



ARTS  ONTARIO
**SOCIAL PURPOSE
REAL ESTATE FOR
ARTS SPACES**
REAL ESTATE FOR CREATIVE CHANGE

CASE STUDY

221A

825 PACIFIC

A SOCIAL PURPOSE REAL ESTATE FOR ARTS SPACES CASE STUDY
BY ARTSBUILD ONTARIO (2025)

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Pictured right: 221A's flagship space on E Georgia (2014).





Pictured above: 221A's second facility at 222 E Georgia Street (2011), and 825 Pacific (2024).

INTRODUCING SOCIAL PURPOSE REAL ESTATE FOR ARTS SPACES

ArtsBuild Ontario's Social Purpose Real Estate (SPRE) for Arts Spaces Program is designed to support arts organizations in navigating real estate challenges and creating sustainable, community-focused spaces. With the leadership and collaboration of partners including the City of Toronto, Toronto Arts Council, Creative Collisions, OCAD University's Cultural Policy Hub, and Toronto Metropolitan University, the program connects expertise from the arts, academia, and municipal sectors. Together, these partners are working to build capacity for arts organizations by exploring models of real estate that balance affordability, long-term stability, and social impact.

As part of this initiative, ArtsBuild Ontario has developed a series of case studies that profile innovative SPRE projects across Canada. These examples illustrate how arts organizations and their partners have transformed properties into hubs for creativity, collaboration, and community benefit. The case studies aim to showcase practical approaches and replicable models that inspire new thinking about space development in the arts sector. By sharing these stories, the program highlights how SPRE can serve as a catalyst for more sustainable arts infrastructure and stronger, more vibrant communities.

INTRODUCING 221A:

How a group of students became 221A through the process of emergent experiments, and grew over time.

221A is a nonprofit organization based in Vancouver that was founded by art and design students from Emily Carr University in 2005. Inspired by self-actualized youth empowerment and anti-infantilization in a post-Olympic Vancouver, the group of friends and budding organization aimed to explore the friction between art and design through the creation of a coworking and exhibition space at 221A E Georgia Street. 221A is headquartered at 825 Pacific, which is situated between the burial grounds of Smeŕchús and the shores of Í7iýelsh, on the unceded Indigenous territories belonging to the xʷməθkʷəy̓əm (Musqueam), Sk̓w̓xwú7mesh (Squamish) and səlilwətaɬ (Tsleil-Waututh) Nations.

With a \$20,000 loan from family and a little help from a group member's grandmother negotiating their first lease, 221A secured space in Vancouver's Chinatown in storefronts where they experimented with public presentations and programming alongside workspace for members of the collective. 221A has since evolved into an arts infrastructure non-profit, working with government partners to take on real estate and capital projects while integrating art, culture, and low-income housing solutions across various spaces in Vancouver.



Pictured above: 221A Board, Personnel, Fellows and Tenants at the 2025 Board Retreat. Photo by Kayla Isomura.

