

Pam Rosenblatt

N.E. Art Spaces Unlocked: Jero Nesson

One Saturday morning at a February 2012 Bagel Bard gathering, I spoke with Steve Glines, **WHLR's** Editor-in-Chief, about art stories for the **WHLR's** Summer 2012 issue. I had just become the art editor as Bridget Galaway decided to move on after the **WHLR's** Winter 2012 issue.

Immediately, Steve mentioned a wonderful interview: Jero Nesson of Fort Point Channel Arts Community, Brickbottom Arts Community, and ArtSpace-Maynard fame. Steve liked the idea because it relates to his daughter, who is a stained glass artist at ArtSpace-Maynard. He knew Nesson as ArtSpace's landlord-artist work space developer through Kitty and found Nesson a quiet, refined man who must have an amazing story.

I agreed, contacted Nesson via e-mail. And then the interview was arranged – with Steve to join us as photographer and co-interviewer. Some days later we met in Jero Nesson's ArtSpace-Maynard's office, 63 Summer Street, Maynard, Massachusetts for an almost 50 minute interview at 11 a.m. on a very snowy Wednesday. Here are segments of the interview:



WHLR: Today is Wednesday, February 29, 2012. Sadie Hawkins's Day. We're interviewing Jero Nesson who is the executive director and president of ArtSpace-Maynard (<http://www.artspacemaynard.com>). How would you like your name to be written in **WHLR**?

Jero Nesson: Jero Nesson. I was listening to a radio show a couple of months ago. And they said, "We're doing a Rossini Opera Festival on his [220th] birthday. He was born on Leap Year [Sadie Hawkins's Day]!"



WHLR: You're from Cambridge. Did you grow up in Cambridge, Massachusetts?

Nesson: Roxbury.

WHLR: Did you go to college in this area?

Nesson: In Boston and New York. I got a B.A. and a M.C.P., which is a Master's of City Planning from Pratt Institute in Columbia University. It was within the School of Architecture.

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WHLR: How did you become interested in developing artists' spaces?

Nesson: That's a good question! I worked as an urban planner for 16 years. My last planning job was as the director of Building Re-Use for the State of Massachusetts. At that time, there were 500 surplus public schools. This was just after Proposition 2 ½ was passed. My job was to figure out how to help communities figure out what to do with these surplus buildings.

After 16 years of doing urban planning, I realized I was totally unsuited for the job. Nothing I ever planned got built or designed, so I was looking for something different. I always had an interest in the arts. I took the job as the director of the Fort Point Arts Community which was a non-profit group made up of about 350 artists who had studios in the Fort Point Channel area of Boston. The artists were on the waterfront close to downtown Boston. The old Fort Point Channel. You didn't have to be a genius to realize that development pressure was headed that way. And artists traditionally had been pushed from place to place.



So apparently over some cold pizza and beer one night, the artists wrote an NEA grant and got some funds to hire a director. So I became the first director. This was in '82 or '83. And so we tried to come up with a strategy for maintaining this community of artists in the face of a lot of wealth and pressure.

Our most visible project was the purchase and development of a 72,000 square foot building

at 249A Street, Fort Point. We found the building, did a quick architectural and financial analysis of the building. It seemed to work as affordable artist live-work space.

We put notice out in the community that we were looking for 35 artists to become partners and developers of this project under theegis of the Fort Point Arts Community. It turned out that we set it up as an artist live and work limited equity co-operative. The limited equity really means that in addition to restricting the use of the building to artists, there was a limit on how much you could re-sell your unit for. Technically, it's your share of the stock where you own your own unit. It's a cross between owning and renting, and the re-use limit was tied to the consumer price index.

So we had 35 brave souls who came forward and became the artists-developers-owners of the building. We developed the building for artists who bought their units for the equivalent of \$20 a square foot, including \$5 a square foot equity down payment.

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So for \$5,000, you could own a 1,000 square foot live work studio – a legal live-work space. But, at the time, people weren't kicking down the doors to be involved. And, at the time, the artists were paying maybe \$1.50, \$2.50 a square foot for rent. I think this worked out to maybe \$4, \$4.50 a square foot. It involved paying a little more now, but having long-term stability and affordability.

We did the project. It was a tremendous success. It became a national model for affordable live-work space. We got a Presidential Design Award.

