

Adapting Public Buildings for Creative Uses

The 204 Cultural Arts Municipal Building



Case Study from Harwich, MA

Prepared by Mass Cultural Council (2025)



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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.



The 204 Cultural Arts Municipal Building
204 Sisson Rd.
Harwich, MA 02645
www.204sisson.com

All images courtesy of The 204.

Introduction

When schools consolidate or close, communities are often left with large, vacant buildings that can quickly become financial burdens and maintenance challenges. However, these same buildings can represent tremendous opportunities when approached with vision and strategic planning. The story of Harwich's journey from school closure to cultural center offers valuable insights for other municipalities facing similar circumstances.

The 204 Cultural Arts Municipal Building stands as a testament to thoughtful adaptive reuse.

Once a middle school, The 204 Cultural Arts Municipal Building has been re-imagined as a vibrant hub for artists and creative professionals. This summary examines how Harwich, Massachusetts successfully converted a surplus municipal building into a thriving cultural center that not only provides much-needed workspace for artists but also strengthens community bonds and contributes to the region's identity and economic growth.



Archival image of the school printed on an old postcard

Origin Story

Middle School Returned to Town

In 2011, the Town of Harwich was notified by the school system that the Harwich Middle School would be returning to municipal control as part of a regionalization effort. This advance notice gave town officials valuable time to begin contemplating the building's future. The following year the Select Board formally voted to accept the property as surplus, though the school remained operational until its closure in 2014.

Key Dates

1937: School Built

2011: Notice of Closure

2012-17: Assessment Period

2017: Reopened as Art Center

5-Year Assessment Period

The town entered a deliberative period of assessment and community consultation in 2014. Rather than rushing to a decision about the building's future, town officials recognized the importance of gathering input and evaluating options. This thoughtful approach would prove crucial to the project's ultimate success.



Exterior of the The 204's Campus

Decision Making Process

At the Annual Town Meeting in 2014, Article 61 (affordable housing consideration) was introduced to decide whether the town would maintain control of the property or pursue a sale or lease. The decision at that time was to postpone indefinitely, allowing for a more thorough consideration of options. In 2016, the town gauged community preferences more formally. At that year's annual town meeting, a non-binding ballot question was presented regarding repurpose options, including housing, a cultural center, or other municipal administrative uses. The ballot information included the fact that the building carried approximately \$125,000 in annual overhead expenses—a transparent acknowledgment of the financial implications of any decision.

Key Dates

2014

Town Meeting
Decision to Keep
Property

2016

Non-Binding
Ballot Question

- \$125,000
Annual
Overhead
Expense
Allocation
- Ballot Outcome
Arts/Culture
(Housing Not
Feasible)

Non-Binding Ballot Outcome

The outcome for the highest number of votes went to housing, reflecting Cape Cod's persistent housing challenges—however, this option was later disqualified due to significant property restrictions. The shared septic system with the adjacent elementary school presented a major obstacle, as did the close proximity to the school, which raised concerns about residential use. The town decided to pursue the direction with the second highest votes and establish a mixed-use municipal building with culture and art components.