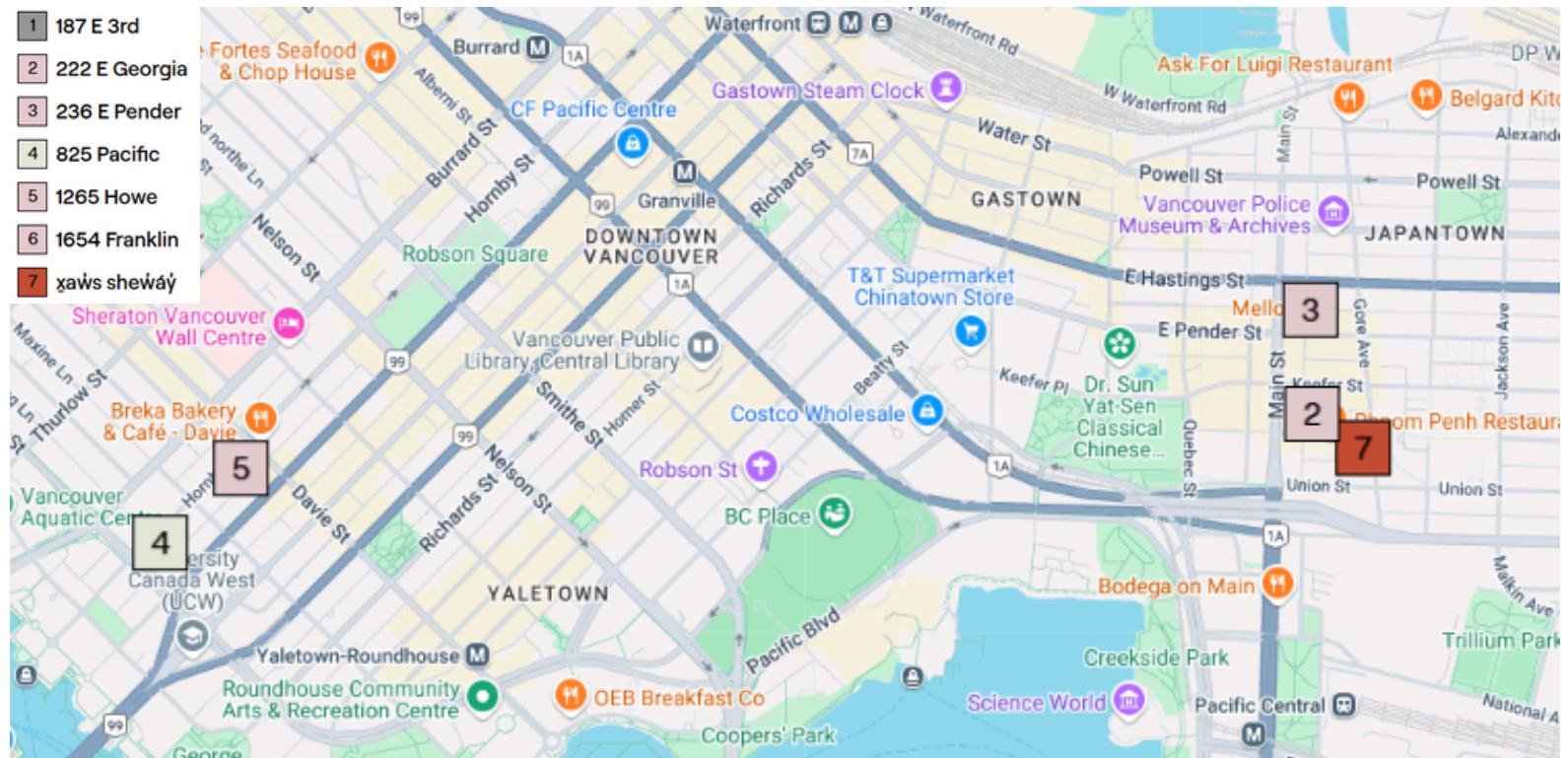
221A has gained considerable experience through their past projects, and has strong governance and leadership, including a board with expertise in finance and real estate. They also have professionalized financial management to ensure the sustainability of their work, and set rental rates on a cost recovery basis. They currently manage 6 buildings that span artist studios and affordable housing for artists, as well as xáws shewáy, a rewilded Indigenous garden. 221A's breadth of activities includes funding programs for artists through its Fellowship program, as well as a variety of research and development activities. All of their buildings are leased, some from the City of Vancouver for no fee, and others from private landlords. 221A's processes are governed by policies that are set by a Board of Directors and paid Tenant Advisory Committee, which establishes criteria for selection of tenants and operation of buildings.

CURRENT 221A PROPERTIES

221A is the largest non-profit cultural space operator in B.C., providing a total of 145 rent-stabilized artist studios and housing units across 6 properties. Their projects incorporate flexible, adaptable spaces that include artist studios, cultural venues, and affordable housing. Their buildings are designed with community input and balance artistic and practical needs. All operate on a head tenant model, with leases spanning from 6 to 60 years. Half of their spaces are purpose-built in partnership with the City of Vancouver.

