

Skyrocketing commercial rents purge reluctant artists from Toronto's west end

The gentrification of the west side is pushing artists out of their commercial spaces, leaving them with nowhere to go.



Roula Partheniou with her neatly packed boxes, preparing to vacate 224 Wallace Ave., where she's kept a studio for more than five years. A 30-day eviction notice will purge the building of dozens of small-scale creative enterprises in favour of Ubisoft, a video game-making giant, as the unchecked commercial real estate market surges upward. (STEVE RUSSELL / TORONTO STAR) | [ORDER THIS PHOTO](#)

By [MURRAY WHYTE](#) Visual arts
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The array of sticky notes on the wall above the desk in Sandra Rechico's west end studio lay out what lies ahead in stark black letters on hot pink: "MOVE," "SELL," "TOSS," "STORE," "HOME."

Everything here will be labelled with one or other, but the conspicuous absence of "STAY" is most important. On September 30, Rechico, along with a couple of dozen other tenants at 224 Wallace Ave, were given eviction notices by [Bilnia Inc.](#), the property's owner, giving them 30 days to vacate. The reason: To make way for Ubisoft, the France-based video gaming corporation, to expand its footprint in the building.

"Commercial spaces for people like us seem to be over in this city," shrugs Rechico, an artist and professor at the University of Guelph. She's sitting here, amid the boxes and garbage bags in her soon-to-be-former studio, with a group of neighbours in the same boat: [Mark Binks](#), a photographer; [Roula Partheniou](#) and [Michael Antkowiak](#), both artists; and Gideon Naf, [whose independent publishing operation](#) sits in the studio next door. "We have — literally — metric tonnes of equipment in there," says Naf, gloomily. "We're too bulky to be a travelling circus."

Painful though it may be, Bilnia's abrupt notice is perfectly legal (the company did not respond to a request for comment). According to the scant regulations governing commercial real estate, 30 days is the minimum requirement for notice to vacate. The landlord is under no legal onus to provide cause, and no regulation restricts the amount a property owner can charge for its spaces.



Sandra Rechico, an artist and professor at the University of Guelph, is in the midst of a hasty purge of her studio at 224 Wallace Ave, where she and dozens of other small-scale creatives were given 30-day eviction notices at the beginning of the month. It's the latest building in the west end to fall prey to an escalating market for commercial leases, on which there are no price restrictions. (STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR)

All of this makes 224 Wallace no more than the current chapter in the long-running story of the city's ongoing purge of grassroots creative enterprise. According to commercial real estate statistics provided by the Toronto Real Estate Board, commercial space in the city's west end has increased on average from \$15.89 per square foot (annually) for spaces under 1,000 square feet in 2006 to \$26.44 in the third quarter of this year.

For Ana Bailao, councillor for Ward 18, where the building sits, it's a worrying trend. "It's a hot topic right now," Bailao says. "Of course we want to attract companies like Ubisoft, but how can we maintain that element of independent, creative operators, who made our neighbourhoods attractive in the first place?"

Bailao's ward, which includes Queen, College, Dundas, Bloor and Dupont Sts. west of Dovercourt Rd., has been a flashpoint of such evictions of people and purpose for more years, with many such episodes highly public, fractious affairs. Most recently, a [precipitous rent hike at 223 Sterling Rd.](#) sent dozens of creative entrepreneurs scrambling just as the [Museum of Contemporary Art finalized its plans to move in.](#)

But the tremors began more than a decade ago here. In 2006, [48 Abell St.](#), a 100,000-square-foot brick warehouse near Queen Street West and Dovercourt Rd, had housed hundreds of artists and other small creative enterprises for decades when its owner sold it for redevelopment.



Painter Matt Bahen with his daughter Isobel in his studio at 224 Wallace Ave., from which he and dozens of other artists and creative businesses are being evicted at the end of the month. It continues an accelerating purge of small-scale cultural enterprise from the city's core, as escalating commercial rents with no price restrictions price all but the most moneyed out of the market. (STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR)

It became a [local cause célèbre](#), energizing area residents into an activist group, Active 18, who lobbied for responsible development ward-wide. The end result was a workable compromise: A cratering of 48 Abell in favour of a condo tower, but one [Active 18 was able to lever the city's Section 37 provision](#) into including 70 permanent live-work spaces for various creative workers.

It was done under the management of Artscape, a not-for-profit developer that promotes ownership for such independent workers as artists and other culture industry workers. Ownership, however, is rarely an option for a group whose activities put them at the low-end of the economic ladder.

According to the Canada Council for the Arts, those describing themselves as artists make an average of \$32,800 per year, 32 per cent less than the overall labour force.