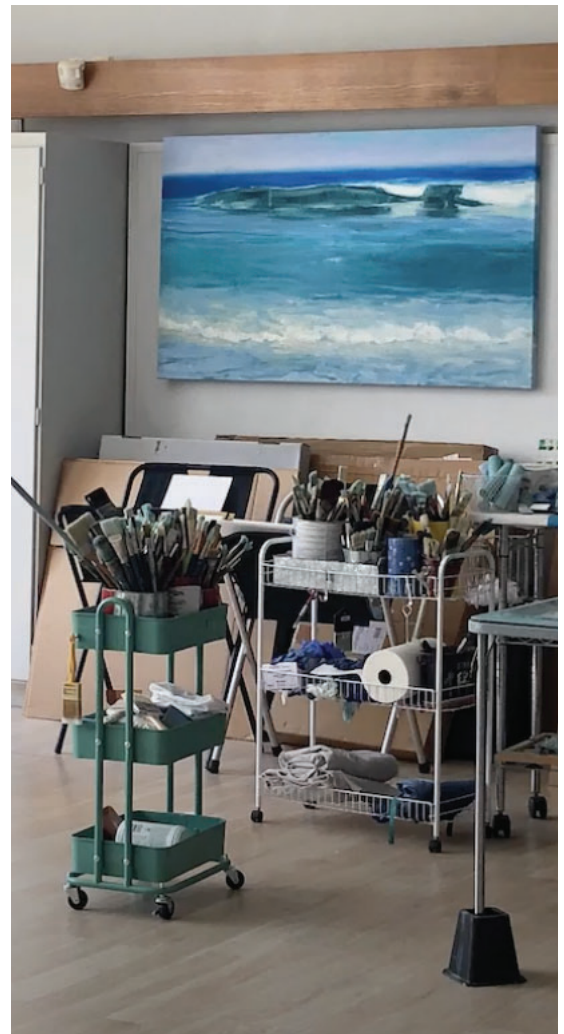
Planning

Baseline Building Conditions

A building condition assessment conducted by the school in 2011 provided valuable baseline information about the facility's condition and needs. A renovation done in 1990 included asbestos abatement, removing a potential obstacle that frequently complicates school building conversions. Responsibility for identifying code compliance requirements fell to a team including the facility manager for the town, fire inspector, and building commissioner. These officials established principles and practices under various codes and compliance efforts, ensuring that the re-purposing would meet all necessary regulations.

The construction and renovation approach has been characterized by pragmatic prioritization rather than comprehensive redevelopment. Projects are evaluated based on “greatest need with highest risk, versus the lowest needs with lowest risk,” focusing on must-have improvements rather than “nice-to-have” enhancements. This evaluation process involved collaboration between the Department of Cultural Affairs and the facilities manager to determine the best approach for implementing necessary projects.

Between 2014 and 2017, the town allocated \$125,000 to cover operating costs, but they also made some capital investments and raised grant money to get the building physically ready for the artists to move in.



Detail of an artist's studio at The 204

Key Dates

1990: Asbestos Abatement

2011: Conditions Assessed

2017: Revolving Account Est.

2022: Dept. of Cultural Affairs Est.

Market Analysis

The decision to focus on artistic and cultural reuse was influenced by several factors beyond the property restrictions that limited the housing option. Cape Cod's emphasis on arts and culture created a natural alignment, and there was a significant regional need for artist studio spaces. A marketing analysis conducted in 2021 compared the studio offerings in the region. This not only looked at square footage of studio spaces, fee structures, amenities, and demand, but also analyzed which towns and facilities were seeing the highest request levels.

Key Dates

2018

Cultural Compact with State

2018-2022

Cultural Economic Development Planning

2021

Market Demand Business Plan Analysis

2022

Cultural Districts Designation



Performance by Appalachia to China at The 204

Cultural Development Planning

Town officials had begun working in 2018 with Mass Cultural Council to pilot a "Cultural Compact" program, creating a framework for partnerships between local governments and cultural leaders, that eventually led to Cultural District designation for both Harwich Port and Harwich Center in 2022. The combination of community support, regional need, and strategic municipal goals made the cultural center concept increasingly compelling and realistic. The facility would play a significant role in Harwich's broader cultural and economic development strategy. Today it serves as a bridge between the town's two cultural districts and functions as the main focus for all town-managed cultural programs and events.



Artwork for Harwich Cultural Districts' signs

Operations

RFPs - Licenses - Rental Agreements

The town's approach to tenant selection evolved over time. Initially, under the direction of the town administrator, annual lease agreements were used. By 2024, a more formal request for proposals (RFP) process was introduced for license agreements for use of the artist studios.

The current RFP model focuses on identifying artists who will contribute to the facility's broader mission. Under the direction of the Department of Cultural Affairs, the town seeks participants who will aid in program development, community-focused activities, and generating foot traffic for the facility. Active involvement is considered a crucial criterion in evaluating potential artist tenants.



Detail of an artist's studio at The 204

These criteria helped ensure that the facility would serve its intended purpose of supporting the local creative community while fostering active engagement.

The rental rates are structured based on square footage, with an additional charge of \$50 applied if water is available in the room. This straightforward approach provides transparency for tenants while acknowledging the additional utility costs associated with water access.

Tenants are required to maintain insurance coverage with a \$1M/\$2M general aggregate policy, ensuring appropriate risk management.

