

The following oral history memoir is the result of 1 videorecorded session of an interview with Nat Roe by Cynthia Tobar on August 21, 2015 in New York City. This interview is part of "Cities for People, Not for Profit": Gentrification and Housing Activism in Bushwick. Nat Roe has reviewed the transcript and has made minor corrections and emendations. The reader is asked to bear in mind that she or he is reading a verbatim transcript of the spoken word, rather than written prose.

Nat Roe

[Start of recorded material at 00:00:00]

Cynthia: Good afternoon. It is Friday, August 21, 2015, and this is an interview for the Bushwick Fair Housing Collective for history. Would you please state your name and affiliation?

Nat: My name is Nat Roe. I am a resident here at Silent Barn. We're in my apartment. I am also a co-founder of this space and I'm the executive director of Flux Factory as well.

Cynthia: And Silent Barn is located here on Bushwick Avenue in Bushwick, Brooklyn. Thank you for taking the time to be a part of the project of the interviews. I just want to start with a little general question just like an icebreaker. Maybe you can even tell me a little bit about your early childhood, your early memories, how you got started along your path, and what brought you eventually to Bushwick? You can start anywhere you like.

Nat: Okay. Well, I was born and raised in New Jersey, Montclair, New Jersey, so I did come into the city pretty frequently and somehow figured that after college I would end up living here. I went to school out in Santa Fe, New Mexico, at a little liberal arts school called St. John's College. After that I taught English in South Korea for about six months and came back to New York for a girl and this was in 2009. When I was purchasing my plane ticket to New York was when Freddie Mac and Fannie Mae were crashing and everybody was freaking out about the recession so I found it difficult to find a job. Eventually I found a listing completely by chance on Twitter to live at a place called Silent Barn. I had been to one concert at Silent Barn before that time, didn't know anybody. The job that I moved to New York for, working in a bakery, of course, I got laid off, maybe fired, like a week later. But I immediately got sucked into this Silent Barn thing. There were four people living there. We were putting on concerts maybe four days a week and I really wanted to get involved with the arts and had been doing music journalism and was a musician myself. So being thrown in the center of that scene changed my life completely and I felt more and more sucked in and like this was kind of my purpose just more as time went on.

So that was in Ridgewood. It was on Wyckoff Ave and Bushwick was right across the street. After I was living there for about two years we were forced to leave. It was kind of that classic artist loft scenario that's been going back many decades, back to Tribeca and the lower East Side, this tradition of artists

taking over industrial spaces and living in them, exhibiting in them, creating work in them. One of the things that I think is really interesting in terms of the city story is that while that loft solution, as an artist led solution to cost savings where the artists are doing their own build out, owning the lease, and they're working directly there and not relying on somebody else to get their space for them. That solution is not really as feasible today. I would think we're kind of in this new era now where because of a more intense regulatory climate, zoning and stuff like that is a lot more under scrutiny and then also because of the more competitive real estate environment. You see quicker changes in zoning and people being forced out more.

I think the Silent Barn story is kind of closely linked with this overall thing that's happening in the city and the press has kind of maintained this narrative too with Silent Barn where DIY which was kind of a label that a generation of artist-led loft spaces, warehouses where people throwing concerts and frequently living and making art. These spaces are being forced now to become legal where most of the people in our DIY community were not even necessarily thinking about what they were doing as being a small business. Even though they were running concerts like almost every night, they weren't really thinking of it as a small business, didn't really have a budget. It was just kind of your individual living space there kind of ends up paying for the whole space and then the shows kind of pay for themselves. That kind of thinking where you're not engaging with the law proactively and thinking like what is my certificate of occupancy, what do we need to do to build out and how do we get the permits for that? Are we allowed to live in this space?

Those questions people in the DIY community are being forced to confront right now. And, yeah, I kind of went astray from my own personal story into this structural thing but that's exactly what Silent Barn did. So after we forced to leave our space in Ridgewood...

Cynthia: When was that?

Nat: 2011, I want to say. I can check on the exact date for you. And we were subsequently robbed as well so we were vacated and then the vacate sign on the front door is basically an advertisement - hey, there's nobody in here and their stuff is in here. So we had everything robbed from us. We were subsequently then able to...we started a kickstarter and raised 20,000 dollars in one day. So we probably would have given up. We had lost the home, whatever business or small business if you want to call it that though we weren't exactly thinking of it in that way and kind of just my whole thing why I was in the city. We lost that in one weekend and the kickstarter did then raise us to a greater deal of accountability where we thought if we are going to spend this money, we can't spend it on space that we might get kicked out of it again. It took us about a year to find the current building, a little bit over that, and that was a very grueling and depressing year. We really didn't know if we were going to make it. I think even a lot of the core members were kind of losing hope at finding an affordable legal space. Forty thousand isn't that

much in the real estate game. In addition to securing this building which at the beginning I believe the rest was 13770 a month. We're on a ten year lease with a five year option to extend. There was an 80,000 build out in addition to that which we actually contracted through the landlord. He ended up beating all the other bids by a long shot.

