

Adapting Public Buildings for Creative Uses

Mother Brook Arts & Community Center



Case Study from Dedham, MA

Prepared by Mass Cultural Council (2025)



Contents

Introduction3

Origin Story3

 Surplus School.....3

 Desirable & Feasible4

 Reuse Committee5

Planning6

 RFP & Creating a Nonprofit6

 Feasibility Study & Charette6

 Due Diligence6

 Artist Database7

 Initial Lease & Artist Demand7

Operations8

 Operating Budget8

 Renting to Artists.....9

 Insurance10

 Capital Fundraising & Projects11

 Economic Impact.....12

 Governance13

 Second Town Lease.....13

Recommendations14

Acknowledgements.....15

Since 2006, Mass Cultural Council has been committed to supporting the development of vibrant creative spaces through consultation services and Cultural Facilities Fund grants. Our hope is that this report provides guidance for other arts organizations and municipalities who may be considering a similar adaptive reuse of space within their communities.



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All images courtesy of MBACC.

Introduction

Dedham, Massachusetts is home to the Mother Brook Arts and Community Center (MBACC). The facility itself is a classic 1920s brick school building, formerly the Avery Elementary Public School in operation until 2012.

The school is situated above the Mother Brook Canal, the oldest hand-dug waterway in the United States, constructed in 1639 to create a hydropower source for nearby flour, textile, and woodworking mills. In 2011, construction on a new school began while a Select Board appointed committee formed to re-envision the future of the building.

This report explores the transformation of this former school into an arts center and is based on first-hand accounts of key figures in MBACC's origin and operations: Erin Becker, Executive Director; and Paul Reynolds, former Dedham Select Board Member.

Origin Story

Surplus School

The idea of repurposing the old Avery School as a creative space emerged when the town built a new



The Avery School in 1923. Photo: Dedham Historical Society

elementary school. Initially, conversations centered on tearing down the old building and embarking on new construction, however Karen O'Connell, Dedham's Economic Development Director, recognized the significant potential of the building and the East Dedham area becoming an arts district.

She championed the idea of reuse from an economic development perspective and began discussions to seek designation for an "arts overlay district."

Key Dates

- 2009: Arts Overlay District discussions begin
- 2011: Avery School Reuse Committee formed

Desirable & Feasible

Paul Reynolds, CEO of FableVision Studios and Executive Director of the Reynolds Center, was also a key figure in MBACC's origins and recalls O'Connell's perspective: "The holy grail is to find a use for the building that is both desirable and feasible and if you can check both of those off, then you know you have something that could be sustainable."

While various options like a new police station, senior center, town hall, or housing were considered, the arts center concept gained traction. Reynolds recounts keeping the arts center idea top of mind until other options were fully explored and dismissed. A pivotal moment occurred when Bob Miller, a Dedham resident who had experience with a similar arts center in the Town of Concord (The Umbrella Arts Center), affirmed the feasibility and desirability of a similar project a few towns away.



A visitor to MBACC's Open Studios

The arts overlay district concept, inspired by Somerville's Union Square, aimed to incentivize creative spaces, artist development, and subsequently attract more housing and activity to the neighborhood. This strategic reimagining of the neighborhood, spearheaded by the Mother Brook Community Group, provided a supportive atmosphere for this project.

Reuse Committee

The journey to establish MBACC involved a comprehensive public process. O’Connell convened the Avery Reuse Committee whose nine diverse members representing various town committees and boards. This committee, with Reynolds as the Select Board Liaison, embarked on a year-long community discernment process. This involved 11 public meetings, mostly held at the old Avery School, to gather community input and discuss potential uses for the building.



Mixed media artist Jess Byrd in her studio

Although an arts center was not a foregone conclusion, it garnered unanimous support from the Reuse Committee who then made a recommendation to the Select Board. The Select Board unanimously endorsed the proposal, sending it to town meeting for approval. This deliberative and transparent process ran concurrently with an arts overlay district strategy and spanned several years.

Reynolds highlights the importance of internal stakeholders: “Finding committed stakeholders in the community is key.” The town ultimately authorized the reuse of the former Avery School as an arts and community center.

Key Dates (2012)

- Reuse Committee Final Report
- Mass Cultural Feasibility Grant
- RFP Issued by Town
- 501(c)(3) Formed to Manage MBACC

Planning

RFP & Creating a Nonprofit

Once the arts center concept was approved, a core group of individuals, including Miller, formed a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization to serve as the managing entity for the Mother Brook Arts and Community Center.

Notably, there were no other bidders for the operation of the Avery School when an RFP was issued in June 2012.

“

It was a beloved neighborhood school but the building was no longer really fit for modern education. And we said, why tear it down? Why not reimagine it?

