



## **APT: A Creative Incubator**

### **A Two-Year Experiment**

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# Executive Summary

APT is a creative incubator space that encompasses artist studios, gallery walls, informal performance space, common-area creative workspaces, and meeting spaces and a conference room. APT's mission is "to provide a creative, collaborative and safe place for artists to make art and for the community to collide with it."

The Arts Partnership, the Metro's umbrella arts organization, has managed the space since December 2016 through an agreement with The Killbourne Group, the local developer that owns the building. APT offers subsidized rents to artists and other creatives to sustain their artistic livelihoods and also to contribute to the livelihood of the arts in downtown Fargo.

From the start, The Arts Partnership viewed APT as a place for risk-taking and experimentation. It was always meant to be a hybrid space, part artist studios, part space-to-activate-the-arts-however-we-can. That means it has worn multiple hats, some more stylishly than others.

Originally, APT was scheduled to close in December 2018, but delays in the development plans for the lot on which it sits have extended APT's existence through June 2019.

This paper, written two years into the creation of APT, is not meant as a formal analysis; indeed, it was conducted with fairly narrow parameters that focused on the experiences that APT tenants and The Arts Partnership's staff have had in working in and managing the space. The paper explores and highlights which aspects of APT have been successful and which have not from those perspectives, based on the following avenues of data and information:

- Interviews with 7 current and former APT tenants – a decidedly small sampling of the total of 47 artists of all stripes who have rented studio space since December 2016 but instructive nonetheless. (See Appendix A.)
- Analysis of sales at the occasional APT art markets. (See Appendix B.)
- Anecdotal evidence, including from artists about how renting an APT studio space has changed their entrepreneurial model.

Overall, the participating artists have benefited and grown artistically and entrepreneurially from their time in the space, whether as renters or as guest artists. Resident artists report that having a studio at APT increased artist productivity. And, importantly, having an artist space that can be open to the public has increased the community's ability to access the arts on a more intimate scale. Also importantly, APT's artists and events have contributed to the Metro's economic baseline, returning money through sales tax on art, income tax for individual artists and so on.

This experiment in creating a diverse artistic micro-community has been successful in ways both tangible and intangible. The financial success of the 2017 Holiday Art Markets, for

example, provides a concrete measure of the economic impact that artists can have in a community. Several of the resident artists have quit their day jobs to focus fully on the business of being an artist.

Obviously, it is harder to quantify and qualify the health-and-well-being impact that the space has had on the community. Security and staffing concerns did restrict the public's access to the artists and spaces in the building to specific hours and events. Although efforts at activating the space necessarily were limited, overall they were successful and indicate that the community at large has a hunger for such opportunities. Indeed, anecdotally, we know that patrons of the space overwhelmingly have benefited by experiencing performances or discovering new artists at APT markets.

Based on these findings, The Arts Partnership committed to a next iteration of APT that can continue to grow the influence and impact the arts have in the Metro.

## **The Physical Plant**

APT is housed in a former Military Entrance Processing Station, remaining as it was since the military vacated. Located at 225 4<sup>th</sup> Avenue North in Fargo, it is technically downtown, but on the eastern and northern edge of downtown. As a non-descript former military building on the edge of what is outside of the six-block long by four-block wide stretch that most consider "downtown," it has proven difficult for some patrons to find.

Originally, APT occupied 12,000 square feet of the 20,000 square foot building. The bulk of the artist studios are located around two open spaces, much like stores ringing a town square. The common/open spaces provide gallery walls, meeting space and informal performance space. Additionally, there is a garage housing kilns for clay and glass, a conference/meeting room and other storage spaces.

The front third of the building originally was given over to commercial tenants (managed directly by the developer). However, over time, the developer has released space to The Arts Partnership for rental to creatives, boosting the APT footprint to approximately 15,000.

Some of the artist tenants liked that the space isn't beautiful; they said it gives them freedom to "spill paint on the carpet." Other artists longed for a more aesthetically pleasing space. One tenant said the lack of windows is disappointing. Another tenant said they understand why the space isn't interesting or beautiful, but in the future more emphasis should be put on aesthetics.