So raising that additional money was like how do we do this? As renters in the market looking for a space that living, we decided that living in the space was really essential, that it was very important that the venue was a home. Public gathering, workspaces, finding there's mixed uses which you used to just see in lofts all together, all integrated, now you got to find generally as renters residential upstairs, commercial downstairs. It's really hard as renters to find a building that is vacant to rent with that. So usually either an owner is renting out upstairs and using that to help finance renovating downstairs so they can get a new commercial tenant in or vice versa. So that's a real challenge for renters looking for multiple uses in one building. We were so lucky to find this place. It took us months to secure the space but it just blew through this glass ceiling that had been on the old space. Although that was a horrible incident and totally traumatizing and was the hardest year I hope of my life, there might be harder ones coming up, the year of the search, on a number levels really difficult, I feel so grateful that it happened because we're legal now. We're here for a long time. We're much bigger than we ever were. We're serving many more people.

Over that year that we were looking for a space, we were really building up and kind of creating an identity as this volunteer led collective. Depending on how you reckon who is a volunteer and involvement, it's somewhere between like 70 to 120, 130 people currently involved here at Silent Barn. Nobody knows how this place works. There are too many moving parts and too many volunteers and communications, a whole project in itself. But through that process of being displaced we were able to set ourselves up as a bigger, stronger, more long-term, more open service to musicians, to our neighbors, to the people who live and work here, to artists, and the legal and open and I'll call it sustainable in that we know we can be here for 15 years which is more sustainability than we thought we would get from the outside. We never could have gotten to that place in our old space and it blows my mind how far the organization has come.

Cynthia: Taking a couple steps back [unintelligible 00:12:41]. Really rich. What I was hoping was maybe [unintelligible 00:12:45] your reflections and observations of those early days where you were in the old space and your interactions that you had with local residents in the community, any observations you remember or reflections?

Nat: Well, I do remember being good friends with a few of our neighbors and really loving that neighborhood around Myrtle-Wyckoff but one of the things about that space is because of our doing stuff in a warehouse and not knowing exactly what the laws were but being pretty sure that we weren't following

them, we were in a position of hiding. No sign on the front. Advertising was only really through social media. So it was kind of friends and like people in the know who were basically invited and it's not like we were flyer-ing or whatever at the laundromat. We were in this weird position because we were a public space but we couldn't completely open to the public to avoid the scrutiny. So that when you're thinking about gentrification and that's a pretty classic thing, like if you're looking at the artist loft solution and like the DIY space solution, when you're looking at that strategy of taking over a warehouse, it's cheap and it's quick and you don't have to rely on anybody else to do it. You are not fully able to integrate with your immediate neighborhood or with the public at large.

Partly I was younger at that point and not thinking as much about gentrification and Ridgewood was at a much less accelerated point back in 2010. I remember even saying on a panel discussion, remarking that we're kind of far out there in comparison to whatever Williamsburg or some more central stuff. So it really means something when this community comes this far out to see this music. So we were kind of thinking like wow, we're kind of out in the middle of nowhere but it really means something that people care so much about our programming that they'll come all the way out. And that was not a very good way of thinking about things. I think it's pretty easy to deconstruct this idea of like people having to come a far way out because, of course, there's all kinds of people around us. Me having said that when I was younger I think was symptomatic of this way of thinking where we were serving people who were kind of in the know about the underground music scene or something like that and weren't thinking enough or engaging enough or being proactive enough with the people who are all around us.

You know, it kind of undermines as a community building exercise the whole project of community building when you're only allowing one stream to be involved with your space. But we kind of had to do it again because we weren't able or even thinking about the regulatory hurdles, the planning hurdles, the money hurdles of getting a long-term legal space. That was keeping us from interacting with our neighbors in the ways that we're now able to and we're trying to proactively seek out...lost my train of thought there.

Cynthia: No, you haven't. [unintelligible 00:17:24] you had mentioned the DIY community [unintelligible 00:17:31].

Nat: Yeah. I mean there was definitely a thing where there was a community of spaces and people spread out, mostly in Brooklyn I guess. And this is the DIY community. You know, you can find writings about this and references to this all online. What it means, super nebulous kind of social phenomenon. I would think that somewhere in the early 2000s maybe you start to see some of these spaces like Secret Project Robot. I mean Flux Factory was definitely a forerunner in that. There was Market Hotel, Shea Stadium, 285 Kent, Death By Audio, Big Snow Buffalo Lodge, The Wallet. There were a lot of these spaces throughout the 2000s, some of which were long-lived, a few which are

still around, many of which got priced out, some of which got shut down by the police. There was definitely a community of people primarily who I think were interested in music but you know you would also frequently see murals all over the walls. That was another hallmark, I think, of the DIY spaces. Somehow everyone put murals all over the walls. Frequently there were in warehouses.