As soon as [the Fort Point Arts Community project] was done, there was a clamor among the artists community in Massachusetts to do more projects.

And I was approached by the Massachusetts Council on the Arts and Humanities to work as a consultant for them full-time, state-wide, to help artists do similar projects.

I worked with artists to do several other buildings, most notably Brickbottom in Somerville, which is a 250,000 square foot building – 150 units of live-work space – and the Claflin School in Newton. Then I was involved with some artists' groups and a few other projects. I later formed a non-profit entity called ArtSpace for the purpose of entering into a lease with the town of Wellesley for a surplus school in Wellesley which we rented out as studio space to artists for 10 years.

After 10 years, the town took the building back and put a couple of million dollars into the building and created a town recreation center there.

A number of artists wanted to stay together, clearly knew Wellesley. The property just wasn't affordable so we wound up developing part of a large building – renting half of a floor in a large industrial building in Framingham: the Bancroft Building on Fountain Street.

And then I was hired as the director of the Emerson Umbrella Center for the Arts in Concord. I was there for 11 years. I did much more management than development. We had a large old facility. I was involved with getting the facility in order and running the arts education program which I had never done before, which was pretty interesting.

WHLR: Were you still affiliated with the other artist developments: Fort Point, etc.



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Nesson: No. I went from Fort Point to Mass. Cultural Council to this Wellesley project to Concord.

So I was at Concord for 11 years. And in Concord, while I was at Emerson Umbrella, we took in another school in Carlisle – a small school building – the Highland School, which had been long disused by the town. But it was in the middle of a school complex in Carlisle, and they couldn't see a good use for it so we took it over.

WHLR: Is that still going?

Nesson: It's in limbo. It's empty as I understand it. And toward my 11th year at the Emerson Umbrella, I was approached by the Superintendent of Schools here in Maynard.

They were hoping to build a new middle school and wanted to know if I thought this building had any possible re-use as an artist building, in part because they couldn't think of anything else to do with the building.

And there was another building called the Roosevelt School - which was much closer to downtown Maynard than this building - that was closed and sitting dead in the water for 15, 20 years and it was a total eyesore. (It turns out a few years ago, they made it into the town library.) It was just awful, and town residents didn't want to see that happen to this building. So I looked at the building, did an evaluation. It was clear the place could work as artists' studios. We had a couple of open houses for artists to come and look at the space. And so I knew it could work. We lined up artists to fill the space. Actually, every project that I've ever done – including Brickbottom in Somerville, a huge space – every space was fully committed prior to signing a purchase and sales agreement or entering a lease because unlike for profit developers we couldn't carry an empty space.

Anyway, there was interest, so we had the artists. The school was delighted to have feasible re-use for this building. They went to Town Meeting, and I think they lost the vote to build a new school by a few votes. Then, I think, six months or nine months later they went back to Town Meeting, and it was approved. And the school moved everything out of [the Fowler Middle School] at the end of December 2000; and the next day we moved in and did some renovations.

We've been up and running for 11 years now. And we've been fully



occupied. We've never had a vacancy. Space is really exceptionally good – and exceptionally affordable. Our rents are about \$7.75 a square foot. And other art centers are more about \$12 to \$14 a square foot. So we have relatively little turnover, so we have about 82 artists that have studio spaces here. We have a gallery. Our gallery exhibits change every month or so. And every May we entertain proposals from solo or groups of artists for exhibits in

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the gallery. It's one of the best non-profit galleries in the area – and you don't have to be an ArtSpace artist to show your work in the gallery!

In addition to that, we have a small theater – a 70 seat theater in what was the old woodworking shop. It called the ACME theater that's based there. They've won all sorts of community theater awards. They're a Maynard-based group that had been around for years but never really had a home. So for the past 11 years [ArtSpace-Maynard] has been their home base. And they won Best Community Theater in Massachusetts, Best in New England, and have competed in the National. So they're really an extraordinary group.



WHLR: This comment may sound a little naïve, but why did you go non-profit with all of these artist studio spaces?

Nesson: It was a way that made it happen. If there was a developer's profit, or even a salary, included in the development cost, back when we started, it wouldn't have happened. Later some private developers have gotten involved, but

it's been less affordable.

WHLR: Steve mentioned to me that you are not an artist. Do you dabble in poetry, writing, or music, etc.?

