THE ARMORY &

Our Arts Ecosystem

City of Somerville
Mayor Katjana J. Ballantyne

Office of Strategic Planning
and Community Development
& Somerville Arts Council

JANUARY 24
WAREHOUSE XI
11 SANBORN CT
INTERACTIVE:

How familiar are you with the Armory?

- How long has the Armory been used for the arts?
- Can you name all six current tenants?
- What is the capacity of the performance hall?
- Can you name at least one celebrity who has utilized the Armory?

Turn to the folks next to you. We’ll regroup in 3 minutes.
GOALS OF THIS MEETING SERIES

• How does the Armory function 50 years from now?

• How does the Armory reflect the needs of the Community?

• Are we on the right track?

MEETINGS IN THE SERIES

Our Arts Ecosystem
January 24 | 6 pm
Warehouse XI
11 Sanborn Ct, Somerville MA

Our Community Spaces
February 27 | 6 pm
Connexion
149 Broadway, Somerville MA

The Armory: Existing
March 26 | 6 pm
Somerville High School
81 Highland Ave, Somerville MA

The Armory: Future
April 23 | 6 pm
Community Baptist Church
31 College Ave, Somerville MA
GOALS FOR TONIGHT

The Armory and its Role in the Art Community

• Review the Armory Master Plan process.

• Discuss the Somerville’s arts ecosystem and the Armory’s place in it.

• Discuss our draft vision of the Armory as a “Live Arts Center” and its origins.
Armory Master Plan
Why?

The City of Somerville acquired the Somerville Armory by eminent domain in June 2021 in order to preserve its use as an artistic center and public asset.

The Armory Master Plan, through community input and research, will guide the City for successful governance of the Armory as a public art center emphasizing public access and serving community need.
Draft Vision for Success

The City’s planning team used research and stakeholder feedback to build a **Vision for the Armory**, where it serves as a successful public asset by serving as an arts center where:

- The Armory is an affordable, stable, supportive home for artists to focus on work.
- The Armory is a welcoming, inspiring place where visitors enjoy diverse programming.
- The Armory is accessible with transparent and equitable governance where neighbors are appreciated and engaged.
Work to Date

**RESEARCH**

Research conducted includes an environmental scan of 46 local arts organizations and 6 in-depth case studies on national organizations.

**STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

Interviews were one-on-one conversations conducted with stakeholders with a wide array of backgrounds and affiliations with the Armory building.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups were small group meetings with participants of similar affiliations. These groups included various artists, tenants, residents, and building neighbors.

**OPERATIONAL MODEL MEETINGS**

Three meetings, two in-person and one online in which operational models of the Armory were presented to the public.
Work to Date

- **Environmental Scan**
- **Case Studies**
- **Vision of Success**
- **Governance & Operating Models**
- **Tenants Meetings**
- **Stakeholder Interviews**
- **Tenant Meetings**
- **Focus Groups**
- **Operating Model Meetings**
The City’s planning team reviewed feedback from this summer’s community meetings and developed four additional meetings, starting tonight, to help make the Armory Master Plan reflective of Somerville’s residents and its creative communities.

Join us for all of meetings, each discussing various topics of the Armory.

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THE ARMORY &

Our Arts Ecosystem
The Boston region has lost several creative workspaces and cultural venues over the last decade. Other cultural spaces are under threat today. There is a critical shortage of entertainment venues and rehearsal spaces, limiting opportunities for performance artists.
Within Somerville

Somerville Open Studios 2023 map featuring hundreds of visual artists showcasing their work

Map: Somerville Open Studios

- Somerville is a densely populated community and is home to many artists and creative workers within the Boston region.

- There are a high concentration of artist studios in old industrial buildings with a main focus on visual art spaces.
The Armory offers nearly 22,000 sf of usable space, including:

- A flexible workspace and two apartments on the third floor.
- Multi-functional spaces on the second floor.
- A 395-person performance hall, café and spaces on the first floor.
- A recording facility and spaces in the basement.
- Publicly owned building so it can maintain affordability.
- 44 space parking lot

*Corrected: Originally incorrectly stated, the capacity of the performance hall as 495.*
Past Uses

The Armory began its role as an **center for art** in 2008 after the purchase and renovation of the building from the State by the Sater Family.

