

‘Money For Nothing’: The Rising Cost of Music Rehearsal Space in Toronto

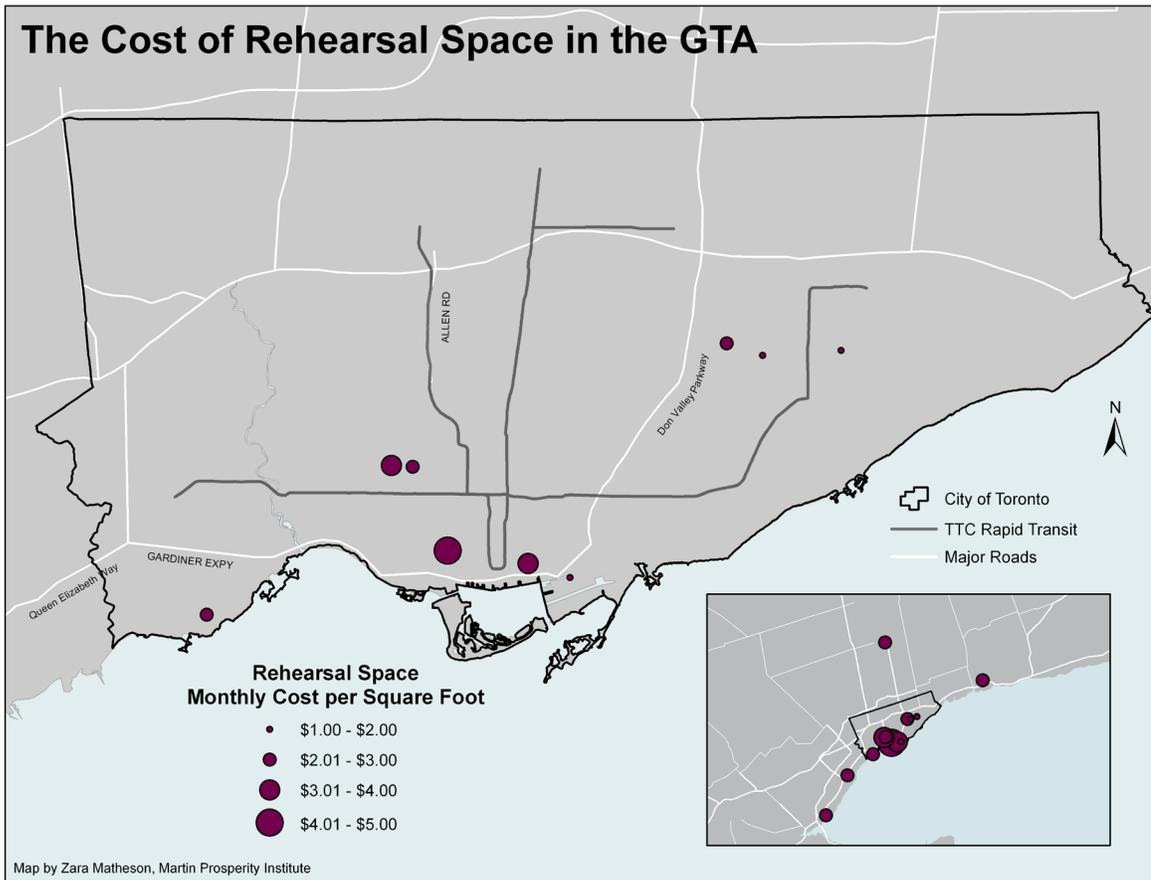
In recent years scholars have noted that increases in land value have priced out artists from Toronto’s central city. Most notably, studies have documented this phenomenon in Toronto’s South-Parkdale and Liberty Village (King-Dufferin) neighbourhoods where the presence of visual artists contributed to increasing land value but were subsequently displaced by it. In addition, Hracs has noted the displacement of independent musicians from Toronto who sought cheaper, more affordable space in suburbs (see Hracs 2009). While most studies emphasize locational difficulties for visual artists, the exploration of studio space for independent musicians has yet to be extensively investigated. It may therefore be problematic to lump independent musicians into the same category with visual artists when assessing issues of displacement and affordability. Even though independent musicians in Toronto face comparable struggles, they also face new and unique challenges when acquiring space.