Location	Use	# of Units	Lease	Partners	Size	Purpose -built
825 Pacific	Coworking, artist studios, events	30	60 years	City of Vancouver	21,000ft ²	yes
187 E 3rd	Artist housing	30	60 years	City of Vancouver	17050ft ²	yes
222 E Georgia	Artist studios, gallery	20	20 years	Yee Society	8,000ft ²	no
236 E Pender	Artist studios	22	22 years	Private landlord, Or Gallery	9,000ft ²	no
1265 Howe	Artist studios	20	60 years	City of Vancouver, Malaspina Printmakers	10,800ft ²	yes
1654 Franklin	Artist studios	25	20 years	Private landlord	21,515ft ²	no

- 1 187 E 3rd
- 2 222 E Georgia
- 3 236 E Pender
- 4 825 Pacific
- 5 1265 Howe
- 6 1654 Franklin
- 7 gaws shewáy



2



3) 236 Pender: space for art production and presentation.

1) 187 E 3rd: thirty non-market housing units owned by the City of Vancouver and operated by 221A Artist Housing Society in collaboration with the Community Land Trust.

2) 222 E Georgia, an 8,000ft² property leased from the Yee Fung Toy Society of Canada used by 221A as a space for collective art production and presentation since 2011.

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With longer leases come higher obligations- it's basically an asset management-type portfolio, which means doing things like recapitalizing the elevator, putting maintenance reserves aside and planning long-term. Shorter leases are renegotiated on smaller cycles with private landlords, which means we have a more active role in terms of having to set and reset, but have less control of rent because we're exposed to the market.

**IF WE WERE JUST
DOING IT FOR THE
MONEY**

NONE OF US WOULD BE HERE.

”

- Brian McBay, Executive Director, 221A

825 PACIFIC

825 Pacific is a seven-storey, purpose-built arts and cultural center located in the heart of Vancouver. Developed as part of the City of Vancouver's Community Amenity Contribution program, it is the first certified commercial Passive House building in the city, reducing energy consumption by up to 90%. This state-of-the-art facility is owned by the City of Vancouver and operated by 221A under a 60-year lease agreement (2022 – 2082), and was recently built with support from the BC Arts Council, Department of Canadian Heritage, and the Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program. 221A pays no rent or property taxes to the City. Instead, they cover only the operating costs associated with the building, as well as leasehold improvements, which are amortized over 30 years. The building houses 30 distinct units designed for a variety of artistic and non-profit uses, providing a sustainable and collaborative environment for creative professionals.

The facility includes:

- 23 non-market studios intended for artists and non-profit offices
- 3 additional units designated for 221A Fellows
- The 221A Fellowship Library
- A ground-floor Project Space for creative studio use and community events
- A 50-person coworking space that offers opportunities for cross-pollination and economic development.

The facility supports a variety of activities, including art presentations and production, and is ideal for artists and cultural practitioners seeking affordable, community-oriented spaces. 825 Pacific is not only a hub for the arts but also an inclusive, accessible facility, designed to serve the local community, including access to co-working space for non-profit organizations, city staff, engineers, designers, and others looking to share an inspiring and collaborative environment. Additional amenities include secure bicycle parking, rentable storage lockers, and an emergency power supply for all power-operated doors.

The journey of 825 Pacific is a compelling example of how a long-term vision, community involvement, and strategic partnerships can bring a social purpose real estate project to life.

“825 Pacific will create long-term security for artists and cultural organizations over the next 60 years.” - Brian McBay

Pictured right: a bookable meeting room. Tenants get monthly credits for use of the meeting room at 825 Pacific.



Pictured left: a person works on their computer at a standing desk while another person works on the communal couch at 825 Pacific.

Pictured right: caregivers and children play at 825 Pacific.



TIMELINE

2014-2015: Initial Conversations & Community Consultations

The community began consulting on the vision for the space seven years before the lease offer. Conversations centred on what the building should look like and its intended use within the arts community. This period set the foundation for what the space would become, and consultations helped ensure that the needs of local artists and the broader community were reflected in the building's design and use.