Nesson: No. I'm an appreciator, a consumer of art. My wife is a former Ballet dancer with the American Ballet Theatre and the Joefrey Company. And both of my sons married artists, so I'm surrounded by artists. I was a Fine Arts minor in college, so I've always had an interest in it. But I keep telling myself that if someday I retire, it's something that I'd probably want to pursue. [And] I'm more of a reader than a writer.

One of the reasons that I love my job so much is that it's so diverse. On any given day, I could be talking about the art that's hanging in the gallery, dealing with plumbing problems (I've become a steam heat expert), dealing with a chipmunk in somebody's studio. So I have lots of interests, including music and art.

I love opera, really enjoy lots of different things. Unlike my wife who, when she was eight years old, knew that she wanted to be a dancer.

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That was her one pointed focus, her life. Until I was in my thirties, I thought there was something wrong with me because I had lots of interests and didn't have that one pointed focus.

WHLR: That's a wonderful trait to have. You can do a lot of different things, and you can go into a lot of different avenues.

Nesson: Yes, I could be a Jeopardy champion. I know a little about a lot!



WHLR: Is ArtSpace-Maynard strictly a non-residential facility?

Nesson: Correct.

WHLR: What do you like most about the art space in ArtSpace-Maynard? And does ArtSpace the corporation have other places?

Nesson: No.

WHLR: You should franchise!

Nesson: No, no. It's more than I can handle!

I enjoy working with artists. It's fun. In my career, as an early planner, I've worked with attorneys. I've worked with government officials. Often people say, "You work with artists. It must be really difficult." It's quite the contrary. They're not only creative people. But in many cases they're survivors. They're risk takers. They're small business people. And I couldn't imagine – like with Brickbottom, we had a 100 artists who are partners. And in 249A Street, it was 35 artists who are partners in this development effort – I couldn't imagine doing it with 35 attorneys, 35 aldermen! So I enjoy the artists, and I enjoy the diversity of little issues that come up every day.

WHLR: Now you've said what you like the most. What do you like the least about the job?

Nesson: Well, the snow! Truthfully, it's been a challenge to accept that this is an old building with a hundred year old heating system, and the pipes break every once in a while. People are rightfully freaked out when things like that happen. I wish it didn't happen, but it's part of what's going on. So it's been a challenge to stay calm and recognize that these issues come up. They're solvable. Other than that, I feel blessed to have a job like this.

WHLR: Where do you see ArtSpace-Maynard, Brickbottom, and Fort Point heading? Do you see them as stable and producing more artists?

Nesson: 249A Street and ArtSpace are clearly stable. Brickbottom had an interesting situation. It was set up as a limited equity co-op. And a

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couple of years after it was occupied (This was during the recession in the '80s), the lender who had financed the project as a co-operative was a little nervous, even though no one had defaulted. They offered the artists the opportunity to convert to condominiums. But [Brickbottom artists] would have to vote out the re-sale restrictions. But I wasn't involved in that by that time. But it was my understanding that they needed a 100% vote to allow [the condominiums] to happen. And it did. So Brickbottom has no restrictions. As a result, I believe there are fewer artists there than there were. But I can't speak to the work that's produced.

WHLR: Every year at their Open Studios, there are less and less studios. Last year, I [Steve] don't even think that they opened in Somerville. I went to the Open Studios next door, but there was nothing at Brickbottom. They didn't open. It's too bad.

Nesson: And stability is always a goal of artists. When I first started out at Fort Point, artists would come into an underdeveloped space, probably spend six months just setting it up, getting it organized before they could even work, and then rents would go up – or they were displaced. So artists had a tradition of being displaced and moving from one place to another. Affordability and stability have always been a priority for artists. And I can see even in this building the artists who are here more often tend to be more productive.

WHLR: Are there any artists here [at ArtSpace-Maynard] whom you would like to mention? We mean the heavy hitters whom you were talking about, such as the ones who are very productive, who are here all the time, who are professional at being artists.

Nesson: Kathleen Volp, Dorothea Cross. There's a guy named George Herman. George has an interesting background. He was an artist at a studio building in Belmont – The Kendall Center. And he lost all of his work in the fire. And Dave Sheppard of the ACME Theater. They've been here since day one. Dave's always here. He's a photographer, too. Eric Hansen.

