

# North by Northwestern

By Ben Oreskes

Uncertainty surrounds the future of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center

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Evanston resident Maggie Weiss is relieved. Weiss, a textile artist, was worried she would be booted from her studio in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center. However, at an Evanston City Council Committee meeting on May 6, she learned she had a reprieve as the committee delayed a vote to deliberate more on the Piven Theatre Workshop's future in the Arts Center.

Nearly 100 people attended the meeting, and 50 people signed up to speak to the proposal.

"People kept coming and signing up, which was pretty impressive," Weiss, the Chair of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center's Tenant Association, said a few days after the meeting.

The Piven Theatre wants a \$2.2 million loan from the city to fund a makeover and expansion, and Evanston's aldermen must approve this expenditure. The city subsidy represents a sizeable portion of the \$3.5 million total projected budget for the renovation. Opponents of the Piven expansion fear the eviction of individual artists and smaller organizations in the building. This Piven renovation could have an adverse effect on other tenants in the Noyes Cultural Arts Center, which is why a number of individuals - including Weiss - oppose the plan.

It's been two years and there still has been no decision about the Piven Theatre's request for help from Evanston to fund a refurbishment and expansion of their space. The state of Evanston's public buildings has been a topic of concern for some time now. Piven told the city administration a couple of years back that unless they could expand and revitalize their space, they would need to relocate. As with any municipal issue, there are many wrinkles in the story and conflicting actors with their own interests. This is no exception, and a struggle now exists between the supporters and detractors of the Piven proposal.

Byrne and Joyce Piven—the parents of actors Joan and Jeremy Piven—started this preeminent arts organization in 1976. "The Mission of the Piven Theatre Workshop is to preserve a process of creative exploration that celebrates each individual's unique voice through an ensemble-based, community-oriented approach to theatre training and performance," says the Piven Theatre Workshop's website. Notable alumni include Joan and John Cusack, along with Jeff Garlin. And city officials are trying to nail down a long-term solution for the organization's facilities.

Weiss's Co-Chair is Larry DiStasi, who runs artistic programming for another Noyes tenant, The Actor's Gymnasium. Every Northwestern theater major spends a significant amount of time there during one of their required classes, and the organization also offers additional courses that many Northwestern students take. In an interview with the [Chicago Tribune](#) recently, DiStasi said he worries about the Piven plan's effect on his own organization's office space.

Weiss, Piven and the Actors Gymnasium are just a few of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center's many tenants. The building, which used to be a school, houses the studios of many individual artists along with organizations who deal in a variety of artistic disciplines. "Probably the only thing we haven't had, which I wanted to do, was bring in a Culinary School," Evanston Parks and Recreation Director Doug Gaynor said. "But I haven't been able to find somebody who has been willing to invest in setting up the kitchen."

For now, though, the future of the Noyes Cultural Arts Center is at a crossroads.

### **One tenant's quest for survival**

Weiss strongly opposes the proposal. Her association with the cultural center began in the 1990's when she taught at the Evanston Art's Center and worked in one of the basement studios. She moved into her second-floor studio in 2008 after 5 years in the basement. The massive windows of this high ceilinged space give the room life, and her colorful fabrics strewn about are vibrant on even the gloomiest of days.

"The lighting is phenomenal. It's so helpful for my work," Weiss said. She dyes all the fabric she works with, and this process requires copious amounts of chemicals and water.

"I realized being in the basement is terrible for fabrics full time, because of the humidity and dampness," Weiss said. "And also, because I use dyeing chemicals and other things, it's not good for my health in terms of having ventilation."

About two months ago, Mr. Gaynor climbed the stairs of City Hall with a recommendation for his boss, Evanston City Manager Wally Bobkiewicz, concerning the Piven plan.

"My mission was to not displace anybody," Gaynor said. "I was trying to take a look at what space was left and how we could move people around in order to not displace anyone."