2021: Lease Offer & Planning

The City of Vancouver approached 221A to take over the project after the initial operating partner was placed in receivership. This was a reverse takeover, as the project asset (the building) was but a promise. The building had been part of a larger development strategy for increased density in the area, with the base building constructed by a developer using the proceeds from a rezoning process. The City of Vancouver and 221A had a longstanding relationship, with 221A's leadership working on various other arts initiatives for over a decade. 221A secured a 60-year lease (until 2082) for the warm shell of the building, which included an agreement with the City for lease commencement on the same day the building was transferred via easement.

2021-2022: Funding the Space

The funding for the building's tenant improvements came through a combination of public funding sources.

2021-22: Fundraising campaign

January 2022: Service plan approved by the Board

April 1, 2022- September 31, 2024: Reporting to government

September 2022: Government of Canada deposit issued and triggered construction start

August 2023: Partial opening

May 2024: Official building launch

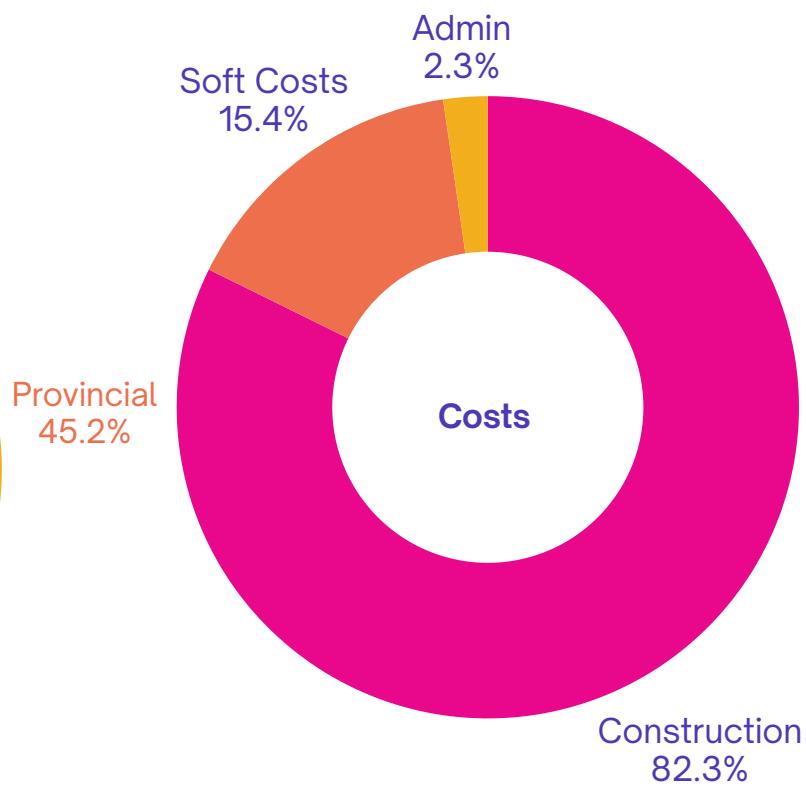
FUNDING THE SPACE

The funding for renovating 825 Pacific came through a combination of public funding sources from all levels of government. Developing 825 Pacific cost \$18.4 million in combined funding from the federal, provincial and municipal governments. As the operating partner, 221A took the lead on bringing in \$2.6 million towards the total cost through accessing arts and culture funds, while the City of Vancouver secured other public funds to fill the \$15.8 million difference towards the base building cost, created as a community amenity contribution from a local developer. The negotiation was between the city and the developer and was guided by the Culture Shift 10-year cultural plan, after many years of advocacy inside and outside the city. This financing model shows how a blend of provincial, federal, and municipal support can be leveraged to address capital deficits.

Revenue

- Federal - Canada Cultural Spaces Fund (CCSF): \$430,000
- Province/Territory- joint Provincial and Federal Investing in Canada Infrastructure Program (ICIP): \$1,174,950
- Municipal/Regional - City of Vancouver cultural infrastructure grants: \$758,374
- 221A: \$ 261,000*

Total revenue: \$2,624,324



*The cost overages from 221A are treated as a leasehold improvement that is amortized over the life of the capital upgrades.

