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A Decade in the Making | ART-FORCE Gives Creatives An Affordable Place to Call Home

By Kristyn Back | November 7, 2017 | No Comments



A decade ago, [Neda Abghari](#) had an inspiring, albeit lofty, dream. Built from inside the walls of the Telephone Factory Lofts (which was once the only subsidized artists residence in Atlanta), Neda envisioned opening her own art-centric space one day.

Two weeks ago, [that dream was publicly announced as a reality](#). Neda's art nonprofit, [The Creatives Project](#) (TCP), along with local developers [Stryant Investments](#), and [Building Insights Inc.](#) will breathe life back into the historic George Adair School with The Academy. TCP's ART-FORCE program is working with numerous city planners, investors, residents, and nonprofits across the city and across multiple properties to continue building TCP's inventory of affordable units to "serve Atlanta's creatives workforce" while the redevelopment of the Academy is underway.

From the humble beginnings of The Creatives Project to the huge affordable housing win, Neda tells us her inspiring story of perseverance, patience, and what happens when you've got a 'sky's the limit' attitude.

Building a Foundation

Back in 2007, TCP started off as a photo documentary project. After receiving a donated

studio space within the Telephone Factory Lofts from long-time patron CG Creative Interiors, Neda began getting to know the local artists that lived there – and the proverbial lightbulb went off.

"Over the years, Sarah Rosenberg, the property manager, and I became very close. I would talk to her about my dreams of starting my own version of the Telephone Factory with added programs through TCP. Being onsite, I always envisioned a future site that would have one floor to house artists, one floor where they would work, and another where they teach classes and workshops while helping to pay their bills. It would become the heart of the neighborhood – where the artists would interact with the community but also with each other."

Between the early days as a photo documentary to the pinnacle moment of securing a commitment from Stryant Investments and Building Insights Inc., The Creatives Project developed into a nonprofit that provided artists with access to free studios or economically viable leases. Those artists would then support youth living in under-resourced areas through arts mentorship.

"My original idea for a concept like this was before TCP, as it stands today, was even born, but we started off with limited contacts and resources. It moved away from this idea of a single space, to building personal relationships with investors who owned single-family homes. They would donate subsidized leases to us specifically for our artists. That's how the program functioned until 2016. We started off small to test out the kinks, learned a few lessons along the way, and continued consulting with developers to figure out how to scale up to the vision for ARTFORCE which you see coming to life now. By 2019, when The Academy opens its doors we will have additional offerings across the city at various large-scale residential developments working with a group of patrons and supporters like Stryant and Building Insights."



Revisoning a Dream

While the expansion of Neda's dream for TCP came in the form of ART-FORCE Housing, it wasn't without a practice in patience and perseverance. After three years of conversations with organizations like Invest Atlanta and introductions to developers like Pullman Historic Development, The Creatives Project had to find a viable cheerleader of both art and affordable housing.

"I remember meeting with Invest Atlanta and talking to them about our concept and our desire to expand resources for artists around affordable housing. Artists are cultural creators who often make parts of our city more desirable to live in. Unfortunately, with no protections in place artists themselves are priced out of the same areas years later (like the Telephone Factory Lofts today). We were really interested in how we could create some sort of long-term affordability."

"At the time, Invest Atlanta had just started considering affordable housing for artists, so they were really excited about our ideas. Unfortunately, at the time, they didn't really have any funding mechanisms in place. They told us that if we could bring arts-friendly

investors to the table, that maybe there was a way we could all sit down and have a conversation, a brainstorm."

"In addition to the Goat Farm, who had been supporting us for years by providing our artists with free studio space, Invest Atlanta and one of **our previous housing patrons** who had been supporting the program for quite some time, introduced us to Atticus LeBlanc, the co-founder of Stryant."

"We met with Stryant and really hit it off talking about the possibility of arts programming at Pullman Yard (a property they were considering when we first met). As we continued deepening our relationship with Stryant and other developers around our ART-FORCE housing concepts, Stryant had identified another historic redevelopment project the George Adair School."