Unlike visual artists, musicians have sonic requirements for space where loud volume and constant noise will need to be tolerated by landlords, tenants, and the building’s physical structure. These requirements tend to exclude most mixed-commercial space or apartments where quieter visual artist activity might be able to thrive. In Toronto, these particular space requirements have left a specialized niche market which has been filled by a small number of rehearsal studio businesses who offer rental units on a monthly and hourly basis. These studios often come at a premium which has further exacerbated the independent musician’s struggle to find affordable space in the central city.

Between March 21st and March 30th we conducted a brief and informal phone survey to acquire information regarding the price and size of monthly rehearsal space for musicians in and around the Greater Toronto Area. This search resulted in a price and space comparison for 14 rehearsal studios. Some of the businesses in the sample had live/work units for rent. However, most did not accommodate fulltime occupancy because of the contentious balance between noise levels and tenant accommodation. Although the study is not exhaustive, it does suggest that the cost of space in downtown Toronto is more expensive than outside of the downtown, as the map suggests.

The map shows a comparison of monthly rehearsal space as graduated circles and generally indicates that studio space in downtown Toronto is more expensive than outside of the downtown. Furthermore, space becomes increasingly cheaper as the studios move away from the downtown core, especially outside the GTA. In the most central location, musicians are expected to pay approximately \$550 per month for a small 120 square foot unit.

In addition to more expensive studio space in downtown Toronto, independent musicians face other macro- and micro-level challenges that continue to burden them financially and add to their difficulty in retaining space. Since the advent of the illegal peer-to-peer music downloading software Napster in 1999, as well as the introduction and rise of CD burning technology, the value of recorded music has plummeted, altering the business structure of the record industry at both



the firm and individual level. Major labels reacted to the digital crisis by downsizing staff and their overall staple of talent to cope with their loss in revenue. On the other hand, musicians gained to ability to distribute their music independently over the Internet and record professionally for much less money than ever before possible. The combination of these factors has resulted in lower entry barriers into the music economy and has led to an increase in the overall number of independent musicians in Canada. Today approximately 95 percent of all musicians are considered to be operating independent of a record label.

Independent musicians in Toronto face fierce competition due to the changes caused by the digital epoch. Toronto is home to the largest concentration of professional musicians in Canada with over six thousand having been recorded in the 2006 census. Furthermore, since 1991 the number of musicians in Toronto has been rising, while their average wages have been decreasing. Between 2001 and 2006 the wages of professional musicians in Toronto has decreased 25.9 percent with an average income of \$13, 773.40 (Hracs et al., forthcoming). Although these numbers are derived from census data and do not include the thousands of independent musicians competing for the same market share, the downward trend demonstrates the added difficulty in acquiring and maintaining Toronto's costly rehearsal space.

Independent musicians in Toronto are forced to continually negotiate the tradeoff between affordable space and the separation from the central city's employment opportunities and amenities. Although musicians can record and distribute their music from anywhere, they continue to cluster in Toronto in order to be closer to live music venues and alternative employment opportunities

for additional income. Compounded by low earnings and high competition, the lack of affordable studio space poses a serious concern in Toronto's ability to retain and foster emerging musical talent. While smaller cities cannot compete directly with Toronto, there are unique jurisdictional advantages to relocating to smaller places. Independent musicians have begun to relocate to places like Halifax, which offers more affordable live/work space, as well as a more inclusive and less competitive music industry (See Hracs et al., forthcoming).

To learn more about the research results, read the full working paper here.

Sources

Hracs, B. J., Grant, J. L., Haggett, J. & Morton, J. (Forthcoming). A Tale of Two Scenes: Civic capital and retaining musicians in Toronto and Halifax. *The Canadian Geographer*.

Hracs, B. J. (2009). Beyond Bohemia: Geographies of Everyday Creativity for Musicians in Toronto. In T. Edensor, S. Millington & N. M. Rantisi (Eds.), *Spaces of Vernacular Creativity: Rethinking the cultural economy* (pp. 75–88). New York, NY: Routledge.

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