Abstract

Preserving the North Light:
Boston’s Early Artist Studio Buildings and the Historic Precedent for Adaptive Use

Allyson Mehley
Advisor: Andrew Dolkart

In the contemporary imagination, the notion of the artist studio unconsciously provokes images of light-infused, expansive, industrial spaces within older urban buildings. This visual representation, as well as common discourse on the subject, often points to 1960s artist colonies as the key historical reference point for the birth of the modern urban studio building.

Although the legacy of these stories is powerful and appropriate within the overall history of artist studio buildings, as well as historic preservation, it does not accurately portray its roots. Present-day accounts of creatively preserving historic buildings through conversions to artist studio buildings can, in part, be attributed to well-publicized examples that began to appear in the 1960s and 1970s. But it has unfortunately masked a richer, more complex account of the long-term relationship between artist studio buildings, cultural values, urban development, and historic preservation that has been actively developing since the mid-nineteenth century.

The objective of this thesis is to examine and identify how the historic evolution of the artist studio building in the United States continues to resonate in preservation today. It recognizes from the outset that the “adaptive use-artist studio building model” is a highly successful prototype for the preservation of older, underutilized buildings. But this thesis explores the questions of why it became successful; what events precipitated its development; and seeks clues in the nineteenth century buildings that prefigured their appropriateness for adaptive use. The research area for this thesis focuses on one city: Boston. This was not a random choice but one based on three key characteristics of Boston’s history: its early leadership in the arts, its role in the evolution of the studio typology and its progressive attitude toward preservation. Also, in present day Boston, artist studio buildings are considered vital elements of the city’s cultural life. Despite severe development pressure and gentrification issues, there is a recognized commitment by the cultural community as well as the city government to keep artists in the city.

In Boston and other cities nationwide, the willing promotion of the “adaptive use-studio building model” by artists, planners, preservationists and others has no doubt benefited many individuals and communities. But without a greater study and understanding of the precedents that helped create the modern artist studio building, the full meaning and significance of this architectural type will continue to go unrealized.