So it was a music community, these kind of cheaply produced spaces that were just really thinking about art and music and not really thinking about civic impact, at least not thinking very well about it, I think. Predominantly white, definitely. Yeah, just people who liked art and liked music and found these strategies to do it themselves. Yeah, Silent Barn was definitely a part of that community. And I think of most of what you would call the DIY community, like that thing, it's definitely we're in a new era now. Most of those spaces have either been shut down, been priced out, and the people that did them for whatever, maybe they moved or something.

Cynthia: Reflecting back, who you do think were the more influential people in the community? Who was leading in that type of movement [unintelligible 00:20:41] DIY mostly at the time in Bushwick, where it's heading now?

Nat: It was individuals running all those spaces. [Eden] was running almost every concert at Death By Audio. You could see him at the sound board. He did all the booking, lived there. They got famously priced out by Vice a year ago. Todd Patrick is definitely a person who figures in largely, Todd P., into that history, pretty controversial guy in a lot of ways but definitely had his mark on Silent Barn, Market Hotel. He ran Monster Island Basement beneath Secret Project Robot's old space out on Kent and did Show Paper. Show Paper was a free publication that listed mostly just DIY concerts. Joe Ahearn, who helped start this space with me and had lived at Silent Barn for four years, something like that, definitely did a lot. Also, he worked with Todd on Show Paper for a while. He was pretty famous. I think he got some press when he was young for doing concerts in subway trains and other kinds of weird experiments like that. So Joe definitely figures in largely. Nora Dabdoub holds it down and still holds it down super hard to this day for Shea Stadium. She's put on a million concerts there and it is worth commenting although I love the DIY scene and am very much a part of it, it's worth noting it's mostly white males who are in that whatever is identified as that community. It's mostly white males running those spaces.

It's worth pointing out that Nora, it's really amazing that she's in such a leadership position. I don't know. I could go on and on with different people who I think were important to the DIY. There were a lot of people. There were a lot of spaces and sometimes people would stick with a space for a very long time. There's this band, the So So Glos, who are still around and started Market, started Shea Stadium, and they did a lot in the DIY community and were really a DIY band. Somehow they were at the center of a lot of stuff.

Cynthia: What happened? Are they still currently active?

Nat: Yeah, they're still active. A lot of these people I'm talking about were all getting around 30s at this point. So I think some of us are living in more normal apartments and not in the crazy DIY warehouses but they're touring. They're more popular than they've ever been. I think like they're a pretty mainstream band at this point. I think they do the band for a living at this point pretty much.

Cynthia: And so take us through that process then. You were displaced and you were looking for a new space and got the current one. You reflected back on your inability due to the circumstances with Silent Barn to not be too interactive with the community. Have you seen that progress or change in its current state [unintelligible 00:25:08] location?

Nat: Yes, absolutely. It's something I feel really good about. It's one of the things that I'm most proud about the space. I think one of the things when we got broken up on a Friday. We got robbed on a Sunday. And then on like Tuesday or Wednesday we started the kickstarter. There was a lot of press. We raised 20,000 in a day mostly through donations under fifty dollars. So that made us realize that this was bigger than us and that there was a community of people stretching back for like seven years. Silent Barn had been around for a long time before all this. So I definitely was not there in the early days, did not start Silent Barn. We saw that there was this large community that identified and really cared about this space and cared about its success. We also saw that we didn't have the expertise or the time to make this thing work and put it back together. So we started forming and kind of conceptualizing the structure of a volunteer community which we called the kitchen and that was because bands played in the kitchen in the old space. They would play right in front of our kitchen.

And that we had lost our home, somehow this volunteer community took on symbolically, like they were the housemates. They were the new roommates. So we came up with all this fun terminology about chefs and sous chefs. We would meet every Monday. It started to grow and grow and we started to get some real experts and some people who were lawyers, people who were architects, some people who just wanted to help us get our kickstarter T-shirts out. That took a while to do that. All kinds of different things, helping book benefit events, helping to run meetings, and so we would have these weekly kitchen meetings. Eventually we were like in addition to those volunteer meetings we need to start having meetings where we're maybe looking at potential leases, talking about our finances. So we started having weekly [pastetics] meetings. We had to form a LLC to take all this kickstarter money because it wasn't going to go into my personal bank account, of course. So we formed a LLC. It was one meeting and then second supplementary meetings and then we started to grow in that structure and there started to be more and more working groups.

