

From Dispossessed Disabled Artists Demanding Housing (DDADH)
To Workman Arts' Executive Director and interim Artistic Director Scott Miller Berry

our lines of thought towards addressing housing at Workman Arts

Workman Arts hires a person who can function as housing worker and long-term housing strategist.

Workman Arts hires this person on a schedule that allows for efficient help to members in need of housing and also allows for time to focus on long-term housing security for Workman Arts members.

This person, as housing worker/strategist, establishes a series of work principles based on a social definition of disability, on a disability-justice lens, on disability advocacy and on models and discourses of mutual aid and solidarity.

The housing worker/strategist establishes a housing advisory council (HAC) and collaborates with the membership and HAC to finalize its membership, decision-making process and its role.

The housing worker/strategist gathers information on the limits of existing housing supports and advocates against them.

The housing worker/strategist establishes and updates a database of useful and productive information and contacts.

The housing worker/strategist remembers that DDADH has a lot of experience and knowledge and is available to share.

Most definitions of disability are “medical”. They locate the disability in the body-mind of the disabled person. They speak of “condition”, “impairment”, “impotence”, etc. A “social” definition of disability says that disability is not a condition in the disabled person but a series of barriers between people. This is a very different understanding that has the advantage of shifting the responsibility for the “disability” onto the ableism, systemic oppression and erasure practiced by our society.

With a disability-justice lens, we understand a working lens that is anchored in the origins of the disability-justice movement and disability studies and their intersectional examination of ableism, disability and systemic oppression. Regarding our human and tenant rights, we expect our housing worker to take action to help us defend them, but also to help members to keep in mind that despite their potential to improve situations, these established rights might be founded on ableist beliefs and oppression and are just tools for us to navigate at best an oppressive housing market.

Parkdale's Economy is an inspiring model of mutual aid. Mutual aid is very different from “charity”. We reject the discourse and the mindset of charity. We are not the ones to be helped by minds hungry for the satisfaction to help. We are unfortunately on the wrong side of systemic oppression and this is where the problem is.

We suggest that Workman Arts' Housing Advisory Council (HAC) be primarily made of Workman Arts members committed to disability-justice and with lived experience of housing insecurity, of finding solutions, and of housing advocacy for short-term and long-term housing security. The council should have a good and up-to-date grasp of the challenges of looking for housing on the private market and of navigating landlord's mistrust and discrimination. It should have experience with the supports that the city offers such as housing help centres, housing allowances (example: the Toronto Transitional Housing Allowance Program (TTHAP)), the Canada-Ontario-Housing Benefit (COHB) rent-geared-to-income (RGI) housing, “affordable” housing, housing in Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC), etc. It should have a stable foot in housing advocacy. It should represent a network of relationships with other non-profit organizations, City housing bureaucrats and City Councillors.

We recommend that HAC

- revises and approves the worker/strategist's work principles
- guides the worker/strategist on the most efficient practices to find housing (ex. is there “affordable” housing available somewhere (Parkdale Neighbourhood Land Trust (PNLT), city's and non-profit “affordable” developments, Artscape's calls), how, where and when is it best to look at online adds, how to reply to them, when to trust landlords; when would it be good that the worker first speaks with the landlord, what financial supports are available and how to get them, who among bureaucrats and councillors could help and how to get that help, etc.)
- guides the worker/strategist's advocacy towards long-term housing security for the membership (ex. what is our “utopia”, who as politicians, bureaucrats and non-profit organizations could be partners (ex. ArtsPond whose equity mission and research is inspiring and which is studying the feasibility of founding a “cultural” land trust. Together with ArtsPond, Workman Arts could found a land trust and possibly get land or a building from the City. Or, WA could partner with St-Clare or TCHC towards a series of units for our population in need. Or, with an existing land trust or housing co-op (PNLT, Friends of Chinatown, Friends of Kensington Market, Davenport land trust (offshoot of Bloor and Dufferin mall development), Co-op Housing Federation of Toronto (CHFT), etc.), etc.

- guides the worker/strategist on facing the fragile relationship between securing long-term housing for Workman Arts members and participating in efforts of de-colonization. We are aware that we live on land stolen from Indigenous communities by settlers who imposed the concept of "ownership" and its practices. We are also aware that no agreement up until now has created the nation-to-nation relationship that we hope one day will exist between Indigenous communities and settlers. In such a context then, buying land can be problematic. We strongly believe however that it might be our only option to survive in Toronto, and that informed attention given to the buying, owning and managing can lead us to a better situation in the large sense of the word.

We have encountered a lot of limits in the housing supports that should be available to us. Examples:

- 1) Individuals with disability have no "priority access" to RGI housing. We are not included in the "priority rules" of the City, neither in the Special Priority (SP) defined by the Province of Ontario. DDADH has written a letter to Housing Secretariat. It is important to follow-up.
- 2) Toronto Community Housing Corporation (TCHC) does not allow transfers from one unit to another one since 2018 unless the tenant is in a serious medical situation or is disabled and claims their right to be accommodated. TCHC has a medical questionnaire specifically dedicated to requests for accommodation/ accessibility. This is not well known.
- 3) TTHAP is/was hidden under layers of opacity and border abusive paternalism in terms of process, decision-making and final entitlement. Mediation by Workman Arts staff will be beneficial.
- 4) All housing allowances provided by the City of Toronto, including TTHAP have been under review since September 2020. The review was triggered by Deputy Mayor Ana Bailao who witnessed the stress experienced by the 17 Paton Road artists after they were order to evacuate their building and were offered to see if they were eligible for TTHAP. The 17 Paton Road artists designed a model for an overhaul of TTHAP, which they presented to Deputy Mayor Bailao, manager Maria Varlokostas and consultant Richard Marshall at Shelter, Support and Housing Administration (SSHA). They then tried to collaborate with SSHA, but agreements were not respected and they chose to end their volunteering with a short analysis of the review. The results of the review were supposed to be presented to the Planning and Housing Committee in November 2021. Has this happened? Are there any improvements? TTHAP could be a major tool to house people of our demographic. Following up would be essential.
- 5) The Canada-Ontario-Housing Benefit (COHB) has opened to individuals with disability who require modified units. COHB does not give access to modified units or to money to directly fund transformations of a unit, only to a monthly financial support to pay rent. Still, the disabled person has to prove that they require a modified unit. Our worker/strategist could advocate for members who are not wheelchair users.
- 6) It seems that the new AccessToHousing portal to RGI housing has eliminated artists-dedicated units (Artscape, artists co-ops). It is important that we enquire about this and push for reinstatement.
- 7) There is growing interest at the moment by art organizations and even art councils to create "cultural"/"creative" land trusts. These trusts are meant to provide work space at affordable prices to artists. Of course, this is good news, but it is also a slap in our face in the sense that the struggle of our demographic is to stay housed and we can't house ourselves in a work space. Advocacy here will be needed.