

Adapting Public Buildings for Creative Uses

Cogswell ArtSpace



Case Study from Haverhill, MA

Prepared by Mass Cultural Council (2026)



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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.



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All images courtesy of Creative Haverhill.

Introduction

The George S. Cogswell School, built in 1891, served the Haverhill community for over a century before being closed in 2004 due to accessibility issues and the city's inability to fund the necessary upgrades. For nearly a decade, the 19,700 square-foot building sat vacant and unheated, used primarily for storage.

Creative Haverhill, a nonprofit dedicated to fostering artistic expression in Haverhill, saw an opportunity to provide a permanent home for their organization and address a significant need in the community.

Haverhill, an affordable city for artists to live in, had lost its cultural anchor when Bradford College closed in 2000. Many local artists were living in Haverhill but selling their work and teaching in other cities. The vision for Cogswell ArtSpace was to fill this gap and create a community hub for artists and residents.



Cogswell School student, staff, and building, c. 1910. Photo: Haverhill Public Library.

Origin Story

From Vacant School to Bold Dream

The journey to Cogswell ArtSpace began with a big idea and a vacant building. The two-story building had four large classrooms on each floor, with an office on the first floor and two on the second. The basement housed a cafeteria, bathrooms, storage, and a teachers' lounge.

Key Dates

- 1891: The George S. Cogswell School opens
- 2004: The City of Haverhill closes school, declares it surplus

After 10 years of sitting vacant, the city issued a public Request for Proposals (RFP) for the building in 2014. The first RFP received little interest and bids that were too low. A second RFP was issued, and Creative Haverhill submitted a bid. Despite a competing residential proposal Creative Haverhill's vision, backed by early technical assistance funding and community support, was accepted for \$175,000 in 2015. The City awarded the organization a 3-year option to purchase the historic Cogswell School.

Danielle Smida, Chairperson of Creative Haverhill and one of the project's founders, recalled that it started by simply driving by the school. "There was something about it having been a community asset and then being closed. Trying to find a way to reopen it as a creative community asset seemed very powerful."



Kids painting outside of Cogswell ArtSpace.

The initial municipal perspective was one of skepticism, with the Mayor at the time saying, "We tried that once at a different space. It didn't happen, so good luck." But the team was motivated by a clear community need.

“A lot of artists came to Haverhill to go to an arts college, then stayed here because it’s affordable. Artists were living here, but they were showing and selling their work in other cities and teaching too, so it felt like a really big gap,” said Erin Padilla, Director of Creative Haverhill.

Finding a building that no one else wanted would enable the organization to both secure a long-term home for operations and restore a space for the arts community in Haverhill.



*Local artist Helen Duncan installs *Begin Again*, a public art installation on the front lawn.*

Early Planning & the Value of Foresight

Creative Haverhill applied for and received a \$9,000 technical support grant from the Massachusetts Cultural Facilities Fund in 2014 to conduct a professional building assessment.

The assessment provided them with critical information about the building’s condition and preliminary cost estimates, before responding to the RFP. This foresight, Smida noted, came from personal experience: “I learned what not to do going through a similar process in my professional career where we acquired a building before doing a conditions assessment.” She also brings a finance background to the team, a perspective that Padilla described as a “key asset because my background is exclusively centered in the arts world, you don’t often times have the finance person at the table when you’re coming up with ideas.”

Key Dates

- 2011: The Greater Haverhill Community Arts & Education Foundation receives a Mass Cultural Adams Grant, begins operating as Creative Haverhill

Early community organizing work, and the resulting knowledge of the building's condition gave them a significant advantage. The project gained early momentum from a few key sources:

- **Community Engagement:** Project leaders went door-to-door, speaking with residents gathering petition signatures, which garnered strong public support for the proposal.
- **Architectural/Preservation Perspective:** They engaged a local architect who had been pivotal in historic preservation in downtown Haverhill and was well known with city officials. This professional expertise in developing the conditions assessment was key.
- **State Earmark:** In 2016, the project received its first state earmark of \$80,000, thanks to the support of Senator Kathleen O'Connor Ives.



Sculpture No. 463 by Tim Chouinard.

Planning

The planning phase was a multi-year effort that balanced the need for robust fundraising with the realities of an aging, vacant building.