And that was a structural device that really allowed us to grow a lot more. You know, you can only do so much in one meeting with so many people and non-hierarchy, collective management, equal input is really important to us. When a group grows to be that large, you're making a presentation rather than a genuine meeting when you have 70 people. We had a working group that was working on finding real estate. We had a working group that was thinking about the build out and architectural aspects of that, groups that were working on fund raising events. There were all different kinds of things. And then, of course, once we found the space, I was doing a lot of the searching for spaces and I became too depressed to do it and Kristen Berry was really energetic and found this space. Of course, to secure it it took a big team effort. But once we secured the space then we started to split into more working groups. There was the events working group to put on shows here. We produce over 400 public events per year. There are in addition to eight bedrooms here there are about 20 sub-tenants on the commercial floor working in multidisciplinary studios, everything from a recording studio to painters to a theater company to people building electronics.

So just managing the rent on all that is like a whole working group and a lot of time right there, so there's that group. Of course, then analyzing and helping building our financial strength is an important working group that's also kind of looking at the money stuff. The residents at this point, the people who live here, our self-managing group that administers the incoming artists and residents, improving the residency program. We just did an open call for new art works in the residence area. So there are little working groups that are working on their own kinds of issues and interacting with each other as need be. Interestingly enough, I think that the more that these working groups became a thing, especially as time has really borne out, the more Silent Barn culture has become a little more fragmented and there isn't as much of like a one cohesive identity to the thing just because when you have that much information you can't know what everyone else is doing. That's one of the big things.

Also our communication structure, our accountability structure, it's like totally half baked and we're like midstream with this thing right now. So we're actually try to reform as a nonprofit or create a nonprofit entity because the LLC is actually not really an adequate corporate structure for us. So we're using that opportunity to re-look at membership and volunteer accountability. You know, it's kind of baked into this process of being a member of the 501 C3 so that's another working group right there, working on the corporate structure. So there's this internal community. Your question was about community and interacting with community. So we have this "internal" structure which is a lot of people.

Cynthia: [unintelligible 00:33:09].

Nat: I'd say between 75 and 150. If someone works door for a few months, I don't know. This is what I was referring to when I was talking about the whole

communication and accountability being half baked. And, of course, it's volunteerism. If you get a job all of a sudden you're going to flake on volunteering. No one can be blamed for that kind of thing. I just totally lost my train of thought.

Cynthia: [unintelligible 00:33:53] committees if you want to fragment it that way?

Nat: Well, I think it's pretty easy to see why separating the internal and external community isn't a really great way of thinking about things but one of our working groups is an outreach working group that's specifically looking at attending community board meetings, partnering with neighboring institutions for individual public events. For instance, there's a senior center that's just a couple blocks that way and we have an exhibition of oil paintings from a group that gets together and paints there. So we had an opening and had their works up for a while. We have this public gathering space. Of course, space is scarce in this city so just having a place where people can get together is a really big asset that we've been able to offer to a lot of organizations, individuals. So the group that's looking closely at issues of gentrification in the immediate neighborhood, they were particularly active looking at the Rheingold rezoning. I don't remember the whole name of the group. They were hosting meetings here and there was a protest recently and we were just open all night as a place for protesters to use the bathroom, get coffee.

So being able to partner with and offer the assets that we have to our neighbors and proactively reaching out to do that and really trying to go out there and get it, it's something that I think we're all really proud of. We've also been trying to host more educational daytime programs. We had this Salvation Army after school program in yesterday, two days ago, and some residents here gave a workshop for them. So it's a really central intention here in addition to having concerts. People party here all the time. We run [unintelligible 00:36:40]. In addition to being just a great place for people to have fun and play music, the civic impact is really something that's really on the minds of everybody here. I think a lot of that is because we're very conscious that we're definitely having an impact in accelerating people moving into this neighborhood. You could put as simply as I've seen Craigslist ads that said like Silent Barn a block away as a way of trying to encourage people to move into that space.

So we're artists and at this point we are I think still predominantly white so it's something that we're trying to be very aware of the role that white artists who are getting space frequently have in this gentrification cycle and we're certainly trying to do a lot to counteract that and ameliorate that and share what we have. I do think that particularly just the offering of a space for people to even just speak or have their classes or something like that, just that dialogue and creating this network of people who are talking I think goes a long way in terms of offering a systemic solution to gentrification problems. When we were in the old space, not able to link up with a really robust way with our community, we were individuals. So when we were in need we could

not reach out to them, couldn't reach out to our next door neighbors, and that's a reciprocal thing. So the more you get your whole neighborhood talking and forming a support group for each other in a way and looking at rezonings that are occurring and strategizing about how are we going to try and get more affordable housing built into the Rheingold developments. I think one of the big strategies that we've tried to use here in distinction to what we couldn't do at the old space is just give a place for people to talk and strategize together.

And hopefully that helps to counteract to what I'm sure is definitely a cultural institution coming into a changing neighborhood, the effects that we're inevitably going to have here.