Three-year terms for rental studios are established per the licensing agreement, and commercial general liability insurance in the amount of \$1M is required for each studio.

Configuration of Spaces

Today, The 204 Cultural Arts Municipal Building has 36 artist studios, which maintain an impressive 98% occupancy rate—a clear indicator of both the facility's appeal and the regional demand for such spaces. These studios are complemented by three shared artist studios designed for collaborative use, and a dedicated maker studio operated by a nonprofit organization.

Beyond the working spaces, the facility offers significant community resources. The 239-seat auditorium provides a venue for performances and presentations, while a multipurpose room equipped with a kitchen enables classes, workshops, and culinary arts programs.

The former library has been repurposed as a multipurpose room that serves as an art gallery, and a Creative Suite offers common shared space for small groups, programs, and meetings. Even the hallways have been activated as gallery space, maximizing the building's potential for displaying and celebrating creative work.



Screenshot from an Instagram post marking The 204's ribbon-cutting



36 ARTIST STUDIOS



239 SEAT AUDITORIUM

Shared Spaces

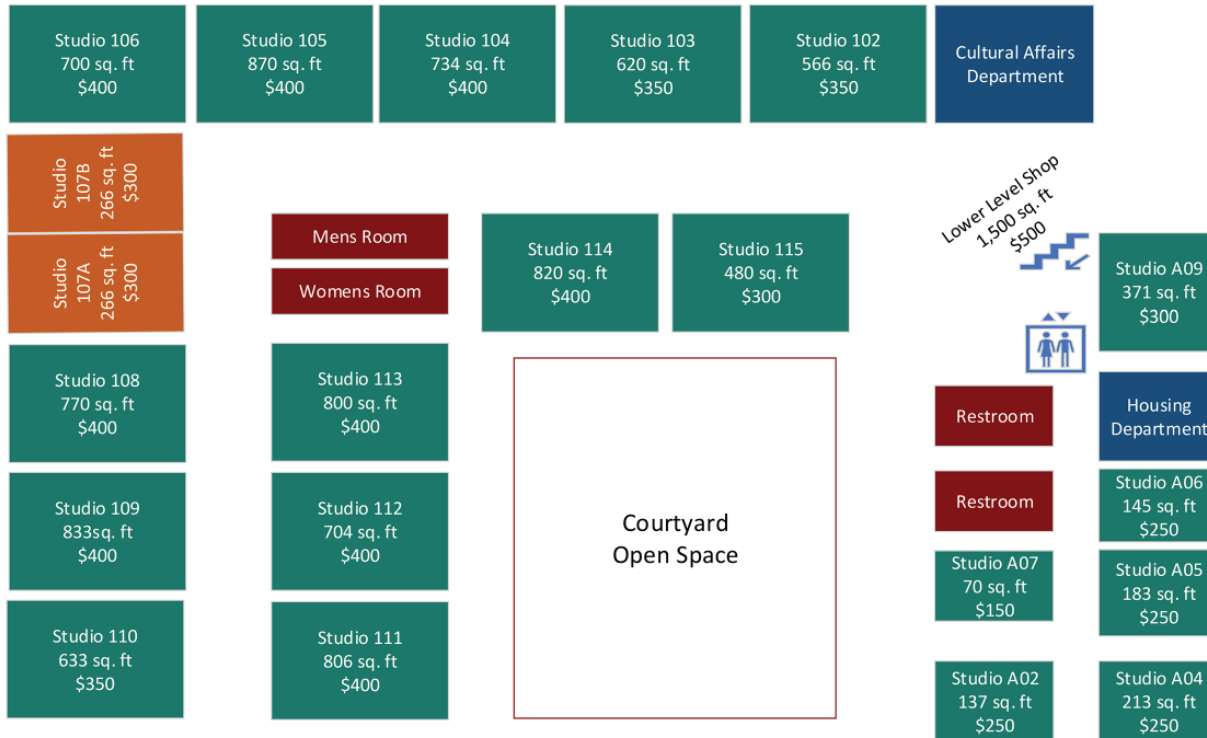
- Artist Studios
- Maker Space
- Kitchen
- Galleries
- Gymnasium
- Courtyard