It's a simple fact that makes rent a necessity for people in the sector. And in a place that has embraced the popular notion of "creative city" economics espoused by Richard Florida of the Martin Institute for Prosperity, skyrocketing commercial rents have had an unintended irony, having all but purged such workers from the core.

Provincial incentives that have lured businesses like Ubisoft into the city — under former premier Dalton McGuinty, in 2009 the province gave \$263 million over 10 years to Ubisoft, a \$2 billion corporation, to set up shop here — are non-existent for smaller operators, a fact they often decry.



Photographer Mark Binks accepts that he'll "just have to be homeless for a while" as eviction from his studio at 224 Wallace Ave looms at the end of the month. "I've given up on being in a cool neighbourhood," he says, as commercial rent spikes upward in an increasing swath outside the city core. (STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR)

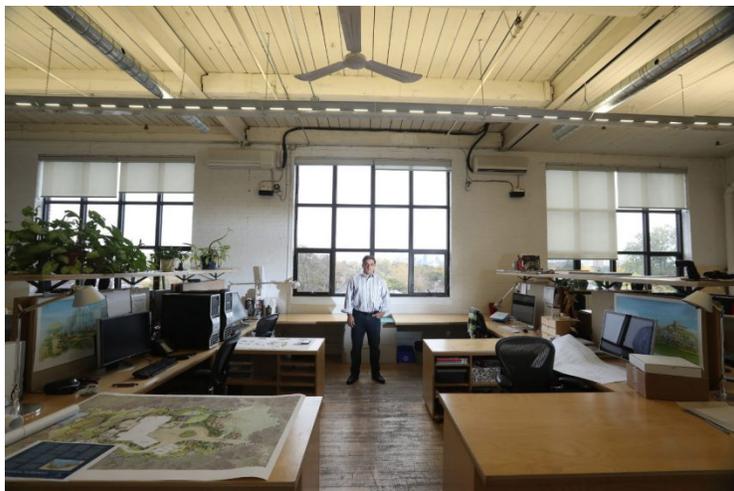
"What they don't seem to understand is that we're businesses, too," said Partheniou, surrounded by stacks of boxes in her own studio. "We have deadlines, we employ people, we contribute."

At the city government level, Bailao says, little can be done. Powerful tools like rent control, which protect residential tenants from sudden rent hikes, are managed at the provincial level. For commercial property, no such rent protections exist, leaving commercial tenants of all scales vulnerable to property owners' determination of what they believe the market will bear.

Nonetheless, Bailao, a recent motion by Ward 20 councillor Joe Cressy has broken the ice on what tools the city might have on hand to relieve some of that pressure.

Spurred by the sudden commercial gentrification of Kensington Market, which in the past decade has been shedding its long-time tenants of vegetable stands, butchers and fish stores for boutiques and cafes, Cressy asked city staff to study the possibility of introducing tax incentives for property owners to lease space to smaller, independent operators, not big-footprint corporate tenants.

Bailao has some hope that such an incentive, applied city-wide, might have some impact on the commercial real estate pressure-cooker her Ward has become. "Can we look at incentivizing specific businesses? That's the kind of thing we're looking at," she says.



Landscape architect Patrick Morello of Land Inc, in his studio at 224 Wallace Ave, where dozens of small-scale creatives were given 30-day eviction notices at the beginning of the month. It's the latest building in the west end to fall prey to an escalating market

for commercial leases, on which there are no price restrictions. (STEVE RUSSELL/TORONTO STAR)

She points to a recent development application for 440 Dufferin St., a long, low-slung brick warehouse slated to become three condominium towers.

The city opposed the development, so the developer appealed to [the Ontario Municipal Board](#). Through negotiation, the developer got what it wanted, but so did the city: An allowance for a permanent space in the new building for a small-scale manufacturing incubator on the first and second floors. “Those buildings are packed with those kinds of people — small businesses, fabricators, artisans, artists,” Bailao says. “And we’re losing them. So the onus is really on us to create some kind of solution.”

Back on Wallace Ave., any solution Bailao can nudge forward will come far too late, and Rechico resigns herself to the task at hand. “I really thought we would have more time here. I guess I was putting my head in the sand,” she says. It’s the regulators, not the property owners, that have failed them here, she says. “I don’t fault Bilnia,” she says. “I just find it incredibly frustrating that there’s nothing in place to provide small creatives some kind of security.”

Nearby, Mark Binks, a photographer, contemplates his immediate future. “We have to accept the fact that we’ll be homeless for a while,” he says, standing in the broad expanse of studio space with towering, brand-new windows, freshly-installed to be enjoyed by someone other than him. “I’ve given up on being in a cool neighbourhood. Pretty soon, there will be nowhere left to move to at all.”