Securing the Building

To mitigate risk and ensure they could raise the necessary funds, Creative Haverhill negotiated a 3-year lease-to-purchase agreement with the City of Haverhill in 2015 after winning the RFP. There was no lease payment other than insurance and maintenance costs as they tracked toward closing.

The initial purchase price was \$160,000 for the facility with a \$5,000 ticking fee each year that the project didn't close.

This arrangement was critical as it gave them time to work towards their fundraising goals before taking on full ownership while serving as an incentive to keep moving forward.

The organization took over responsibility for the building, including insurance, which was an enormous expense as vacant buildings cost more to insure. There were no zoning amendments needed since the envisioned use was similar to the current underlying zoning. Creative Haverhill would officially acquire the building in 2019.

The Funding Puzzle

In 2016 Creative Haverhill launched a capital campaign, seeded by foundation grants and the organization's first state budget appropriation. A Commonwealth Places Grant, a matching crowd source funding tool administered by Mass Development, also catalyzed the public campaign and secured funds.

The project's initial financing strategy included heavy reliance on historic tax credits—both Massachusetts Historic Tax Credits (\$410,000 to date) and National Park Service Historic Tax Credits. However, a major and persistent challenge has been monetizing these credits.

“It's very challenging for a nonprofit with a project of this size to get an entity to monetize or buy the tax credits,” said Padilla.

The inability to find a partner to purchase the credits meant their initial plan to complete the renovation in a single 18-month period had to be abandoned.

“

Artists were living here, but they were showing and selling their work in other cities and teaching too, so it felt like a really big gap.”

– Erin Padilla, Director of Creative Haverhill

Key Dates

- 2014: Mass Cultural Facilities Fund grant received for a feasibility study
- 2015: City awards Creative Haverhill with a 3-year option to purchase the school



Crash Course in Building Systems

Taking control of the building came with immediate and costly lessons.

A major incident occurred in 2017 when a pipe in the dry fire suppression system burst during a cold Haverhill winter.

“A dry system isn’t ever completely dry. There’s always a little bit of water in it,” said Smida. The burst resulted in firefighters pushing down water through the steps, where it froze.

This crash course in building systems led to the purchase and installation of a new, automated system to prevent similar future issues.



Creative Haverhill was also tasked with removing an 8,000-gallon underground oil tank and performing a full environmental abatement for asbestos and mold.

The City of Haverhill was unable to help with these costs, given they were already being fiscally stretched to meet their obligations. Building insurance would help pay for the expense.

Pivot to Phased Construction

The rising costs and funding shifts due to the COVID-19 pandemic forced a strategic pivot. The team decided to move from a one-shot renovation to a phased approach. This decision, while not ideal from a cost-efficiency standpoint, was a necessity.

Top: Phased renovations starting in the basement with the underground plumbing.

Bottom: ADA code upgrades beginning with the stairway railings, thanks to local artist, wood worker, and boat builder, Josh Mingels.

“We started to see a little bit of donor fatigue where they wanted to see investment in the building,” Smida said.

Support from elected officials has been consistent which has helped in every phase of the project. The team would upgrade all major systems in phases, with a focus on fixing the building from the bottom up. To date, work has included:

- **Systems Upgrades:** Upgrading of all major systems, including underground plumbing, electrical service (from 200 to 1,600 amps), and the HVAC system.
- **Accessibility:** The project has begun addressing ADA compliance, including a new elevator pit and new handrails for all stairways.
- **Roof Restoration:** The historic slate roof was restored with a grant from the City of Haverhill, stopping water from entering the building.

Partnering with the Community

Creative Haverhill has leaned heavily on community partnerships to stretch its resources. They engaged local groups like Whittier Vocational Technical High School and the Sheriff's Department to assist with demolition and other non-specialized tasks, further embedding the project in the community.

“We’re scrappy,” Smida said. “This community support has been consistent throughout the whole project.”

Finding the right professional partners has been another key lesson. The team has worked with the same construction firm, Berkeley Builders, from the start.

“They’ve known about the project for so long and have been willing to provide estimates for years before we even got to the stage where we were actually getting to work with them,” said Padilla.