Tenants are free to decorate and paint their studio interiors and doors. Artists said this personalization is imperative for any similar spaces they would wish to rent.

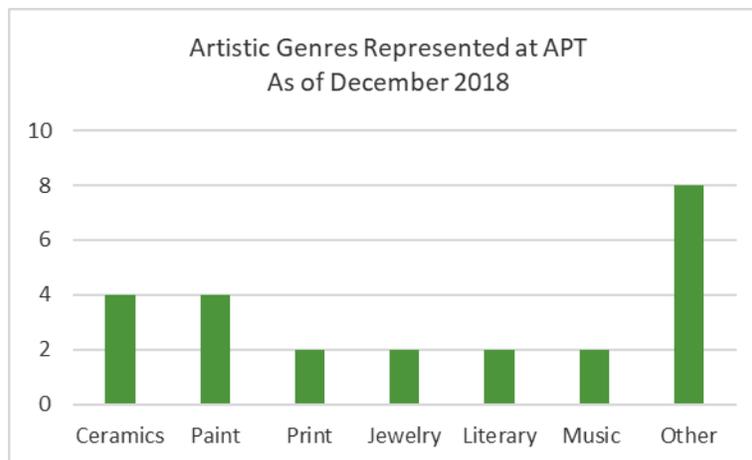
## Demographics of APT

Overall, APT serves a broad range of artists and arts consumers, attracting those working in or seeking out a range of artistic genres.

### *Studio Artists*

As of December 2018, APT houses 26 artists ranging from full-time, more established artists in their 40s and 50s to emerging artists (including recent college graduates) who may work part-time at other, non-artistic jobs. From the start, The Arts Partnership hoped to encourage a diversity of career stages and genres; that wish has resulted in inclusion of some artists working in genres that may have precluded access to other studio spaces.

These artists work in a wide range of artistic genres, with the majority in the visual arts. Beyond the “usual” types of artists, APT houses those working in interior design, clothing design, graphic design, fused glass, media production and floral arrangement.



Note: Some artists work across multiple genres.

The mix of artistic genres remains a selling point for many of the current tenants. Often artist studio spaces gather like artists, painters with painters or maybe a few printmakers thrown in. It is less common for a ceramist to have as studio neighbors a poet and a jewelry maker. APT’s mix of artistic genres has promoted intra-genre artistic collaborations. Too, studio artists have found it useful to have a range of perspectives and informal critiques from “outsider” perspectives.

## Use of the Space

### ***By Studio Artists***

Tenants use their studio spaces primarily to produce their own creative work and sometimes to meet with clients, but do not often use the common or public spaces for extensive creative work or business. A couple of the studio artists have used their APT studios or common spaces to offer classes available to the general public. Additionally, a couple studio artists held pop-up art exhibits in the two main gallery spaces.

Some resident artists have self-set schedules for their studio time, working at the same time on the same days every week. Others come to their studios as their personal and/or non-arts professional schedules allow. Artists spend anywhere from 15 minutes to more than 8 hours in their space for a work session, during all hours of the day and night. Because of this range, many surveyed tenants said 24/7 access was crucial.

Given that the building is not staffed 24/7, the outside doors remain locked unless the building is specially opened to the general public. Obviously, this limits access by the general public to specific days/times and makes it difficult for artist tenants to meet with clients or receive deliveries. One tenant suggested that a gallery and storefront with regular hours would increase the visibility of APT in the community and likely lead to increased sales. Other tenants have wanted to open their studio up as a shop, but cannot given the security needs for the building at large.

Tenants suggested that any new artist space should have greater accessibility for the public, but they also voiced concern about turning into an “artist zoo.” Many felt it would be disruptive and would limit their creative production time if the general public were allowed in at all hours.

### ***By Non-Tenant Artists***

Non-tenant artists have rented or used space at APT for gallery shows, performance space and classes, and have participated in various art markets (see below). In some cases, The Arts Partnership has been the host of such events, but in others, The Arts Partnership has simply facilitated the use of the space.