WHLR: It's an election year. Do things [in the art space work world] depend on who gets elected?

Nesson: The approach that we took often didn't involve the public sector or the politicians. Almost, in every case, our funding was self-funding or through banks. The only interaction that we've had – the model that I pursued – was with this approach. The only interaction we had with the public sector was if it was a public building, and they were putting out a request for public proposals that we had to put in a proposal and then negotiate a lease with the town. Or if we needed zoning or building codes changes. But other than that we pretty much did not rely on public funding – none of



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these projects have public funding except in the cases of the projects I worked on for the Mass. Cultural Council, who paid my salary, so there were never any developer's fees or profits attached to these projects. It's really very much of a private sector approach to providing studio space for artists. And ArtSpace is self-supporting. We don't rely on public funding.



WHLR: What words of advice do you have for up and coming art studio space developers and artists?

Nesson: I remember years ago I got a call from a young woman who was at BU. I think she was getting a Master's degree in Arts Administration. And so she was asking me what I would suggest would be valuable courses for her.

WHLR: Plumbing!

Nesson: And it's not unique to me. A lot of arts administrators are dealing with such horrible things

as clogged toilets and a lot of hands on work.

WHLR: Do you have any funny stories you'd like to tell about ArtSpace-Maynard?

Nesson: Well, one of the issues on my agenda today is dealing with a chipmunk in somebody's studio, so it's come to that!

WHLR: How does your family like your business? You said that they're all involved with the arts.

Nesson: My wife is extremely supportive. I'm happy: she's happy. If I were a full-time plumber and that was what I enjoyed doing, she would be supportive. But she enjoys coming to the exhibits. My two daughter-in-laws are visual artists and art teachers, so we have lots to talk about!

WHLR: Are there any upcoming events that you would like to mention?

Nesson: One of our best events is our Open Studios. It takes place on September 29 – 30, 2012. All the studios are open. You meet all 82 artists, see their works in the context of their studios. It's free! And it's really wonderful and interesting. The quality of artwork that's produced here is really extraordinary given the fact that we don't make qualitative judgments about people's work.

WHLR: Have you watched anyone develop that has turned into a fantastic artist that you're so proud that you give them a space to develop in?

Nesson: I think that's true for a lot of the artists. I've worked with well over a thousand artists here in Massachusetts, and you can count on one hand the number of artists who support themselves on their artwork. In terms of success, financial success, I mean. But there are a lot

of artists whose work in this building I look at and I see evolve over the years that are just I'm really glad that you asked that question because I hardly ever stand back and reflect on things like this. And I hardly ever consciously think, "Boy, she's come a long way. Her work has grown." But that's the reality. And one of the nice things about Open Studios is it's almost like a time lapse because I don't often go into people's studios so I'll get to see somebody's work once a year every year and it seems to me almost everybody here has grown in my humble judgment. It's true. It's really true. There's a really interesting book called *The \$12 Million Dollar Stuffed Shark* (<http://us.macmillan.com/the12millionstuffedshark/DonThompson>):

The Curious Economics of Contemporary Art. It's a semi-best seller. It's all about the Fine Arts world. All about branding. And it's sad. And it really gives you some insight into how artists get recognized. It's often because they're shown in a particular gallery or because they have some connection. At that international New York level, very little of the value is based on the talent.

Have you heard of this gallery owner Saatchi in London? He's one of the biggest guys in the Fine Arts world. He commissions an artist in Australia to get a shark, catch a shark. They caught a shark. They stuffed a shark and mounted it or put it in this tank with embalming fluid. Saatchi gets this piece of art work shown in a semi-government prestige gallery in London because he was on the Board of Directors. And because it showed there and because it was in his gallery, he put a \$12 million dollar price tag on it. And the thing was disintegrating because it wasn't embalmed properly. And he had no trouble selling it!

And the book also gives an example of some artwork. I think it was Rauschenberg, an artist whose work was owned by Laurence Rockefeller. It was put up for sale at Christie's. And because it was owned by Rockefeller, [it sold at a high price]. If the same work were owned by me, it would have sold for much less. So it's all about the branding, not about the work.

WHLR: Thank you for the interview.

Nesson: You're welcome. This was fun. I hardly ever step back and look from this perspective, so I enjoyed it!

