state arts council and also worked at the Boston Redevelopment Authority as director of Economic Development. She has recently been appointed as executive director of the

Cambridge Center for Adult Education.

**Christina Lanzl** an arts professional serving the creative economy for over twenty years, is project manager at the Urban Arts Institute, a non-profit organization affiliated with and housed at Massachusetts College of Art and Design. Urban Arts works to promote excellence in the design of our public places and specializes in creating public artworks and cultural assets in communities. Lanzl is founder and chair of the Placemaking Network at the Boston Society of Architects/AIA and she lives in the Fort Point Channel Landmark District.

**Sarah D. Kelly** is Executive Director of the Boston Preservation Alliance

*continued on page 9*

## Preservation and Boston's Creative Economy

*continued from page 12*

**Sarah D. Kelly:** What does the creative economy mean to you, and why is it important to Massachusetts and to Boston?

**Beate Becker:** My definition goes back to the New England Creative Economy Initia-

tive. What that means is everything from music, film, design, and performing arts—all of the different kinds of expressions. We are talking about nonprofit business, and about commercial enterprises. And then we are talking about skills and occupations of creative workers, and the whole structure of supportive organizations from funding institutions to educational institutions all feeding into this creative economy.

**Christina Lanzl:** Once known as the Athens of America, Boston and the Commonwealth of Massachusetts, are intellectual centers of the highest order. We have one of the highest concentrations of design related professionals in the country, rivaled only by cities like New York. Creative economy means the concentration of positive creative workforce that is committed to and believes in what they do, serving creative

enterprises of both the commercial and non-profit sectors.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** Many of Boston's historic buildings are being converted into new uses—like artist housing and live/work spaces. How does this help create a more vibrant economy?

**Susan Hartnett:** What artists need is what old factory buildings have: the unobstructed floors, the indestructible building, like Hibernian Hall or the Boston Center for the Arts. In old factory buildings, just the light alone from those huge windows is perfect. Plus, there is the romantic feeling of walking into an old building. If you're a fool for it—which either you are or you aren't—you love old buildings. Artists really capture that. It works for them technically, but also on another level of inspiration.

**Beate Becker:** It improves buildings and preserves the character, and character is an important thing to Boston. But by refurbishing the buildings and bringing them up-to-date by the content, it rejuvenates the activities that take place inside, and I think that is the ideal mix of being able to respect the past but also being able to look forward. That is what you see so much of in Europe, respect for history but not being stuck in the century in which they were built, and really adapting—that whole concept of adaptation is the exemplification of what the creative economy is.

**Christina Lanzl:** Live/work studios and artist spaces are essentially small businesses. They serve as economic incubators. Smaller businesses are at the core of a vibrant community. They are tied into their

local communities in many ways, often participate in and contribute to community and public programs. I'm very much witness to that in my own community in Fort Point Channel. We all know each other and together we create cultural life and economy that serves both the neighborhood and the world, literally.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** Do you believe the creative economy encompasses creative ways of using buildings and architecture?

**Beate Becker:** Absolutely. I think there is no question that the built environment is part of the whole creative and cultural economy. People definitely associate Boston with history, and associate the buildings with history and culture. The industrial revolution happened in these old buildings that are now becoming the sites for the next revolution in creativity.

**Susan Hartnett:** The largest sector of the creative economy is architects. Especially in New England where we have an incredible stock of buildings, and where there is an emphasis on greening your building, there is great opportunity for architecture to meet the creative economy.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** Do you view Boston's historic structures as a competitive advantage? How can that translate into economic benefits?

**Susan Hartnett:** There is no question that Boston and Cambridge are the two most gorgeous cities in the country, and this is largely because of the stock of their buildings. It is also because increasingly the addition of new architecture respects and

interacts with the old. It doesn't just plop itself next to historic buildings, but sits between them. We have the reuse of our fabulous buildings scattered around our fabulous, walkable, ride-your-bike, cities.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** What is the attraction of Boston's historic buildings for studios, practice spaces and performance venues?

**Beate Becker:** In Fort Point Channel...these [loft-style warehouse] structures were built for production so there was a soundness and quality of construction, and also a scale of construction that is really unusual to find nowadays, so they are just extraordinary spaces.

**Christina Lanzl:** Boston's historic warehouse buildings offer ideal conditions for all types of creative users. They have weight-bearing floors, freight elevator access, excellent light and are easily adapted to many creative uses, whether it's subdividing a space for artistic and gallery uses or soundproofing a recording studio or practice room. Most of them are clustered together in neighborhoods, so that a dialogue and concentration can be established. This allows easy networking and collaboration, as well as joint marketing initiatives.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** How about the Theatre District? What impact does the renovation of historic theatres like the Cutler Majestic and the Opera House, and soon the Paramount and Modern Theatres, have on the cultural economy?

**Beate Becker:** What's great with the Majestic is that it's an incredible renovation, but in the absence of the partnership

with Emerson College, with just the theater, I don't think it would have had the same impact. All of these partnerships with educational institutions and cultural institutions are pieces of a puzzle. That's what I want to say about the creative economy: that in and of itself, it's not enough, but it has to be totally integrated into economic and urban development. There are partnerships around Boston now, and that is what is really important.

**Christina Lanzl:** The cluster of theatres in the Theatre District creates its identity. It becomes easier to find and to direct folks to it. This allows for comprehensive marketing as well as the flourishing of all kinds of businesses that cater to theatre goers. This ranges from hotels, restaurants, cafes and pubs to parking facilities, costume shops, ticket agencies and other entertainment industry establishments.

**Sarah D. Kelly:** What are some of your favorite buildings in Boston? What do you love about them?

**Susan Hartnett:** The ropewalk [in the Charlestown Navy Yard], is amazing. It should have a creative use. That building should be filled with, I think, the creative economy. I think Hibernian Hall is also incredible. That, along with other structures in Dudley Square—Ferdinands, the Hotel Dartmouth—is a very important and great space. There is so much going on there [in Dudley Square] with preservation, and creativity, and reuse. I love the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, and I love the Boston Public Library. Those are just the classics.



The SOWA Open Market, nestled within historic warehouse buildings on Harrison Avenue in the South End, is open every Sunday through October 25<sup>th</sup>.

### SOWA Open Market

*Photo courtesy of  
Chris Masci, SOWA  
Open Market*

**Christina Lanzl:** The historic buildings and warehouses of historic Fort Point, particularly the ones on Summer Street. I remember the very first time I came to the neighborhood about twenty years ago and my first reaction was, wow, the buildings are obviously loved, because they are well cared for. Their architectural detail and the breadth of architectural expression are both homogeneous and rich. I also love the Hancock Tower, particularly its view from the South End, where the entire building literally looks like a single, tall pane of glass. I am less enthusiastic about how this building meets the ground plane where I see an opportunity to enliven the public space. The new Mattapan branch library, by William Rawn and Associates, is fantastic. The Boston Public Library has sensitively been

linking the design of new branches to the main, historic Copley Square library. New branches feature an interior courtyard just like the original building (the new Allston branch is another example). That's a wonderful thing. You understand that relationship immediately and it's brilliant. The Mattapan courtyard is walled by a tall granite wall. Above it is just the sky—a really dramatic space.

**Beate Becker:** I know the building that I absolutely love: the Athenaeum. It's the interior, it's the quiet, and I like the way it overlooks the burial ground. It's this haven. To me it is the heart of Boston. It's funny; it's not particularly notable on the outside, but I love it. ■