**ARTS ORGANIZATIONS THAT HAVE CALLED THE ARMORY HOME**

- Červená Barva Press
- Center for Arabic Culture
- Yesterday Service Sheet Music
- Hi-N-Dry
- Mark Sandman Project
- Armory Sound
- Actors’ Shakespeare Project

Červená Barva Press

Actors’ Shakespeare Project
Current Uses

3
2
1
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Somerville Arts Council
SomArt Rehearsal Space
Residential Tenant

Somerville Arts Council
SomArt BIPOC Space
Warming Center (Jan-Mar 2024)

Center for Arts at the Armory
Rooted Cafe
Performance Hall
Acoustic Strings of New England

Dead Moon Audio
Audio Tech Services
Center for Arts at the Armory
Lavender Room
Out of the Blue Community Arts*
John Lavoie Training

*Out of the Blue Community Arts manages the artwork in all of the common spaces.
Discussion
DISCUSS

How is the Armory unique as both a physical asset and a multi-use operation?

(Think of this question in relationship to our arts ecosystem)
• It is large, and it can be a flexible space which allows it to capture a variety of community needs, including a farmer’s market, fundraisers, music (performance and recording), dance, youth theater, visual galleries, a café, participatory dance, celebrations (weddings, birthdays, etc.), Brazilian and other cultural events, drag, a space for nonprofits and other coalitions to meet. Having this accessible space is also important for maintaining a diversity of types of groups and events in the city.

• The Armory provides technical infrastructure for performances (lighting, audio, a stage), which is better than a raw space for performers since it saves them the upfront costs of fitting the space out.

• The building has free parking and is accessible by the bus, and accessible access up the ramp from the sidewalk. Also has a loading dock that is helpful for artists with a lot of gear/materials. Parking is also used for things like driving lessons.

• The building has common spaces which allow tenants to come together.

• People can rent rooms by the hour.

• The performance hall is historic and wide, rather than long, which is unique for acoustics.

• A lot of great businesses exist there like the literary press in the basement, the exercise studio (which could also be used for dance). It has space both for music and for ancillary support to music trades (like repair, promotion, recording).
• Parts of the building are soundproofed—Though more can be done.
• Geographic location near the high school, City Hall, and the library is helpful to make the Armory a resource.
• The Armory provides opportunities for in-person intergenerational interactions.
• The historic façade of the building makes it very recognizable.
• There are not many medium-sized venues like this in the area.

• A space like the Armory needs ongoing investment, capital improvements, cleaning, maintenance, etc., to stay vibrant.
• Community members expressed appreciation for the independent nature of the management structure in which Arts at the Armory curates the main hall and café. Municipal employees have to worry about scrutiny in a way that private groups don’t need to, which can impact how they run an arts center.
• Concern for the idea of the City managing a physical asset like this, since it is not their strength and it risks it becoming a “second annex” to City Hall.
• More staff and support is needed to increase programming.

• Members of the Arts at the Armory board expressed that because their rent has increased, the organization needs to charge more for the performance hall than they would like to. They would like to make the space more affordable to a broader array of users.

Questions:

• Should the focus be on live arts? Does that preclude other arts businesses like a press or visual arts business?

• How can the way the Armory is stewarded make a more cohesive community for the tenants and for Somerville more broadly? Universities/libraries act as space stewards and program spaces. Can we use a similar model at the Armory to make a space where people enjoy hanging out?

• People have left since COVID—How do we keep the concentration we still have?
Vision of a “Live Arts Center”
What is a “Live Arts Center”

We define **live art** as a range of disciplines which are performed in front of a live audience, including theatre, music, and dance. A “**live art center**” would support all aspects of the creation and presentation of work that is meant to be experienced both within the building and in the broader community.
How did we get here?

**RESEARCH**

Research conducted includes an environmental scan of 46 local arts organizations and 6 in-depth case studies on national organizations.

**STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS**

Interviews were one-on-one conversations conducted with stakeholders with a wide array of backgrounds and affiliations with the Armory building.

**FOCUS GROUPS**

Focus groups were small group meetings with participants of similar affiliations. These groups included various artists, tenants, residents, and building neighbors.

**OPERATIONAL MODEL MEETINGS**

Three meetings, two in-person and one online in which operational models of the Armory were presented to the public.
How did we get here?

What we Learned

- Detailed case studies have been compiled that address increased relevancy and community connection; artist development programs; education program offerings; financial sustainability; and the connection between the City, the arts, and the community.

- Activities at the Armory must be designed to be nimble and respond to what is now a rapidly changing environment. Case study research allows for a broad exploration of the tools and programs that model organizations are utilizing to engage with their residents, business community, donors, artists, and visitors in new and transformational ways.
How did we get here?

What we heard

- The Armory should be run as an affordable Arts Hub
- The Armory should host artists from outside of Boston to "cross-pollinate" with local artists
- The Armory must be affordable and accessible for all occupants, users and visitors.