For example, during Mental Health Month in May 2018 The Arts Partnership curated an exhibit of work by artists who use art as a healing tool. In addition to the paintings and drawings on exhibit, the opening reception featured poetry by a writer who suffers from bi-polar disorder and talks by several of the participating artists. In another example, The Arts Partnership worked with Make-A-Wish Foundation to create an exhibition opportunity for a teenaged artist wish recipient. Approximately 200 people attended the opening event; The Arts Partnership opened the space by appointment for those wishing to see the exhibit in the subsequent weeks.

Musicians and performers have also used the space, holding CD release launch parties and ticketed live performances. In such events, The Arts Partnership serves as a rental facility and has had no input in the content or execution of the events.

A key impediment to non-APT tenants using the space is the security/staffing issue, which greatly limits accessibility and has meant that The Arts Partnership needs to be present to open the doors by appointment or during the specific events.

### ***By Non-Artists***

The Arts Partnership is the primary “external” user of APT for “non-art”, using it as both formal and informal meeting space, ranging from one-on-one meetings with artists or business leaders to TAP board retreats to grant review panels. The Arts Partnership also hosts events in APT, such as Community Supported Art, a program that introduces artists to arts consumers, and its spring fundraising event, An Artful Evening.

APT is also open for groups or individuals to use. A number of businesses and higher education entities have used the space for retreats or large meetings they’d prefer were held “off campus” in a non-traditional meeting space. APT has even been the location for a bridal shower and a wedding, among other private events.

### ***As Retail Space***

Although staffing/security issues have precluded the use of APT as a regular/on-going retail space, The Arts Partnership always envisioned that the general public would have access to the artists through occasional open studio or art market events. Several such events were held in the first year of APT’s existence, with varying degrees of success in attracting the general public and in sales of the artists’ work.

The Arts Partnership decided to experiment with a more sustained art market, launching a Holiday Art Market on Small Business Saturday in November 2017 that continued through the first weekend in January. The results of that Holiday Market were impressive: \$20,000 in collective sales over the four-hour retail events held on ten Thursdays and Saturdays over the six-week period. Sales per artist per event averaged \$96. More than 1,200 people frequented the 10 markets. Appendix B provides a more comprehensive look at the 2017-2018 holiday markets.

Given the success of those Holiday Art Markets, APT has continued to open as a retail space for one-time art market events for Valentine’s Day and Mother’s Day, and has taken part in larger events organized by other entities in the community, including Corks and Canvas, Cocoa Crawl, and Studio Crawl. Some of these events are more financially successful than others (and none has topped the 2017-2018 holiday markets in terms of sales and attendance), but generally all can be deemed as successful from a perspective of audience awareness and participation.

## **Benefits to Artists**

Artists report a number of benefits to renting studio space at APT, including having a distraction-free dedicated space; increased productivity; opportunities for networking; and art sales.

### ***A Dedicated Space***

Most artists feel that having a dedicated studio space outside of their homes was integral to their growth as an artist. Such space gives artists freedom to leave a project in mid-implementation without worrying about cleaning up and, importantly, to have a professional space to meet with clients (though they still raise concerns about accessibility; artists are unable to have clients in their space without letting them in at one of the outside doors). One tenant said that having a studio space at APT was worth it if only to have a business address.

### ***Increased Productivity and Creativity***

Overall, tenants noted that APT has increased their productivity. Some artists stated that having a studio allowed them to take their art production to the “next level,” whether that was creatively or entrepreneurially or both.

Being surrounded by creative makers increases artists’ drive to create and sell. Artists who previously spent time in isolated studios or had worked from home said there was a clear advantage to being surrounded by peers, in large part because of the informal critiques and direct artistic feedback.

The art markets and other events at APT further drive productivity. Some tenants felt motivated to set goals for themselves in preparation of art markets in ways they hadn’t before. These goals included artistic and production goals, such as making new work and more of it, as well as marketing goals, such as making business cards or finally finishing their website. One artist said, “In a studio on my own I would have less exposure, less feedback, and less events to plan and promote.”