The 204 Cultural Arts Center Floorplans



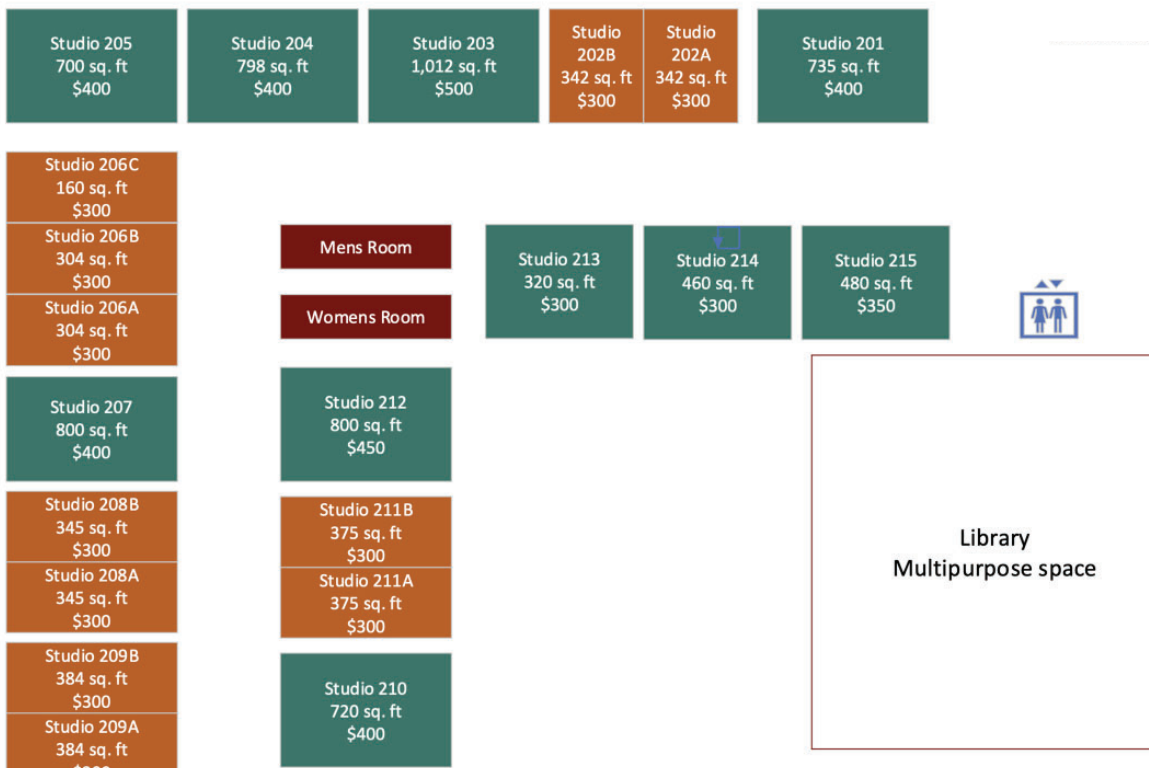
First Floor Directory

- Municipal Office
- Shared Studio
- Single Studio
- Amenity



Second Floor Directory

- Municipal Office
- Shared Studio
- Single Studio
- Amenity



Operating Budget

In 2017, a budget request of \$145,000 was made to manage facilities maintenance and utilities. Rather than establishing a separate operating budget, the town created a revolving account where utilities and maintenance are paid from rental revenues. This self-sustaining approach has proven effective, with annual expenses estimated at \$145,000 and annual revenues estimated at \$165,000, creating a modest but important positive margin.



The 204 Library

“

Artists have to be good citizens and team players in the building's programs.

– Kara Mewhinney, Harwich's Cultural Affairs Director

Staffing

The Department of Cultural Affairs was eventually established by the town as a separate line item under the operational budget with an annual budget of \$92,000. This dual financial structure—with the facility itself operating through a revolving account and the programming and administrative function supported through the municipal budget—has created a sustainable framework that balances fiscal responsibility with necessary support for the cultural mission.

Oversight

Yearly reports are presented to the Select Board, who oversee the facility. Through the board chair, questions are answered as to the program involvement and active use of the building. The Select Board in turn looks at the revenues and determines if the model is still working for the town.

