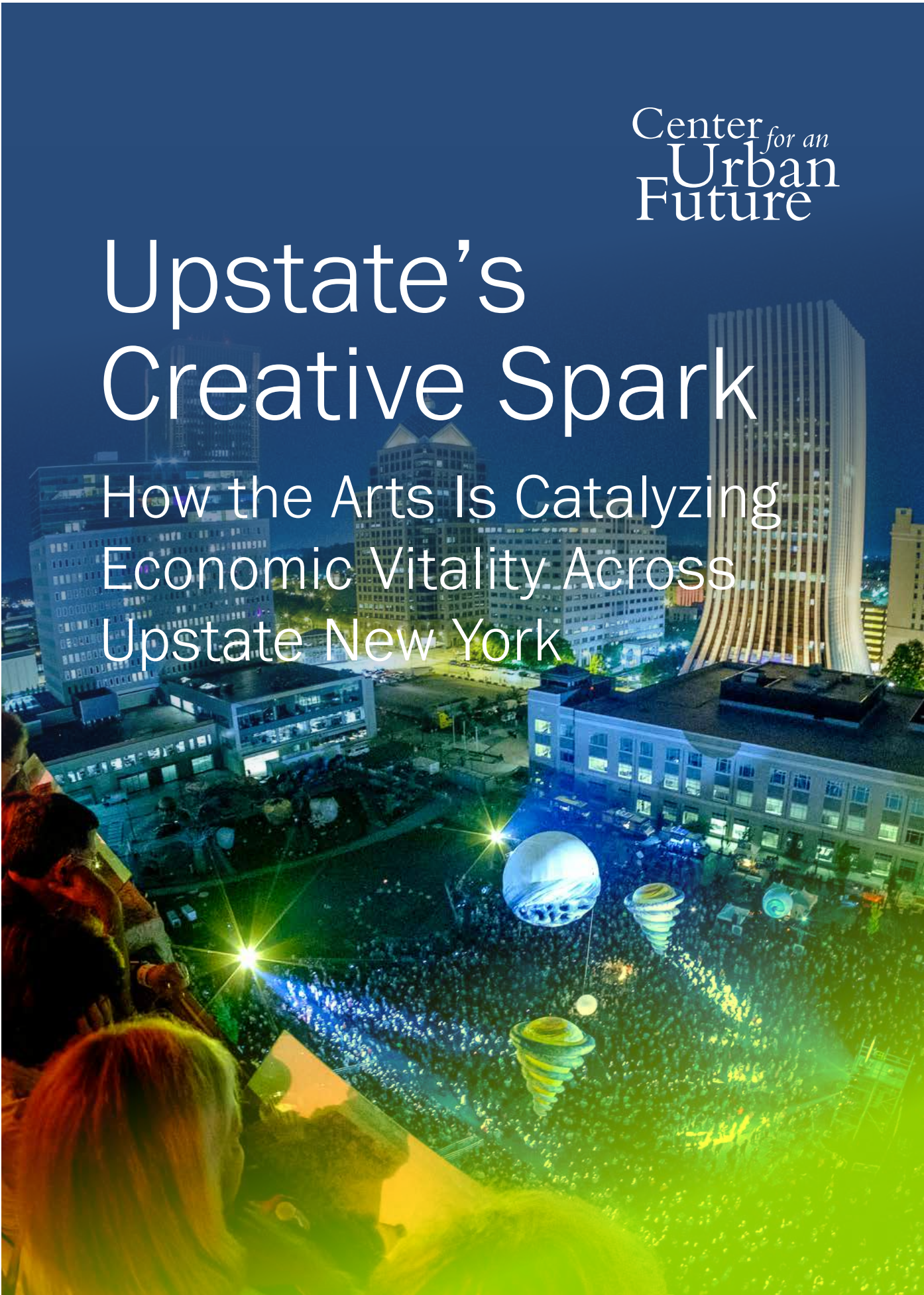


Upstate's Creative Spark

How the Arts Is Catalyzing
Economic Vitality Across
Upstate New York



Center *for an* Urban Future

Upstate's Creative Spark is a publication of the Center for an Urban Future. Researched and written by Sarah Amandolare, Charlotte Crowe, Joseph Didomizio, and Eric Grode. Edited by Charlotte Crowe, Eli Dvorkin, and Jonathan Bowles. Additional research by Charles Shaviro, Iraj Zia, and Eric Raimondi. Graphics by Blake Robert Mills. Designed by Stislow Design.

Center for an Urban Future (CUF) is a leading New York City-based think tank that generates smart and sustainable public policies to reduce inequality, increase economic mobility, and grow the economy.



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The Power of the Arts to Revitalize New York

REVIVING THE FORTUNES OF UPSTATE NEW YORK HAS BEEN A MAJOR ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

priority of governors and legislators since at least the 1990s. During this time, state policymakers have rolled out an array of strategies, development projects, and financial incentives designed to reverse decades of economic stagnation and population declines—and foster new investment in hard-hit downtown areas. While some of these public initiatives have produced results, few have had as powerful an economic and social impact on upstate communities as another far less appreciated catalyst: the arts.

Employment in the arts and culture sector across upstate New York surged 35 percent from 2009 to 2019, nearly 10 times the overall rate of employment growth upstate (4 percent) and three times the growth rate of the healthcare sector (12 percent).¹ This employment boom occurred in nearly every corner of the state, with striking arts sector job growth in Buffalo (59 percent), Syracuse (53.5 percent), Albany (33 percent), and across regions including the Hudson Valley (48 percent), Southern Tier (36.5 percent), North Country (28.5 percent), and Capital Region (21 percent).²

In addition, artists have been fueling much of the population growth in upstate communities. At a time when many upstate cities have seen little overall population growth—and when the under-65 population has been in rapid decline in most communities—the number of working artists in upstate New York increased by 26.5 percent between 2011 and 2021.³ This influx of artists and homegrown talent—and the accompanying revival of art galleries, festivals, theaters, concert halls, and museums—has helped reinvigorate downtown communities, drive tourism, and spark the creation of new restaurants, coffee shops, and other small businesses.

But this impact could be so much more. Indeed, the growth in artists and arts-related employment has occurred in spite of declining levels of public investment in the arts across upstate New York. The primary grantmaking budget for the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), the state's primary arts funding mechanism, fell from \$63.1 million in FY 2008 to \$40.6 million today—a 35.6 percent decline, after adjusting for inflation—and is now 68 percent below its 1990 peak. Fortunately, Governor Hochul and the state legislature have stepped up non-recurring state funding to NYSCA to partially offset the loss of federal relief dollars; still, the total grantmaking budget will decline compared to FY 2023.⁴

At the same time, even though the arts sector has been an engine of economic opportunity, the state's economic development tools—from the Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs), to the Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), to Market New York's tourism grant program—too often overlook it. In 2021, upstate REDCs only awarded 3.7 percent of all grants to projects related to arts and culture. Likewise, just 12 out of the 104 DRI projects across all of New York State in 2022, or 11.5 percent, were related to arts and culture.⁵

While New York has barely begun to harness the full potential of the arts in upstate communities, there are also several emerging challenges that could dampen future growth in this increasingly vital part of the economy. As rents and property costs skyrocket in many communities, artists and arts groups face growing concerns about being priced out of the places they have helped revitalize. Highly competitive operating grants haven't nearly kept pace with inflation, leaving many nonprofits operating on shoestring budgets with few, if any, full-time employees. And in many places, critical arts infrastructure like arts councils, arts districts, and nonprofits that support artists are underfunded or missing altogether.

Where other economic development initiatives have seen mixed results in upstate New York overcome decades of underinvestment, job loss, and population decline, the under-the-radar arts sector has provided a much-needed economic jolt while also creating new opportunities for inclusive growth. By better integrating the arts into New York State economic development planning, policymakers have an opportunity to build on recent momentum and lay the groundwork for a more vibrant, sustainable, and equitable economy.

This report details the economic impact of the arts in upstate New York and the challenges the sector faces as pandemic-era funding dwindles. It also advances ten recommendations for how state and local policy-makers can better support working artists and arts organizations in New York. Supported by a grant from the Rochester Area Community Foundation, the report builds on the Center for an Urban Future’s previous research on New York’s arts and culture sector and broader creative economy, including the 2021 report *Creative Comeback: Surveying NYC’s Arts Ecosystem in the Wake of COVID-19* and the 2015 report *Creative New York*. It was informed by extensive data analysis and interviews with over 90 New Yorkers, including directors of arts and cultural organizations, individual artists, leaders of local and regional economic and community development organizations, small business owners, community leaders, and government officials, among many others.

Without the attention or investment afforded many other sectors, the arts have become a leading driver of economic opportunity across the state, sparking a new sense of possibility and hometown pride. In places that had been struggling to develop a post-industrial identity and stave off population decline, new and newly revitalized concert halls, galleries, theaters, murals and more have helped reanimate once-empty streets and draw new visitors and residents alike.

“Arts and culture have a way of revitalizing communities that I don’t think there’s any equivalent to. We’ve seen it throughout the state,” says Tim Weidemann, director of Ulster County’s department of economic development.

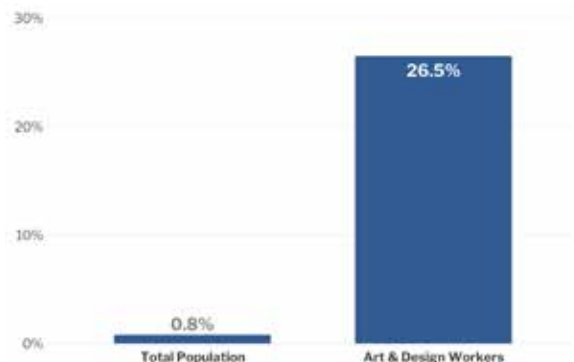
New data analysis by the Center for an Urban Future reveals that upstate New York’s resident artist population has expanded in cities and counties across the state in recent years, helping to counter decades of population losses among residents under age 65. The total population of art and design workers upstate grew from 10,747 in 2011 to 13,596 in

2021, a 26.5 percent increase. The growth of the resident artist population has outpaced total population growth in nearly every major city in the state, including Buffalo, Syracuse, and Rochester. In Albany, the resident artist population grew 50 percent, while the total population increased just 3 percent. In Buffalo, the resident artist population grew 45.3 percent, while the total population rose only 2.4 percent. (The 26.5 percent jump in the resident artist population upstate was also double the rate of growth of working artists in New York City.)⁶

In addition to welcoming more recent arrivals, cities and towns upstate are also seeing more young artists who grew up or earned degrees locally decide to put down roots. “We’ve absolutely seen a change in the way young people think about this city,” observes Bleu Cease, the executive director of the Rochester Contemporary Art Center. “The sentiment is no longer that graduates of the surrounding colleges and universities with arts programs are leaving for major

The Artist Population in Upstate New York Is Growing Faster Than the Overall Population

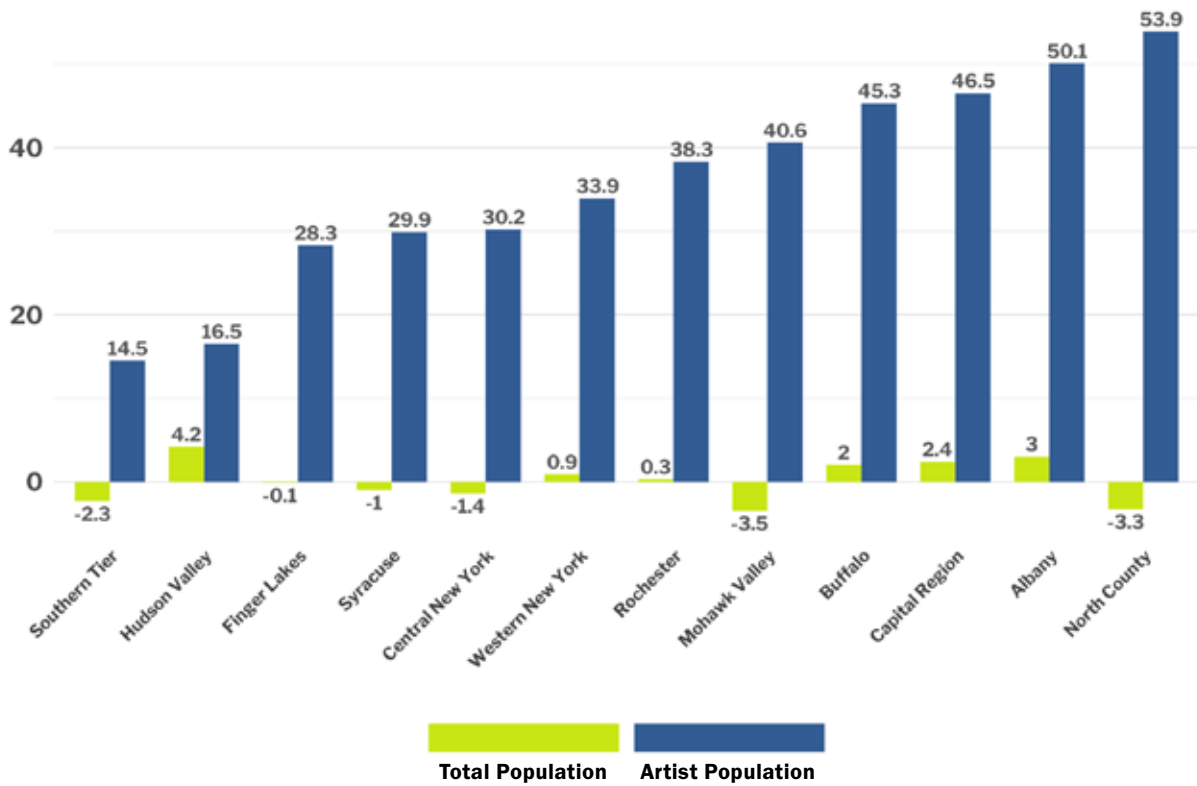
Percentage growth in total population vs. art and design workers in upstate New York, 2011–2021



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

The Growth of the Artist Population vs. the Overall Population Across Upstate New York

Percent change in resident artists and total population in upstate regions, 2011–2021



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

metros. On a weekly basis, I meet artists who have decided to stay here.” Albany-based visual designer, arts educator, and activist Jade Warrick, who returned to her hometown from Los Angeles, says that more artists in the area are asking themselves, “Why do I need to leave my community to make the art I want to make?”

Many of these artists and the organizations that support them have seized on upstate New York’s abundance of underused buildings and public spaces to create new events and community hubs. The Rochester Fringe Festival has become one of the three biggest fringe festivals in the country since its 2012 debut in the city’s Martin Luther King Jr. Park, “which hadn’t been used [for public programming] for 20 years,” remembers the festival’s CEO and producer Erica Fee. ArtPort Kingston, established in 2019, brought contemporary art to neglected historic buildings on the waterfront, along with 350 visitors per weekend even during the pandemic—more than half of them exploring the area for the first time. In Buffalo, K Art Gallery brought contemporary Indigenous

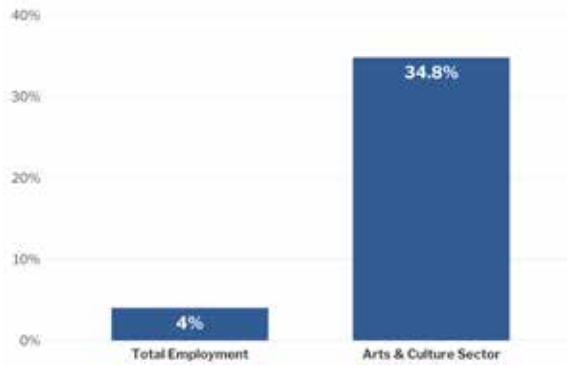
art to a 19th-century brownstone, while Assembly House 150 transformed an abandoned church into an interactive workshop and exhibition space.

Artists have seeded new organizations for communities historically deprived of arts programming. Avenue Blackbox Theatre became the first fully programmed performing arts venue in Rochester’s northeast quadrant when it opened its doors in 2018, and has since promoted a former teen fellow into a full-time employee. In 2019, the The Art Effect opened a youth-led gallery space in a neglected Poughkeepsie neighborhood and started a curatorial training program for youth from low-income backgrounds. In 2020, The Black Arts Collective began presenting arts and professional development programming in Syracuse, nurturing a community of Black curators, artists, and performers.

Meanwhile, once-grand, long-neglected theaters up and down the state have been revived, from Proctors Theater in Schenectady, which restored its Vaudeville-era architectural details in 2015, to the Landmark Theatre in Syracuse, which underwent a

Employment Growth in the Arts and Culture Sector Exceeds Overall Employment Growth in Upstate New York

Percentage of employment growth by sector, 2009–2019



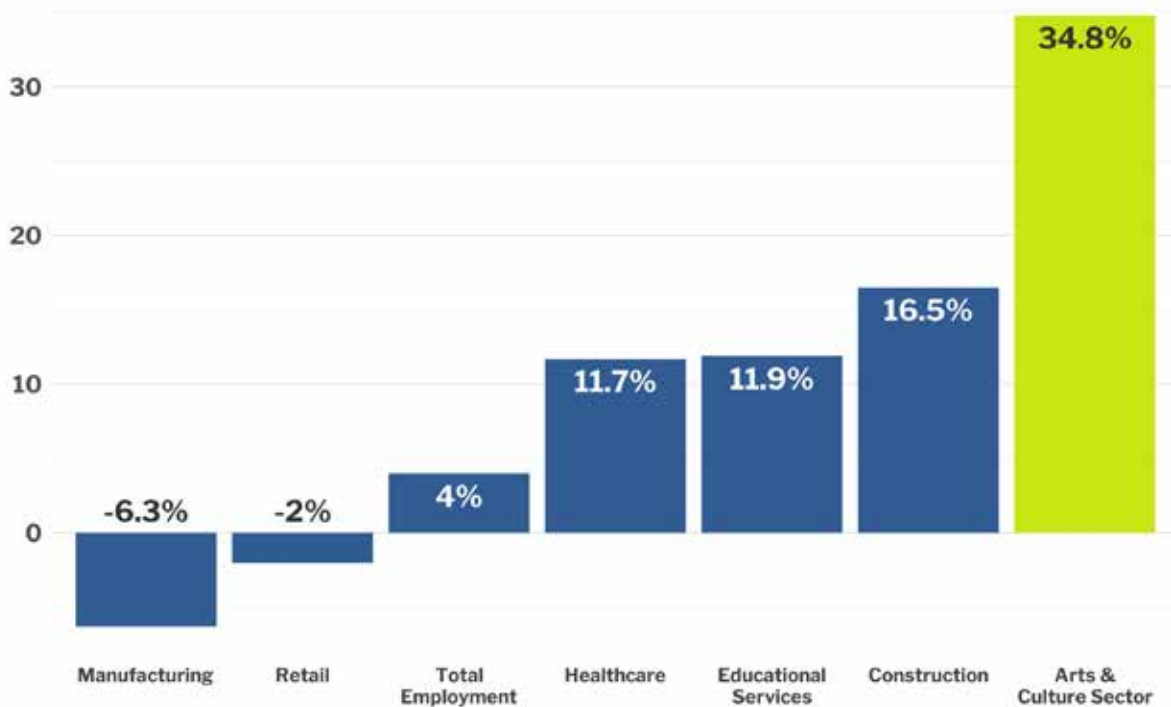
Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

\$2.4 million renovation in 2021. Anchor institutions including The Pines@SPAC in Saratoga and the Ulster Performing Arts Center in Kingston have also undergone major renovations, and several communities are banking on ambitious new and expanded cultural institutions to boost quality of life and drive regional tourism, from the new David Rockefeller Creative Arts Center at the Pocantico Center in Tarrytown to the expansion of Storm King Art Center in the Hudson Valley to the reimagining of an Adirondack amusement park into a campus for the arts.

