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Tackling Affordability Challenges in NYC's Arts and Culture Sector

In this testimony before the City Council's Committee on Cultural Affairs, Editorial and Policy Director Eli Dvorkin details the affordability crisis facing New York City's artists, creative workers, and cultural nonprofits, and advances ideas for how city government can respond.

by Eli Dvorkin

Testimony of Eli Dvorkin
Editorial & Policy Director, Center for an Urban Future
Before the New York City Council Committee on Cultural Affairs, Libraries and International Relations
Oversight Hearing on Affordability in New York City's Arts and Cultural Sector
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Good morning Chair Williams and members of the Committee.

My name is Eli Dvorkin, and I'm the editorial and policy director at the Center for an Urban Future. Thank you for the opportunity to testify today.

Today, New York City employs more than 326,000 people in its creative economy, more than any other U.S. city. At the core of the creative economy, our vibrant, diverse, and innovative arts sector remains one of the city's most important sources of strength. But that foundation is beginning to crack.

Since the pandemic, the city's arts ecosystem has faced serious new threats, driven in large part by an affordability crisis that is hitting artists, creative workers, and cultural organizations especially hard. Our new *Creative New York* report finds that no major part of the cultural sector has fully recovered, even as the city's broader economy has rebounded.

Since 2019, New York has seen an 18.8 percent decline in dancers, an 8 percent drop in actors, and a 2.8 percent decrease

in musicians. Overall, the city's resident artist population is down 4.4 percent—after increasing by nearly 35 percent between 2004 and 2019.

It's striking how broadly these losses now extend. The declines are not limited to artistic occupations. The city has also seen sharp drops among fashion designers, film and video editors, graphic designers, and art directors—occupations that had been growing, middle-class anchors of the economy.

Over the same period, creative industries that had been among the city's fastest-growing sectors are now contracting. From early 2020 to early 2025, employment is down across film and television, advertising, design, publishing, architecture, and the performing arts, even as overall city employment has grown.

One clear consequence: New York City is beginning to lose ground nationally. The city's share of people working nationwide in creative occupations has declined from 9.3 percent to 8.6 percent since 2019. During that same period, other cities—from Nashville to Miami—have expanded their creative workforces, often paired with significantly lower costs of living.

Taken together, these trends point to a structural shift in the culture sector—one that is unlikely to reverse without deliberate policy action.

So why is this happening now? Affording life in New York has never been easy for artists. What our research shows is that the pressure has intensified to a breaking point as expenses have risen far faster than incomes or revenues—both for artists and for the organizations that employ them.

New data from ArtsPool, which provides administrative support to small and mid-sized arts nonprofits, illustrates the gap clearly. Between 2019 and 2024, median revenues among member organizations rose just 2.2 percent, while median operating expenses climbed 64 percent.

For workers, the squeeze is just as severe. After adjusting for New York's cost of living, creative workers earn about 23 percent less than the national average, up from a 15 percent gap a decade ago. These pressures are compounded by longstanding disparities: artists of color earn roughly 27 percent less than white artists, further narrowing who can afford to remain in the city.

At the same time, creative employment has shifted sharply toward freelance and contract work. Since 2019, self-employment in creative industries has grown by more than 10 percent, and over the past decade the number of independent artists, writers, and performers has surged—bringing flexibility, but also deepening insecurity around benefits, housing eligibility, and access to credit.

Housing costs sit at the center of this crisis. Neighborhoods that long anchored the city's creative life are losing artists at alarming rates. The artist population on the Upper West Side has fallen by nearly one-third over the past decade. On the Lower East Side, it has declined by 55 percent.

And insurance costs have surged. In some cases, monthly premiums for performance venues now cost what an entire year of coverage did a decade ago. Taken together, these pressures are pricing people and organizations out faster than wages, revenues, or funding can keep up.

Progress to date—and its limits

With consistent support from the City Council, the Department of Cultural Affairs (DCLA) has made meaningful progress in recent years. Its budget has grown significantly over the past decade, baseline funding has expanded, both the Cultural Institutions Group and the Cultural Development Fund have grown and diversified, and initiatives like Create in Place point in exactly the right direction—toward safeguarding cultural spaces and infrastructure.

Our research also makes clear, however, that the affordability pressures now reshaping the creative sector extend far beyond DCLA's core focus areas. Housing costs, insurance markets, permitting rules, freelance labor protections, and access to public space are shaped by decisions across city government.

DCLA should be championing this work at every turn. But it cannot do it alone. And without additional resources, even the most promising new initiatives like Create in Place will struggle to meet the scale of the moment.

This is a cross-agency affordability challenge, and it requires a citywide response.

What the City Council can do

Our report points to several steps the City Council is well positioned to advance.

First, the City Council should consider a City of Yes for Artists package—one that integrates arts infrastructure into land use and planning decisions across the city. Space for artists and cultural organizations should be treated as a core part of neighborhood rezonings and city planning, not as an afterthought. The city should develop a citywide Artist Live/Work Standard to establish clear zoning and building-code models for safe, practical mixed-use housing and workspaces. Artist space should also be incorporated into office-to-residential conversions and major public projects, and a new Artist Housing Accelerator could help cover early-stage costs that often prevent these projects from moving forward.

Second, New York needs a little bit of artist housing everywhere. The Council can help make that possible by passing legislation to clarify that artist-preference housing is permissible and can be incorporated into affordable housing developments across neighborhoods. These policies should reflect how today's creative workforce actually earns a living, particularly as freelance and contract work has become more common.

The urgency is clear. Over the past decade, other U.S. cities have created more than 2,800 units of dedicated artist housing, with more approved or underway. New York City has created none.

Third, the city should pilot portable benefits for freelance and independent creative workers. A growing share of the creative workforce lacks access to basic economic protections. A city-led pilot would help stabilize careers, reduce inequities, and improve retention of creative talent.

Fourth, the city should take action to address out-of-control insurance costs. By pooling purchasing power and helping negotiate more favorable terms, the city can reduce a major destabilizing force for small venues and community-based cultural organizations.

Fifth, the Council should legislate a biennial artist survey to ensure city policy is grounded in up-to-date information about artists' housing, income, and workspace needs.

Finally, the city should expand income-generating opportunities by activating public space. A five-borough cultural festival would create paid opportunities for artists while drawing New Yorkers into parks, plazas, open streets, and city-owned buildings across all five boroughs. To make this sustainable, the city should also reform the Temporary Place of Assembly permitting process. And to unlock more potential over time, the city should embed artists more deeply across city government, building on and expanding the Public Artists in Residence program.

If these pressures continue unchecked, the city risks losing not only cultural vitality, but a core pillar of its economic and civic life. The choice before policymakers is whether to treat arts and culture as an amenity, or as essential infrastructure deserving of a serious, coordinated affordability strategy.

Thank you for the opportunity to testify. I look forward to working with the Council to ensure New York remains a place where

artists and cultural organizations can afford to thrive.

Read the full *Creative New York* report for a deeper look at the affordability challenges in the arts and culture sector and to take a look at our ten policy recommendations.

Check out our report *Integrating Artists into NYC's Affordable Housing Strategy* to learn about the key challenges to building artist housing and six ideas for how the city can do so in the future.

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CENTER FOR AN URBAN FUTURE
120 Wall Street, 20th Floor, New York, NY 10005

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