

A \$24M expansion of a major CT arts center is to start soon. A place “great ideas’ will come from.

Kenneth R. Gosselin : 5-6 minutes : 11/21/2025

Think movie theaters, a cafe, performing arts, more space for educational programs and more.

After years of planning and fundraising, [Real Art Ways](#) — the contemporary arts center that has been a fixture in Hartford’s Parkville neighborhood for three decades — will begin construction in February on [the largest expansion in its history](#), after raising nearly \$7 million in individual and corporate donations.

Construction is expected to take about a year, with the expansion calling for a major addition that will increase the size of the arts venue by 50%. The project also includes the addition of three movie screens, bringing the organization’s total to four. The project also calls for a dedicated area for the performing arts, a new café and more space for educational programs.

RAW held an indoor ceremonial groundbreaking at its Arbor Street building. But when it came time for the actual groundbreaking, it was non-traditional as the arts organization itself.

“Your typical groundbreaking involves dirt,” Will K. Wilkins, RAW’s executive director, said. “We’re shoveling popcorn!”

Participants — including Lt. Gov. Susan Bysiewicz, Speaker of the House Matt Ritter and [Capital Region Development Authority](#) executive director David S. Steuber — tossed the popped kernels into a wheelbarrow. They were cheered on by dozens of well-wishers, many of them donors to the project.



David S. Steuber, executive director of the Capital Region Development Authority, tosses a shovel of popcorn at an indoor groundbreaking for a major expansion at Real Art Ways in Hartford. (Kenneth R. Gosselin/Hartford Courant)

The expansion will crown a \$24 million plan that also includes the \$4.25 million purchase of 56 Arbor St in 2021. The nonprofit arts organization had leased space in the building — a former typewriter factory built in 1917 — for more than 30 years.

“When Will talked about this place, he didn’t talk about the gallery, he didn’t talk about an arts center, he talked about community,” Hartford Mayor Arunan Arulampalam said, during speeches prior to the popcorn shoveling. “That’s what Real Art Ways has built right here at 56 Arbor. Here in this space that’s going to be a café. Can you imagine the amount of incredible, great ideas that are going to come out of this café right here in Parkville?”

Arulampalam said it was certainly an unusual move to add movie screens in times when some movie theaters were closing. But RAW’s plan demonstrated its commitment to bringing independent films to the city and the surrounding area.

“It’s focused on the art and not the dollars,” Arulampalam said.

Eric Ort, RAW’s capital campaign director, said the arts organization still aims to raise another \$1.7 million in donations for the project.



In a file photo, Will K. Wilkins, executive director of Real Art Ways in Hartford shows the plans for the new addition that will be added on at the contemporary arts organization. (Aaron Flaum/Hartford Courant)

The state's investment in the project also has been significant: \$1 million for the purchase, another \$3 million in 2022 for the expansion and \$9.1 million from the state's Community Investment Fund in 2023 for a total of \$13.1 million.

Bysiewicz said it is critical to make investments in arts and cultural organizations.

"Art has the power to bring people together, especially at a moment in our state and our country when so many people are lonely," Bysiewicz said. "Places like Real Art Ways bring people together and have the power to promote social connection and so much more."

Ritter, a Hartford Democrat and co-chair of the CIF board, said organizations such as RAW are crucial to a combination of arts, culture, athletics and museums that will boost vibrancy in urban centers such as Hartford. And, Ritter said, an organization such as RAW can't be recreated elsewhere.

CRDA is lending \$4.5 million to the project is what is known as a "bridge loan" that will allow the project to move ahead and lock in costs. The bridge loan avoids waiting to assemble all the funding sources and risk construction cost inflation and loss of previously-approved grants that could expire. The loan would bridge financing such as historic credits, federal funds and capital pledges that will come in within the next few years, according to CRDA.

The idea behind buying the 4-story, brick building was grounded in diversifying the sources of the nonprofit organization's revenue to include rental income from tenants, many of whom have a focus of arts and creativity that dovetail with RAW. The overall budget also includes a new roof and elevator for the former factory.

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