

THE COMMERCIAL OBSERVER

Anita's Way: Douglas Durst's Eldest Daughter Merges Art with Real Estate

By [Jotham Sederstrom](#) 6/19, 9:30am

Since launching Chashama 17 years ago out of her father Douglas Durst's building on 44th Street in Times Square, Anita Durst has helped locate affordable or free studio and gallery space for hundreds of artists in all five boroughs. With a portfolio of 17 spaces, donated by the likes of Rockrose Development and New York City, Chashama currently manages an



estimated \$2 million in real estate. On the eve of the group's Gala Monday, Mr. Durst's eldest daughter spoke to The Commercial Observer about lessons learned from her famous family, what's in store for her arts program in the upcoming months, and how dad helped her land a role on the sitcom 30 Rock.

The Commercial Observer: What is your relationship with real estate? Do you consider yourself an artist or a broker?

Ms. Durst: Well, my family is in real estate. Right now we're the third generation running the real estate company, and I lived with my grandfather [Seymour Durst] in the old York Library, and he had a collection on New York of maps, books and memorabilia dating back to the 1800s. Through living with him and going on walks with him—and him pointing out buildings to me and us taking pictures, and me attending my father's meetings—I've learned a lot about real estate.

You attended Durst Organization meetings? How old were you?

When I was about 25, I would go to his meetings. The meetings were in what would become known as the Condé Nast building, at 4 Times Square, and they were meeting with the Condé Nast people and really just negotiating the lease terms.

Were there lessons you learned while sitting in on those meetings?

I was interested in understanding the business world and to see how transactions are negotiated.

Chashama's annual gala is on Monday. Do real estate professionals show up?

Our gala has had people from the real estate industry, the entertainment industry, lawyers, accountants ... so a mix—and many different kinds of artists, as well.

With Chashama, are you involved during negotiations with the building owners?

When we do the letters of agreement we have a standard contract, but some of them change it, you know, like they want their ... We just got a space on 26th Street and 10th Avenue, at 303 10th Avenue. And [the owner] wants us to put the windows back if we leave and they don't rent out the space. So, it's small little things like that.

Are they tough negotiators, or do they support the arts?

Well, they want to ensure that we can't stay there forever, so those things are very, very set. But, no, they're not really tough. I think they understand, and our letter of agreement is very straightforward and very clear. We've been working on it to make it clean.

What is the benefit for building owners to handing over free space to artists?

Well, it helps market it and enliven the neighborhood because when you have a dark block you don't really want to move your business there if you don't see anything happening there, any energy. And when you have something there, it really produces a feeling of, of new energy.

Are there building owners who are more resistance to donating space to artists?

There might be, but we wouldn't necessarily know because we generally deal only with people who come directly to us. The landowner will contact us and then we will agree to take the space. Then we give the landowner \$5 million-worth of insurance on the space. And we have a letter of agreement with them where we do, like, the first six months. And then we go to a month-to-month contract. Then once we've done those agreements and the insurance, we bring the artists into the space.

A lot of our spaces we've actually been in for four or five years—like our spaces up in Harlem in the beer factory. I mean, Rockrose said we'd be able to stay there until 2013, but we're still on a month-to-month contract with them.

Besides Rockrose, what other owners have donated space?

The city. We work with the EDC and that's where we have a hundred visual art studios at the Brooklyn Army Terminal. We're on a month-to-month contract with them. We ask a nominal fee for the space there, but in all our spaces we pay for the electricity and for upkeep. So if Rockrose had their spaces empty in Long Island City, they'd have to pay for the maintenance man to go there and make sure there are no leaks. But when we're there we're bringing hundreds of people, which cuts down on costs.

Your father named a building after your younger sister, Helena? Why don't you have a building named after you?

I have the through block, Anita's Way. It's between [The Condé Nast] building and another next to it.

Is it really Anita's Way?

Yes. I get my way. Actually, we put performances in there, or we just had somebody open the hall and they just did a history of what's happened in Times Square for the last 40 years—events like that. I also went and got married there the other day. I married myself.

Excuse me?

It was a few weeks ago. I married myself.

What were your vows?

That I wouldn't get mad at myself if I made mistakes, and I would love myself as much as I love others. I can't remember what the third one was. But they got a veil for me and went in and they took pictures, and threw rice while a U-Haul waited to take me away.

Did you have guests?

Yeah, I brought my husband, and he married himself as well.

Is Douglas proud that you chose real estate as a profession?

I think he is, yes. I would say he, yes. I would say he's very proud. And he's very supportive and he really has helped us. It's one of the reasons that we're able to continue on because he gives us great support all the time. So I'd say yes.

Do you give each other advice?

I don't give him advice. I definitely don't give him advice. He helps with like, for the gala he will help. He will give me suggestions of people to invite. And he's always very supportive. He shows his support by coming to it.

Does the Durst name alone open up a lot of opportunities?

Yes, it does.

How much of the artists' space is donated by the Durst Organization?

It's been reduced quite a bit. There was a time when it was almost entirely Durst Organization property. I think now it's 10 percent, and the rest is other landowners.

Is Chashama actually financially sustainable?

Right now it is, yeah. Because what we do is each artist pays a small fee for utilizing the space. And so there's a small fee or it's free. That helps us have an earned income.

Among real estate people who cherish the arts, the Walentas family comes to mind. Does Chashama deal with them?

[Jed Walentas] already works with so many artists and he has so many things. He'd actually offered us the Galapagos space many years ago, but then we already had all of 42nd Street and my one administrator said no! I was like, "Please? It's so awesome."

Is there any particular lesson about real estate you remember either Douglas or Seymour teaching?

I would say my biggest lesson is the beauty of a building and its structure. I think that's one of

my earliest lessons and something I learned from my grandfather, and it's to look at the architecture and really ... Whenever I walk into an old building and I see the structure of it, that's one of my earliest lessons.

On a social level, do you count many real estate professionals as close friends?

No. No, I do not.

You're an actress, and among your credits is 30 Rock. How did you get that role?

I have a very good agent named Douglas Durst. They wanted to use the lobby or use one of the [Durst Organization] spaces. And he said that in exchange for him letting them tape in the building ... So he would help get me parts, small parts in productions.

What character did you play?

A businesswoman. Yeah, I was just like standing in the line, like "Give me my hotdog!" And [Tina Fey] just, like, budged in front of me. It was a lot of fun.

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