Management & Operations

The management structure has evolved to support the operations. The establishment of a full-time Director of Cultural Affairs position in 2022, supported by a part-time program aide, created dedicated professional stewardship for the facility. This departmental structure provides the necessary administrative capacity to manage the diverse activities and relationships that make the center function effectively.

The facility operates on an “as is” basis, with the understanding that certain artistic disciplines—such as wood turning or ceramics—cannot be accommodated due to the lack of specialized systems to support the machinery and type of work involved. This practical limitation acknowledges that accommodating all artistic disciplines would require significant investments in ventilation, power capacity, fire protection, and alarm systems that are beyond the current scope of the project.

The facility’s operations are integrated with other municipal functions. The Recreation Department utilizes the gymnasium for their programs, the Police Department runs a seasonal indoor futsal league in the same space, and all municipal departments have access to the facility for meetings, programs, and workshops. There is also a municipal agreement between the town and the school for field use behind the facility. This multi-departmental utilization maximizes the building’s value to the broader community while distributing the benefits across municipal services.



Images taken from The 204’s social media promoting events like open mics, community flea markets, and found object art classes.

The 204 Artist Directory - 1st Floor

THE 204

Cultural Arts Municipal Building

ARTIST DIRECTORY

CREATIVE SUITE

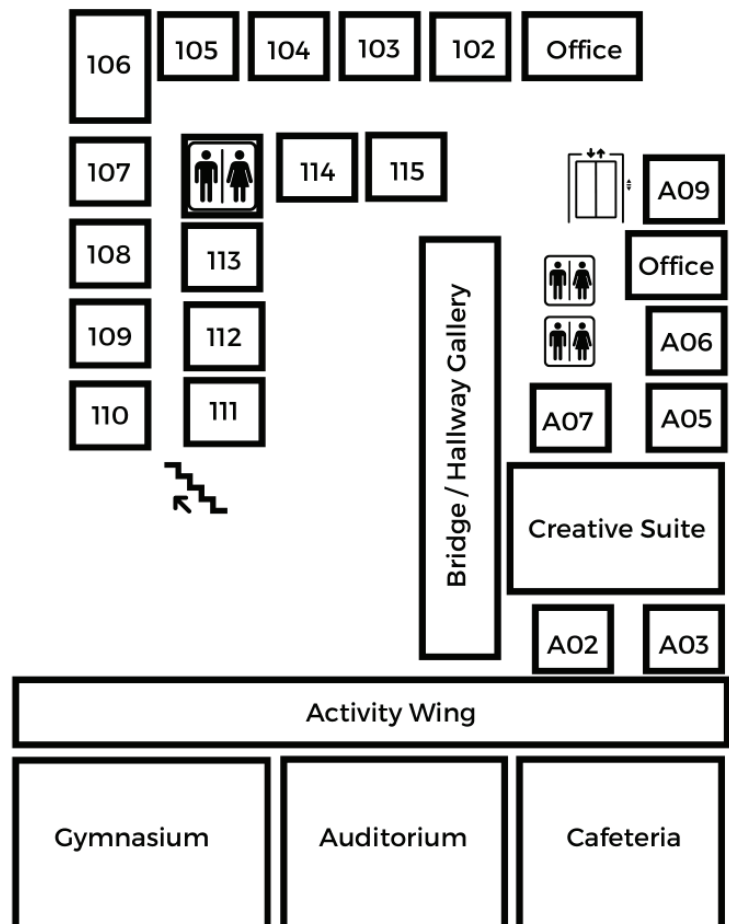
★ ★ John Bonanni	A02
★ ★ Cape Cod Poetry Review	
★ ★ Tim Johnson	A04
★ ★ Short Tales	
★ ★ Storytelling for Children, Sculpture,	
★ ★ Painter, Puppeteer	
David Cravenho	A05
Artist	
★ ★ Jon Latulipe	A06
★ ★ Candle Maker, Photography, Jewelry	
★ ★ Natalie Stafford	A07
★ ★ Oil & Watercolor Artist	
Mitzi Bramble	A09

FIRST FLOOR

Nick Nickerson	111
Chatham Coastal Creations	
★ ★ Heather Pilchard	112
★ ★ Painter, Book Binding	
Whitney Heavey	113
Painter	
★ ★ Heather MacKenzie	114
★ ★ Picture Poet	
★ ★ Fine Art Photographer, Artist	
★ ★ Deborah Fowler Greenwood	115
★ ★ Painter	