On the other hand, major lessons were learned when early architectural and engineering work had to be redone. “We put a lot of trust in people that just didn’t quite align with the full vision,” she said.



Public art installation, Second Nature: Portraits of Resilience Jessica Furtado. Funded by the Haverhill Cultural Council.

Operations

The organization's goal is to create a sustainable operational model that is not solely reliant on contributed income.



Community Open House event in 2019.

A Hybrid Revenue Model

The future Cogswell ArtSpace will feature a mix of earned and un-earned revenue streams to support its operations. Earned income will come from a variety of sources.

“Half of the upstairs will be individual artist studio spaces, which will be rental spaces,” Padilla said.

This will provide an initial, stable revenue stream. The basement will house a community makerspace for ceramics, printmaking, and wood-working. Access to this space will

likely be membership-based, providing a stable source of recurring revenue. The gallery and multi-use programming rooms will also be available for event rentals.

Additional unearned income will continue to come from grants, sponsorships, and donations, with the long-term goal of increasing earned income to reduce reliance on fundraising.

Key Dates: 2016

- Capital campaign is launched
- Project receives its 1st state budget appropriation
- Phase One Environmental Study & Full Environmental Abatement completed

Padilla said the goal is for this diversified revenue stream to create a sustainable operational structure that will become a resource for artists and the community for years to come.

Financial Discipline

The team has been disciplined about not taking on significant debt until the very end of the project.

“The last thing we want to do is renovate the space and then not be able to operate because we can’t service our debt,” Smida said.

They’ve also been focused on building a financial reserve. At this time there is \$155,000 in operating reserves, and the business model includes a building reserve to ensure they can maintain the building’s assets in the future. “15 years, 30 years will be here before you know it,” she said.

Testing the Model

While the main building is being renovated, Creative Haverhill has opened a small downtown gallery and programming space to test their programming model and build community demand.

We’re basically calling it our baby Cogswell,” said Padilla. This space is allowing them to “prove our model a bit, prove the demand a bit, and try out some of the programs that we want to bring to the community thanks to an Essex County Community Foundation Partnership grant.”

Programming at Cogswell ArtSpace will include a mix of paid and free offerings to balance revenue generation with equitable access for underserved populations. Paid opportunities, such as specialized workshops,



Community poetry and art gathering funded by the Haverhill Cultural Council.

workforce development classes, and arts education programs, will supplement free events like youth art activities, festivals, and exhibitions.



Project Status - April 2026

With the first phase of upgrades complete, Cogswell ArtSpace is focusing on advancing key infrastructure improvements, including ADA compliance upgrades, plumbing and bathroom renovations, and an upgraded sprinkler system.

They were awarded another Cultural Facilities Fund grant that covered half of the cost for the elevator, and now they are actively fundraising to secure the remaining match needed for installation.

They have also installed two long-term sculptures on the front lawn by Dale Rogers and Tim Chouinard, and are developing plans to enhance the landscaping to create a more functional and welcoming outdoor space.



With demand continuing to exceed capacity at the 495-square-foot downtown incubator space—and now that heating and electrical upgrades are complete—they are exploring creative solutions for a phased opening of the first floor, pending city approval.

The need for this space remains incredibly strong within the community, and they are confident of the meaningful impact it will have once fully realized.

Top: Swedish painting workshop hosted at Creative Haverhill @ 43 Washington St.

Bottom: Exterior of Creative Haverhill @ 43 Washington St.

Recommendations to Others Taking on this Work

Based on Creative Haverhill's experience, here are some key lessons for others considering a similar adaptive reuse project.

- 1** Be patient and flexible with project timelines and the testing of your vision. Projects of this scale take significantly more time than you anticipate.
- 2** Vet your partners to ensure your architectural, engineering, and construction teams fully understand and are aligned with your vision, particularly the unique needs of a nonprofit and a flexible community space.
- 3** Diversify funding sources, include crowd sourcing, and advocate for state and local appropriations. Also, be aware of the challenges of monetizing historic tax credits, especially for smaller projects.
- 4** Include operating and capital reserves as part of your capital campaign.
- 5** Involve the community, such as vocational schools and civic groups. You may be surprised what they are willing to contribute.

Additional Resources for Adapting Buildings

- Cultural Facilities Fund
- Guide for Developing Artist Space



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