Gaynor told Bobkiewicz that they would probably need two studios for the Piven overhaul to work, and Bobkiewicz decided the Evanston Children's Choir would have to go. Additionally Weiss would need to move back to the basement where there is no running water except for a hose coming over the side of a wall.

This solution didn't sit well with Weiss, and jeopardized her chances of staying in the studio she loves so much.

"I've been there [the basement] and I know that it doesn't quite work with textiles,"

Weiss said. "So I was thinking that I'd have to find another place to make my art."

The eviction decision was as simple as it sounds. Bobkiewicz just chose an organization to kick out, along with the tenants who would be relocated to other locations in the building. In the end though, Bobkiewicz retracted this decision in response to public outrage.

### **Alternatives to Piven appear**

Another angered citizen is Julie Phelan, who was drawn into the fight after hearing her kids' camp at the Arts Center might close if the Piven plan was approved.

"I have a big fairness issue and this just doesn't seem fair," Phelan said. "What affects me as a taxpayer is that instead of running this building so that its budgets balance, they're going to run it possibly into the ground. Or they're going to run it so that it creates a huge deficit."

A heated back-and-forth continues two years after the City first requested renovation proposals for the building. Many of Noyes' other artists who represent all sorts of mediums oppose the Piven expansion. Over time conflicting proposals have surfaced, and are constantly changing.

Weiss says the tenants pitched another idea about two years ago for the committee to consider. If the government moved its offices out of the building, rent could then be charged on all the rooms.

"It becomes very self-sustaining and actually creates a capital reserve fund," said Weiss.

### **Not so simple**

The plan Weiss refers to died after just one council meeting, but it still resonates with many opponents of the Piven proposal. Piven Executive Director Leslie Brown finds flaws in the fine print of this alternate proposal, and complains the 2011 budget included in this proposition is incomplete.

The proposal doesn't include the actual cost of expenses like "refuse removal," "snow removal," and "maintenance/repairs" among other things. [According to a copy of this Self Sustainability Model from November 2011](#), "Not Included" fills the boxes where the estimated costs would go for these services. Brown notes a surplus might disappear when these expenditures are incorporated, and even if they were, this surplus would be insufficient to adequately fix the facilities.

"It's very questionable as to whether or not that self-sustainability model would work for the building," Brown said. "Even then if all of it was sussed out, and you indeed found a \$50,000 surplus here, the building needs about \$5 million worth in renovations."

This price tag comes from a city estimate on costs for fixing things like the electrical system, as well as the Theatre's estimate for securing the ceiling and rebuilding the

performance area.

## **The next 50 years**

In the face of vocal opposition, the Piven Theatre marches on in its quest for a refurbished space and a strengthened future as a leading performing arts organization. Brown says her organization has been thinking for some time about the next stage of their strategic plan. The theatre has been at Noyes for almost 40 years, and looking forward, the state of their facilities needs to be addressed.

“We’ve had brown and black outs on a regular basis,” Brown said. “I could bring into the City Council the three computers that have been fried because of that.”

Gaynor observes the slew of interests of all the different players in this debate. As a city employee in an a-political position, he refuses to comment about the lack of transparency observed by some opponents. His challenge is to make sense of the proposals and come up with a recommendation for the aldermen.

“It’s been going on for two years,” Gaynor said. “There are so many different players. The Pivens have gone to the mayor. The Pivens have gone to the City Manager. And then all the tenants, they’ve all done the same thing.”

On Monday the Human Services Committee motioned to move the Piven resolution from their committee to the full City Council. This happened before Bobkiewicz even presented his office’s finding. Information the committee had requested at last month's meeting.

“In honest reality it will go before the larger City Council,” Alderman Peter Braithwaite said as the hearing started.

A final decision could come next month when the full City Council meets on July 8th, and Weiss and her cohort will certainly show up in force to any meeting germane to this debate. They’ll keep fighting this expansion taking part in the democratic process; making sure their voices are heard.