The economic impact—and promise—of the upstate arts renaissance is clear. Between 2009 and 2019, employment growth in the arts and culture sector—including arts and culture venues, theater and dance companies, museums, musical groups, art schools, and independent artists—increased by 34.8 percent, outpacing a range of other industries, from educational services (11.9 percent) and healthcare (11.7 percent), to retail (-2 percent) and manufacturing (-6.3 percent).

Employment Growth in the Arts and Culture Sector Outpaces Other Key Industries in Upstate New York

Percentage of employment growth by industry, 2009–2019



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

Though the pandemic hit the sector especially hard, arts and culture employment is up 11 percent since the low of 2020, with particularly remarkable rebounds in the Mohawk Valley (13.5 percent), Buffalo (12.8), the Capital Region (12 percent), and Rochester (10.7 percent).⁷

The arts have also been a major factor in the growth of tourism upstate, which has contributed to employment growth in a range of tourism-related industries. Between 2009 and 2019, employment in the accommodation and restaurant industries grew by 33.2 percent and 18.2 percent respectively, with tourist spending jumping by 51.1 percent in the same period, from \$13 to \$19.6 billion.⁸

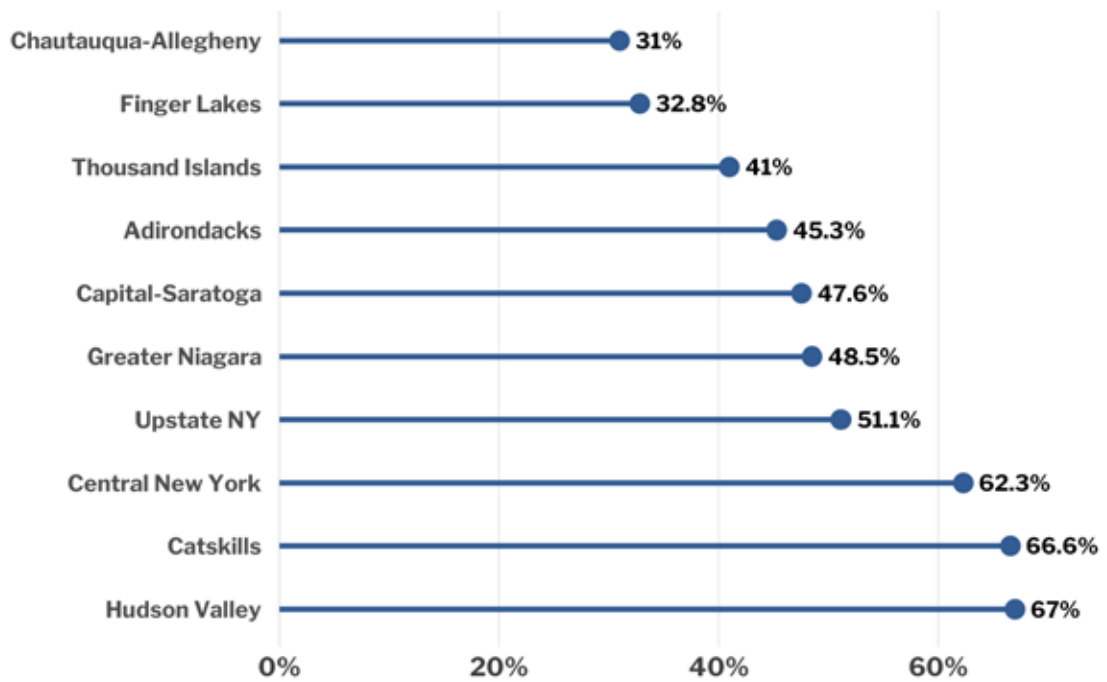
The influx of visitors and locals alike are reanimating downtown streets that, in the 1990s and early aughts, were often empty—especially after 5 p.m. and on the weekends. “We have genuine feet on the street, here to enjoy what the city has to offer, all because of the arts,” says Jeff Buell, principal at Redburn Development Partners, which recently rehabilitated eight buildings in downtown Albany that had been vacant for nearly a decade.

Restaurants, retailers, and a wide variety of other small businesses have reaped the benefits. “We’re usually booked solid right before a show [at Tarrytown Music Hall],” says David Starkey, the owner of the Sweet Grass Grill, which serves local, seasonal food across the street from the venue. The Native Eatery and Bar in Rochester serves up to 50 percent more diners when there’s a performance at the Geva Theater, while Phoebe’s Restaurant estimates their profits grow by 75 percent when something’s on at Syracuse Stage.

Bigger businesses from out of town are also taking note of reanimated downtowns. On a visit to Syracuse in 2022, executives from the computer chip manufacturer Micron Technology spotted the restored marquee at the Landmark Theater announcing a sold-out show. “The vibe downtown that night impressed them,” recalls Kevin Younis, the executive deputy commissioner of Empire State Development, the umbrella organization for New York’s two principal economic development entities. Confident that Syracuse could attract and retain workers, Micron soon announced a \$100-billion commitment to build a mega-complex there, which is slated to create 9,000 jobs.

Significant Increases in Tourism Spending Across Upstate New York

Percentage increase in tourism spending by region, 2011–2021



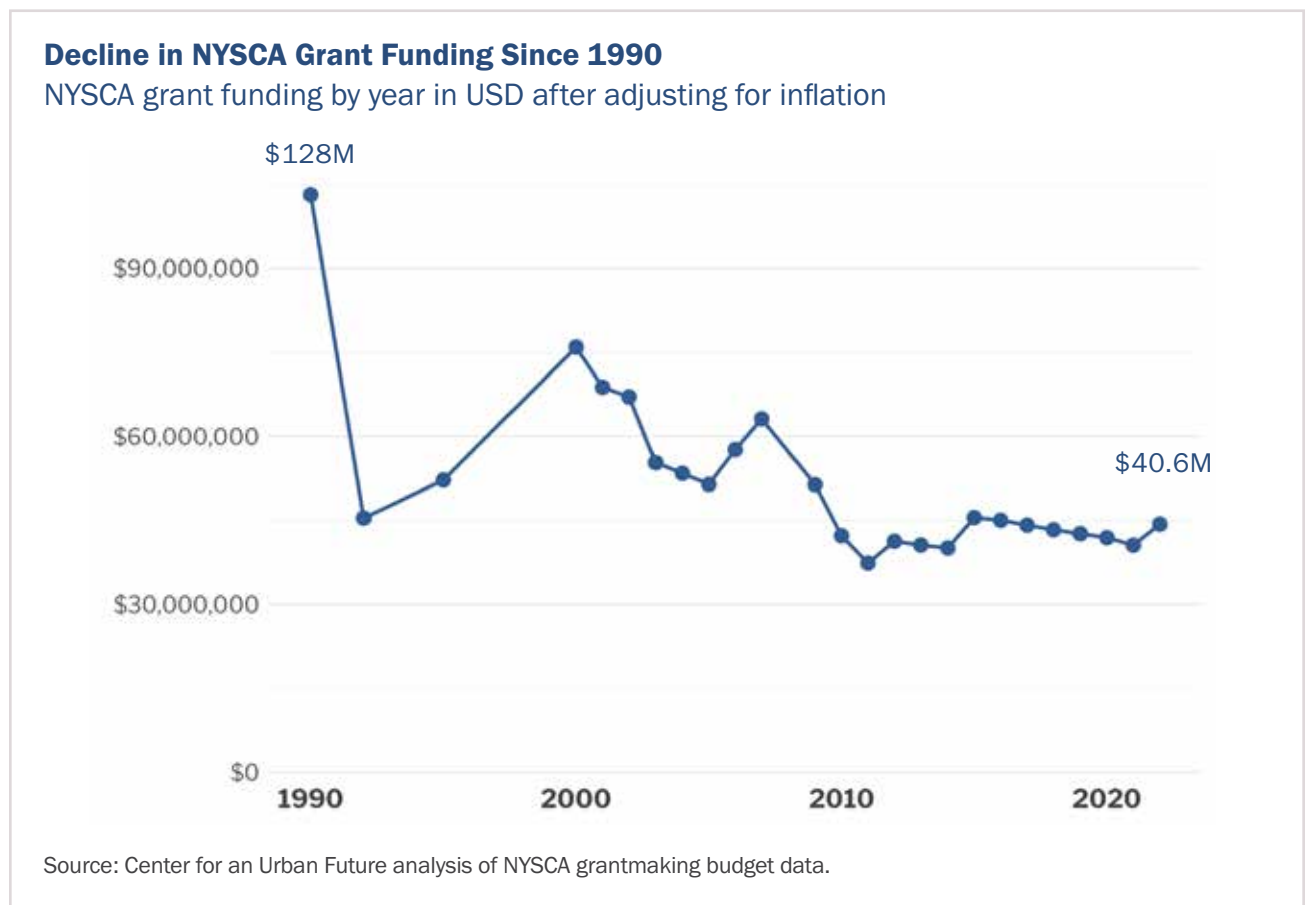
Source: CUF analysis of Tourism Economics traveler spending data from the Empire State Development Corporation.

The value of the arts upstate, however, can hardly be reduced to its economic impact. Artists and art organizations are working to knit together a stronger social fabric—one that has been frayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. “The arts are intrinsic to community healing,” says Cjala Surratt, one of the co-founders of the Black Artist Collective in Syracuse. In cities, towns, and rural areas, artists are helping communities recover, forging links between generations, engaging youth in ways that ignite their passions, fostering dialogue about social justice issues, and creating spaces and occasions for neighbors to connect. “One of our central functions is building community,” says Christopher Mannelli, producing director of the Geva Theater in Rochester. “The arts allow connections to happen in a society that feels so divided.”

Arts funding has struggled to keep pace.

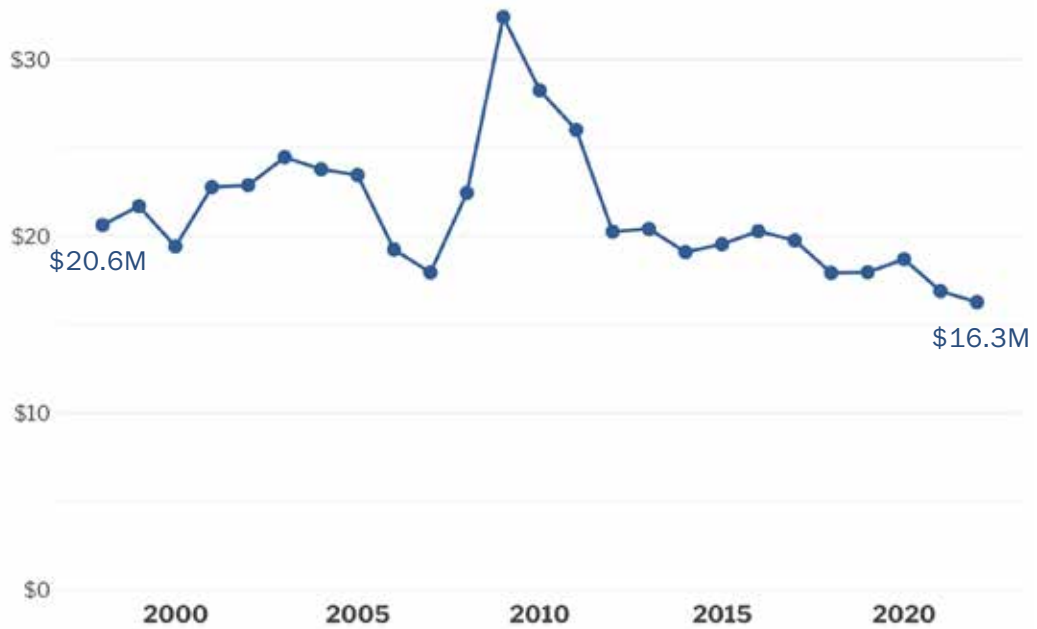
Despite the enormous potential for the arts to continue driving economic opportunity, improving quality of life, and strengthening communities across every corner of New York State, public support for the sector is extremely limited—and it has declined in recent decades.

While NYSCA continues to be an essential source of funding for artists across the state, its primary grantmaking budget has declined 35.6 percent between 2008 and 2023, and a whopping 68 percent since 1990, after adjusting for inflation—from \$128 to \$40.6 million in FY 2024. While Governor Hochul and the state legislature directed \$90 million in crucial recovery funds for the arts sector in FY2022 and FY2023—stabilizing organizations reeling from the loss of audiences and revenues and creating transformational new initiatives—and stepped up additional one-time funding in FY2024, this level of support will need to become permanent going forward in order to secure the gains achieved since the depths of the



Decline in National Endowment for the Arts Funding to Upstate New York

NEA grant funding by year in millions of USD after adjusting for inflation



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of NEA funding data.

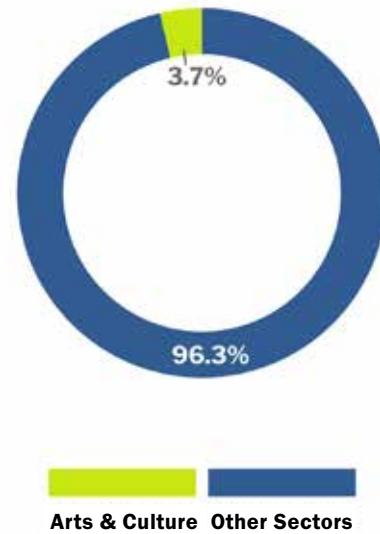
pandemic, ensure a full recovery for the arts and culture sector, and lay the foundation for a stronger and more equitable arts ecosystem in the future.

Counties and municipalities have struggled as much as ever to fund the arts. The city of Syracuse, for example, invested only \$3,500 in arts and culture funding in the most recent fiscal year, and the entire sum was earmarked to one organization. “We receive absolutely no county funding. We receive no municipal funding from any of the towns or the one city in our county,” says the leader of one county arts council in a largely rural area.

Federal support for the arts has also been on the decline. Excluding the recent pandemic-related stimulus, since 1998, inflation-adjusted National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) grant funding to New York State declined 21.2 percent between 1998 and 2022, from \$20.6 million to \$16.3 million. NEA funding to organizations and artists in upstate New York has trended downward as well, decreasing 1.8 percent since 1998 after adjusting for inflation. In the same period, significant decreases in inflation-adjusted NEA funding were felt in Albany (-67.6 percent), Syracuse (-56.8 percent), and Rochester (-47.2 percent).⁹

Grants for Arts and Culture Projects Account for a Fraction of REDC Funding

Percentage of REDC funding allocated to arts and culture related projects vs. all other project types, 2022



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of REDC funding data.

Seizing opportunities to link arts and inclusive economic development.

While arts-focused entities like NYSCA and the NEA will likely always be the main source of funding for artists and cultural organizations in New York, the state has missed out on opportunities to help supplement those dollars by using more of its economic development resources to support the arts. For example, while the creative sector has been a catalyst for economic growth upstate, the state’s Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs) have too often overlooked the arts in their funding allocations. The arts and culture sector is poorly represented on REDC boards in upstate New York; of 227 total board members, only 4 are affiliated with the arts and culture sector.¹⁰ The lack of representation contributes to a funding system in which relatively few arts and culture projects break through. The Center for an Urban Future’s analysis reveals that only 3.7 percent of all REDC grants awarded in

2021 went to projects focused on arts and culture—\$23.4 out of \$639 million.

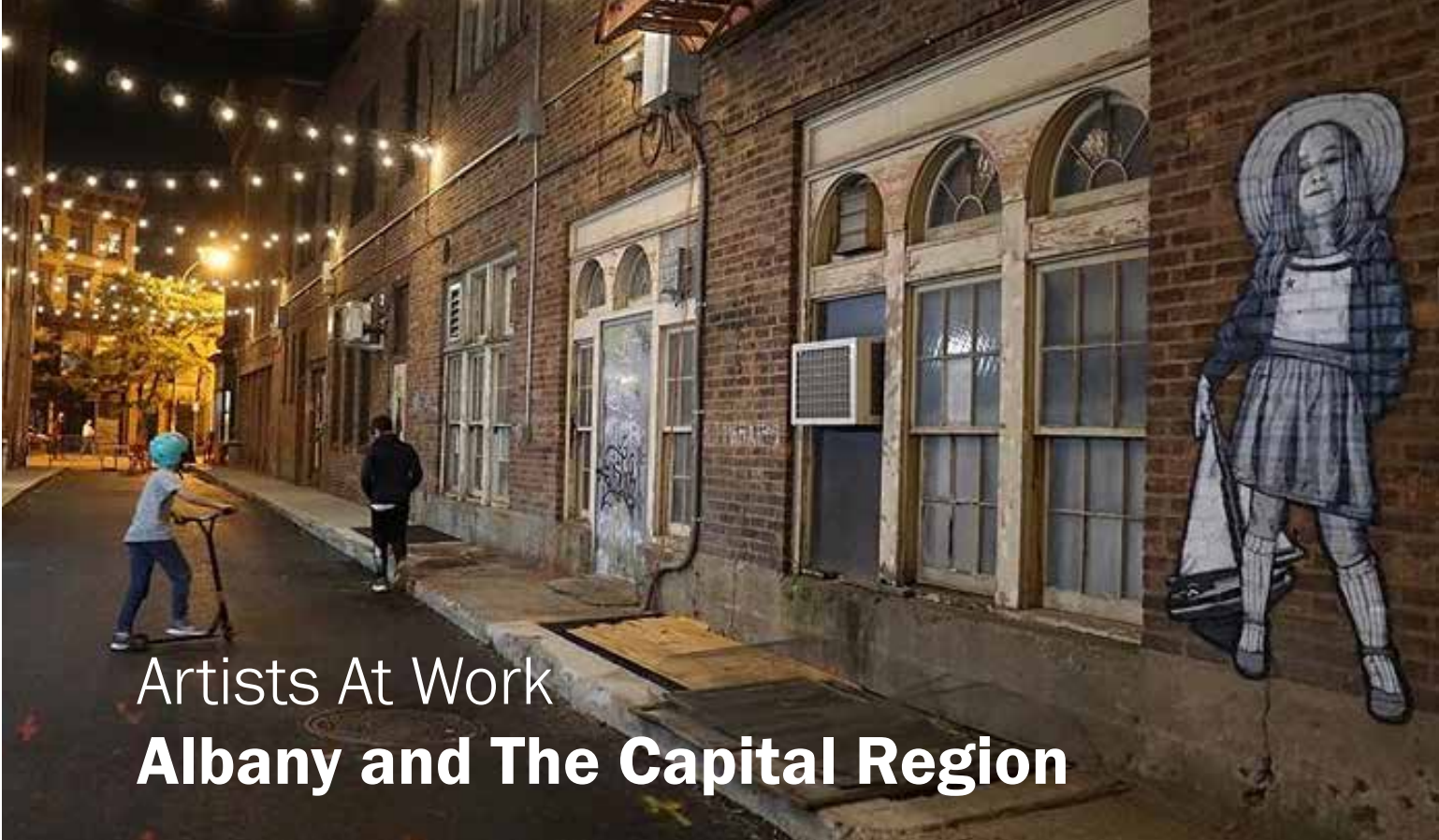
Similarly, only 12 out of the 104 Downtown Revitalization Initiative projects across all of New York State in 2022, or 11.5 percent, were focused on arts and culture. In the village of Perry in the Finger Lakes Region and the city of Dunkirk in Western New York, no DRI projects were related to arts and culture.