– Paul Reynolds former Dedham Select Board Member



Interior of the Avery School before becoming MBACC

Feasibility Study & Charette

The project secured a \$20,000 grant from Mass Cultural Council for a professional feasibility and market demand analysis for the new artist space. The grant dovetailed with the town’s plans to conduct a charette to explore creating arts overlay zoning for the entire neighborhood.

The Dedham Economic Development Department secured an additional \$20,000 to develop a comprehensive community development plan for East Dedham, featuring the creative economy as the catalyst for revitalization efforts. The Metropolitan Area Planning Council (MAPC), the regional planning agency, endorsed this approach and facilitated the charette in 2012.

Due Diligence

The 2012 planning grant from Mass Cultural Council enabled the new organization to:

- Review “existing conditions” documents
- Identify facility capital priorities
- Conduct code and zoning reviews

- Determine the number of studios and administrative support required
- Design a master plan with use assignments
- Create a website and marketing materials



Ceramics resident Martín Hanley sketches during Open Studios

Key Dates

2013

- MBACC Signs 5-Year Lease
- Town Warrant for Arts Overlay District
- Building opens to public
- All Studio Spaces Leased

2014

- Dedham Passes Arts Overlay Zoning District

2023

- New 30-Year Lease Signed

Artist Database

Another significant component was the development of an artist database. This was custom designed and refined for improved functionality over time. Utilizing the database, the new nonprofit sent emails announcing the process of leasing the available studio space that, in combination with social media promotion, attracted over 100 artists to the first open studio tour.

Initial Lease & Artist Demand

An initial five-year lease with the town was signed in January 2013. The process of identifying and attracting artist tenants began immediately after the lease was signed, with open houses hosted that March.

“More than 200 folks attended those,” said Becker. “Sixty-eight artists requested studio space. And by the end of 2013, all of the studio spaces that were available at that time were fully leased.”

This demonstrated strong demand, and MBACC continues to maintain a studio waitlist of approximately 40 artists.

The lease agreement with the town stipulated that MBACC pay a percentage of specific revenue buckets, primarily lease revenue. This structure, which does not include revenue from event space or performances, results in relatively low rent per square footage. This percentage-based rent model provided a supportive on-ramp for the organization, allowing it to grow to full capacity without the burden of high fixed rent costs during the initial phases.

“

We don't just rely on studio rents. We've learned how to diversify our revenue streams to ensure our sustainability.

– Erin Becker, MBACC Executive Director



Best-selling author/illustrator Jeff Kinney talking to kids and families in MBACC's event space

Operations

Mother Brook Arts and Community Center operates as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit. They officially opened the doors to the facility it leases from the Town of Dedham in 2013.

Operating Budget

MBACC's annual operating budget has ranged between \$500,000 and \$750,000. While significant portions of the budget for the first 10 years came from grants for major facilities upgrades; revenues from studio rentals, classes, and the ceramics program now cover staffing, utilities, and facilities maintenance costs. The budget has considerable room for growth with the onboarding of more community-focused programs.

Renting to Artists

The building is currently fully leased, and the ceramics program (including semi-private studios and memberships) is also filled and has a waiting list. There are approximately 35 individual artists using studio spaces, and another 40 in the ceramics program. Two shared studios house many artists: one is used by 26 artists and another 15.



Ceramics resident Knaide Rosenberg

“The ceramics program is an expansive ceramics ecosystem on the lower level,” said Becker, “catering to artists at different career stages.”

MBACC maximizes its 30,000 sq ft through:

- **17 individual studios**, ranging from intimate to larger collectives.
- **2 shared studios**, Full Tilt Print Studio and Ore Metals Studio.
- **A modern ceramics studio** with wheel-throwing, hand-building, and membership options.

Plus:

- **3,000 sq. ft. multi-use gallery/event space**, available for performances, classes, and rentals—hosting everything from pottery workshops to birthday parties and Porchfest.
- **Public park** located outside the building on the actual Mother Brook waterway.

Lease terms for individual artists are typically one-year leases, while the print and metal collectives have five-year leases. Artists are required to participate in biannual open studio events held in the spring and December.

“Community is in our name,” said Becker. “We want artists to participate actively in the community.”

While not strictly required for all public events, artists are encouraged to open their studios for public engagement.



MBACC with holiday lights

Insurance

Regarding insurance and liability, MBACC maintains an umbrella policy with stipulated amounts of \$1 million per occurrence and \$2 million aggregate, as per their lease with the town. For open studios and MBACC-hosted events, everyone in the building is covered by this policy. However, individual artists or collectives who teach public classes or conduct activities solely within their studios are required to have their own liability insurance. MBACC is exploring options for future leases, potentially requiring individual artists to carry affordable add-on policies or provide proof of coverage from their homeowner's insurance.

Capital Fundraising & Projects

The building, though unoccupied, still largely resembled an elementary school when MBACC took over the space in 2013.

“It was in a pretty raw state,” said Becker. The responsibility for capital needs, including major repairs like a broken boiler, fell to the 501(c)(3).