Costs for Leasehold Improvements

- Construction: \$2,160,306
- Soft Costs: \$404,495
- Operations & Admin: \$59,523

Total costs: \$2,624,324

RENTAL STRUCTURE

Spanning a total area of 21,000 square feet, 825 Pacific is designed to foster creativity and innovation while offering flexible, affordable workspaces. 825 Pacific has 30 private artist studios that currently host artists working across various disciplines, including painting, film, printmaking, publishing, drawing, sculpture, performance, and installation, as well as small cultural businesses and non-profit arts and culture administrative offices. Units range in size from 132 to 449 square feet, with monthly rents between \$500 and \$1,835, inclusive of common area costs, taxes, and maintenance fees. Memberships for coworking spaces are available for \$200 to \$400 per month.

Rental terms at 825 Pacific are designed to be flexible, with units available on one-year subleases, potentially extending on a case-by-case basis. Rent includes a wide array of services such as electricity, water, waste disposal, cleaning, and maintenance. As 221A is a registered Canadian charitable organization, tenants are exempt from GST on rent. This facility offers a unique opportunity for artists and non-profits to secure space within a high-performance, energy-efficient building that also promotes community engagement and cultural expression.

GOVERNANCE & OPERATIONS

The governance of 825 Pacific aligns with 221A's mission-driven approach to arts and culture, and is consistent with their other creative spaces in terms of Board involvement. Board oversight ensures that the space is used in ways that reflect its values of inclusivity, equity, and sustainability. 221A operates under a board of directors that is responsible for setting rental rates, selecting tenants, and establishing policies for the space. The board includes a Space and Land Committee that addresses tenant and facility maintenance issues. A Cross-Portfolio Tenant Committee provides feedback on policies and reviews reports, ensuring that the voices of those using the space are considered in decision-making. The space is subleased to individual artists, small cultural nonprofits, and organizations.

IMPACT ON THE ARTS COMMUNITY

825 Pacific works to fill several community needs regarding affordable artist studios, access to workspace, and the broader need for equitable opportunities for artists and cultural organizations.

Artist Studios & Affordable Rent: The facility offers 23 non-market rent-stabilized artist studios, with rents ranging from \$500 - \$1,835 per month. The rent structure is designed to ensure that artists and small nonprofits can access space at affordable rates, making it possible for creative professionals to thrive without being priced out of Vancouver's competitive real estate market.

Fellowships & Equity: The 221A Fellowship Program provides opportunities for emerging and established artists to engage in creative practice without the financial burden of high rents. This program is particularly geared towards artists from equity-deserving groups and provides a platform for these individuals to showcase their work. Each artist receives a \$72,000 stipend.

Coworking Space & Community Impact: The coworking space at 825 Pacific currently hosts 20 users and is designed to cater to the needs of arts administrators, nonprofits, and other community-driven organizations. This 2,000 ft² space offers ergonomic desks, meeting rooms, shared kitchen and washroom facilities, and is available to users on a sliding scale. The coworking space supports broader community engagement, including for organizations like funders and record designers, making it an inspiring environment of collaboration.

“Our work at 221A is about making space for artists and non-profits, but our bigger goal is to make sure the arts are part of shaping a more equitable city.” - Brian McBay