Policymakers have ample opportunity to integrate the arts into the broader statewide economic development strategy, including the REDCs, DRI, and Market New York—in addition to investing in stronger arts infrastructure like arts councils and arts districts, creating more affordable housing for artists, and helping arts organizations find permanent homes and achieve long-term financial stability. These and other policies have the potential to sustain the artists and arts organizations that make upstate New York such a vibrant place to live—and help lay the groundwork for stronger local communities and economies across every corner of the state.

Arts and Culture Sector Employment Growth by Subindustry

Industry	2009 Jobs	2019 Jobs	Difference	% Growth
Fine Arts Schools	2,887	4,125	1,238	42.9%
Museums	2,609	3,239	630	24.2%
Theater Companies and Dinner Theaters	1,430	2,043	614	42.9%
Independent Artists, Writers, and Performers	748	1,017	269	36.0%
Musical Groups and Artists	870	774	-96	-11.1%
Historical Sites	397	551	154	38.8%
Zoos and Botanical Gardens	289	522	233	80.9%
Nature Parks and Other Similar Institutions	355	451	96	26.9%
Dance Companies	102	306	203	198.5%
Art Dealers	193	275	82	42.6%
Other Performing Arts Companies	31	51	20	64.1%
Arts and Culture Sector Total	9,909	13,352	3,443	34.8%

Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.



Artists At Work Albany and The Capital Region

Murals by artist Joe Iurato helped transform Franklin Alley in downtown Troy. Photo by Joe Iurato.

By the numbers

The resident artist and design worker population grew **50.1** percent between 2011 and 2021, from 967 to 1,452) compared to 3 percent growth in the total population.

Employment in the arts and culture sector grew **33.1** percent between 2009 and 2019, from 763 to 1,015, compared to 5.5 percent growth in total employment.

Since the pandemic low in 2020, employment in the arts and culture sector has rebounded by **12 percent**.

The average annual earnings in the arts and culture sector was **\$35,578** in 2021.

Tourist spending rose by 47.6 percent between 2009 and 2019, from \$1.5 to \$2.2 billion.

Inflation-adjusted NEA funding declined by **67.6 percent** between 1998 and 2022, from \$77,203 to \$25,000.

Albany received **\$1,761,915** in NYSCA funding in FY22, 1.7 percent of the state's total of \$103,257,146.

The Capital Region received a total of **\$3.93 million** in REDC grant funds in 2021, 16.8 percent of the \$23.4 million in total funds allocated through the REDCs to arts and culture projects statewide.

The largest arts and culture REDC award in Albany in 2021 was **\$500,000** to the Historic Albany Foundation for refurbishing of the Van Ostrande-Radliff House, the oldest building in Albany.

ONLY A DECADE OR SO AGO, THE CAPITAL REGION was better known as a government seat than an arts hub. But now, an average weeknight might offer live Latin music in a gallery-adjacent beer garden, light-based art illuminating historical buildings, or a staged reading of an Off-Broadway play by local actors. A wave of upstart galleries and theaters, dynamic artists and arts leaders, and new public art and events has swept through Albany, Troy, and Schenectady. The budding sector has become an important catalyst for economic opportunity in the region.

There are more artists living in the Capital Region now than ever before. A data analysis by the Center for an Urban Future reveals that, from 2011 to 2021, Albany's resident artist population grew by 50.1 percent—from 967 to 1,452—while the total population increased just 3 percent. Standout artists in a wide range of genres can be found in every corner of the region. The Albany Symphony Orchestra has won two Grammy Awards, including Best Classical Instrumental Solo in 2021. That same year, Troy hip-hop artist Selli Paper was recognized by *Vogue* for having one of the year's best songs, and Jade Warrick's murals for the Uniting Line project—which reimaged an underpass connecting the neglected neighborhoods of North Central Troy with the city's thriving downtown—inspired a short documentary film by PBS.

Over the past decade, new venues have also cropped up while existing institutions have expanded their programming. Collar Works evolved from holding pop-up exhibits in vacant storefronts into one of Troy's most exciting galleries. Founder and producing artistic director Jean-Remy Monnay has grown his fledgling theater company into the prolific Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate NY, which stages three to four productions per year. And in Albany and Troy, "there's a profusion of underground DIY venues for music and regional art that are popping up, says Corey Aldrich, executive director of the Upstate Alliance for the Creative Economy. No Fun hosts live indie and experimental bands several nights a week in downtown Troy, while Albany is home to The Dojo Beyond Space and Time, an experimental space for local comics and musicians.

Public art initiatives are also spurring economic development and tourism in Capital Region cities. Visitors spent more than \$11,500 at local businesses during Breathing Lights, which illuminated hundreds

of abandoned buildings across Troy, Albany, and Schenectady in 2016. The project also garnered \$227,000 in philanthropic donations and led to a \$3.4 million grant from the New York State Attorney General for regional Land Bank efforts. Capital Walls, fueled by \$72,000 from Albany's 2020 Downtown Revitalization Initiative award, has increased the number of murals in downtown Albany from two to more than 20 over the past seven years, helping attract new investments in housing and commercial space, new younger residents, and retail stores and restaurants.

"We used to be such a 9-to-5 government town. Now, new businesses are coming in to capture the young folks that are living here, and so they're staying open past three o'clock," says Georgette Steffens, executive director of the Downtown Albany Business Improvement District.

"Arts and culture play a really important role when people are making decisions about where they want to live, where they want to invest their lives and their family's lives. And companies want to be where people are," adds Katie Newcombe, chief economic development officer at the Center for Economic Growth, an Albany-based economic development agency.

Albany area housing developers like Jeff Buell, principal at Redburn Development Partners, say that the region's cultural renaissance has been a catalyst—for new residents moving to the region's downtown areas and new businesses that are supported by residents and visitors coming in for cultural events. Before the pandemic, Redburn rehabilitated eight buildings in downtown Albany that had been vacant for about a decade, converting them into 291 apartments and about 107,000 square feet of commercial space. "There was nothing there, and now all of our apartments are full, our commercial tenants are operational. Empire Live is doing five shows a week that draw 1,000 people," says Buell.

Public art has contributed to the ongoing revitalization of downtown Troy, transforming Franklin Alley from a dumpster-lined eyesore to a pedestrian thoroughfare with colorful murals and overhead lighting in 2020. The Arts Center of the Capital Region hired muralist Joe Iurato to paint the walls of the alley, using \$50,000 from NYSCA as well as funds from businesses lining the alley. The project has "certainly had an impact on business," says Vic

Christopher, who opened the natural wine bar Lucas Confectionery in 2012, and subsequently opened a restaurant, a cocktail bar, a cafe, a wine shop, and a grocer in the Franklin Alley area. “We replaced this filthy alley with a place where people are taking their wedding photos,” Christopher says.

In Capital Region cities, downtown theaters have been anchors for revitalization. By relocating north from downtown into the Arbor Hill neighborhood, Capital Repertory theater is “shifting gravity and creating a dynamic new connection point,” says Jeff Mirel, principal at Rosenblum Development, which is currently constructing a multifamily project with 80 apartments and ground floor retail in that corridor.

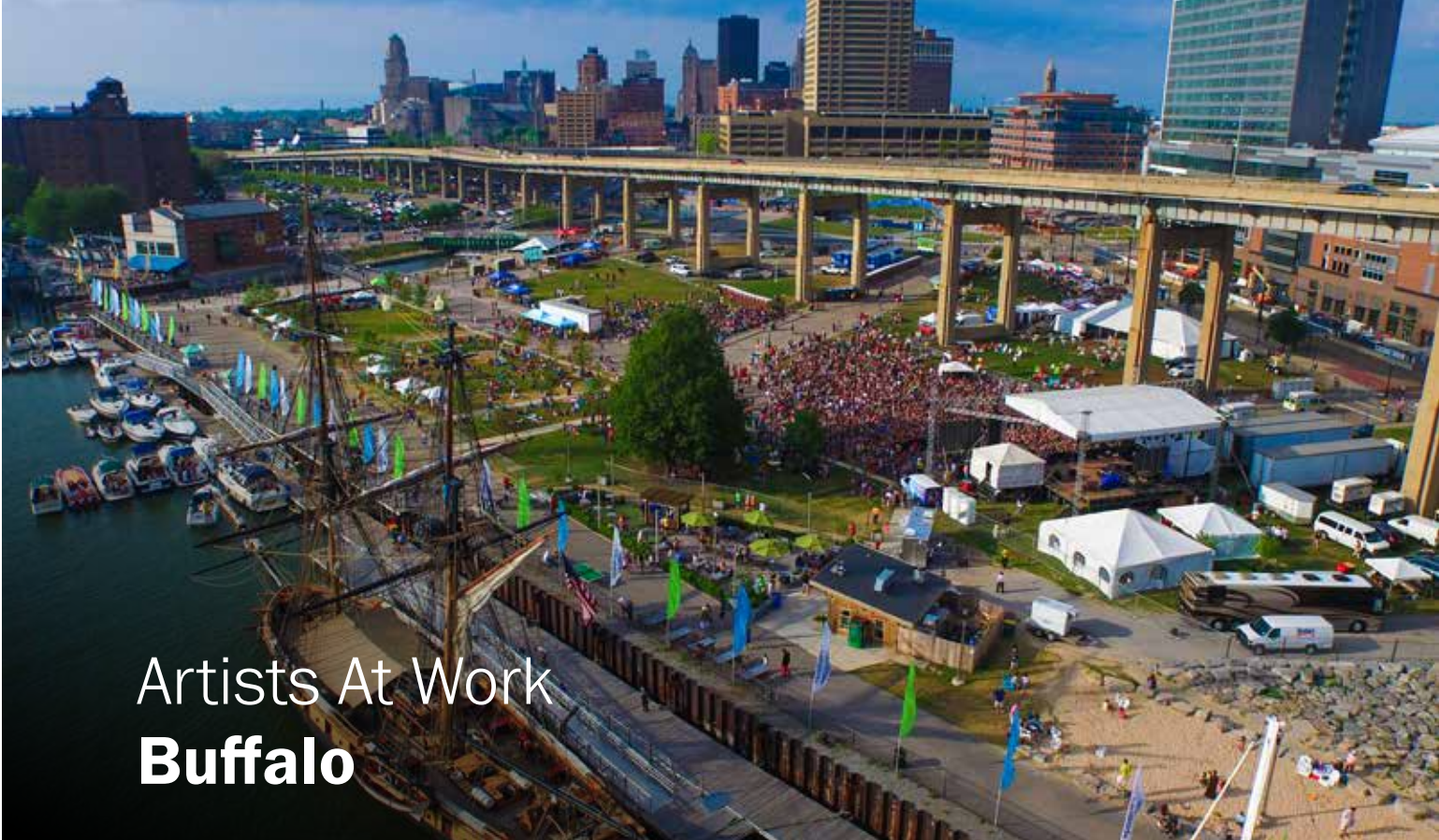
The Troy Savings Bank Music Hall has seen attendance nearly double since 2011, when executive director Jon Elbaum arrived. “There were a lot of empty storefronts. And the attendance at events at our Hall was reflective of that,” Elbaum says. As the Hall began ramping up programming—including a solo performance by Elvis Costello that “woke up the community to [their] work”—other local venues followed suit. Now, Elbaum sees many more families walking around downtown Troy, a wider variety of restaurants, and “a tremendous amount of residential real estate development.” All of this has been good for the natural wine bar Lucas Confectionery, which often has “a killer night” when the Music Hall hosts younger artists, Christopher says.

Downtown Schenectady has also been transformed since the early 2000s, when a project to restore Proctors Theater integrated a \$10 million central heating and cooling plant “as an incentive to bring businesses back downtown,” says Philip Morris, the CEO of Proctors Collaborative, which leads Proctors Theater and Capital Repertory Theater in Albany. Proctors is now the utility provider for about 20 businesses downtown, where development and the arts are continuing to expand. Downtown Schenectady now has about 60 dining and nightlife businesses, compared to 48 in 2012, along with two murals through the Capital Walls program, and a collection of studios at Electric City Barn for makers from woodworkers to jewelry artists to welders.

Arts and culture are also feeding a regional tourism boom. From 2009 to 2019, tourist spending grew 47.6 percent in the Capital-Saratoga area, from \$1.5 billion to \$2.2 billion. Tyler Herrick, president of Spruce Hospitality, which includes a hotel with two restaurants in Glens Falls, sees “an uptick in business anytime there’s an arts event, whether it’s a Wood Theater performance or the Adirondack Theatre Festival in the summer or a show at the Strand Theater in Hudson Falls.” And those cultural tourists also “have the best spend” on a per-guest basis, he says.

But despite all of this progress, the Capital Region’s arts and culture sector is facing formidable challenges, including the need to support artists and organizations serving communities of color who have not benefited equitably from the city’s recent growth. The Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate NY (BTTUNY), for example, has had a rent-free residency at the Capital Repertory Theater in Albany since 2021, but will need more space to continue growing its impact, including training new local actors of color, according to producing artistic director Jean-Remy Monnay. “We’re in a good place because of The Rep’s support. But I would love to eventually get our own home, because we need to do more for the community, to run workshops and have space for rehearsals,” says Monnay. For now, purchasing a space remains out of reach.

The Capital Region is also rife with unused real estate, at least some of which could be developed for arts uses, with greater investment from New York State. “True economic development occurs when we really invest in the arts. That goes side by side with our need to invest in infrastructure. And if you can ever marry the two, infrastructure and art, then you’ve really got a home run,” says Buell of Redburn Development. The firm’s next potential project is the restoration of Albany’s Central Warehouse, a 500,000-square-foot former cold storage building that hasn’t been used for 40 years. A \$100 million restoration could include artist live-work and affordable spaces, but “it would be so much easier if there was a pot of money that acknowledged, at a state level, even at a municipal level, that art is economic development,” Buell says.



Artists At Work Buffalo

Arts and culture festivals at Canalside have revived a formerly deserted stretch of the Buffalo River.

By the numbers

The resident artist and design worker population grew **45.3 percent** between 2011 and 2021, from 1,229 to 1,785, compared to 2.4 percent growth in the total population.

Employment in the arts and culture sector grew **58.9 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from 1,244 to 1,976, compared to 4.6 percent growth in total employment.

Since the pandemic low in 2020, employment in the arts and culture sector has rebounded by **12.8 percent**, faster than any other region in the state.

The average annual earnings in the arts and culture sector was **\$35,232** in 2021.

Tourist spending rose by **48.5 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from \$1.9 to \$2.8 billion.

Inflation-adjusted NEA funding increased by 6.8 percent from \$203,243 in 1998 to \$217,000 in 2022.

Buffalo received **\$3,288,500** in NYSCA funding in FY22, 3.2 percent of the state's total of \$103,257,146.

Western New York received a total of **\$3.31 million** in REDC grant funds in 2021, 14.2 percent of the \$23.4 million in total funds allocated through the REDCs to arts and culture projects statewide.

The largest arts and culture REDC award in 2022 was **\$2 million** to Buffalo Studios, a new movie studio in South Buffalo.

IN 2014, THE ARTIST DENNIS MAHER PURCHASED a church in Allentown, on Buffalo's West Side, for \$35,000. Like many buildings in the area, it had been abandoned for nearly 20 years. But by 2017, the church was no longer empty. Now known as Assembly House 150, the interactive, experiential learning center is abuzz with high school students and adults learning new design, construction, and creative thinking skills, while members of the public wander through "walk-in works of art" from 3D murals to immersive furniture.

It wasn't only cheap real estate that made Assembly House 150 possible, Maher remembers, but also Buffalo's burgeoning community of artists and arts organizations. "For a city of its size, there's an extremely high number of arts organizations, and a very strong backbone of grassroots nonprofit initiatives and organizations that have incubated here over the last 20 years," he says. "That provides very fertile ground, and means Buffalo is a place where it's possible to do things that are difficult to do in other places."

Allentown alone has incubated an impressive number of arts organizations in the last few decades. El Museo gallery purchased a permanent space on Allen Street in 1997 and has since presented numerous exhibitions by historically underserved artists, including artists from the region's growing population of refugees and immigrants. Starlight Studio on Delaware Avenue opened in 2004, offering artists with developmental disabilities technical assistance and exhibition space, while around the corner, folk singer Ani DiFranco and her record label, Righteous Babe Records, saved another church from demolition and transformed its sanctuary into a 1,200-seat performing arts space. Now known as Babeville, the building is also home to a recording studio and the Hallwalls Contemporary Arts Center, which exhibits new works across disciplines. And as of 2020, Allentown boasts the first and only Native-owned gallery in the country to solely showcase Native contemporary artists—K Art—which is located next to a giant new mural urging passerby to "Keep Buffalo a Secret."

New art venues and events are also cropping up elsewhere in the city, while anchor institutions are undergoing transformative renovations. On the West Side, the nonprofit PUSH Buffalo recently transformed

School 77, a derelict former public-school building, into solar-powered senior apartments, community space, and a new home for the Ujima theatre company, which strives to foster civic conversation with productions about the lives of African Americans and other marginalized people. On the East Side, plans are underway to renovate the African American Cultural Center, and Buffalo Arts Studio has expanded to fill 20,000 square feet of what was formerly a vacant industrial complex with affordable artist studios, three arts classroom, two galleries, a ceramic workshop and kiln, community room, and shop selling local artists' wares that collectively reach more than 12,000 annual visitors.

In Buffalo's cultural district, the Burchfield Penney Art Center, which showcases work from Western New York artists, recently moved into a new building with constantly changing artwork projected onto its façade, while the Albright-Knox Gallery—Buffalo's largest art museum—is finishing up a \$180 million renovation and planning to reopen in the summer of 2023.

The city's theatre district has also experienced a recent renaissance. Shea's Performing Arts Center—an ornate cinema from the 1920s that was badly dilapidated by the 1970s—was overhauled to host Broadway shows, and in 2000 and 2012 expanded to two additional theaters nearby in order to showcase off-Broadway productions, comedy, and collaborations with local theatre companies. A few doors down from Shea's, what was once a Greyhound bus terminal reopened as Alleyway Theater in 2005 and now produces six new plays a year, hosts a festival for emerging playwrights, and offers professional training for teens. Farther south on Main Street, Road Less Traveled Productions, one of Buffalo's 20 homegrown theatre companies, opened its own dedicated theatre in 2018, in the former Baker Shoes building that had sat vacant for 30 years.