"I shared TCP's vision for ART-FORCE and they shared their vision for redevelopment in terms of historic preservation and long-term affordability through design. The more we discussed our ideas, the more we realized how complementary our long-term goals were around thoughtful community development practices. I became really excited about establishing more arts-based community programs for Adair Park and surrounding neighborhoods, as we had been working for years with artists TCP had previously housed in the community. Stryant was excited about supporting the expansion of our work by providing us a home for these programs, including ART-FORCE at The Academy. With their innovative design thinking and our ties to the community through programming, we look forward to creating a really special place for our all of our neighbors and community at large."

"It's the first project of its kind existing in Atlanta. The Telephone Factory Lofts was a great example of affordable housing for artists before the housing opportunity bonds expired, The BeltLine came through, and the property was sold to new investors. But even still, outside of the holiday art sales, a high level of public community engagement wasn't really established."

The Art of Design

The development of The Academy comes at a cost and not just when talking about financing a property that has sat unused for over 40 years (10 without a roof). Atlanta's ongoing development has sparked numerous debates on gentrification and displacement. What The Creatives Project, Stryant, and Building Insights hope to create is a model for how to do it right.

"Development, gentrification, and displacement are unstoppable. They will always continue because we live in a very capitalistic society. But there are ways to be thoughtful and conscious of the impact a development is going to have on existing and future communities. With this particular project, what excites me is the innovation of the design that the development group has planned. It's a new model for Atlanta and it will ensure long-term affordability simply through design."

"Stryant and Building Insights want to build a design model that is replicable for other communities to use whether it's for the arts or for elders. TCP's programs add an additional dimension of support to community development, building a village within this building, within each floor, within each wing, supported by smart design."

"The Academy will cater to creatives through the various amenities and offerings onsite

but anyone with a heart for art will enjoy living there. It could be your grandma, your aunt, an art student, a musician, a graphic designer, or Joe Schmo who really loves creation and culture. All are welcome. TCP will create an atmosphere which invites participation and interaction among people from all walks of life to connect through the arts."

"I'm really conscious about how artists can impact the changes that typically lead to displacement, so programs will be crucial in honoring and preserving the voices of the community and its history. For example, since 2014, through our program "Capturing Community," we have been bringing local artists and residents together through the documentary arts. With interviews and intimate photography youth work to capture their stories hidden and untold stories of their neighborhood elders to help strengthen community narratives. Through programs like "Capturing Community," we will have a chance at playing a more positive role and continue to have a positive impact."

A Historic Victory

Creating an affordable housing project that simultaneously involves supporting artists is why The Academy is a historic victory for Atlanta. It doesn't go without modest days of dreaming. Or for years of perseverance and patience. Or for looking to the skies, even when life throws curveballs in the shape of cancer.

"Part of me was terrified when I was diagnosed. Things seemed to finally be falling into place for ART-FORCE after all of this work we'd been doing behind the scenes for all these years. I kept wondering when the seeds we had planted would sprout. Would it be during my treatments? Would they wait for me? Would I even have the chance to see them come to life? I had my fingers crossed all throughout treatments. It was truly

amazing because it was after my very last treatment in February that the deed situation between APS and the city had cleared and in June our supporters, Stryant and Building Insights, were able to purchase the property."

"I remember the first time I went over to the site after Stryant's purchase and commitment to TCP. I looked up to the sky and thought, '*wow, the sky really is the limit.*' It was a full circle moment that flashed me back to my conversations with Sarah. I used to always say "*slow and steady wins the race*" but after facing breast cancer, I remind myself every day to lay the races to rest. '*Slow and steady wins the sky*' is my new and improved motto."

"There are so many incredible people who have been working towards TCP's vision for so long and the sky truly is the limit. Life is full of distractions...The politics, or details, or grind of it all, and it tries to knock us off track. Or life just happens and you think, '*there goes everything I've been working for.*' But for me, it goes back to remaining focused yet flexible and staying true to our ideals while holding up patience. If you're able to align your personal goals, ideals, and your mission, things naturally and eventually fall into place. I've surrounded myself with a team of like-minded dreamers and cheerleaders. Without them, TCP could not have become what it is today. I'm so grateful to have met, and have the support of, a tribe who shares this pie in the sky dream."

*If you're interested in supporting and learning more about The Creatives Project attend their **annual exhibition PRIME**, taking place Sunday, November 12.*

Photos are property of The Creatives Project and Stryant Investments INC.

