



What is Live Work Housing?

Live work housing combines residential and non-residential uses within the same units. They are most often associated with artist spaces, that combine living and creative spaces together.

Large-scale, former industrial buildings lend themselves to artist live work housing for many reasons. As they are often no longer suitable for full-scale manufacturing, industrial buildings can provide affordable, small-scale housing and studio space for the artist community. The large windows provide natural light, the tall ceilings provide the space for large pieces of work and the existing loading docks make it easy to access the delivery of materials or ship finished products. Additionally, the uniqueness of these grand interior spaces offers an imaginative place for creativity.

Live work housing typically requires that the resident of the unit is also the owner of the operating artistic business.

With limited ground space for large parking lots at historic industrial sites, live work housing can be an excellent fit because it typically has minimal parking needs on-site.

Live Work Zoning in Practice

In the Berkshires, the 19th Century Eclipse Mill in North Adams was originally used for textile manufacturing. Today, it contains 40 loft condominiums for artist/studio live workspaces. The units range in size from 1700 to 3500 square feet. A bookstore, pottery studio, movement studio and gallery are some of the arts-based businesses found in the Eclipse Mill. Through a revised zoning ordinance, the city of North Adams found a means to allow this innovative use.

Benefits of Live Work Housing Zoning

The benefits of live work housing include providing a unique housing option. With a combined live/work space, the units are often more affordable than separate locations for housing and work. With a new use, vacant or underutilized mill buildings can contribute to the local economy, drawing visitors to the studio spaces. Additionally, rehabilitated buildings provide increased property taxes to the municipality. Finally, with artists part of the community, there is more opportunity for vibrant activity such as open houses, festivals, public art and live performances.

BRPC PROGRAM

Community Planning Program
berkshireplanning.org/programs

Live Work Housing Examples in Massachusetts

Beverly - In the city of Beverly, the central business zoning district allow artists live-work spaces by right while in other zoning districts they are allowed by special permit, through the planning board. The ordinance includes both development standards and performance standards.

Boston - The Walter Baker Chocolate Factory campus includes thirteen units of income restricted, artist certified, live work housing.

Easthampton - Eastworks is a mixed-use building of commercial, office, warehouse, and residential uses. Tenants on the lower floors include a restaurant, retail businesses, government offices and non-profit organizations, with the top floor consisting of 46 live work lofts. Originally a textile mill, it housed several manufacturing businesses up until 1996, when it became vacant. With the benefit of a Mixed Use/Mill Industrial Zoning District, the new owners had the flexibility to design a build out based on market demand, finding creative ways to convert the space to a variety of new uses. With art shows and live performances, Eastworks provides a vibrant community space to those that live in the mill complex as well as those from the surrounding area. <https://www.eastworks.com/>



Fitchburg - Within the Downtown Smart Growth Zoning District, artist live work is allowed as of right, following plan approval.

Lowell - The zoning ordinance for the city of Lowell includes an Artist Overlay District. Its purpose is to encourage artists to live and work in the downtown area, promoting a venue for art, culture and entertainment. The approval process includes site plan review and a special permit from the Zoning Board of Appeals. Site requirements include, among other things, parking spaces and that the buildings must be at least 60 years old. One example of how this overlay district zoning has transformed vacant industrial space is the Western Avenue Studios. This five-building complex of 265,000 square feet has been fully converted to creative space for artists. <https://westernavenuestudios.com/spaces/>

Somerville - Like many other ordinances where the spaces are restricted to artists, Somerville requires evidence that all the residents are in a creative enterprise. In their case, the ordinance requires that occupants must be a certified artist with the Somerville Arts Council.

West Springfield - Included within the list of allowable uses of the Mill Revitalization Overlay District are artist live-work spaces.

Establishing a Live Work Zoning Bylaw

A Live Work Zoning bylaw or ordinance is established by the local legislative body, town meeting or city council. A change to a zoning bylaw requires a 2/3 affirmative vote of Town Meeting or City Council. Prior to a vote by the local legislative body, the planning board holds a public hearing and submits a report.

A Live Work Zoning bylaw is best established as part of a master planning or strategic planning process, that considers the challenges to re-use, the needs of the area, develops goals for the community and envisions the potential of a new use at the site.