"The creation of the theater district brought people back downtown," says Scott Behrand, co-founder of Road Less Traveled Productions and co-chair of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance. "There were all these different arts destinations and then more restaurants, and then people wanted to live downtown again. Now you're seeing massive investment. The arts have been a pivotal piece to getting things headed in the right direction."

The city also designated a literary corridor downtown in 2016, which includes the Buffalo Literary Arts Center and Western New York Books Arts—originally an artist collaborative that bought its building on Washington Street in 2008 and transformed it into a gallery with rotating exhibitions, a store that supports over 100 local makers, and studios for letterpress, screen printing, paper making, and more.

The explosion of artistic activity across the city has created jobs and contributed to the first population growth Buffalo has seen in decades. From 2009 to 2019, employment in the arts and culture sector in Buffalo surged 58.9 percent, while in the same period overall employment upstate grew by only 4 percent. From 2011 to 2021, the resident artist population in Buffalo increased 45.3 percent, from 1,229 to 1,785, while in 2020 the city's overall population increased 2 percent—reversing a decline that began in 1950.

The arts are undoubtedly helping to draw new residents to Western New York. “We did a survey of newcomers to the region, and the highest percentage was people who hadn't known that much about Buffalo, but heard about it, came here to visit, and then moved here,” says Tom Kucharski, president and CEO of Invest Buffalo Niagara, an economic development organization that represents the eight counties of Western New York. “We just did [the survey] again, and again, the same results with a higher percentage. So we're obviously onto something.”

“All these wonderful cultural attractions impact the overall quality of life for our residents,” says Patrick Kaler, president and CEO of Visit Buffalo Niagara, the official destination marketing organization for Erie County and Western New York. “It helps with our overall business attraction as well as new resident attraction, to be able to offer such a strong quality of life.”

In addition to new residents, the arts are also attracting tourists from across the state and the country, who spent an estimated \$1.8 billion in Erie County in 2021, according to a study by the company Tourism Economics. Kaler explains that while Niagara Falls used to be the region's biggest draw for tourists, that's no longer the case. “They're coming for our cuisine, our outdoor recreation. They're coming for conventions and sporting events. But at the top of that list is our overall arts and culture scene,” he says.

Tourists and locals alike are filling sidewalks and streets in neighborhoods dense with arts venues, boosting local businesses. The West Side's Grant Street corridor, for example, once a pass-through, is now home to a game shop, record store, a co-op bakery, and two independent bookstores: WestSide Stories and Rust Belt Books. “As a lifelong Buffalonian, I'm very comfortable saying Grant Street has changed significantly over the past 20 years. There's even nightlife there now,” says Carolynn Welch, the director of the Westminister Economic Development Initiative (WEDI).

Though WEDI's Westside Bazaar, a small business incubator offering food and unique products, mainly from immigrants and refugees from Southeast Asia and the Middle East, was forced to close after a fire in 2022, it's now slated to open a much larger space in the heart of downtown Buffalo, in the same historic building as the Contemporary Photography and Visual Art Center (CEPA) Gallery.

Relatively robust funding at the federal, state, and county levels have helped drive this artistic activity and revitalization. Though NEA funding in Buffalo only modestly increased between 1998 and 2022—by 6.8 percent, from \$203,243 to \$217,000 after adjusting for inflation—many upstate cities, including Albany, Rochester, and Syracuse, experienced declines. In addition, the Cullen Foundation and NYSCA awarded nearly \$280,000 in grants to 65 organizations across western New York in 2022, focusing on local arts programs designed to reach underserved audiences.

After former Erie County Executive Chris Collins slashed funding for all but nine of the largest arts organizations in Buffalo in 2010, the Buffalo Community Foundation and Arts Services Inc., Western New York's regional arts council, stepped in and raised \$430,000 to support 36 local arts organizations, with the city contributing an additional \$200,000. Since 2012, the county has become a consistent funder of arts and cultural organizations, allocating approximately \$7 million each year. Like Syracuse, Buffalo raises revenues for the arts with a hotel room occupancy or bed tax. In FY2022, Buffalo's bed tax raised a total of \$7,704,666 for the arts and culture sector, with \$1.7 million directed to the Buffalo Zoo, \$1.3 directed to museums, \$1.3 directed to conservation initiatives, and \$1.4 to arts groups.

The problem is that more arts groups are now competing for these funds: according to Mariely

Ortiz, a senior planner for Erie County who helps coordinate disbursement of county funding, in 2023 there were 107 different organizations that applied for funding, up from 67 in 2014—a 63 percent increase. And any small organizations without access to county, state, or federal funds cannot look to the city for support. Roughly \$1 million of Buffalo's annual budget was dedicated to the arts prior to 2001, but that funding was cut and has never been restored. From 2002 to 2011, the city dedicated \$0 to the arts, and since 2011 has provided limited capital grants but no programmatic or general operating support to local arts organizations. Though the advocacy organization Frontline Arts Buffalo partnered with the city to create a plan to disburse more than \$2 million in ARPA funding to arts organizations, the city has yet to establish a timeline for disbursement.

Perhaps the greatest challenge facing the arts sector in Buffalo, however, is an inequitable distribution of resources. The proliferation of galleries, performance spaces, maker workshops, and more has been largely concentrated on the West Side, with little investment in the East Side, where 85 percent of the city's Black residents live. "You have to employ artists from the east side and artists on the west side. You have to do your due diligence to make sure the people who are accessing arts funding come from the community, not just your community," says Jillian Hanesworth, Buffalo's first-ever Poet Laureate, who was born and raised on the East Side. "We can't just value artists of color during Black History Month and Martin Luther King, Jr. ceremonies and Juneteenth. We have to have consistent investment into their growth as artists."



A new mural by Maxx Moses at D'Youville College in Buffalo.
Photo by Ed Healy.



Artists At Work The Hudson Valley

The restored Ulster Performing Arts Center (UPAC) in Kingston.
Photo by John Fischer.

By the numbers

The resident artist and design worker population grew **16.5 percent** between 2011 and 2021, from 5,232 to 6,094, compared to 4.2 percent growth in the total population.

Employment in the arts and culture sector grew **47.7 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from 3,030 to 4,473, compared to 8.5 percent growth in total employment.

Since the pandemic low in 2020, employment in the arts and culture sector has rebounded by **6.3 percent**, faster than New York City.

The average annual earnings in the arts and culture sector was **\$48,786** in 2021.

Tourist spending rose by **67 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from \$2.7 to \$4.5 billion.

Inflation-adjusted NEA funding increased by 320 percent from \$146,000 in 1998 to \$615,000 in 2022.

The Hudson Valley received **\$8,049,680** in NYSCA funding in FY22, 7.8 percent of the state's total of \$103,257,146.

The Hudson Valley region received a total of **\$5.65 million** in REDC grant funds in 2021, 24.1 percent of the \$23.4 million in total funds allocated through the REDCs to arts and culture projects statewide.

The largest arts and culture REDC awards in 2021 were **\$2 million** for the Storm King Art Center and **\$2 million** for the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival.

IN MIDTOWN KINGSTON, A NEW ROUNDABOUT intersection and bike lanes encourage exploration along Broadway, where the crop of upstart businesses includes an Indian market, a brewery tasting room, and a wine bar that relocated from Hudson. These changes have come in the past year alone, but the neighborhood's revival has been underway for the past decade, fueled by a growing arts and culture sector.

The Kingston Midtown Arts District launched in 2016, followed by the reopening of the Ulster Performing Arts Center (UPAC) after extensive renovations. Other recent additions along Broadway include the new studios of Radio Kingston and the Center for Photography at Woodstock, which is renovating a former cigar factory into its future headquarters.

"Broadway was always just the connector between uptown and downtown, but it really is a destination now. The success of UPAC has been critical in changing that dynamic," says Ward Todd, president of the Ulster County Regional Chamber of Commerce.

In communities throughout the Hudson Valley, a similar story is unfolding. In a region where cities had been struggling to recover from the loss of thousands of IBM jobs in the 1990s, arts and culture have provided a new sense of optimism and possibility. During the decade preceding the pandemic, from 2009 to 2019, arts and culture sector employment in the Hudson Valley increased 47.7 percent, outpacing overall employment growth of 8.5 percent. During the same period, tourist spending in the region increased 67 percent, from \$2.7 billion to \$4.5 billion. And the arts and culture sector has been key to attracting visitors, with the Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival drawing an annual audience of about 35,000, while about 75 percent of the estimated 110,000 visitors to Dia Beacon in 2022 were day trippers.

Artists have been drawn to the Hudson Valley for centuries. Thomas Cole sailed up the Hudson River in 1825 and established the Hudson River School of painting, capturing Catskills landscapes that would become world famous. The Byrdcliffe Arts Colony, established in Woodstock in 1902, evolved from a utopian arts and crafts community into a year-round residency for 60 artists. In the 1930s and 1940s, Newburgh was considered a proving ground for touring performers, including Ella Fitzgerald and then-unknown Frank Sinatra. Storm King Art Center, created in 1960, has since grown into one of the world's largest outdoor campuses

for contemporary sculpture. And for decades, regional fabricators have been playing a critical role in the art world, including Polich Tallix (recently bought by UAP), known for having collaborated with artists like Alexander Calder, Roy Lichtenstein, and Richard Serra.

But the expansion of arts and culture over the past decade or so has no precedent, and extends from rural areas like Wassaic and Livingston Manor, to small towns and villages like Catskill and Tarrytown, to cities like Poughkeepsie and Newburgh. Foreland has transformed Catskill's unused waterfront buildings into a contemporary art complex. The Wassaic Project provides year-round artist residencies and arts education programs for local youth, as well as an annual festival that can draw several thousand attendees. In downtown Poughkeepsie, the Trolley Barn launched its youth-focused gallery and curatorial program in 2020, while Newburgh's Ann Street Gallery started a fellowship program for emerging BIPOC and Latinx artists in 2022 that was recently awarded a grant from the National Endowment for the Arts. And the relaunched Catskill Art Space has brought the work of renowned artists James Turrell and Sol LeWitt to tiny Livingston Manor, enhancing tourism offerings and helping drive foot traffic to local businesses.

"We are a very small town that's defined by our local Main Street. There's only so much hiking and eating and drinking you can do, and I think that there really is this desire to find other offerings, especially in the offseason, that are able to cater to both our local residents as well as visitors," says Sally Wright, executive director of Catskill Art Space. "When people are at CAS, it spills over to surrounding local businesses. Our opening was one of the biggest days for the wine bar across the street from us. When we have our free education program, the kids would then go to the ice cream store next door, or parents take that time to visit other local markets."

The economic impacts of arts and culture have been especially pronounced in Hudson and Beacon, two cities where downtowns have undergone remarkable change.

While arts venues began cropping up in Hudson in the mid-2000s, their numbers have grown exponentially city since then. There are about 25 galleries along Warren Street alone, and Columbia County has welcomed new venues while existing institutions

have taken their programming in exciting new directions. Basilica Hudson, founded in 2010, attracts at least 20,000 visitors per year to festivals, films, and performances in its solar-powered 19th-century factory. The Olana State Historic Site has begun exhibiting contemporary art, including a 2015 exhibit featuring the work of major artists, from Chuck Close to Cindy Sherman. Hudson Hall collaborated with opera director R.B. Schlather in 2017, earning coverage in *The New Yorker*. And the 2014 arrival of art dealer Jack Shainman's gallery The School, in nearby Kinderhook, has helped bring even more thought-provoking exhibitions and established artists to the area, says Ruth Adams, co-executive director of Art Omi, a 120-acre outdoor sculpture and architecture park in Ghent, about 10 miles from Hudson.

"The impression used to be that people are leaving New York City to get a very different experience upstate. Now, they realize that you can get those experiences here. The last five years have changed everything," says Adams. Art Omi has seen attendance grow from about 10,000 in 2012 to about 30,000 in 2017 to about 45,000 last year.

This thriving creative ecosystem has also been a boon for the local economy. Columbia County sales tax revenue increased 25 percent from 2019 to 2022, growing from \$44.7 million to \$54.8 million, "because of the people who were attracted here during the pandemic, because of the arts and cultural assets that exist here," says F. Michael Tucker, President & CEO of the Columbia Economic Development Corporation. Columbia County welcomed about 224 new businesses in 2022, and existing small businesses benefited from events like Hudson Hall's Jazz Fest and Winter Walk, a street festival with art installations.

"It's good for the local businesses that surround it. And it's good publicity for the town," says Jeff Gimmel, chef and owner of two Hudson restaurants, Swoon Kitchenbar, which opened in 2004, and Le Perche, which he purchased in 2018.

The arts and culture sector has also spurred the revival of Beacon. The 2003 opening of Dia Beacon in a former Nabisco factory heralded the beginning of the city's transformation into an arts destination. At the time, many buildings along Main Street were boarded up. Artists were already there, in galleries along Main Street, but it wasn't until the past seven years or so that new developments began to trans-

form the city. "For the longest time, there was this black hole in the middle of Main Street, and now that area is vital," says Matthew Agoglia, the president of BeaconArts, which promotes local artists.

Arts and culture have also sparked change in Westchester. By attracting artists to the second and third floors of downtown buildings in the 1990s, Peekskill was able to bring professional and retail services back to its downtown. "It stabilized property values and probably even increased [them]," says Bill Powers, executive director of the Peekskill Business Improvement District, where at least 100 artists continue to live and work today. The Jacob Burns Film Center, a nonprofit film and education center, "has remade the village of Pleasantville," says Marsha Gordon, co-chair of Mid-Hudson Regional Economic Development Corporation and president and CEO of The Business Council of Westchester. "There are people in the restaurants and at the farmers market. They took this sleepy little town and made it a destination."

Since undergoing a \$1.5 million restoration in 2015—spurred by a \$400,000 matching grant from the New York State Office of Parks, Recreation & Historic Preservation—the Tarrytown Music Hall has become an even more important source of business for local restaurants and hotels. The theater draws around 100,000 people annually, many of whom travel in from around the Tri-State area "We get a lot of guests that are either going to or coming from the Music Hall. It draws guests and clients from New York City or New Jersey or even areas above Westchester to come and visit us," says Cesar Antipas, director of operations for Goosefeather, the restaurant inside the Tarrytown House Estate hotel.

Even as arts have proliferated throughout the Hudson Valley, the sector is facing serious challenges that could undermine its future. The region's skyrocketing home prices and shortage of affordable rentals have been well publicized since the pandemic, when the Hudson Valley attracted historically high numbers of new residents. And while Beacon's revival is notable, many artists who helped make the city attractive to visitors and new residents can no longer afford space to create or show their work. One visual artist and gallery leader estimates that more than half of Beacon's Main Street galleries have closed over the past several years, due largely to rising rents. "Back in 2010-2011, every other

place was a gallery. It's really changed a lot," says the artist.

Another challenge faces historic theaters that have helped revitalize downtowns, but need more funding to keep up with maintenance costs, which are not covered by NYSCA or other government capital funds. If Hudson Hall can't afford maintenance on its historic theater, then its workforce development program for local public school students "would be the first on the chopping block," says executive director Tandra Dillon.

Arts organizations are also challenged with ensuring they can keep existing staff and hire the next generation of arts leaders. "People have left for better paying jobs in our community. They go to the city or the county," says Chris Silva, executive director of the Bardavon theater in Poughkeepsie. With the increased NYSCA, NEA, and federal relief funding related to the pandemic, the Bardavon was able to promote an intern, who had been planning to move to Brooklyn, to a full-time staff member. But Silva worries about funding decreasing as the crisis wanes. "Zoos, aquariums, botanical gardens have been supported by the state of New York for decades because of their impact in downtowns. What about us?" he says.

Other institutions need NYSCA capital funding, but are struggling to find enough matching funds.

A fully restored Ritz Theater at Safe Harbors in Newburgh has been promised to the local community, but the organization has been making only piecemeal progress. "The new capital grant from NYSCA is up to \$2 million, which is amazing, but that's a one-to-one match. An organization like mine struggles to raise \$2 million, so we have to seriously consider whether we have the capacity to apply for such grants," says executive director Lisa Silverstone.

And in Kingston's Rondout District, the Reher Center for Immigrant History has been struggling to find funding to make accessibility improvements to its museum. The organization has been excluded from certain state economic development grant programs because of its nonprofit status. "The challenge that often comes up is that many of our arts and cultural organizations are 501(c)3s, and so the traditional economic development toolkit, which often involves tax credits or programs that explicitly make not-for-profits ineligible, can't apply," explains Tim Weidemann, the director of Ulster county's department of economic development. "Those are projects that should be recognized as economic development projects. We've got to find a better way to align the evaluation rubrics that the state has set up for the various economic development grant programs to the things that organizations like the Reher Center are doing."



Winter Walk performance at Hudson Hall in downtown Hudson.
Photo by Claudia Cinquegrana.



Artists At Work Rochester

A performance of Hair at the Geva Theatre in downtown Rochester. Photo by Goat Factory Media Entertainment.

By the numbers

The resident artist and design worker population grew **38.3 percent** between 2011 and 2021, from 1,299 to 1,796, compared to 0.3 percent growth in the total population.

Employment in the arts and culture sector grew **14.1 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from 1,535 to 1,752, compared to 5.5 percent growth in total employment.

Since the pandemic low in 2020, employment in the arts and culture sector has rebounded by **10.7 percent**.

The average annual earnings in the arts and culture sector was **\$33,857** in 2021.

Tourist spending rose by **32.8 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from \$2.5 to \$3.3 billion.

Inflation-adjusted NEA funding declined **47.2 percent** from \$428,389 in 1998 to \$226,000 in 2022.

Rochester received **\$3,594,700** in NYSCA funding in FY22, 3.5 percent of the state's total of \$103,257,146.

The region received a total of **\$2.29 million** in REDC grant funds in 2021, 9.8 percent of the of the \$23.4 million in total funds allocated through the REDCs to arts and culture projects statewide.

The largest arts and culture REDC award in 2022 was **\$2 million** for The Strong National Museum of Play.

FOR DECADES, ROCHESTER WAS KNOWN FOR its “Big Three” employers—Kodak, Xerox, and Bausch and Lomb—and saw its fortunes closely tied to theirs. However, in recent years, the flourishing of Rochester’s increasingly vibrant and diverse cultural scene has renewed the city’s identity as a cultural capital, and helped spark a more diversified and inclusive economy in the process.

More than a century later, Rochester’s reputation as a center for the arts has only grown; the city was recently ranked by the National Center for Arts Research (NCAR) as one of the country’s top 20 most vibrant arts communities—nestled between Chicago and Austin. Rochester’s arts scene is employing locals, drawing more working artists to the city, and helping seed new business ventures, even as the ‘Big Three’ companies, have drastically shrunk or closed their doors altogether. The arts and culture sector in Rochester added 217 jobs between 2009 and 2019, a 14.1 percent increase, and the sector has already rebounded by 10.7 percent since the pandemic. Even while the total population of Rochester has barely changed (+0.3 percent), its resident artist population grew 38.3 percent from 2011 to 2021, from 1,299 to 1,796.