### ***Networking and Visibility***

Exposure at art markets has had longer-term effects on tenants beyond the immediacy of selling something to the customer in front of them. Indeed, the increased visibility to the general public is important for each artist’s “brand.” Subsequent to participation in an art market or other event, several artists have been commissioned to create art for new clients. Finally, networking amongst tenants has led to referrals, articles in local magazines, and partnerships with local businesses.

## ***Sales***

As noted previously, the art markets and other events (i.e. Studio Crawl) held throughout the year promoted sales for both resident and guest artists. The APT art markets provided the opportunity for artists to sell their work to the general public, often for the first time. Some artists had not seriously considered selling their work in any significant way before APT, given how few outlets exist for art or artisan product in the Metro.

The Arts Partnership has collected sales data from most of the markets – as stated elsewhere, some were more lucrative for the participating artists than others. What was impossible to track was how participating in the events had impact beyond the day-of. Anecdotally, artists were content even when they did not sell as well as anticipated. Many expressed satisfaction with the increased exposure to a new public, and we do know anecdotally that several artists were contacted about follow-up purchases (“we can’t stop thinking about that painting...”) and commissions.

## **Conclusion**

From The Arts Partnership’s perspective, APT has fulfilled its mission “to provide a creative, collaborative and safe place for artists to make art and for the community to collide with it.” Importantly, it has proven the concept that supporting artists and other creatives with reasonable spaces in which to create and sell has a positive impact socially and financially that extends beyond the benefits each individual artist experiences.

APT has given artists a new capacity to expand their work and business. Artist tenants feel their tenure at APT has given them better resources, networks, and – importantly – the confidence to pursue their craft as a full- or part-time career rather than a hobby.

# Appendix A: Survey

*Note: This survey was administered by e-mail, in person, or by phone call.*

## Apt Survey



Thank you for taking your time to share your thoughts about APT. Please answer these questions and return them to [danica@theartspartnership.net](mailto:danica@theartspartnership.net).

1. Describe how, how often and when you use your space.
2. Has having a space at APT helped you grow or innovate as an artist? Has it helped make you more productive?
3. Do you interact often/sometimes/not at all with other tenants?
  - a) Is it primarily social or work related?
  - b) Has it led to breakthroughs for you as an artist?
  - c) Have you collaborated with any other tenants?
4. Is there anything you wish you could be doing with in the space that you don't currently do?
5. Do you sell what you're making? yes
  - a) How does your use of the space contribute to that?
  - b) Has income from art sales increased since you moved into APT?
  - c) Has APT had an impact in your sales beyond the art markets?
6. If APT didn't exist, would you seek another similar arrangement?
7. What expectations do you find are being met very well?
8. What expectations do you find are *not* being met very well?
9. Do you believe you're getting sufficient value for your money?
10. (If a previous tenant) Why did you leave APT?

# Appendix B: 2017-2018 Holiday Art Market

## APT Holiday Market Sales

Sat. 11/25	Thur. 11/30	Sat. 12/2	Thur. 12/7	Sat. 12/9	Thur. 12/14	Sat. 12/16	Thur. 12/21	Thur. 1/4	Sat. 1/6	Total
\$3,669	\$2,144	\$1,833	\$2,086	\$1,349	\$1,898	\$2,579	\$2,484	596	1325	\$19,961