Cynthia: Maybe you can do me a favor, link that with how we met. We met [unintelligible 00:40:10] state of New York. Tell me a little bit about that. Tell me about your participation and the topics that were of interest [unintelligible 00:40:20] in New York.

Nat: I've known [Patty Johnson] for a while now. I guess I met her through Flux Factory stuff. Flux Factory is similar to Silent Barn in that it's a collective of people working in a shared space in Long Island City. Somehow between Silent Barn and Flux Factory I managed to get into this position where I'm working in affordable community arts work and living spaces. Patty invited me to participate in that conference. I think I would say a lot of what I was just saying about people getting together and talking and building that support network and the awareness network puts you into a position where you're able to mobilize. And one of the things I have seen come out of that is one of the other speakers, Jenny Dubnau who speaks the ASAP group, Artist Studio Affordability Project, we've continued to meet. She spoke on a panel and we then hosted a meeting at Flux Factory and Patty was there and a few other people from the conference. And this is just one reason I felt the conference was good, so the conference helped to coalesce and grow this group that's looking at one particular issue which I think could be extremely practical in terms of thinking about gentrification.

It's so easy to look at structural problems and my gosh, how hard it is. So one of the main things that group is advocating for is the Small Business Job Survival Act, SBJSA, and this is a law that could be passed by the city council and has a growing number of supporters in the city council and it looks at commercial renters and even more specifically what happens when their lease is up. So how long do they get to extend? Do they have the first option to extend or do they not have any rights at all when they're out of their lease.

Cynthia: What's that law called again?

Nat: Small Business Job Survival Act. So I've personally been advocating for this to all kinds of people that I know and I think it poses one of the most specific and productive solutions to gentrification in all the talks that I've been to around these issues. So this law would, if passed, prevent really large spikes in

rent so there would be a cap on how much...your landlord can't just say okay, now your rent is two times as much. The neighborhood has changed, sorry. If there's a disagreement about what a fair rent increase would be, there's binding third party arbitration based on the evaluation of the building's value, again right to extend and what's proposed there is that you're entitled to a ten year extension. And there are some other things in there that protect the commercial renter's ability to stay in a neighborhood and so with respect to the Artist Affordability Conference, to stay in New York conference that Patty Johnson organized, it impacts restaurants, laundromats, light manufacturing, people who are doing all kinds of commercial things and while the mayor has certainly focused on affordable living, yeah, it's a more important issue in a lot of ways. A person's home comes first.

But thinking about where do they work that directly affects where you can live first of all and has a tremendous impact on transportation infrastructure, on just the character of a neighborhood, the sorts of stores you walk by. Is it an ATM or is it a bodega? And I think we know what kind of New York we want to see. Small businesses are so important and hire so many people, employ so many people and enable them to live in the city. So beyond that connection to living...I was on a roll for a second there.

Cynthia: Well, I mean [unintelligible 00:46:15] really great. [unintelligible 00:46:19] sponsoring or backing this bill or trying to get this bill passed.

Nat: There are a few different activist groups behind it. The one that I've been talking to directly is the Artist Studio Affordability Project. There's also Take Back NYC which I think has been working...the ASP, of course, is working on artists' studios as one segment of the issue. I think Take Back NYC has been looking more completely at the whole sector. One of the things that I think is really cool about this is...now I guess I'm qualified enough to be the executive director of a nonprofit and we have been able to sustain and plan for this. We're about like 8000 square feet and like, I don't know, 50 tenants here at Silent Barn, something like that, 40 tenants. And I never thought that I was going to be someone who was helping to run small businesses. When I started running what was basically a small business, the old Silent Barn space, I didn't really know why a budget was an important thing to make for instance. Didn't really think about laws. So I think it's tremendously important for...I think it's so important to have a low barrier for entry to entrepreneurship in New York City. I think that innovative ideas, experimental ideas, grassroots cultural things, all kinds of grassroots ideas, you need to be able to get into them without knowing exactly how it works.

The more there's a really esoteric barrier of knowledge and the more there's a dollar challenge to get past, the more you're not going to see new ideas and interesting ideas coming. So for that reason I think that supporting renters and commercial renters is really important. To rent a building, well, you need to make like a down payment. Maybe you need to do a little bit of build out. Even that much is like so hard if you're trying to get some new, weird, crazy

idea that you've got off the ground. But buying a building, like Silent Barn is nowhere near a place where we're able to buy a building and Flux Factory is struggling to think about how can we buy a building after being just renters for so many years and so much planning, so much expertise, so much support from all different levels still can't get over that massive barrier to entry. And so while I think buying is a solution that I think people who are thinking about gentrification should really think about and it's an important solution for there to be mission based ownership and ethical ownership, I think also giving more rights to renters is really important and both of these strategies should be used simultaneously. So you should be able to rent a space without investing that much money and you should be able to have some security into the future.