Artists from Rochester have been breaking out on the global stage. In music, acclaimed metal band Undeath recently sold out the Photo City Music Hall, a 500-capacity music venue founded in 2016, and is now embarking on a European tour. The absurdist rapper RXK Nephew’s prolific output—he released more than 400 songs in 2021—has earned him coverage in the *Washington Post* and *Rolling Stone*. Danielle Ponder, a former public defender, is now headlining a nationwide tour in support of her critically acclaimed debut album, *Some of Us Are Brave*. Penny Sterling has toured the country with a series of theater pieces about her experiences as a transgender woman, most recently *Someone No One Can See*. The 2019 film *Queen & Slim* was based in part on the photography of Rochester-born Deana Lawson, who won the 2020 Hugo Boss Prize for “significant achievement in contemporary art.” And at the most recent Grammy Awards in February 2023, three Eastman School of Music graduates took home awards, including Monroe County native Renée Fleming, who won for her album *Voice of Nature: the Anthropocene*.

Downtown Rochester is still home to the Eastman School of Music and the Rochester Philharmonic, which welcomed more than 100,000 visitors last year. The downtown area has recently become a hub for visual art, dance, and theater. In 2001, the Rochester Contemporary Art Center, known as RoCo, moved into a former dress shop on East Avenue, where visitors can encounter work by both renowned and emerging artists from New York State and beyond. In 2004, Garth Fagan Dance Company overhauled its headquarters and dance school on Chestnut Street, where more than 400 students of all levels learn leadership skills alongside technique and choreography, and Geva Theatre completed a renovation of its historic building on Woodbury Boulevard in 2016, welcoming more than 140,000 annual visitors to the renovated space before the COVID-19 pandemic.

Rochester’s large and growing Latinx population is also playing an increasingly vital role in the city’s cultural renaissance, although inequities in access to funding and exposure remain a serious missed opportunity for the region. The Puerto Rican Festival attracts more than 20,000 visitors annually and will celebrate its 53rd anniversary in 2023, making it the city’s longest-running cultural event. The Borinquen Dance Theatre, led by Nydia Padilla-Rodríguez, has taught more than 1,000 students since its inception in 1981. For over a decade, the Rochester Latino Theatre Company, the city’s first bilingual theater group, has provided a vital platform for emerging and established Latinx writers and performers. And Latinx artists have long been at the vanguard of public art in Rochester, including the legendary artist Range of graffiti collective FUA Krew, and Justin Suarez, who founded the youth mural program Roc Paint Division, which is now in its eighth season.

Although the flourishing cultural ecosystem in Rochester is not a new phenomenon, the past decade has seen the city’s creativity reach new heights. In 2012, the community intervention project Wall/Therapy commissioned 11 street artists from across the globe to rehabilitate 16 walls downtown, inspiring residents to view the ‘Image City,’ a moniker originally attributed to Kodak, in a proud new way. Since then, Wall/Therapy murals have proliferated on both sides of the river, transforming the landscape, bolstering local identity, and drawing visitors from far afield. “Every year, when mural-making season

starts, folks make the trip up from NYC just to take mural pictures, to take tours of the murals,” says the group’s founder, Ian Wilson. “They come here because we give them a reason to.”

Two growing festivals are also drawing hundreds of thousands of visitors to Rochester, having quickly earned international reputations. The Rochester Jazz Festival audience grew from 15,000 in 2002 to 208,000 in 2019, and the Fringe Festival, which debuted in 2012, has since drawn more than half a million visitors to nearly 4,000 performances.

Where some economic development initiatives have struggled to help Rochester overcome decades of underinvestment—amid population and job losses—the arts are succeeding in sparking new opportunities.

“We asked to use MLK Park, which essentially hadn’t been used [for public programming] for 20 years,” recalls Erica Fee, who created and continues to produce the Fringe Festival, which has included everything from experimental theater to mass karaoke performances to burlesque circus acts. “And now it’s used constantly.”

Local businesses are reaping the benefits. Festival days are the busiest days of the year at Java’s café, a coffee shop next door to Eastman Hall. Andy York, the shop’s manager, doubles the staff on festival days and typically sees sales triple.

Restaurateur Ross Mueller chose the location of his latest venture, Native Eatery and Bar, precisely because of its proximity to Geva Theater. “I didn’t originally want a restaurant this big,” he says of the building, kitty-corner from the theater. “But I did it because Geva was right there. I even put \$20,000 into building 12 steps that would make it easier to walk from us to the theater.” So far, the investment has paid off: on the evenings of a Geva performance, the restaurant serves 30 to 50 percent more tables.

For all the arts contribute to Rochester—connecting locals, attracting visitors, boosting small businesses, and inspiring new investments—they receive startlingly little federal, state, county, or municipal support. Excluding federal stimulus money for pandemic recovery, NEA funding in Rochester has been on a downward trajectory since the late 1990s, from \$428,389 in 1998 to \$226,000 in 2022, a 47.2 percent decrease. While Rochester was awarded \$10 million as part of the state’s 2021 Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI), none of that money was earmarked for arts-related initiatives.

Monroe County’s 2021 \$1.2 billion budget committed just over one-tenth of a percent—\$1.4 million—to arts and culture. About two-thirds (64 percent) of that funding, or \$900,000, went to the Rochester Museum and Science Center, and 13 percent, or \$180,000 went to the Rochester Philharmonic. Most of the rest was split between seven other large organizations, including the Memorial Art Gallery, while a remaining \$45,000 was sprinkled among 11 mid-size organizations.

In recent months, Monroe County Executive Adam Bello has taken steps to heed the call for decentralized support. The county’s proposed FY2023 budget increased support for mid-sized arts to \$1 million, and also includes \$200,000 for community festival support and a \$60,000 line-item grant for the new Avenue Blackbox Theatre, which was founded in 2018 to showcase the work of Black, LGBTQ+, and other historically underresourced artists in the historic Joseph Avenue neighborhood.

NYSCA granted \$3.6 million to arts organizations in Rochester in 2022—more funding than was allocated from either Monroe County or the federal government. However, newer, smaller, and mid-size organizations, especially those led by and serving communities of color, continue to experience challenges securing public funding—with dozens of organizations and artists unable to access funding in any given year.

Despite being home to the second-largest population of Latinx residents in the state, Rochester does not have a center for Latinx arts (the city’s former Puerto Rican Arts & Cultural Center closed in the 1980s). Even as their impact grows, only a handful of Latinx-led organizations have received funding from the city, county, or state in recent years.

“We’re still driving for an equitable process for awarding some of these funds,” says Bleu Cease, the executive director of the Rochester Contemporary Art Center, an artist-founded gallery space best known for its 6x6 show, in which everyone from schoolchildren to mayors to Philip Glass and George Condo contribute 6-inch-by-6-inch artworks that are then sold anonymously. “There’s a hesitancy to commit to organizations at the bottom. It shouldn’t take 45 years for the next crop of grassroots organizations to grow and sustain permanence.”

“The community knows the organizations that are directly supporting them,” says Adam Eaton,

director of Rochester Artist Collaborative, a nonprofit that provides artists from low-income neighborhoods with the space and tools they need to create. “Make it easier for us to support them.”

Funding at the city level for any sized arts organization, however, remains meager. In FY2022, the city committed over \$200,000 in capital funding to arts and culture institutions, including the public library system, and 1 percent of city capital project dollars, or about \$240,000, to public art installations—but no expense money to arts organizations. “The city uses images of our work in its literature and presentations, which implies that it supports us, but that’s not necessarily true,” says Ian Wilson, the founder of Wall/Therapy.

There is consensus among arts advocates that Rochester would benefit from not only more robust funding for the arts, but also stronger intermediary organizations with the ability to both advocate for and equitably allocate funding. The Arts and Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, which used to direct state grants and administer a group health plan for artists, was forced by financial pressures to vacate its office in 2014, and it officially dissolved in 2021. “We have no infrastructure,” says Rachel DeGuzman, president and CEO of the arts consultancy 21st Century Arts, an arts consultancy that specializes in strategic marketing and connecting cultural

organizations with underrepresented communities. “We have no arts and cultural council anymore.”

The Rochester Area Community Foundation is helping convene arts leaders from across Monroe County to recreate an arts council—but in order to avoid the pitfalls of the last council, the new one will need consistent funding from both the state and the county. Only with robust staff and resources will the new council be able to build and sustain relationships across the county, the region, and beyond, fostering collaboration among arts organizations and artists, ensuring equitable access to funding and technical assistance, and working with partners to tap into larger state funding streams—including economic development capital dollars allocated through the Regional Economic Development Councils and tourism funding through the Market New York program.

With support from the state, the council could address several pressing needs in the arts sector in Rochester and beyond, including technical grant-writing assistance for small organizations and independent artists, and marketing to raise awareness of the breadth of the region’s offerings.

“If lawmakers truly want to help,” says Eaton of Rochester Artist Collaborative, “they would give smaller organizations the space and the funding to flourish.”



Students visit a Wall/Therapy mural in Rochester. Photo by Erich Lehman.



Artists At Work Syracuse

A concert at the historic Landmark Theatre on South Salina Street in Syracuse. Photo by Todd Frederick Michalek.

By the numbers

The resident artist and design worker population grew **29.9 percent** between 2011 and 2021, from 765 to 994, compared to a total population decline of 0.6 percent.

Employment in the arts and culture sector grew **53.5 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from 539 in 2009 to 827 in 2019, compared to 1.8 percent growth in total employment.

Since the pandemic low in 2020, employment in the arts and culture sector has rebounded by **4.9 percent**.

The average annual earnings in the arts and culture sector was **\$31,877** in 2021.

Tourist spending in Central New York increased **62.3 percent** between 2009 and 2019, from \$1.6 to \$2.6 billion.

Inflation-adjusted NEA funding declined **47.2 percent** from \$428,389 in 1998 to \$226,000 in 2022.

Syracuse received **\$1,874,830** in NYSCA funding in FY22, 1.8 percent of the state's total of \$103,257,146.

The region received a total of **\$1.3 million** in REDC grant funds in 2021, 5.6 percent of the \$23.4 million in total funds allocated through the REDCs to arts and culture projects statewide.

The largest arts and culture REDC award in 2021 was **\$800,000** for the Everson Museum of Art of Syracuse and Onondaga County.

WHILE ON A VISIT TO SYRACUSE, EXECUTIVES

from the computer chip manufacturer Micron Technology were walking along Salina Street when they spotted the Landmark Theater's restored marquee announcing that night's sold-out show. "It contributed to the vibe downtown, which impressed them," recalls Kevin Younis, the executive deputy commissioner of Empire State Development, the umbrella organization for New York's two principal economic development entities. Shortly thereafter, Micron announced a plan to build a mega-complex in the area, creating an estimated 9,000 jobs with average salaries of over \$100,000.

While several factors undoubtedly determined Micron's \$100-billion commitment, Syracuse's vibrant arts culture played an important role in convincing the company that the city could attract and retain workers. "Quality of life came up a lot when we put together the Micron deal," says Honora Spillane, vice president of economic development at CenterState CEO, an economic strategy and business leadership organization dedicated to the prosperity of the region. "[We show] people why it's so great to live and work here, and the arts have a lot to do with that. Beyond dollars-and-cents business decisions, the arts and vibrant neighborhoods—these contribute to the quality of a place, to its broader appeal."

The appeal of Salina Street and the surrounding downtown area is a relatively new phenomenon. While the opulent Landmark Theater, originally a cinema, first opened in 1928, by the late 60s it was shuttered and demolition loomed. In the early aughts, downtown Syracuse looked like so many other post-industrial downtowns across the state, with boarded-up storefronts and mostly deserted sidewalks after dark. "I came back and walked down Salina Street and wept," recalls Stephen Butler, an Onondaga county native who serves as the executive director of Central New York Arts (CNY Arts), a nonprofit that supports the area's artists and arts organizations. "But something has begun to grow here since then. These rust belt towns typically turn the lights out at 5 p.m. when people leave work, but now the arts are keeping the lights on for another five hours."

CNY Arts played an important role in revitalizing downtown Syracuse by directing county funding to arts institutions like the Landmark, and the nearby Everson Art Museum, Syracuse Opera, and Redhouse

Arts Center—which opened a new \$10 million space on Salina Street in 2018 and subsequently had the busiest season in its history, with audiences growing by 20 percent. With a windfall of ARPA funding in 2021, CNY Arts was also able to fund eight new murals by local artists in partnership with city councilmember Jimmy Monto. The City as Canvas initiative unveiled the latest 90-foot mural by Cecily Thomas in October of 2022, with the words "MUST BE THE PLACE" scrawled across the entire west wall of the CNY Jazz offices and Jazz Central theater building downtown.

"My hope is that when people look at this mural, they immediately think of all the reasons why Syracuse is such a wonderful place," Thomas said in a statement. "I think that whether you grew up here or are a transplant, it's easy to take pride in the fact that this is your home. Syracuse must be the place!"¹¹

Other exciting additions to Syracuse's downtown include the Wildflowers Arts Consortium, a marketplace for work by local artists which also offers space for workshops and exhibitions, and Wunderbar, a queer bar and theater that hosts weekly events from experimental open mics to improv comedy. Parthenon Books, the city's first independent bookstore in 30 years, opened directly across from the Landmark in 2022 and now offers author talks and book groups. It's only a few doors down from the often packed restaurant Oh My Darling, which celebrated its grand opening in March 2019 and survived the pandemic, while farther south, Café Kubal is serving up locally roasted coffee in a freshly renovated building that once housed the Dey Brothers department store—its final iteration having closed in 1992, prompting the New York Times headline, "In Downtown Syracuse, the Streets Get Emptier."¹²

These days, the streets of Syracuse are a far cry from empty. As the city's arts venues and organizations have grown and new ones have proliferated, they have hired more staff, with employment in the sector growing by 53.5 percent between 2009 and 2019. More working artists have moved to the city, with Syracuse's resident artist population rising 29.9 percent between 2011 and 2021, from 765 to 994. The lively downtown has drawn other residents, too, with 1,316 residential units added to the area between 2010 and 2020, and additional projects totaling \$141 million planned or in progress. Many of

these newcomers are young, with Syracuse recently ranked third in the nation for millennial movers-in by the National Association of Realtors.

In addition to attracting young people from elsewhere in the state and country, more young people who grew up in the area are deciding to stay local. “I grew up here in the 1990s and left, and it’s night and day compared to then,” explains Spillane of CenterState CEO. “We no longer tell our kids that to work for a great company or have a meaningful impact, you have to leave. Those things happen here now.”

Likewise, people don’t have to leave Syracuse to see a Broadway production, visit a world-class museum, or hear a Booker prizewinning author read their work. In 2019, Syracuse Stage, a professional theater that collaborates with Syracuse University’s drama department, presented the world premiere of the play *Thoughts of a Colored Man*, and though live theater came to a standstill during the pandemic, the play, by Keenan Scott II, was one of the first new works on Broadway when it reopened in 2021. The Everson Museum of Art—an American art museum with one of the largest collections of ceramics in the world, housed in a distinctive building designed by I.M. Pei—made national headlines in 2020 when it sold off a Jackson Pollock painting and used the proceeds to purchase work by underrepresented artists. In 2022, Syracuse University professor George Saunders, named “the best short-story writer in English” by *Time*, celebrated the publication of his latest collection, *Liberation Day*, by discussing the book with SU Provost Gretchen Ritter days before appearing on *The Late Show* with Stephen Colbert.

The problem is that too many Syracuse residents aren’t aware of the breadth of offerings in their own backyard. “I spend a lot of time on Reddit hearing people say, ‘I just moved here. What is there to do in Syracuse?’” says Mike Intaglietta, the executive director of the Landmark Theater. “There’s got to be a better strategy than answering people on Reddit.”

Cash-strapped, short-staffed arts organizations can devote little, if any, of their budget to marketing, which makes it difficult for them to reach locals, never mind potential tourists across and beyond the state. “We have such a limited marketing budget that people miss all the awesomeness there is to enjoy,” says Elizabeth Dunbar, the director and CEO of the Everson Museum of Art. “Boosting marketing regionally would be hugely important for us. There

needs to be more marketing in the travel and tourism sectors.”

Like the Everson Museum of Art, many arts organizations in Syracuse rely primarily on funding from NYSCA and Onondaga County. With the exception of recent, one-time ARPA funds directed by the city toward arts and culture—which made the City as Canvas murals possible—municipal funding has been virtually nonexistent, and inflation-adjusted NEA funding to Syracuse has declined 56.8 percent between 1998 and 2022, from \$220,120 to \$95,000. Though Syracuse was awarded Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) funding in 2021, none of it was dedicated to any arts or culture related projects.

NYSCA, however, awarded nearly \$2 million to Syracuse arts organizations in FY2023, with half distributed via CNY Arts and half awarded directly to 20 organizations in amounts ranging from \$5,000 to \$49,500. In FY2023, Onondaga County also raised more than \$2 million via a hotel room occupancy tax (ROT) to support the arts and culture—a model far more counties should consider. A portion of these funds were distributed directly—including \$150,000 to the Museum of Science and Technology, and \$50,000 to the Landmark Theater—and a portion were distributed via CNY Arts, with the lion’s share awarded to the Everson Museum of Art, Museum of Science and Technology, the Landmark Theater, Redhouse Arts Center, Syracuse City Ballet, Syracuse Opera, and Syracuse Stage, with only \$252,500 regranted as smaller project support and economic development grants.

While anchor institutions play a pivotal role in the community and deserve support, the problem with the current funding model is that it often leaves behind smaller upstarts such as the Black Artist Collective, which financially supports and promotes Black artists, performers, and curators, with a mission to foster a far more representative arts and culture sector in Syracuse, where 29.2 percent of the population is Black and no anchor art institutions are led by a Black director or equivalent.

“One of the barriers we face is that legacy companies get first dibs on grants, so we’re low on the totem pole,” says Jaleel Campbell, one of the collective’s co-founders. Founded in 2020, the Black Artist Collective has already produced a variety of programs, from a Black History month showcase to Snowmies Holiday Market to the professional



The lobby of the Everson Museum of Art, designed by I.M. Pei, in downtown Syracuse.
Photo by Jamie Young.

development workshop About Ya Art Business 101, but without additional, reliable funding, it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the nonprofit to secure its own dedicated space, hire paid staff, sponsor additional member artists, or expand its public programming.

Limited funding sources, particularly for smaller organizations, means that most arts workers in Syracuse earn extremely low wages. The average annual salary for arts workers in Syracuse, \$31,877, is the lowest of any region in the state. Artists are

often asked to work “in service to the community, or in exchange for visibility or resume building—in other words, for free,” explains Cjala Surratt, who co-founded the Black Artist Collective alongside Jaleel Campbell, Alice “Queen” Olom, Martikah Williams, and Qiana Williams. More robust, diverse funding opportunities at both the state and county levels could finally mean fairly compensating the artists, curators, directors, stage managers, administrators, and more for their numerous contributions to the city, from driving economic and population growth to those that may

How the Arts Sector Is Catalyzing Economic Vitality and Strengthening Communities across Upstate New York

POST-INDUSTRIAL CITIES AND TOWNS ACROSS

upstate New York struggled through decades of population decline, job loss, and underinvestment, with downtown streets lined with boarded-up storefronts into the early aughts. From Newburgh to Troy, the arts and culture sector has helped these places find a new sense of energy and identity by revitalizing neglected spaces, driving foot traffic, boosting local businesses, drawing new residents and visitors alike, and inspiring young people to stay in their communities and sustain the creative momentum.