RESEARCH

METHODOLOGY

Interviews were one-on-one conversations conducted with stakeholders with a wide array of backgrounds and affiliations with the Armory building.

STAKEHOLDER INTERVIEWS

FOCUS GROUPS

OPERATIONAL MODEL MEETINGS

SUMMARY DOCUMENTS

Stakeholder Interview Report
How did we get here?

What we heard

- Skepticism about how the Armory can be equitably accessible to a diverse community of artists and the broader public.
- Concern over the affordability of the Armory spaces.
- Acknowledge tension around operating the Armory as an arts hub and a community space.
- Support the Armory being activated by arts programs, especially performing arts.
- Committed to using the Armory engage the public through performances, exhibitions, and events.

Focus groups were small group meetings with participants of similar affiliations. These groups included various artists, tenants, residents, and building neighbors.
How did we get here?

What we heard

- Majority of attendees at the Community Meetings expressed significant concerns about the City as the owner and operator of the Armory.

- A majority of attendees gravitated towards the “multi-tenant model” because it allows current programming to continue and opportunity to enhance diverse tenants and activities.

- Several attendees were in favor of a “third-party operator model” which was not presented in these meetings.
Tenant and Community Feedback

**TENANT MEETINGS**
- The City has been meeting with tenants quarterly and hosted individual meetings to hear feedback on building issues and continue open lines of communications.

**CENTER FOR ARTS AT THE ARMORY MEETING - AUGUST 15, 2023**
- Lead by Center for Arts at the Armory
- 100 people in person and online

**CENTER FOR ARTS AT THE ARMORY PETITION**
- Abandon the proposed model of the City as owner/operator.
- Adopt a 3rd party operator model
- Issue RFPs
- Create an Armory governance model
Examples

Boston Center for the Arts

New York Live Arts
https://newyorklivearts.org/about/rent-space/

Penn Live Arts
https://pennlivearts.org/

Live Arts, Charlottesville, Virginia
https://livearts.org/

Live Arts Maryland
https://liveartsmd.org/venues/

Marfa Live Arts
https://www.mWarfalivearts.org/programs

THE ARMORY & OUR ARTS ECOSYSTEM
Discussion
Given what currently exists, what additional uses could support the Armory as a “Live Arts Center?”

What challenges and opportunities do you see in having co-existing uses in a “Live Arts Center?”
Responses

Given what currently exists, what additional uses could support the Armory as a “Live Arts Center?”

- Food and education can help foster a sense of community.
- More uses that grow and support the younger generation of artists.
- “Live art” description doesn’t feel accurate, and feels confusing. Many people did not like this term. It’s more about how the arts can be supported and how arts and business intersect. Participants didn’t want any artists to feel neglected if they don’t perform.
- Would appreciate the presence of organizations like MassCreative that support the creation of art.
- Interest expressed in adding artist residences, youth markets/programming, and different uses between the day and night to allow for more financial opportunity.

Questions

- Are there uses that can allow for an overall sliding scale model? Such as uses that can pay higher so others can pay lower.
- If the center is publicly owned, then why is it still expensive? Can there be a space added for people who can’t afford a space elsewhere?
Opportunities

- Can we shift to a notion of art as playground, rather than art as competition? A playground in this case is a space for cross pollination and education.
- Different people can use the same material/gear that they may not otherwise have access to.
- Allows for inter-disciplinary creation.

Challenges

- Everyone wants to do their own thing, and it’s hard to get people to come together to collaborate.
- Need to soundproof between floors.
- Different uses have different needs, so the Armory may need more storage for the material everyone needs.
- Loading in, setting up, other logistical items can be difficult when they vary for different users or when they need to happen at the same time. Hard to be all things to all people.
Are We Missing Anything?

Are We on the Right Track?
Responses

- Attendees were not thrilled about the idea of a “Live Arts” title. There’s confusion about what this means / it feels like the service part of the ecosystem is lost in this title, even if the definition intends to keep it. All arts should be welcome in an ecosystem. Should not leave out any types of arts either, like print shops.

- The warming center should not go in a building devoted to the arts.

- Attendees expressed frustration that these meetings are still talking about the conceptual. When can we get to talking about the nitty gritty? Could we look at an inventory of spaces in the building and what can go in each? They felt they have heard enough of what people like about the performance hall, and want to build more on what they’ve already heard in the past.

- Attendees were unclear how the consultant (Create Today, who has supported the Master Planning process) is still involved—Staff noted that the consultant has shifted to doing research while staff take over the engagement work.
Thank You
Next month, we will explore if and how the Armory can successfully accommodate community and civic programming.