FIRST FLOOR

Highpoint Vintage	102
Vintage Textiles & Ephemera	
★ ★ Erika Nickerson	103
★ ★ Beach Cottage Living	
Carolyn Dunford	104
Fine Artist, Painter	
★ ★ Sharon DiGennaro	105
★ ★ Wildflower Studio	
★ ★ Mixed Media Artist	
Georgene Riedl	106
Abstract Artist	
Joanne Patukonis	107
Abstract Artist, Mixed Media	
Dona J. Spillane	108
Visual Artist	
Nina Gagarin	109
Fine Art, Custom Murals	
★ ★ Jane Bessette	110
★ ★ Stichology-Sewing School for Kids	
★ ★ Cape Cod Makers	
★ ★ Makerspace-DIY Culture	



The 204 Artist Directory - 2nd Floor

THE 204

SECOND FLOOR

Anne Flash Visual Artist	201	Cindy Ennes Fine Artist	209
Anne Morse Visual Artist	202	Kim Gagne Fine Artist	
CJ Conrad Visual Artist		Stephane Ruault Via Vitro Sacred Arts	210
★ ★ Nettie B. Berkeley Nettie B. By the Sea Mixed Media	203	★ ★ Adele Scott Designs Quilting	211
Roe Osborn Sculpture, Photography, Visual Artist	204	★ ★ Rug Braiding School Fiber Arts	
★ ★ Bernadette Waystack Original Paintings, Woodblock Prints Visual Artist	205	Taylor Fox Painter of Pictures	212
★ ★ Alla Zbinovsky Artist, Potter, Iconographer	206	Ellen Davies Abstract Artist	213
Patricia Thomas Artist		Gail Hickey Funky Fanciful Furniture Artist & Craftsman	214
★ ★ Mary Jane Xenakis Fine Art, Quilling, Gelli Plate Printing Basketry	207	Martha Little Fuentes Portrait, Landscape, Still Life	215
Jodi French Visual Artist	208		
Holly Delaney Visual Artist			

FACILITY INFORMATION

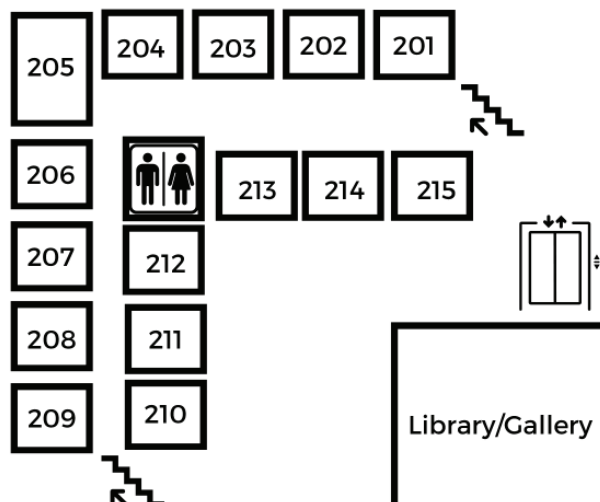
Kara Mewhinney
Director of Cultural Affairs
Office: 508-301-1913
Cell: 774-212-3482
Email: kmewhinney@harwich-ma.gov

Mary Pat Maloney
Program Aide-Cultural Affairs
Office: 508-552-2737
Email: mary.maloney@harwich-ma.gov

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Office Hours
Monday - Friday
9:00am-3:00pm
Or by appointment
204 Sisson Road, Harwich MA

★ ★ **Offers Workshops and Classes**
Artists make their own hours. You can schedule an appointment with them to view their studio or join us at one of our scheduled open houses.



Recommendations to Others Taking on this Work

- 1 Gather community support and guidance by listening. Hold community information meetings or strategic planning sessions.
- 2 Be clear and decisive with the plan and intent for utilizing the property.
- 3 Get Select Board and Administration support with initiatives and plans.
- 4 Create and implement a brand.
- 5 Maintain forward thinking movement.



Performance by Maureen Hancock at The 204

Additional Resources for Adapting Buildings

- Cultural Facilities Fund
- Guide for Developing Artist Space



Exterior of The 204

Acknowledgments

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