You should be able to sustain your business knowing that all of a sudden, one year from now, five years from now, whatever your lease is, you should be able to know I'm not going to have to suddenly shift my entire business model because I'm going to have to move out to wherever and be completely isolated from my whole customer base or I'm not going to have to completely switch around my business model because all of a sudden it costs 40% more to do business in this space. What's at stake here is that innovative ideas, grassroots ideas that don't have the proof yet that would get them beyond some of these barriers of entry can find a place or they cannot find a place and fizzle. So I think renters' rights and this specific law, the Small Business Jobs Sustainability Act, that single law would have such a tremendous impact on the viability of grassroots and innovative ideas.

Cynthia: And what were your reflections of the participation and attendance of the group of people who attended [unintelligible 00:51:52]? Was it productive? Was it rewarding?

Nat: I thought there were a lot of great ideas that were thrown out on the table. Actually one of the most interesting notions which really I wouldn't have said what I just said...I'm forgetting the name of the panelist now but one of the speakers was talking about legitimizing renting culture and really looking at that as...

Cynthia: [unintelligible 00:52:29]. Correct? [unintelligible 00:52:33] and try to remember her name as well.

Nat: She was African-American and descended from slaves and she was comparing the cycle of displacement to this American historical narrative of Europeans taking land from the people who originally lived here and also then owning bodies, owning slaves. So one of the things that I think she was seeing and I don't think I understood it just as well as she did. She was really onto something really philosophically interesting that really set off some ideas in my mind. But she was looking at legitimizing renting culture and giving more support to renting culture now to breaking the cycle of the ownership of bodies and the ownership of land that somehow is controlling people in this

kind of unethical way. Yeah, I don't think I could say much more than that. I totally wish I could remember her name right now.

Cynthia: I have it written down somewhere. I can look it up for you.

Nat: Yeah. I think the knee jerk solution to getting out of this gentrification cycle is like take the building off the market, buy it. It's an important solution, I think. There was a panel on buying...

Cynthia: Just the idea of talking about creative approaches to ownership rather than just to be falling on the shoulders of just one artist's idea of collective ownership and of course [unintelligible 00:54:33] talking about what's so wrong with renting and why is it becoming harder in New York City, [unintelligible 00:54:41] city. [unintelligible 00:54:44] this idea that these approaches being done simultaneously.

Nat: I think both things have to happen. This is from a city policy perspective. I think this is what the government should be doing because certainly the real estate industry isn't thinking about these civic equality issues. This is a singular role that the government has to play. Yeah, I think it's two tracks. One is giving more rights to renters, making it easier to have a sustainable business, place of living, so that new innovative new ideas which support job growth which are huge assets to neighborhoods. Renters bring so much on so many different levels. So I think that's got to be strengthened by the city. And the SBJSA, I think, is a solution, a viable solution that gets us a lot of the way there, really improves it. I think also regarding buying, the barrier to entry is so high even for proven organizations. With Flux Factory we've been renters for 21 years now. So in rent we've paid like millions and the amount of grants and fund raising support that we've gotten over the years is also huge. It's immensely difficult for us as a 21-year-old organization with a long fund raising and philanthropic and grant winning history it is so daunting to try and buy. And that's where we're trying to go.

It's difficult for two reasons because there's the access to information, so it's an esoteric trade. There are all kinds of laws. The way that the real estate market plays out, there's definitely a lot of savvy that certain professionals have and I think actually a lot of those professionals have deliberately made their knowledge proprietary. So I'm very interested in seeing a very proactive approach to getting this information and this knowledge out there. I think there's got to be websites, books, educational courses on how do you look at multi-year financial plans. How does that all break out between your mortgage, your down payment, your improvements, different taxes, operational costs? How does that break out into a timeline where you're looking at filing for making different renovations, trying to secure a lease? Leases are tough. And, of course, lawyers are a great example of information being very proprietary where you have to pay them for their knowledge. That's not all without reason. They got to pay off their student debts. But I think a lot of that legal information should be much more open and accessible.

And then also regarding the money part. Of course, that's a very steep barrier to entry with buying a building. I think there needs to be more proactive approaches from the city to finance grassroots organizations purchasing property. Of course, Bill de Blasio is looking at affordability a lot. It's great but it's this top down approach where he's like okay, let's look at the Sunnyside Yards and like let's make this big idea where I'm going to like build platforms above...oh, I'm not supposed to talk about this stuff. You need to scrub that stuff on the Sunnyside Yards. Wait, can I talk about it? Okay, actually I can because he announced it. So Mayor Bill de Blasio announced at his state of the city, whatever, that he wanted to build a few hundred thousand affordable living units above the Sunnyside rail yards, so like this huge engineering feat and like there were be some sort of getting developers and public investors to build these huge buildings there. That's great but I think that small organizations and individuals know how to do affordable housing better.