“I think it was within a year that the boiler broke,” Reynolds said, “and we were responsible for that.”

In 2014, Mass Cultural Facilities Fund provided a \$210,00 capital grant for the installation of a multi-zone HVAC system. This was a matching grant, and the town and community rose to the occasion to raise the funds.

Early fundraising efforts like the “Heat It Up” campaign engaged the community and demonstrated public support.



(Top to bottom): Summer 2024 author event with Peter Reynolds and Jeff Kinney; a vendor during Open Studios; a former classroom transformed into artist studio space

Subsequent Capital Projects:

- **2015** - Eversource grant (\$23,000) to replace common area and gallery lights; UPS grant (\$25,000) for acoustical upgrades to the performing space
- **2017** - Ceramics Studio opens with help from Blue Hills Bank Foundation (\$125,000)
- **2019** - Restroom renovation funded by Patronicity (\$180,000)
- **2025** - Roof repairs matching grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund (\$163,000)

Total capital investments to date: \$1.4 million



A banner advertising Open Studios

Economic Impact

MBACC plays a significant role in Dedham's broader cultural and economic development strategy.

Reynolds pointed to the economic impact of the number of visitors the arts center brings into Dedham, who then spend money at local establishments. "It makes Dedham more attractive to move to as well."

Becker agreed: “I think it has done the job. And I think it can continue to do the job in a bigger way.” In close proximity to Boston, MBACC also provides affordable space for artists who may be displaced from more expensive areas in the city.

Governance

The governance model for MBACC involves a nine-member board, all of whom are current or former Dedham residents. Interestingly, none of the current board members are artists; they are described by Becker as “concerned citizens who have been supportive since the very beginning.”

The organization is considering involving studio artists in the governance model, perhaps through an artist representative with a standing seat on the board. The board



A young visitor examines artwork

has been hands-on, assisting with operations like spreading mulch, mowing the lawn, and minor repairs.

“It’s really heartening to me,” said Becker.

The organization anticipates a shift towards a more strategic role for the board in the next two years. In addition to the main board, there is an advisory board and various committees (building, development and events, governance, and future membership) which are open to non-board members, allowing broader community involvement in decision-making.

Second Town Lease

The Town of Dedham decided to grant a 30-year lease to MBACC in 2023, which will run through the early 2040s. This extension from the initial 10-year lease indicates significant confidence in the center’s viability and positive impact on the community.



Original MBACC logo

Recommendations to Others Taking on this Work

- 1 Be prepared to demonstrate sustainability through a clear business plan.
- 2 Engage the key stakeholders within the community that can build support.
- 3 Communication, marketing, and active engagement with town and elected officials and other community organizations.
- 4 Embrace the “hard fun” and build resilience in the face of challenges.
- 5 Cultivate imagination in order to create something that doesn’t exist yet.



Ceramics residents Jessica Finch and Jo Soshnick

Additional Resources for Adapting Buildings

- Cultural Facilities Fund
- Guide for Developing Artist Space



Attendees at MBACC's ribbon cutting ceremony, June 2011

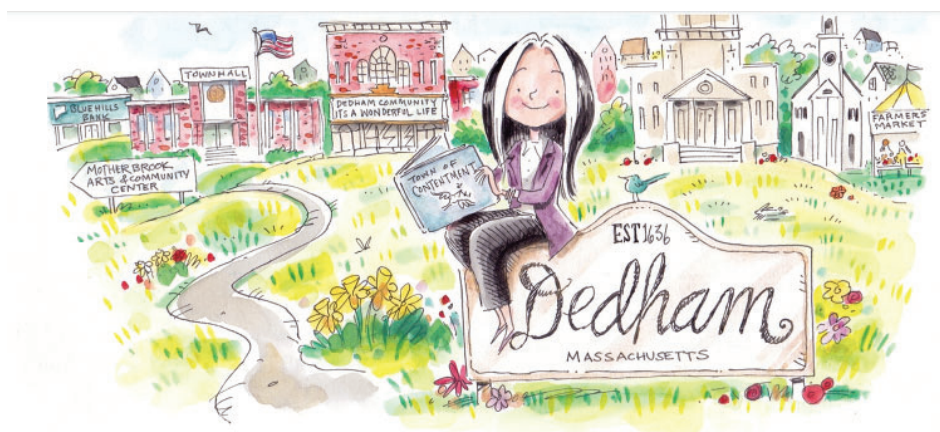
Acknowledgments

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Special thanks to:

- Karen O'Connell, former Economic Development Director, Dedham
- Miranda Cook, Program Officer, Mass Cultural Council



Karen O'Connell made her mark!

Peter H. Reynolds 2015

Original pen and ink by author/illustrator Peter H. Reynolds to memorialize Town of Dedham's Economic Development Director Karen O'Connell who understood the economic value of the arts, and who sadly passed away in 2015