Downtown theaters and performing arts festivals are revitalizing upstate cities and driving foot traffic to local businesses.

For decades, upstate communities have depended on the performing arts for spillover economic and tourism effects: theatergoers are often reliable restaurant patrons, while festivals bring in hotel guests and day-trippers. But over the past decade or so, downtown theaters and performing arts festivals have spurred neighborhood transformations, sparking new small businesses, mixed-use developments, and infrastructure improvements. These changes are attracting new residents and employers, often to places where populations had been in decline.

As historic theaters have invested in renovations and expanded their programming, restaurants, bars, cafes, and other small businesses have cropped up nearby. An \$11 million renovation to Rochester's Geva Theatre convinced restaurateur Ross Mueller to invest in a larger space kitty-corner from the venue. "I didn't originally want a restaurant that was this big, but I did it because Geva was right there," he says. Downtown Syracuse has an independent bookstore for the first time in 30 years: Parthenon Books opened in June 2022 directly across from the Landmark Theater. "We definitely

do more business when the Landmark has something going on," says manager Selena Giampa. From the mid-2000s until 2015, "you couldn't get a seat at Davidson's on a Wood Theater night," says Rick Davidson, managing partner of Davidson Brothers Brewpub in downtown Glens Falls, where the Charles R. Wood Theater occupies a renovated Woolworth's department store and hosts the annual Adirondack Theatre Festival. "Those people who were coming to the show and getting a meal still are, but Davidson's doesn't get as many of them, because there are so many other restaurants here now. It's good for everybody."

The development of a theater district in downtown Buffalo—including the resurgence of Shea's Performing Arts Center, the transformation of a former bus station into Alleyway Theater, and a vacant building into Road Less Traveled Theater—has brought people back downtown. "Traffic coming back to Main Street has been a game changer for my organization and for this neighborhood," says Scott Behrend, co-chair of the Greater Buffalo Cultural Alliance and executive director of Road Less Traveled Productions. "The arts were a pivotal piece to getting things headed in the right direction. There were all these different arts destinations and then more restaurants, and then people wanted to live downtown again. Now you're seeing massive investment."

Likewise, in Syracuse, residential development has followed swiftly on the heels of renovations of the Landmark Theater and Redhouse Arts Center, as well as the arrivals of art spaces like the Wildflowers Consortium, a marketplace of work by local artists, and Wunderbar, a queer bar and theater that hosts a breadth of events, from experimental open mics to improv comedy. Between 2010 and 2020, 1,316 new residential units were added downtown, with additional projections totaling \$141 million in planned or in progress developments.

In Midtown Kingston, which suffered from the loss of IBM in the 1990s, a \$5.4 million renovation

to the Ulster Performing Arts Center (UPAC) and the creation of a Midtown Arts District in 2017 have transformed the corridor, bringing in an estimated 50,000 additional visitors, along with several new restaurants, bike lanes, and a new home for local station Radio Kingston. “There really is a sense of new life in the Midtown Kingston area. The success of UPAC has been critical in changing that dynamic,” says Ward Todd, president at Ulster County Regional Chamber of Commerce.

Public art is reviving unused spaces, spurring new investment, and drawing visitors to nearby businesses.

In cities throughout upstate New York, public art is more than just a beautification tool. Projects such as murals, light displays, and performance art are demonstrating the effectiveness of creative place-making—the strategy of integrating arts and culture with community building and economic development. Some projects have finally managed to address stubborn challenges, like neglected buildings and underused streets.

Before a 2020 revitalization effort, Franklin Alley in downtown Troy was lined with dumpsters and avoided by pedestrians. “That was the worst alley downtown. And people didn’t feel safe in it,” says Dylan Turek, director of economic development at the City of Troy and Troy Local Economic Development Corporation. Now, new lighting illuminates brick walls painted with colorful murals by Joe Iurato—while garbage storage is out of sight. The alley’s makeover “definitely has a huge impact” on foot traffic, says Vic Christopher, who owns seven nearby restaurants and retail shops. “Every time I walk past the alley, I see people taking photos, even wedding photos.”

Public art initiatives have also become important tools for attracting cultural tourists. Among visitors to Breathing Lights, a 2016 public art installation which artfully illuminated hundreds of abandoned buildings in Capital Region cities, the majority engaged in other nearby activities and spent between \$10 and \$50. Wall/Therapy, a mural initiative in Rochester, drew visitors from more than 2,000 other cities to its annual mural festival. “Every year, when

mural-making season starts, folks make the trip up from New York City just to take mural pictures,” says Wall/Therapy founder Ian Wilson. “They come here because we give them a reason to.”

Public art is also an important way to support local artists, particularly those from underserved communities—and ensure those communities see themselves reflected in artwork and cityscapes. After participating in Capital Walls, an ongoing mural program in Albany and Schenectady, Jade Warrick started Amplified Voices, a mural program for local youth of color. Jimmy Monto, Syracuse’s first openly LGBTQ member of the Common Council, spearheaded City as Canvas, a set of eight murals by local Black and brown artists. “We’ve had a chance to elevate these artists who were really struggling. Cayetano Valenzuela was our first artist, and his murals are on postcards now,” says Monto.

Arts and cultural institutions and events are boosting tourism year-round.

Upstate communities are increasingly leaning heavily on arts and culture to drive tourism throughout the year. Day-trippers from nearby communities flock to cities and towns to view public art and catch shows at downtown venues, while theater festivals attract fans from around the world and marquee museums can attract tens of thousands of annual visitors. Many local businesses are reaping the benefits. Between 2009 and 2019, tourist spending in upstate New York increased by 51.1 percent, from \$13 billion to \$19.6 billion. During the same period, employment in the region increased 33.2 percent in accommodations and 18.2 percent in restaurants and bars.

Theater festivals are among the state’s greatest arts and cultural tourism drivers. Since debuting in 2012, the Rochester Fringe Festival has drawn more than a half million visitors from around the world to nearly 4,000 performances. Fringe Festival attendance has increased dramatically, rising from 30,000 in 2012 to 100,000 in 2019, its peak year thus far. And in Glens Falls, the annual Adirondack Theatre Festival has had a significant impact on the local economy. Tyler Herrick, president of Spruce Hospitality Group, which includes the Queensbury Hotel, Fenimore’s Pub, and Park 26 restaurant,

says the festival is a major source of business. “On a per-guest basis, those are the guests that have the best spend,” he says.

Tourist spending has exploded in the Hudson Valley and the Catskills in particular. In 2019, travelers spent \$4.5 billion in the Hudson Valley and \$1.6 billion in the Catskills—up 66 and 67 percent from 2009 respectively. These successes point back to state spending on the arts. Storm King Arts Center, which received a \$2.6 million REDC grant in 2021, welcome nearly 240,000 visitors last year. The Hudson Valley Shakespeare Festival also received an REDC grant in 2021 for \$2 million, and drew 35,000 attendees. Newer events are also helping drive tourism to the region. Upstate Art Weekend, a self-guided arts tour across the Hudson Valley, has expanded from 23 participating arts organizations, venues, and creative projects in 2020 to more than 145 participants in 2022, attracting thousands of visitors.

Many cultural tourists are making stops at local restaurants, coffee shops, and breweries. “It’s not just going to the museum. It’s going to two or three different places in the Hudson Valley where you might see a play in the afternoon and visit a craft brewery as part of your experience,” says F. Michael Tucker, president and CEO of Columbia Economic Development Corporation. “Based on the amount of Dia pins we clean up at the end of the day that people leave around? I think that’s definitely one of the bigger draws,” says Harry Manning, general manager at Hudson Valley Brewery in Beacon. Dia Beacon expects to welcome 110,000 visitors in 2023, about 75 percent of whom are day trippers.

The explosion of the arts and culture upstate has also led to a shift in how regions approach marketing themselves. Attractions such as Buffalo’s West Side Bazar, which hosts about 80,000 unique visits per year, have become increasingly important tourism drivers. “It used to be that we would lead with Niagara Falls, because it’s 20 minutes away,” says Patrick Kaler, president and CEO of Visit Buffalo Niagara. “But now the purpose of a trip to Buffalo is not for Niagara Falls. They’re coming for our arts and culture,” Kaler says. Tourism spending has skyrocketed in Greater Niagara, home to Buffalo, growing 48.5 percent from \$1.9 billion in 2009 to \$2.8 billion in 2019.

The arts are building awareness of the need for economic development in communities historically lacking investment.

Even as downtowns have undergone dramatic transformations, many areas in upstate cities have been left behind—and artists and arts organizations are challenging cities to invest more resources in these long-neglected neighborhoods. By engaging communities in performance art, cultural festivals, and public art, artists and arts organizations are playing an important role in centering local perspectives in revitalization efforts.

A multiphase public art initiative called Uniting Line has reimagined an underpass that divides Downtown Troy from North Central Troy, where the poverty rate of 44 percent is nearly double the city-wide rate, and the percentage of Black residents is more than double the city-wide percentage.¹³ Uniting Line features a series of large-scale murals designed by artist and activist Jade Warrick, who was selected by the local community. The project also figured in Troy’s successful 2021 Downtown Revitalization Initiative application, which put forward several development projects in North Central Troy’s Hillside North neighborhood.

Albany Barn, a creative arts incubator and community art center with 22 live-work apartments and 13,000 square feet of studio, exhibition, performance and program space in the heart of the city’s underserved Arbor Hill neighborhood, was created in 2014 “to provide a springboard for local artists and facilitate beneficial relationships between creatives, neighbors, and the broader community,” says Jeff Mirel, founder and former Albany Barn board member who is now a principal at Rosenblum Development, a regional commercial real estate developer. Now, Albany Barn is among a cluster of arts organizations, including Capital Repertory theater, helping propel development beyond downtown Albany and increase connectivity to surrounding neighborhoods including the up-and-coming Warehouse District, a longstanding manufacturing area that’s seen a recent influx of craft beverage makers, restaurants, and increasingly, residential developments. “We’re beginning to see a larger mixed-use district emerge,” explains Mirel.

In 2022, the Trolley Barn Gallery, located in the Middle Main area of Poughkeepsie, began hosting the PKX Festival to engage locals in arts programming. In its first year, the three-day festival brought in over 700 visitors including partner nonprofits and guest artists. “We’ve gotten a glimpse into how bright the future of public art throughout Poughkeepsie is and what it can mean for this community,” says Fenichel-Hewitt, executive director of The Art Effect, the nonprofit that operates the gallery.

In Rochester, the Avenue Blackbox Theatre

opened in 2018 in the historic Joseph Avenue neighborhood with a mission to showcase the work of artists of color, youth, LGBTQ+ creatives, and other traditionally marginalized collaborators across disciplines. The theater hosts drama programs for children and teens, as well as a monthly open house event called Black AF Friday, where emerging Black artists can sell their wares. Many participating artists have already gone on to open up other spaces in Rochester. “We’re paying it forward,” says the founder, Reenah Golden.

Upstate New York Is Full of Artists at the Top of Their Game

“It makes 9-year-olds giddy to see someone who looks like them two stories high,” says **Jade Warrick**, whose murals can be seen on walls and bridges in both Albany and Troy. Warrick, also known as TrashKiD, makes a point of using public art to “normalize Black joy in nature.” Like many upstate artists, Warrick wears many hats in the community: founder of Amplified Voices, a mural program that teaches teens from underserved communities the value of art; founder of the food justice nonprofit the Creative Good; and host of PBS’s television series “AHA! A House for Arts.” She also previously served as curator of Public Art and Placemaking at The Arts Center of the Capital Region, and sees art as playing a pivotal role in boosting the Capital Region’s quality of life. “When people move into a new city, they want to find culture and community,” Warrick said. “If we keep the arts strong, we keep the economy strong.”

Conductors tend to rack up frequent-flyer miles with appearances in multiple cities, and **JoAnn Falletta**—who was named one of the “Fifty Great Conductors” of all time by *Gramophone* magazine in January 2023—is no exception. But despite her commitment to symphonies in Ireland, Virginia, Hawaii, and elsewhere, the former pupil of Leonard Bernstein spends close to two-thirds of her time in Buffalo, where she was appointed music director of the city’s philharmonic orchestra in 1998, becoming the first female music director of a major symphony orchestra in the United States. “In Buffalo, we really pride ourselves on being an artistic city,” says Maestro Falletta, who has won Grammy Awards leading the orchestra in recorded works by John Corigliano and Richard Danielpour. “I think the state needs to celebrate that. They need to talk about it. When you talk about New York’s natural beauty as a selling point, also talk about the dance companies and theater troupes.”

When the Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York (BTTUNY) mounted its first major production in 2013, founder **Jean-Remy Monnay** knew exactly the story he wanted to tell—a scorching tale of racism within the U.S. military during World War I—but was at a loss for how to tell it. “I had no idea where I could find seven Black actors in the area,” said Monnay, who had moved to Albany after fleeing Haiti as a teenager and then working as an actor in New York City. “Now I can put on any play of any size and find actors. We had a lot to do with that, and I’m proud to see it.” Major networks and streaming services now reach out to BTTUNY if they are filming in the region for help with casting. Now he would like to see other smaller arts organizations get the resources they deserve. “Artists need more training and more space,” he said. “There are so many empty buildings, and so many theater companies are looking for space. There must be a way to connect them.”

In Buffalo, arts and culture have been integrated into efforts to redevelop abandoned buildings on the city's west side into affordable housing and new public spaces. The housing nonprofit PUSH Buffalo redeveloped School 77, a former public school, into award-winning, solar-powered senior apartments, community space, and a new home for the Ujima theater company. And in Allentown, the artist Dennis Maher transformed an empty church into an art, design, and construction incubator called Assembly House 150, where locals can participate in hands-on

skills-building courses and visitors can discover "walk-in works of art." According to Maher, Assembly House 150 is a place where artists, designers, tradespeople, architects, and planners can come together to "build a more artful and equitable city."

Since the 1990s, **Wilfredo Morel** has sculpted recycled materials into horses, birds, humans, and even giant trees. His work provides a model for art as a focal point in urban renewal, emphasizing a revitalization of discarded and neglected resources. Whether he is operating his fabrication studio in Dutchess County or his gallery in Peekskill, helping 20 Peekskill schoolchildren create a mural through his Arts10566 nonprofit, or advocating for migrant workers in his job as director of Hispanic health at Hudson River HealthCare, Morel's work centers communities that have become far more diverse in recent years. "The Hudson Valley region is not what it was 30 years ago," he says. "Mt. Kisco is Guatemalan all the way. Beacon used to be Puerto Rican; now it's Colombian. And Poughkeepsie? We call it Oaxakeepsie because so many people come from the Oaxaca region of Mexico. There is strong diversity here now."

Jillian Hanesworth spent two years lobbying the city of Buffalo to create the position of poet laureate. When the city finally did, in 2021, it chose Hanesworth to "inspire Buffalo in verse." Quotes of hers can now be found on local t-shirts ("We are a living testament to our ancestors' refusal to die"), and she has performed her own spoken-word poetry hundreds of times in Buffalo as well as Toronto and Baltimore. "When people see me, they're just seeing a girl from the east side of Buffalo who was taught to survive using whatever tools I had at my disposal," says Hanesworth, whose first collection is called "The Revolution Will Rhyme." "In communities like mine, which are more racially and economically segregated than other cities in the state, we lean on art to explain, process, validate and understand our individual and collective experiences. It helps us be the city of good neighbors."

Arts organizations are nurturing upstate New York's next generation of artists.

Many nonprofit organizations and cultural venues are helping expand access to arts programming for public school students. After-school programs, meet-and-greets with professional artists, and workforce development programs are exposing youth to career pathways in the arts and laying the foundation for a far more representative arts sector in upstate New York. Currently, Black and Hispanic New Yorkers are under-represented in the sector: only 4.4 percent of arts workers are Black compared to 8.7 percent of the total population upstate, while only 5.2 percent of arts workers are Hispanic compared to 10.1 percent of the total population.¹⁴ As the art world looks to expand opportunities for artists of color and from low-income backgrounds, local arts and culture organizations and venues can provide a “bridge to help students see that it’s a viable career, and if they’re interested, that they can have an opportunity to do this,” says Nicole Fenichel-Hewitt, executive director of The Art Effect, a nonprofit focused on arts education for youth.

Public school students in Kingston, for example, have been invited into the Ulster Performing Arts Center to meet renowned artists during soundcheck, from Obie and Tony Award winning tap dancer Savion Glover to Grammy and Academy Award winning

musician Jon Batiste. In Albany, Amplified Voices provides mentorship for teens of color who are aspiring artists. In partnership with the Albany Center Gallery and Albany Barn, Amplified Voices hosted workshops in painting technique, project planning, and more for teens in Albany, Troy, and Schenectady in the summer of 2021, during which they created a traveling mural that was exhibited at three Albany Public Library branches.

In Poughkeepsie, The Art Effect launched a curatorial training program at the Trolley Barn Gallery for youth from low-income backgrounds in 2020. Students ages 16 to 22 work with a professional curator from local and nationally recognized museums, such as the Loeb Gallery at Vassar College or the Museum of Contemporary Art Detroit, to first design a call for entry, then select and hang works for an annual exhibition. “It’s such a leg up, if you’re in high school and you have worked for two years in a local gallery curating shows with a small group of students,” says Fenichel-Hewitt.

At Hudson Hall in Hudson, the 2022 Live Arts and Media Workforce Development Program targeted Hudson City School District students at risk of failing school. Students were paid a minimum hourly wage for the five-day vocational skills workshop, and several went on to get hired for local arts and events jobs. “We’re having them help us run shows and shadow our technical operators,” says Tandra Dillon, Hudson Hall executive director.

The Challenges Facing the Arts Sector Across Upstate New York

THE PANDEMIC HIT THE ARTS AND CULTURE sector hard, forcing theatres, galleries, concert halls, museums, and other important community spaces to shut their doors and leaving thousands of artists out of work. Employment in the arts and culture sector upstate is still down 18.3 percent since the start of the pandemic, just as most relief programs are running dry.¹⁵ But even before the pandemic, the sector was facing a number of challenges that threaten its sustainability, inclusivity, and vibrancy.

Funding for the arts upstate is extremely limited.

Funding for the arts in many cities and towns in upstate New York has declined at the federal, state, county, and local levels in recent decades, with the exception of pandemic relief dollars. A dearth of sustained funding makes it difficult—if not impossible—for arts organizations to afford and maintain permanent spaces, hire staff and pay them competitive wages, expand their programming, or effectively market their offerings.