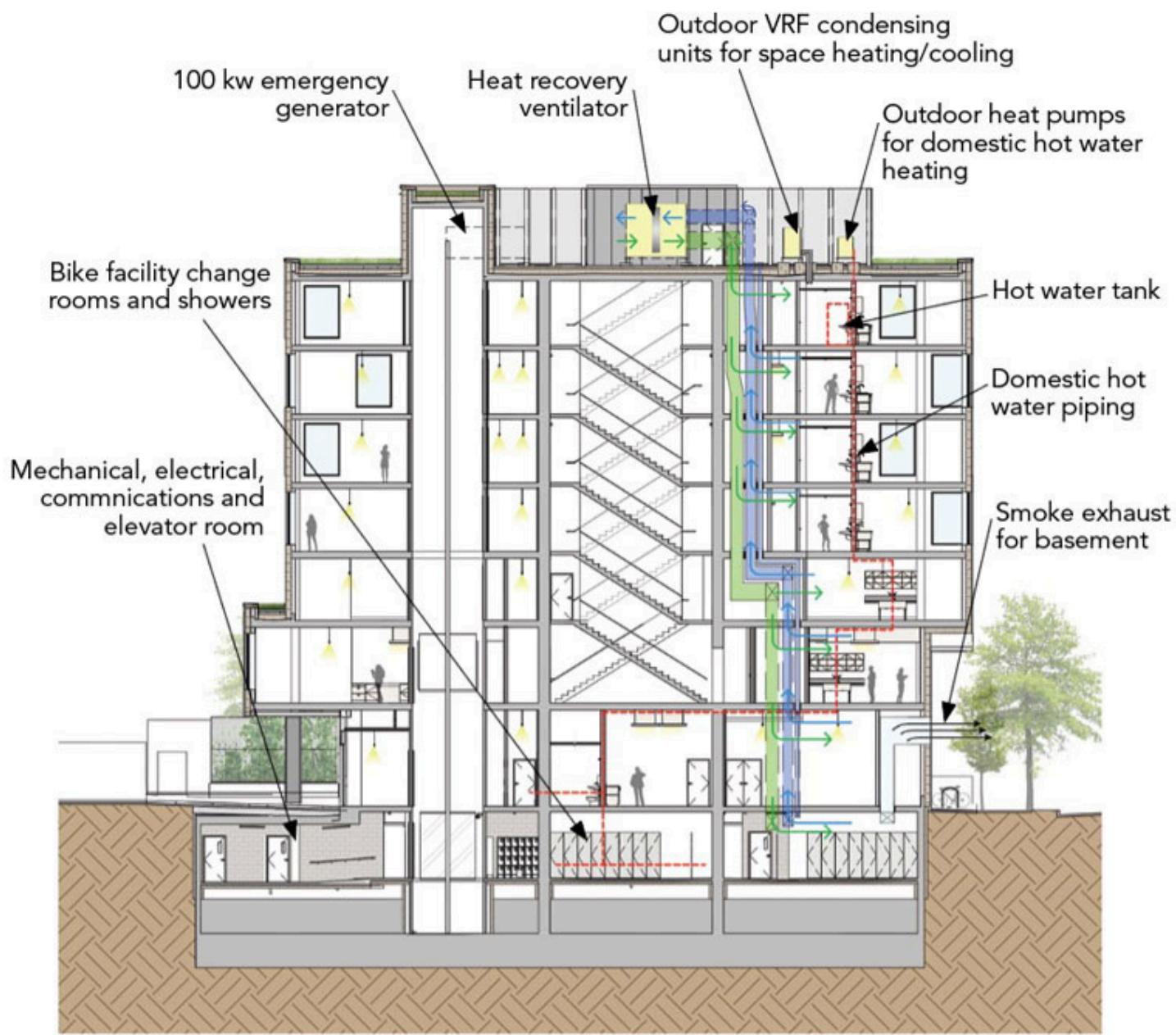
Pictured left: 221A Fellow Christian Vistan poses for a photo in their studio at 825 Pacific.

Pictured right: the community gathers for an artist talk in the communal space at 825 Pacific.



SUSTAINABILITY & LONG-TERM PLANNING

825 Pacific is designed with sustainability in mind, both in terms of its environmental impact and financial model. The building is a Passive House design, the first of its kind for a commercial building in Vancouver, reducing energy output by up to 90%. 221A pays no rent or property taxes to the City and uses rental income to cover the operating costs associated with the building. Leasehold improvements are being amortized over 20 years, and capital deficits are filled through a range of funding sources.



Currently, 221A is proposing to add the building to a cultural land trust, which would further ensure its long-term stability and continued access for the arts community.

LESSONS LEARNED

"Number one is definitely some kind of social purpose.... a willingness and interest in serving the community. The other ones are from a technical standpoint- our design skills and advocating for regulation, being able to present in front of people, being able to meet people, not shuddering in fear when numbers come about, and having a willingness to collaborate. Also very important is an understanding of the cultural sector and deep awareness of the idiosyncrasies of artists."