Figure 3: APT Holiday Market sales numbers over a 10-market period

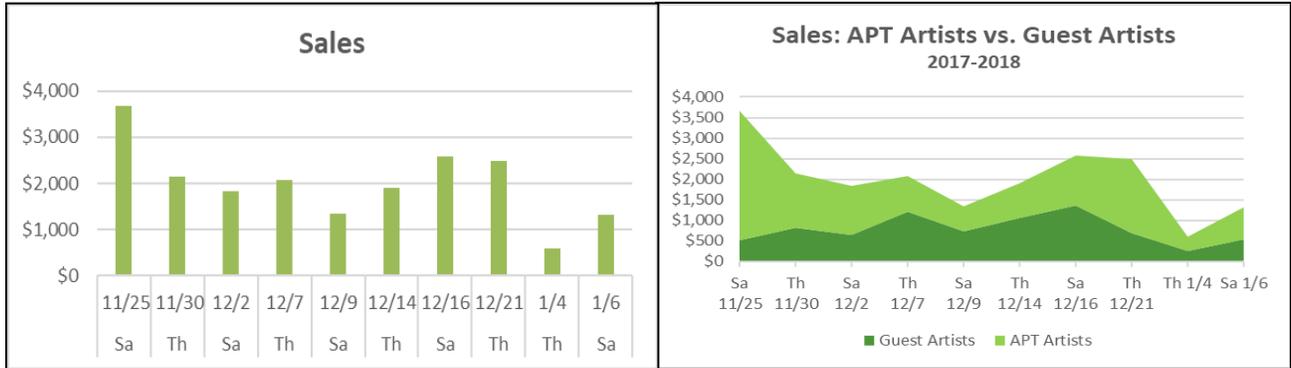


Figure 4 & 5: Charts illustrating the sales numbers from Figure 3

## APT Holiday Market Attendance

Sat. 11/25	Thur. 11/30	Sat. 12/2	Thur. 12/7	Sat. 12/9	Thur. 12/14	Sat. 12/16	Thur. 12/21	Thur. 1/4	Sat. 1/6	Total
317	109	154	151	98	89	113	79	42	57	1209

Figure 6: APT Holiday Market attendance numbers over a 10-market period.

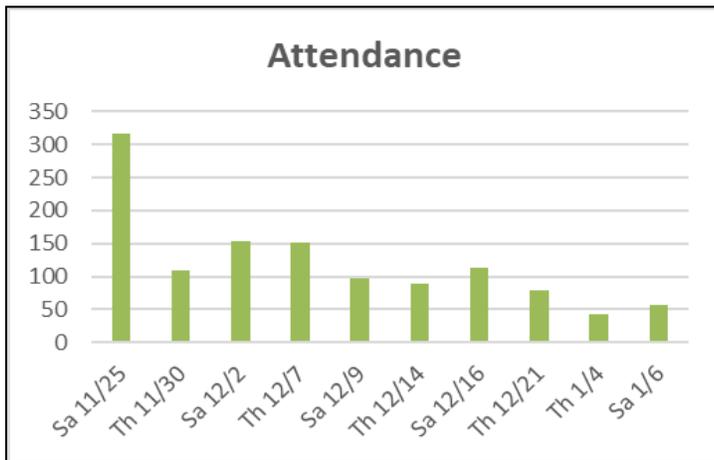
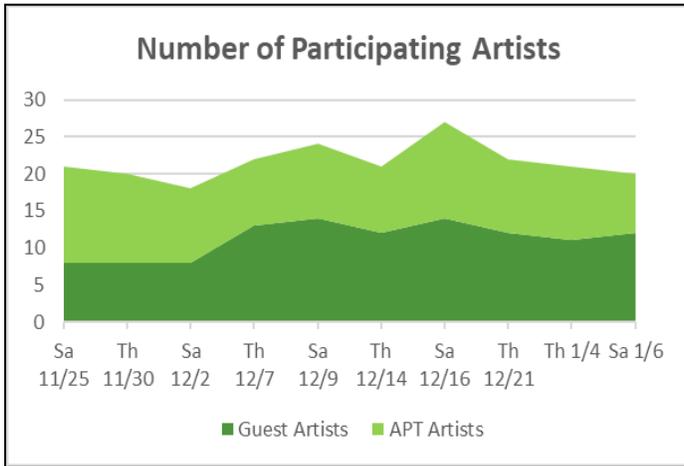


Figure 7: Chart illustrating the attendance numbers from Figure 6.

**APT Holiday Market Artist Participation**

Sat. 11/25	Thur. 11/30	Sat. 12/2	Thur. 12/7	Sat. 12/9	Thur. 12/14	Sat. 12/16	Thur. 12/21	Thur. 1/4	Sat. 1/6	Total
20	19	18	21	23	20	26	21	20	20	35

**Figure 7:** APT Holiday Market artist participation numbers over a 10-market period



**Figure 8:** Chart illustrating the artist participation numbers from Figure 7