New York's primary vehicle for arts funding is the New York State Council on the Arts (NYSCA), but NYSCA's total grantmaking budget shrunk 35.8 percent between 2008 and 2022 after adjusting for inflation, from \$63,112,924 to \$40,535,000, excluding recovery relief and capital appropriation dollars. This funding was stretched between hundreds of arts organizations and individual artists, with Rochester receiving 3.5 percent of total NYSCA 2022 grants, Buffalo 3.2 percent, Syracuse 1.8 percent, and Albany 1.7 percent. In each of those cities, the funds were then divided between up to 45 arts and culture organizations, including statewide community regrant partners (SCRs) that then further divided them between an even greater number of organizations and individual artists.¹⁶

Federal funding for the arts in New York state has also declined and continues to be heavily concentrated in New York City. Between 1998 and 2022, NEA funding dropped 47.2 percent in Rochester, 56.8 percent in Syracuse, and 67.6 percent in Albany, with Albany receiving only \$25,000 in 2022. Though roughly a third of New York state's population lives upstate, upstate arts organizations received only 8.8 percent of all NEA funding in the state between 1998 and 2022—\$47 million of \$532 million.¹⁷

In many places, funding at the municipal levels is completely nonexistent. Before 2001, \$1 million had been allocated to the arts in Buffalo's annual budget, but that budget line was cut in the midst of the economic downturn and has never been restored, leaving the city's local arts organizations without any programmatic or general operating support. Likewise, the city of Rochester provided no programmatic or general operating dollars to arts organizations in 2022, while the city of Syracuse allocated only \$3,500 to a single arts organization.

County funding for arts and culture is more variable. Some counties allocate revenue from hotel room occupancy taxes—or bed taxes—to the arts and culture sector. In Erie County, for example, a hotel occupancy tax raises roughly \$7 million annually for arts related projects. A room occupancy tax in Onondaga County, home to Syracuse, raises roughly \$2 million annually for arts related projects. The problem is that funds are allocated at the discretion of county executives who sometimes direct them toward projects only tangentially—if at all—related to the arts. According to one arts leader in Rochester, the Monroe County executive's plan to build an \$85-million aquarium was "met with resounding silence from the arts sector." Moreover, other counties do not direct little, if any, revenue from hotel room occupancy taxes to local arts organizations.

The arts and culture sector is too often overlooked in the state's economic development strategy.

The arts and culture sector creates the conditions for new small businesses to start and grow, drives tourism, and improves quality of life for local residents, helping to attract and retain the talent sought by businesses. In the Capital Region, where computing, biotech, and green energy companies will need to fill thousands of new jobs in the next few years, the arts are helping to draw workers to the region and convince locals to stay. “For people to want to live here, or for people to stay here, arts and culture and the creative economy are absolutely critical,” says Katie Newcombe, chief economic development officer at the Center for Economic Growth, which developed a marketing campaign for the region that features profiles of its creative locals.

But New York State has not fully recognized the economic development potential posed by arts and culture. Limiting the government focus on the arts to NYSCA is holding back the sector from having an even greater impact. “The fact that arts is largely seen as relegated to just NYSCA lends to the sense that it’s a stepchild, it’s another thing that doesn’t really fit in the economic development mold, and that’s problematic,” says Tim Weidemann of Ulster county’s department of economic development.

“We’ve got to find a way to make placemaking and culture and arts part of the overall economic strategy,” adds Tom Kucharski, president and CEO of Invest Buffalo Niagara, an economic development organization that represents the eight counties of Western New York.

The arts have too often been overlooked by the state’s Regional Economic Development Councils (REDCs), despite the success of previous efforts to integrate the arts into economic development initiatives. “Program dollars were tied to the state’s overall strategies. It’s how we received funding for Troy’s Master Plan for Public Art and our first major installations,” remembers Elizabeth Reiss, president of Arts NYS and executive director of the Arts Center of the Capital Region. But that collaboration ended in 2019, and in 2021, of the \$106.37 million in REDC funds directed to the Hudson Valley, only \$5.65 million—5.4 percent—went to arts and culture related projects. Only 3.9

percent of 2021 REDC dollars were directed to arts and culture projects in the Capital Region, 4.8 percent in Western New York, 3.5 percent in the Finger Lakes, and 2.2 percent in the North Country, with the largest awards directed to large organizations such as The Strong National Museum of Play in Rochester, the upcoming film production studio Buffalo Studios, and the Shakespeare Festival and Storm King Arts Center in the Hudson Valley.

The Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) also often overlooks opportunities in the arts despite past success stories. Capital Walls, a public art placemaking initiative in downtown Albany, was partly funded with a \$75,000 grant through Albany’s 2016 DRI award. “The investment in the arts has shown developers that the city is investing in itself. So developers are coming in and doing residential conversions, and those residential conversions are attracting new younger residents,” says Georgette Steffens, executive director of the Downtown Albany Business Improvement District.

Yet DRI funds are rarely directed to arts-related projects in cities, towns, and villages across upstate New York. In 2021, Rochester was awarded \$10 million in DRI funds, but none of that money was earmarked for arts-related initiatives. In 2022, the city of Dunkirk in Western New York and the village of Perry in the Finger Lakes Region were each awarded \$10 million in DRI funds, with none of it directed to arts-related initiatives, while in Port Jervis, the Mid-Hudson Region’s DRI recipient, only 0.71 percent of DRI funds were directed to the arts. When arts related projects do receive DRI funding, the average amount is 44.1 percent less than other types of projects receive—\$439,309 compared to \$786,695.

The state’s Market New York program, which supports regional marketing efforts to promote tourism, has a better record of funding arts-related initiatives. Last year, 52 percent of Market New York’s grant funds were directed to arts and culture organizations and events—approximately \$5 million out of \$9.5 million. But these grants require recipients to match 50 to 80 percent of grants funds, an impossibility for many small and mid-sized organizations. They are also granted on a reimbursement basis, leaving cash-strapped organizations struggling to find initial financing, and as one-offs, they do not yet provide the sustained support many organizations need.

Other untapped opportunities for the state to support the arts include the Restore New York Communities Initiative (“Restore NY”) and Community Development Block Grant (CDBG), which encourage adaptive reuse of underused or dilapidated buildings. In the last budget cycle, state leaders authorized an unprecedented \$250 million for Restore NY—the first reappropriation of funding to the program in five years. There is enormous potential for New York State to make annual Restore NY funding a vehicle for arts and cultural investments. “Those dollars have more flexibility around the types of uses, so they could be geared towards public arts projects or housing for artists communities or art facilities, and the same goes for CDBG,” says Ryan Silva, Executive Director of New York State Economic Development Council.

Operating grants are highly competitive, especially for small organizations, and haven’t nearly kept pace with inflation.

Many federal, state, county, and municipal arts grants are designed to cover the cost of specific programs or capital projects—not the year-after-year operating expenses of staff salaries and benefits, rent and utilities, equipment, marketing, and insurance. “Operating grants are so few and far between,” says the leader of a cultural institution in the Hudson Valley. “So many grants do not provide for operations at all.” Others may provide a certain amount for operations one year and a different amount the following year, making it impossible for organizations to engage in long-term planning, whether it’s signing a lease or hiring a new member of staff.

“I thought that we would get maximum funding for general operating support, but we got half of what we’d gotten the year prior,” explains the leader of a small-town gallery and performance space who cannot move forward with plans to hire a part-time marketing and development employee.

Small and mid-size organizations struggle the most to secure operating funds. NYSCA, a reliable source of essential operating dollars, historically

directed the bulk of funds to large, long-established institutions downstate, and while that has changed in recent years, there is still more progress to be made. Part of the challenge lies in building the capacity of local arts intermediaries and community-based organizations to help smaller arts groups and those serving historically marginalized communities to get onto the radar of local and county officials and the leaders of some philanthropic organizations. Newer organizations don’t want to compete with larger anchor institutions for funding, but often feel as though limited arts dollars, in particular from local government or philanthropic funders, are committed to large organizations before smaller ones have a chance to make their case.

And while costs have risen rapidly with inflation, NYSCA’s organizations grants—available in amounts ranging from \$10,000 to \$49,000—haven’t budged. “Inflation is hitting us, too. I haven’t seen a cost of living increase in grantmaking in my lifetime,” says the executive director of one historic theater in the Hudson Valley. Another arts leader adds that “operational costs are rising—insurance, utilities, salaries and benefits—and those rising costs are not always met with increased grant funding.”

At Hudson Hall, for example, between 2019 and 2023, property insurance increased by \$5,000, utilities increased by \$6,000, and payroll expenses increased by \$67,000—without adding any staff members—yet in the same period, their NYSCA funding actually decreased by \$5,500, from \$55,000 in 2019 to \$49,500 in 2023.

NYSCA’s programming regrants for individual artists and small organizations have struggled to keep pace with rising costs. “Venues are experiencing the impacts of inflation, which is causing all of their expenses associated with running their facilities and programs to go up,” says a staff member at a statewide community regrant partner organization, which partners with NYSCA to redistribute funds. Now that in-person performances and events have resumed, the rising costs of transportation are posing a significant challenge for artists and venues. “Higher gas prices are a heavy burden on artists who need to shoulder the cost of their own transportation, as well as organizations that have to reimburse them,” the staff member adds.

There is an absence of well-funded, place-based intermediaries to lend assistance and foster collaboration.

Arts intermediaries—including arts councils, arts districts, and nonprofits that support local artists—are essential for a thriving local arts and cultural sector. They help emerging artists and upstart organizations connect, collaborate, access critical funding, and grow. But across the state, many of these intermediaries are often poorly funded and short-staffed, limiting their ability to assist nonprofit arts organizations and working artists. In certain places, they are absent altogether. The Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester, for example, was forced by financial pressure to vacate its office in 2014 and officially dissolved in 2021. (The neighboring Genesee Valley Council on the Arts is now responsible for serving the greater Rochester region.) In other places, cultural intermediaries are largely run by volunteers and took financial hits during the pandemic. “Every one of the eight or nine local arts alliances and arts councils that represent in some way our eight-county region is valuable and completely strapped,” says Betsy Constantine, president & CEO of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo.

In places like Rochester, artists have had trouble accessing supports like grantwriting assistance and health insurance—since the Arts & Cultural Council for Greater Rochester dissolved. “We have no infrastructure anymore,” says Rachel DeGuzman, president and CEO 21st Century Arts, a consultancy which assists arts organizations with development, marketing, and outreach.

“One of the challenges is that a lot of the independent artists don’t have access to funding support because a nonprofit component is required. How do you set up hubs or resource centers to help those artists access the funding that’s already there?” says Galin Brooks, president and CEO of Rochester Downtown Development Corp.

One important category of intermediaries are known as statewide community regrant partners, which distribute NYSCA’s programming grants for individual artists and arts organizations. NYSCA depends on the deep local knowledge of these organizations—the longstanding relationships and trust they have built in their communities. But as state

funding for NYSCA has declined over the decades, it’s increasingly difficult for short-staffed organizations to sustain basic operations, let alone expand their reach. Salaries are low, and many organizations struggle to raise private dollars to supplement crucial NYSCA regrant funding.

Regranting partners in rural areas in particular have struggled to reach artists, including Native artists living in the Akwesasne Mohawk region and Seneca territories in Cattaraugus County, and folk artists living in rural communities and tiny towns. One positive development in the incorporation of travel stipends into NYSCA’s operating grants, which several organizations cited as essential in helping to expand the reach of their programs and services across large geographies.

“We really need to think about how we strengthen [intermediaries],” says Constantine of the Community Foundation for Greater Buffalo. “That includes ensuring they have shared resources and that artists can tap into those resources.”

Arts organizations struggle to raise capital funds and maintain their spaces long-term.

NYSCA’s capital projects grants enable arts and cultural organizations to adaptively reuse buildings and make strategic investments in their facilities, but these funds are inaccessible to many small and mid-sized organizations due to the grant requirements, and do not account for any long-term maintenance. This has made it extremely difficult for many arts organizations to complete renovations that would make their facilities more functional and welcoming to the public, and maintain those facilities over time.

NYSCA capital grants, for example, typically fund just half of total capital project costs, requiring grantees to describe how they will raise the remaining funds. (Last year, NYSCA began making no-match capital grants, which organizations say are hugely helpful and should be continued.) Without reliable municipal funding—or the philanthropic support that many organizations enjoy in New York City—many upstate organizations don’t have anywhere to turn for matching funds. “Where do we find matching funds? Across upstate New York, very few counties, cities, or towns have funding dedicated to the arts.

Even fewer have foundations or corporations that fund the arts, nevermind fund them as generously as a capital project would need them to do,” says Elizabeth Reiss of the Arts Center of the Capital Region.

A capital grant of about \$6 million would allow the Arts Center of the Capital Region to develop its upper floors, but the organization would then need to find about three million dollars. “Impossible. Maybe I can find \$100,000. Maybe. So that means I have to bite off a \$200,000 project. Like just rehabbing some windows. And then in a few years I can do another project,” Reiss says. Rather than tackling the most transformative projects that would allow arts organizations to expand their programs and attract new audiences, many are forced to pursue piecemeal projects instead.

Another barrier to securing NYSCA capital grants is that organizations are typically required to initially finance the projects themselves, only after which NYSCA reimburses them. “Getting these state funds is great, but it comes with a match and a huge cash flow lag,” says Lisa Silverstone, executive director at Safe Harbors of the Hudson Valley, which has been slowly restoring the historic Ritz Theater, a \$25 million project that she hopes will be “a game changer in Newburgh.”

Despite these hurdles, many arts organizations have prevailed in restoring and renovating historic and previously derelict buildings across upstate New York, from Hudson Hall to Poughkeepsie’s Bardavon Theater. But the challenge then becomes maintaining these buildings without any state support. “Even though we spent \$20 million [on renovations], there’s always something breaking down. It’s just the nature of it. We can’t just patch it,” explains Chris Silva, executive director of the Bardavon, which is among a group of 14 historic downtown theaters in upstate New York that are lobbying for an arts line item in the governor’s budget, in addition to NYSCA funding, to help address the ongoing expense of preserving their buildings.

Likewise, in Hudson, it took 30 years to restore historic Hudson Hall, which now attracts world-renowned artists like opera director R.B. Schlather. But Hudson Hall’s executive director, Tambra Dillon, is scared that all their recent progress could disappear “if the boiler were to go, or the building needed repainting, or there’s some serious repairs that need to happen.”

The artists and arts organizations helping revitalize cities upstate are often then priced out of them.

Throughout upstate New York, artists and arts organizations have played an essential role in transforming once-neglected places—and now many are becoming the victims of their own success as surging costs push them out. With rents and real estate prices skyrocketing in many cities and towns upstate, it has become increasingly difficult for working artists to find affordable housing and studio space, and for local arts organizations to find affordable long-term programming and office space. Over the past eight years alone, the average rent grew by 52.7 percent in Buffalo, 47.4 percent in Rochester, 37.5 percent in Albany, and 35.1 percent in Syracuse. Whereas an artist could have found a one-bedroom apartment in Buffalo for about \$800 in 2015, now the average one-bedroom costs upwards of \$1,200.¹⁸

“Artists are being priced out of their homes because of the work they do bringing a region up,” says Connie Sullivan of the Arts Council of the Southern Finger Lakes.

In Glens Falls, for example, young painters like Hannah Williams—whose murals are visible across town—have helped “change the perception of Glens Falls from a failed factory town to an arts mecca,” according to Kate Austin-Avon, the director of the arts district there. “But now it’s less likely that people like Hannah can find somewhere to live.”

While below-market-rate housing is available to artists in some cities, the stock is far too low. When a writer in Beacon recently found herself scrambling to find a new home after her rent went up 30 percent, one of her first calls was to the West End Lofts, which offers affordable apartments for artists—but the waitlist was years long. Getting an apartment there, the West End representative told her, was like “winning the lottery.” Similarly, when Buffalo native and poet Jillian Hanesworth inquired about the waitlist for one of 60 affordable units for artists at Artspace Buffalo Lofts, she was told it was four years long.

Affordable studio space—which has long drawn artists upstate—is also becoming increasingly scarce in many gentrifying cities and towns. “Affordable space and housing is the most critical need for our gallery and others,” says the leader of an artist-funded gallery in Beacon who has seen high-end retail and luxury condominiums proliferate while more than half of the galleries along Main Street have closed in recent years.

In South Buffalo, new residential and commercial developments have recently overtaken buildings once used as artist studios in the Larkinville and Seneca areas. “Now it’s the Great Arrow Building [in North Buffalo],” explains Shirley Verrico, the curator of Buffalo Arts Studio. “It had a lot of artist studios in it, and they still have a few, but when they redevelop, artists tend to get pushed out.”

Elizabeth Dubben, the executive director of Collar Works, a gallery in Troy focused on underrepresented and emerging artists, says that the Capital Region is “completely void of affordable artist studio infrastructure.” To fill the gap, Collar Works has developed a plan to expand its footprint by creating affordable artist studios, in addition to growing its residency program. The gallery has begun securing funds, but “access to significant capital funding as a small nonprofit is challenging,” says Dubben.

It has also become increasingly difficult for smaller arts organizations to find affordable, permanent space, which limits the programs they are able to produce. The Black Theatre Troupe of Upstate New York, which expands opportunities for new actors, directors, and playwrights of color, has been unable to secure its own space in Albany—which limits how they rehearse and their ability to offer educational programs to the public. “Hopefully, in the next few years, we’ll have our own building, so we can do more for the community. That’s my dream,” says Jean-Remy Monnay, the troupe’s founder and producing artistic director.

Similarly, the Black Artist Collective in Syracuse has not yet found a long-term space they can afford, which limits the programs they have been able to offer. “Eventually, when we have our own space, we will be able to present more,” says Qiana Williams, one of the collective’s co-founders.

Too many arts organizations depend on underpaid and unpaid labor and have no succession plans.

Upstate New York is filled with arts organizations that have been scraping by without enough funding to pay existing staff living wages or bring on new staff. Many arts organization leaders are nearing retirement without the resources to recruit their successors and keep their organizations alive. “How do we come up with compensation so we can maintain the staff that we have and be here for the next generation? That is one of the biggest concerns that we have,” says Alma Carillo of Buffalo Arts Studio and the Frontline Arts steering committee.