- Brian McBay

Develop Strategic Partnerships:

The success of 825 Pacific is rooted in strong partnerships between 221A, the City of Vancouver, and funding bodies, including the British Columbia Arts Council, the Department of Canadian Heritage, and the federal government. Cultivating long-term relationships and understanding the needs of the community are essential for securing support.

Securing Diverse Funding Sources:

Tapping into a mix of funding sources, including infrastructure programs and government grants, was crucial for a project of this scale. For 825 Pacific, the \$2.6 million in renovation costs was raised through a combination of public funding, showing how diverse financial support can fill capital deficits. It's a great example of how combining different types of financial support can help bridge capital gaps and get a project off the ground.

Centring Equity & Accessibility:

Accessible design was prioritized during the renovation process. The building is fully accessible via a wheelchair-friendly front entrance and a centrally located elevator. Each floor includes accessible, single-stall, gender-neutral bathrooms, and the basement floor offers two double-stall universal bathrooms equipped with accessible showers, as well as a changing station. The building is equipped with an emergency power supply for all power-operated doors, and areas of refuge are available on each floor for added safety. All units have natural light. Service animals are welcome.

Providing affordable spaces for BIPOC artists and cultural nonprofits ensures that the space serves a diverse range of community members. By offering sliding scale rents and accessible, flexible spaces, 825 Pacific fills a gap in the arts community, particularly for emerging and underrepresented voices. 825 Pacific stands as a model for social purpose real estate in the arts. Through strategic partnerships, careful planning, and a strong commitment to community engagement, 221A has created a space that not only serves artists but also enriches Vancouver's cultural landscape through ensuring the artists that shape the city's vibrancy have space to connect, create and resist displacement in an increasingly hostile real estate market through a by community, for community model.

WHAT'S NEXT?

In addition to continuing to steward their nine spaces, 221A is busy advocating for a sustainable community-managed stewardship model in the form of cultural land trusts by undertaking a multi-year feasibility study to advance the creation of a Cultural Land Trust (CLT) in BC. From 2009-2019, over 400,000 square feet of artist studios were lost in the City of Vancouver. The feasibility study will provide a closer review of target assets for acquisition by the CLT, as well as considerations for Indigenous collaboration, knowledge mobilization, and report dissemination with cultural space operators and public funders across Canada.

The Cultural Land Trust (CLT), incorporated as a non-profit Society in BC in December 2021, is mandated to increase long-term security of tenure of space for cultural and arts purposes in BC through ownership and stewardship of land and buildings. The CLT model is being advanced in the UK (Creative Land Trust, London), US (Community Arts Stabilization Trust, San Francisco; Cultural Space Agency, Seattle), as well as early models being developed in Toronto, including the Chinatown Land Trust, Kensington Market Land Trust, and Community & Cultural Spaces Trust.

The Cultural Land Trust aims to provide artists and arts organizations with access to the stabilizing force of affordable space and open pathways to sustainable stewardship and ownership. The CLT aims to establish a significant portfolio of 30 freehold properties in BC by 2030, providing a stability of tenure to support a thriving arts and culture sector. This model recycles the pre-existing government grants back into the sector.

This CLT is part of a new wave of land trusts and non-profits supporting and developing space for culture and arts communities in their respective jurisdictions. While acknowledging that the process of developing broad cultural-space solutions must prioritize the needs of local contexts, 221A aims to use this project as a model that can be replicated nationally. With urgency and clarity of purpose, the Cultural Land Trust represents a critical shift toward sustainable cultural infrastructure, offering hope, stability, and a new path forward for the arts in British Columbia.

REFERENCES & FURTHER READING

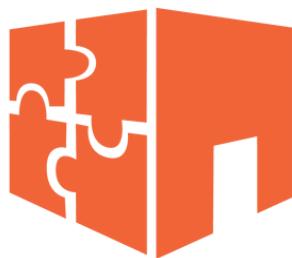
- [New space brings back artistic vibrancy to downtown Vancouver](#)
- [Blog post: 21,000ft² Arts & Cultural Space at 825 Pacific officially opens!](#)

PARTNER RECOGNITION

This project has been made possible in part by the Government of Canada.

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THANK YOU!

If you have any questions or would like to discuss our work further, please don't hesitate to reach out.

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