They're going to be thriftier about it. They're going to be more strategic about it and it's really going to result in something that bolsters the city's existing infrastructure rather than just like popping this whole entire different infrastructure into wherever City Hall thinks they can get this. So I think financing solutions, loan solutions, even just straight up cash for down payments because there's really no support other than philanthropy for the down payment. You can get a mortgage, of course. Banks do that but that part of things is particularly difficult for organizations and individuals of course. So I think if the city were to take that approach where it was trying to bolster small businesses' ability to secure buildings, to buy buildings so that they could be sustainable and sustainably affordable that would be a better approach than the approach that the mayor has been taking.

Cynthia: Which is just the top down?

Nat: Yeah. Not entirely. Of course, the Department of Cultural Affairs in New York is larger than the National Endowment for the Arts. Huge organization giving operational support to lots of nonprofit. I think it's like over 1000 nonprofits they support and part of that is capital costs. Theoretically, I guess if you had bought a building as a nonprofit you could use that for the renovations to operationalize that space. So the DCA is huge for arts nonprofits with respect to being able to be affordable and provide services for their groups but then also towards like space and being able to maintain a space. So the city does a lot but I think it can do more.

Cynthia: And where do you see Silent Barn in all of this, I guess, moving forward? That could even [unintelligible 01:02:58] again, [unintelligible 01:03:01] that support small businesses. Maybe thinking about it again, bringing it back to Bushwick.

Nat: Oh, yeah, we're talking about Bushwick.

Cynthia: Even city wide, not just the neighborhood, just happens to be the focus of the study but not exclusive to Bushwick. It's a city wide practice. What are your reflections on that?

Nat: Silent Barn, I think, is a paradigm in a lot of ways of a small business struggling to survive. Certainly there's a lot we do for advocacy on a systematic level and we were kind of talking a little a bit about that earlier. One of the things that's going to be really interesting moving forward with this space is, you saw the scaffolding across the street, that's all going to be high end residential.

Cynthia: [unintelligible 01:04:10] up the street. [unintelligible 01:04:17].

Nat: We are utterly encircled. Yeah, that church where they recently took down the pinnacle.

Cynthia: That's where I attended two years ago [unintelligible 01:04:26] becoming this thing. Yeah, the wagons are circling.

Nat: This gas station, I understand to be under the process of rezoning. This building, my understanding is that the owner has air rights to go up about nine, ten stories. So he's just telling us when our lease is done, he's knocking the thing down and building ten story housing so that's going to be awesome for his retirement. He's going to be just fine. We are renters in this city. We don't actually get that much support. We're really an independent organization fiscally. Since we're an LLC, we were talking about how we're working on creating this 501 C3 which would enter into some way with a partnership with the LLC. Hopefully, we'll be able to dissolve the LLC and give the 501 C3 ownership over everything. Because we're a LLC we're not allowed to get a lot of the benefits that nonprofits, access to grants, tax exemptions. We have a great relationship with our council person. His offices had meetings here. We can't discretionary funding from his office for one. We do get donations. Of course, those original kickstarter donations just put the fire under us. But most of our money comes from rent on sub-tenants. We're selling real estate primarily. That's about two-thirds of Silent Barn's budget. And, of course, it's mission based real estate which is offered at sub market rates and which comes packaged in with all sort of assets, access to programming, access to community, access to shared workspaces, etc.

When I say we sell real estate, I would say we're an example of mission based real estate. And then the rest comes through ticket sales, does a little bit. We take 25% of the cut from covers at the door. You pay seven dollars to come to a concert or whatever and the bar, so booze has a good markup. We sell a lot of it. We're constantly thinking about how we can sell more because we got to pay our rent on this building and it's so high. Almost every month here we're running at a deficit. So we have a lot of really high level multi-financial planning. We have always had 100% occupancy on sub-tenants throughout

this building and when I say it's sub market, I don't mean it's cheap. We really want to offer cheaper rent to people. We're running 400 public events a year, selling booze to people. Like there's no more profitable product than booze other than like, I don't know, gasoline or something. Maybe we should get into that business. And we're still running at a deficit. And our rent is only going to go up over the course of the years and when we get to the end of our ten-year lease and have to then negotiate our rent within certain bounds for the five year extension it's only going to get more difficult and then after we're entirely out of our lease, are we going to be able to offer our owner rent such that he's convinced that he's not going to build up ten stories and sell market rate apartments?

So we're a really good example of an organization that has done a tremendous amount of planning, that has a tremendous amount of volunteerism, and has been highly successful. And all the same, because we are renters, we're fucked. We're totally fucked. We're probably not going to be around for more than 13 years. Maybe we'll all be done by then. We might be happy to be done with all this work at that point so who knows whether the volunteer body will want to continue at that point but we probably won't have the option.

