



# No Vacancy: Turning Empty Spaces Into Cultural Pop-Ups

John Farley | October 31, 2011 4:04 AM



Formerly empty storefront being turned into a gallery by the arts non-profit No Longer Empty. The organization takes vacant commercial spaces and offers them to artists for temporary use. Photo courtesy of No Longer Empty.

In recent years, corporate retailers and restaurateurs alike have created pop-up shops, filling vacant commercial and under-used public spaces with temporary shops in order to experiment with concepts and test new markets.

But at a time when vacant space is amply available but expensive to rent or purchase, some of the most innovative uses have come from the arts community.

In 2006, Mayor Michael Bloomberg called the creative sector the “heart and soul” of New York City. But back then a booming real estate bubble was rapidly forcing New York artists into increasingly tiny, functionally inadequate work spaces, if not out of the city altogether.

When the real estate bubble popped in 2008, hundreds of commercial spaces became vacant. And many remain too expensive for retailers and developers to lease or buy them. Nonprofit groups and for-profit projects have found that transforming these empty spaces into unusual, temporary artistic creations presents a viable solution that works equally well for artists, landlords and the city as a whole.

## Patching a Hole in the Neighborhood

Anita Durst — the iconoclastic artist granddaughter of controversy-added Time Square real estate developer Seymour Durst – founded the nonprofit organization Chashama in 1995 to foster a relationship between owners of underused real estate and the city’s emerging artists.



Chashama's store-front at 266 W. 37th St. The space

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Here's how Chashama's model works:

Building owners come to Chashama when they have properties they're having trouble renting. Chashama rents the property itself — generally at a discounted price on a month-to-month basis — and then offers the space to an artist who has an idea for an installation in the space.

For example, Chashama connected artist Rebecca Sherman with an empty storefront at 266 W. 37th St., which she will turn into a [multimedia exhibition from Nov. 30 to Dec. 12](#).

It's great for the artists, who get gallery space free of charge. But there's also great appeal for the landlords, particularly ones who own storefronts.

*We testified recently at City Council and recommended that a landlord should be able to get a tax incentive for putting an empty space into use. That would encourage people not to leave their spaces empty.*

—Manon Slome, No Longer Empty

“If a landowner has a building and he knows he can't use it for a couple of years, there's a negative energy in the neighborhood. But while we're there we create a positive energy,” said Durst. In other words, unoccupied space is not only prone to physical deterioration — a turnoff to those who might be interested in a property — it can also drive investors away from surrounding properties and dampen community spirit.

And there's another benefit for landlords: foot traffic.

“Smart building owners understand that this art in their windows makes their space look more attractive to future renters,” Ellen Scott, creative director of [Smart Spaces](#), told the [Daily News](#). “We've found the currency building owners care about most is cash, but not far behind that is publicity.” Smart Spaces is similar to Chashama, but adds an educational component by offering guided walking tours of their temporary exhibits.

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Chashama and Smart Spaces both rely on federal grants, such as those provided by the [National Endowment for the Arts](#), but in some cases, private building owners and public institutions will offer spaces rent-free.

Chashama has also [benefited from a package of art initiatives that the mayor's office introduced](#) in 2009. One of those initiatives allowed Chashama to occupy space in the [Brooklyn Army Terminal](#) in Sunset Park, which they let artists use as studios on the condition that they participate in an entrepreneurial training program.



Dancers performing "Show Me the Money" at the abandoned bank vault at 14 Wall St. The space is part of the Lower Manhattan Cultural Council's Swing Space program. Photo courtesy of Imcc.net.

### Pop-Ups as “Swinging Residencies”

The [Lower Manhattan Cultural Council](#) has its own system for creating arts pop-ups through its [Swing Space residency program](#). Since 2005, the city agency has given more than 1,000 artists temporary residency in 20 under-used, publicly owned spaces. Past projects have included giving rehearsal space to an experimental dance company in an abandoned bank vault on Wall Street.

will house a temporary exhibition by artist Rebecca Sherman from Nov. 30 through Dec. 12. Photo courtesy of Chamshama.



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Another Swing Space project was an art installation that filled an abandoned paint factory with chalkboards, which were covered with one *very* long math equation.

### **Pop-Ups: Incentives for Investment and Education**

Some organizations and artists believe the city could help mobilize more landlords to donate space.

“We testified recently at City Council and recommended that a landlord should be able to get a tax incentive for putting an empty space into use. That would encourage people not to leave their spaces empty,” said Manon Slome, president of [No Longer Empty](#).

Like Chashama, No Longer Empty is a nonprofit that connects artists to temporary vacant spaces. No Longer Empty is unique in that it aims to relate artistic projects to the sites which house them, as well as to the surrounding community, and in that it only uses spaces that are donated free of charge.

“Our mission is to expand the audience of contemporary art,” said Slome. Doing this involves coordinating with community organizers and local artists to imagine projects that contribute to arts education, often for children, and increasing cultural tourism to the area.

For instance, in 2010 No Longer Empty [created a temporary exhibit at the Chelsea Hotel](#), which included work by artists that resided in the building. Many of the artworks referenced the hotel’s current financial troubles.



The Andrew Freedman Home in the Bronx. In December, No Longer Empty will turn the empty mansion into a temporary community art center. Photo courtesy of No Longer Empty.

### **Big Sleep, Big Profits**

The nonprofits creating pop-up galleries can certainly help generate considerable revenue through the sale of art and support the real estate industry. But a current theatrical production, the [critically acclaimed “Sleep No More,”](#) suggests that the creative use of temporary space not only aids development, it can also be highly profitable.

### **WATCH VIDEO:**

*Interview with the producers of “Sleep No More,” now playing at 530 W. 27th Street in Manhattan. Youtube/theatremania.*

The delightfully creepy experimental adaptation of “Macbeth” is nearing the end of its nine-month run in three connected warehouses on 27th Street, between 10th and 11th avenues. While the producers declined to comment on the play’s profits, the play has consistently sold-out three performances a night with audiences of more than 400 at a ticket price of \$75.

Until the play’s New York City producers rented the gargantuan spaces last year, the landlord had not been able to find a renter or a developer since they were vacated in 2007. Its last residents were some of the cities hottest nightclubs – Twilo, B.E.D., the Guest House and others – which were shuttered after the city began cracking down on the Chelsea nightclub district in 2006.

Though it has a very different model than other cultural pop-ups, “Sleep No More” proves that these temporary endeavors can generate significant tax revenue.

Tags: arts and culture, Chashama, development, funding, Lower Manhattan Cultural Council, Michael Bloomberg, No Longer Empty, pop up spaces, recession, Sleep No More, Smart Spaces, tax incentives, vacant space

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