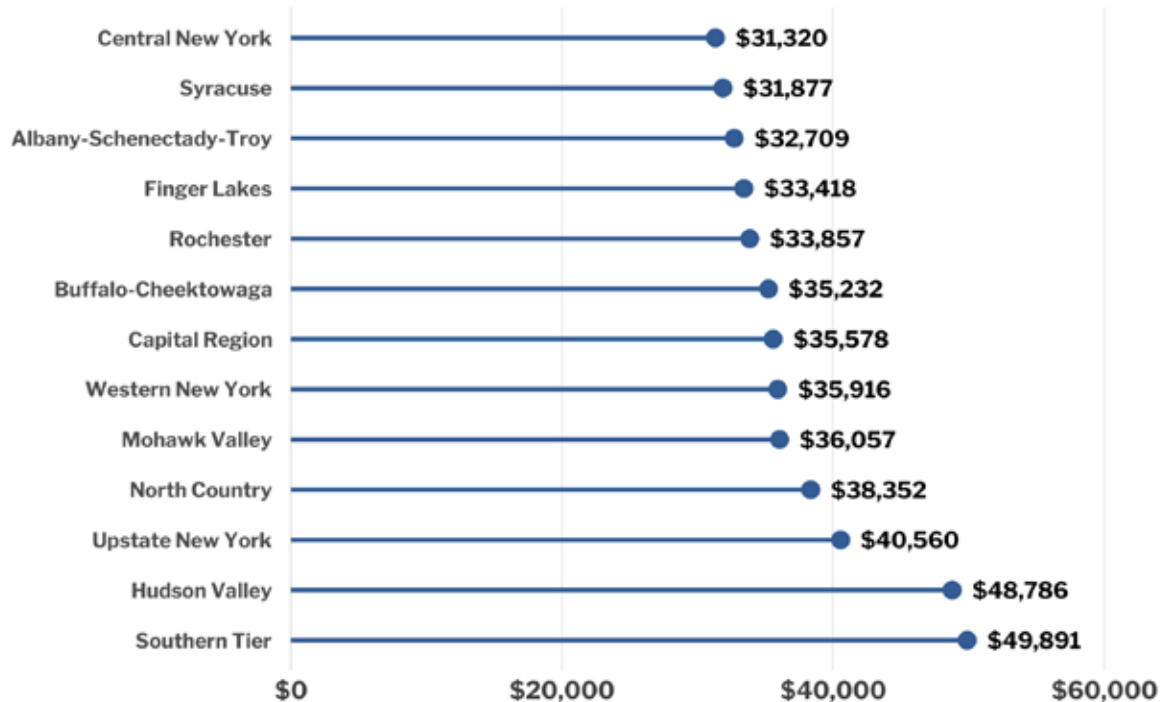
Low wages continue to pose a challenge to the arts sector’s long-term sustainability. The average wage in the upstate arts and culture sector is \$40,560 and much lower in regions like Central New York (\$31,320), the Capital Region (\$32,709), and the Finger Lakes (\$33,718). These are not family-sustaining wages in New York state, where the poverty line for a family of four is \$27,740.¹⁹

Adjusted for inflation, wages for arts workers only grew 11.4 percent over the last decade—an average of 1.1 percent per year. “We managed to make a significant pay bump for a lot of our staff last year, but with the current state of the economy, that’s just been eaten up with inflation and gas prices, because in a rural setting, a few hundred bucks a month just getting to work,” says Jeremy Adams, the co-executive director of Art Omi, a 120-acre sculpture and architecture park in Columbia County that offers an artist residency.

Chris Silva, the executive director of the Bardavon and UPAC theaters, has lost workers to “better paying jobs in our community,” and worries about who will succeed him and the long-time employees he hired nearly three decades ago. “When we all leave, how are we going to replace ourselves with quality people?” he says. Without more consistent funding with which to hire and retain staff, the next generation of downtown theaters throughout upstate New York is in jeopardy, according to Silva. “It comes down to keeping these places not only vibrant in terms of the artistic side, but vibrant in terms of the people who work in these places.”

Low Wages Pose a Challenge to the Sustainability of the Arts and Culture Sector Long-Term

Average annual wage of arts and culture employees in upstate New York by region, 2021



Source: Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

Many founders of arts organizations only nominally pay themselves: John Sowle, who has served as the artistic and managing director of the Bridge Street Theatre in Catskill as a “labor of love” since 2013, is a retired IT worker who only makes \$10,000 a year and works 60-hour weeks directing, designing, and doing publicity for performances. His husband also does publicity and acts. “This theater is pretty much a two-person operation,” says Sowle. He would like to find someone to take over his role, but acknowledges “it would be hard for somebody without some money to take it on.”

The radiologist and former graffiti artist Ian Wilson started Wall/Therapy in 2012, commissioning street artists from around the globe to paint murals on 16 walls across Rochester. With Wilson personally contributing over \$110,000 to fund the organization, it has since produced murals on both sides of the Genesee River, brought hundreds of visitors downtown, and hosted several successful events, including one 2017 block party featuring local musician Danielle Ponder, which drew a crowd of about

400. Despite their success, however, Wall/Therapy recently had to scale back its programming—including its popular annual festival—due to a lack of resources. “Our team just got run down,” explains Erich Lehman, Wall/Therapy’s co-curator and lead organizer, who, like Wilson, volunteers his time alongside a full-time job in IT at Rochester Institute of Technology. “We didn’t have the bandwidth to do that event and a dozen murals across the city at the same time,” he says. “We depend on volunteer support. I want to pay people, but there’s not enough money there to do it.”

Arts organizations lack the capacity to gather the data they need for effective advocacy.

Arts organizations need data to demonstrate their impact to potential funders, including New York State. But many groups throughout upstate New York lack the capacity to track event attendance, let alone gather

robust and meaningful data on how their programming affects local communities and small businesses. “There’s nobody to even calculate attendance. These organizations are running on such a shoestring to begin with. It’s just some dedicated volunteers,” says Kate Austin-Avon of the Glens Falls arts district.

In recent years, applications for NYSCA capital grants have asked that organizations quantify the economic impacts of a project, such as job creation, visitation, and direct effects on the surrounding area. But that can be especially challenging in rural or small-town settings. “We all know the arts are a tremendous means for economic stimulus, but it’s really hard to have financials that substantiate that. I can anecdotally say, when we opened on October 22, local businesses said that it was the busiest day of the year, but I don’t have hard numbers,” says the executive director of a gallery in a rural area, who asked for anonymity in order to speak freely about the challenges of securing state funding.

“You do need to have boots on the ground to get good numbers [about] where attendees are from and how much money they have spent,” agrees Erica Fee, who founded and directs the Rochester Fringe Festival. Fee considered hiring an outside consultant to conduct an economic impact study, but was quoted

\$25,000 and couldn’t afford it. “We keep on having funders say, ‘Why haven’t you paid for it?’ Help with that would be amazing, so we could tell the full story of our impact,” she says.

Wall/Therapy, also in Rochester, does not have the capacity to conduct the surveys necessary to paint a full picture of their impact and therefore better advocate for funding from local and state leaders, as well as philanthropic funders. “I don’t have a team... with the bandwidth to do this stuff,” says co-founder Erich Lehman. “To track anything beyond anecdotal data has been impossible, which is difficult when we’re trying to get a grant.”

Many arts leaders would welcome data collection support from Empire State Development or NYSCA, such as funding for organizations to partner with Americans for the Arts to develop economic impact reports. “If NYSCA could facilitate an Americans for the Arts report for every region, and pay for it, and help the staff at organizations collecting the data, it would be so great. Agencies would have the data they need to advocate for themselves, and the state would have it, too,” says Liz Lane, director of grants and programs for Central New York Arts. “The intermediary organizations, the arts councils, are poised to help.”

Basic Income for Artists: Learning From Creatives Rebuild New York

Rapidly rising costs for everything from art materials to studio space prevent many New York artists from focusing on their creative pursuits and create barriers to an artistic practice for those without generational wealth. Encouragingly, a recent initiative, Creatives Rebuild New York (CRNY), is working to tackle this challenge. Funded by the Mellon Foundation, CRNY is the first statewide program to provide guaranteed income to artists in New York. CRNY features two programs: Guaranteed Income for Artists and the Artists Employment Program. Guaranteed Income for Artists provides \$1,000 a month to 2,400 artists statewide, of which 718 are based upstate, over the course of 18 months. The Artists Employment Program matches 300 artists with community-based organizations and provides them with an annual salary of \$65,000 for two years.

CRNY’s programs relieves some of the cost pressures facing New York artists, allowing them to focus on their artistic practices and to work with local organizations to strengthen their communities. In Rochester, five local Latinx artists joined Grupo Cultural Latinos En Rochester to hold art classes and health workshops in service to the local community. In Kingston, TRANSART brought on four critically acclaimed artists to provide jazz instructional opportunities and mentorship to artists from underresourced communities. And in Utica, the artist Danielle Schenandoah joined Munson-Williams-Proctor Art Institute as cultural liaison, where she is now designing programming to strengthen indigenous perspectives in both the organization and wider Mohawk Valley, including her own tribe, the Oneida Nation. This unprecedented experiment is demonstrating the power of basic income to unlock the potential of New York’s artists to uplift their communities. However, without sustained support, this initiative is set to conclude in 2024.

Recommendations

Boosting the Upstate Arts Sector as a Catalyst for a Stronger New York

1. Make the arts and culture sector a centerpiece of statewide economic development planning.

Upstate New York's vibrant arts and culture sector has become a growing catalyst for economic opportunity over the past decade—outpacing overall employment growth by a factor of ten, reversing years of population declines, fostering new investment in hard-hit downtown areas, and serving as a beacon for local talent. However, arts and culture investments to date have formed just a small fraction of the state's economic development portfolio, including just 3.7 percent of REDC-funded projects in 2021. New York State should make the arts and culture sector a centerpiece of inclusive economic development planning going forward and take steps to ensure that the arts sector has a seat at the table. Governor Hochul and the State Legislature should invest \$500 million over five years in economic development initiatives that leverage the arts and culture sector to spur inclusive economic opportunities (without drawing from NYSCA's limited grantmaking budget); ensure that at least 15 percent of each REDC's membership is comprised of leaders from the arts and culture sector; work with local partners to increase the share of Downtown Revitalization Initiative projects focused on the arts and culture sector to at least 25 percent; and expand the Market New York program to include multiyear funding for destination marketing initiatives focused on creating arts and culture districts, supporting recurring festivals and events, and sustaining public art installations. To help deliver on this vision, the state should consider elevating NYSCA to become a cabinet-level agency.

2. Double NYSCA's recurring grantmaking budget to \$80 million annually, so that grants can keep pace with the growth of the sector alongside rising costs—and reach more small and mid-sized organizations.

Operating support from the New York State Council on the Arts has been a catalyst for growing and sustaining New York's rich array of cultural organizations for more than 60 years—providing a much-needed source of general operating support for organizations large and small, and reaching even more organizations through local regranteeing partners. However, state funding for NYSCA fell from \$63,112,924 in FY2008 to \$40,635,000 in FY2024—a 35.6 percent decline, after adjusting for inflation—and is now 68 percent below its 1990 peak. To help the Council keep pace with the growing arts and culture sector—as well as skyrocketing costs for everything from rent and wages to energy bills and health insurance—Governor Hochul and the State Legislature should double NYSCA's grantmaking budget to \$80 million annually, and then index future increases to inflation to ensure that the agency does not fall behind again.

3. Invest in place-based arts infrastructure, including arts councils, arts districts, and other arts service organizations.

In addition to boosting NYSCA's grantmaking capabilities with recurring expense funding, New York State should do much more to invest in place-based support infrastructure critical to the long-term vitality of the arts and culture sector. This should include seed funding to help establish and sustain local arts districts in neighborhoods and cities across the state without arts districts today; capacity-building grants to help local arts service organizations scale their reach and impact; and support for adding a community development expert or urban planner to the staff of each regional arts council to help better integrate the arts sector into local planning.

4. Launch a new initiative to help 100 arts organizations led by and/or serving historically marginalized communities to acquire long-term affordable spaces over the next five years.

For many arts organizations—especially those led by and serving communities of color—the successes of the past decade have been a double-edged sword: while the growth of the arts and culture sector has helped reverse decades of population decline and sparked new investment in hard-hit downtowns, artists and arts organizations are increasingly at risk of being priced out of their own communities. To help address this growing challenge, New York State should launch a new initiative designed to help 100 arts organizations across the state acquire long-term affordable spaces, with a focus on organizations led by and/or serving historically marginalized communities. Options include securing long-term leases for large commercial buildings and working with local partners to offer affordable and renewable sublets to artists and arts organizations; creating space for the arts in underutilized or empty state-, county-, and city-owned buildings; leveraging capital dollars to help organizations purchase buildings in need of significant renovation; and lowering interest rates for arts organizations by providing loan-loss reserves to nonprofit lenders.

5. Ensure that New York State's ambitious housing plan includes housing for artists.

In recognition of New York State's growing housing crisis, Governor Hochul has called on the state to add 800,000 new housing units over the next 10 years, supported by more than \$25 billion in new investment. To ensure that every community benefiting from new housing is able to flourish, New York State should take steps to ensure that affordable housing for artists is included as part of this vital effort. New York State Homes and Community Renewal should help counties and municipalities determine the local need for artist housing and live-work space by supporting local planning studies focused on these needs—very few of which exist today. To ensure equity in the development of artist housing, New York State should support a new initiative designed to connect housing developers with organizations led by and supporting artists of color with the goal of ensuring that underrepresented artists are prioritized in marketing and tenant selection and to facilitate agreements between nonprofit developers and arts nonprofits to help boost the supply of majority-affordable developments with an artist preference.

6. Help working artists achieve financial stability over the long-term.

Even as New York's working artists are leading the state's overall recovery from the COVID-19 pandemic, many artists themselves have been stretched to the breaking point. To cultivate a stronger and more equitable arts and culture sector for the long term, New York State will need to address several major challenges to personal and professional sustainability. First, far too many artists and arts workers lack access to the benefits that are typically attached to full-time employment, including workers' compensation, health insurance, and retirement savings. New York State should lay the groundwork for an expansion of access to benefits for freelance and independent workers by piloting a system of universal, portable benefits that move with arts workers from job to job. Second, artists face serious challenges getting paid on time for commissions and other projects. New York State should pass freelancer protections to ensure that independent artists are paid in a timely fashion and have recourse if they do not.

7. Develop infrastructure to provide shared “back office” services for small arts organizations—and succession planning so that organizations outlast any one leader.

Many of New York State's arts and culture organizations function with just a handful of staff, or are operated by a single individual. To help more of the state's small arts organizations thrive, New York State should partner with counties, municipalities, professional services firms, and philanthropic foundations to create shared “back office” services that multiple organizations in a single geographic area can use. These arts admin resource centers could be in-person or virtual, and include on-demand services such as accounting, human resources, legal services, architects, grant writing, and facilities management, with each service offered at predetermined hourly rates based on retainer contracts. To further support long-term continuity for many of the state's small arts organizations, New York should launch a succession planning program designed to ensure that organizations run by long-serving solo directors or small founding teams are able to transition into new leadership or ownership models without closing their doors.

8. Equip arts organizations with the data they need for effective advocacy and program design.

For many artists and arts groups across upstate New York, the pursuit of effective advocacy has been hampered by a lack of access to high quality, consistently updated data. Governor Hochul and the State Legislature should address this gap by directing Empire State Development to develop arts and culture sector data dashboards for each region of the state, including quarterly and annual data on employment, wages, business formation, artist residency and migration patterns, cultural tourism, and other indicators. These dashboards should also provide access to major national sources of arts-related data, including Americans for the Arts' “Arts and Economic Prosperity” data and data from SMU DataArts database.

9. Generate new, dedicated revenues for the arts at the county and city levels.

Given the decline in federal funding for the arts across upstate New York, and the sharp decrease in NYSCA funding since 1990, cities and counties should pursue dedicated local revenues that are specifically allocated to support the arts. Options include enacting municipal room occupancy taxes for short-term stays, with revenues dedicated to the arts; introducing a billboard tax, modeled on a successful model in Toronto, to generate funds for public art programs; implementing a small property tax surcharge directed to support the arts, as Jersey City has done; and using land-value capture tools to direct a portion of the projected increase in tax revenue from new development to support the arts.

10. Put artists to work promoting, strengthening, and supporting their communities.

New York's working artists have an essential role to play in strengthening neighborhoods across the state—creating the conditions for economic opportunity to grow, supporting youth and community development, drawing visitors from across the region and around the world, and renewing the social fabric in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic. To unlock the full potential of New York's artists to make positive change in all these areas and more, New York State should pursue a set of policies designed to put artists to work in service of their communities. Ideas include leveraging public and private funds to create an ongoing New York Artist Corps designed to enlist artists in developing community-scale public art projects statewide; embedding artists in state and local government agencies, modeled on New York City's successful Public Artist in Residence program; launching a state-wide tourism marketing campaign with grants for local artists to develop innovative physical and digital artworks intended to showcase their home regions; and allocating funding for artists as part of state RFPs focused on a broad array of policy challenges, from bolstering public health, conducting effective community outreach around new programs and benefits, and combating the state's mental health crisis, to supporting recent immigrants and asylum-seekers, addressing gun violence, and improving traffic safety. On all these issues and more, artists are uniquely well positioned to help New York make progress—but are too often left out of the solution.

Endnotes

1. This report defines the arts and culture sector as the performing arts, arts and culture venues, and independent artists, writers, and performers, including the following subgroups: art dealers, fine art schools, theater companies, dance companies, musical groups and artists, other performing arts companies, museums, historical sites, zoos and botanical gardens, and nature parks.
2. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
3. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the U.S. Census Bureau 2011 and 2021 American Community Survey 1-year estimates.
4. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from NYSCA and NEA grant funding in all of New York State from 1998-2022, available from <https://apps.nea.gov/grantsearch>.
5. Center for an Urban Future analysis of REDC awards, available from <https://regionalcouncils.ny.gov>. Center for an Urban Future analysis of Downtown Revitalization Initiative (DRI) awards from DRI round 6, available from <https://www.ny.gov/downtown-revitalization-initiative/dri-round-six-communities>.
6. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the American Community Survey. This report uses the category of “art and design workers” as defined by the Bureau of Labor Statistics, which includes the following occupations: art directors, craft artists, fine artists, special effects artists and animators, all other artists and related workers, commercial and industrial designers, fashion designers, graphic designers, interior designers, merchandise displayers and window trimmers, set and exhibit designers, and all other designers.
7. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
8. Center for an Urban Future analysis of Tourism Economics traveler spending data from Empire State Development.
9. Center for an Urban Future analysis of NEA grant funding from 1998-2022.
10. Center for an Urban Future analysis of REDC board membership in New York’s economic state development regions with the exception of New York City and Long Island, “Regional Economic Development Council 2022 Annual Report,” <https://regionalcouncils.ny.gov/>
11. CNY Jazz Central, “The latest ‘Syracuse as Canvas’ mural to be unveiled in downtown Syracuse this week,” Syracuse.com, Oct. 27 2022, <https://www.syracuse.com/living/2022/10/the-latest-syracuse-as-canvas-mural-to-be-unveiled-in-downtown-syracuse-this-week.html>
12. Sarah Lyall, “In Downtown Syracuse, the Streets Get Emptier; The Closing of the Last Department Store Causes the City to Try to Redefine Its Core,” The New York Times, August 21, 1992, <https://www.nytimes.com/1992/08/21/nyregion/downtown-syracuse-streets-get-emptier-closing-last-department-store-causes-city.html>
13. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the 2021 American Community Survey.
14. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.
15. Ibid.
16. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from NYSCA, available from https://www.nysca.org/grant_app/org_search.cfm.
17. Center for an Urban Future analysis of NEA grant funding in all of New York State from 1998-2022.
18. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from the Zillow Observed Rent Index, an index that tracks the median or average rent in an area, weighted to the rental housing stock to ensure representativeness across the entire market, not just those homes currently listed for rent.
19. Center for an Urban Future analysis of data from Lightcast.