Cynthia: In regards to these [unintelligible 01:09:40] you see also ripple through the community. What are your thoughts on that?

Nat: The volunteer community here?

Cynthia: Also how you see again development across the street, how that was affecting. When you arrived you said at the earlier location you did have conversations with your neighbors. How about in this community? How do you see that changing?

Nat: Oh, yeah. Well, there'll probably be some douche bags around us in these like weird luxury buildings. We are thinking carefully about soundproofing which is probably going to be like ten to twenty thousand dollars. We're going to have to think more carefully about that and plan for that. Within our own community there is a real awareness that we're running at a deficit and everybody's thinking how can we get more money and that puts pressure on the booking team. So there's pressure on the booking team. Nobody wants to think about like how many people we can get through the door. It's fun to have a big concert but we just want to think about music but we're forced through our financial position to alter our curatorial thinking. So the kind of art we put on because we are renters, when it's a Friday or Saturday we have to get people through the door. This is my cat, Mama. We discovered her in the alley next to the old Silent Barn space and she is called Mama because she had had four kittens and was like just eating out of the trash and she was stray, started sneaking in and she was so nice that eventually the stray started to legitimately live there.

Cynthia: Like everyone here.

Nat: Yeah, I guess. Bunch of strays.

Cynthia: Thank you for your feedback. Coming back to your point about...

Nat: Yeah. It strains our curatorial freedom and we're trying to think how can we organize fund raisers. We're like struggling to get a qualified grant writer. We've never had a strong grant writer. I wouldn't say a strong grant writer but because we've only had volunteer grant writers we haven't been able to get people who could put in a ton of time or necessarily have the professional background. The grant landscape is a little esoteric and something that one learns about through time. So we've never been strong with grants. But we're always having to think about money and how to survive. It's the same thing like when I was working a bunch of part time jobs and stressing every fucking morning about how I'm going to pay my rent. So you end up doing all sorts of weird gigs that are stupid or like working for an organization or a boss that you like totally hate. We have to do stuff like that here. I'm not saying all the art here is produced with love and I'm not saying we book concerts because of the money or anything like that but there's a mission strain caused by affordability issues associated with rentership.

Cynthia: So what [unintelligible 01:14:08] I guess moving forward, what are some [unintelligible 01:14:14] that Silent Barn is taking. [unintelligible 01:14:14] about it?

Nat: Well, we're locked in with our lease. We're legal in all aspects so that's 13 years of sustainability in space as long as we can kind of beat this deficit. Again, we're working from an advocacy angle to try and support and give a home to these grassroots, political, civil, neighborhood, community issues. We haven't really thought in earnest about buying. We're struggling to continue renting. We don't have the capacity to think about buying right now.

Cynthia: Have you thought about nurturing relationships with outside organizations, local in the area, that are also advocating for more rights and less of the [unintelligible 01:15:32] of the renter as they pertain not to just small businesses but to the local community, have you thought of reaching out to other local organizations and seeing how you partner up?

Nat: We do a lot. We're very active with that. Again, this is the outreach working group that's working most closely with those issues. Right now, the working groups I work with are the residents and some of the liabilities and legal issues I work on pretty closely.

Cynthia: But also in regards to this whole small business act that you were talking about, this type of legislation, it seems like there is a lot of potential with something like that. [unintelligible 01:16:16] you get catapulted into evolving into something even larger.

Nat: This is exactly what we're trying to do.

Cynthia: Well, I think we're done. Do you have any final words before we log off? Any final words from Mama?

Nat: Like I'm done with this. No, I got a lot of stuff out.

Cynthia: Thank you so much for your time.

Nat: Of course. This is fun. Maybe this is one good final thought. When I started getting sucked into Silent Barn, it was because I loved music. I loved working with musicians. I loved running shows, booking shows, knowing musicians, stuff like that. Somewhere in the five years, six years since I've been working with Silent Barn and Flux Factory now, although I love art, love music, I think what I'm really interested in is the civic impact of these kinds of spaces. And I do think that collectively led places that produce culture and which integrate many different aspects of life, living in an apartment, inviting people in for public events, working collectively on your creative practice or trade, I think integrating all those things under one roof and having a collective around that, I think that offers a really valuable civic model. It's a little democracy and they're totally messy and dysfunctional. People disagree all the time. They're not efficient at making decisions like unilateral one person runs a business but the results of it are singular. You get very diverse perspectives all brought together and people appreciating that diversity in itself even if they don't necessarily agree with each idea or like each individual artist's esthetic. I think it's kind of really helped to reaffirm what I think is good or could be good about this country, about the democratic experiment. It offers a small scale paradigm of what I think this country has set out to do. It encourages good citizenship. So I think this is why at this point I'm primarily interested in artist community spaces.

[End of recorded material at 01:19:44]