

Bringing Vacant Spaces to Life

2 Lafayette

Creative Space Making



CHALLENGE

Vacant storefronts in New York City tell a story that is as cultural as it is economic. During the pandemic, these vacancies multiplied: once-bustling corridors fell silent, leaving communities without places to gather or create and depriving neighborhoods of much-needed economic activity. Although vacancy rates have begun to improve, dropping from 15.7% in Manhattan in late 2023 to 14.5% by mid-2024 (NYCEDC, 2024), the problem remains structural. Storefronts sit idle for years, waiting for long-term leases or costly renovations, while artists and community organizations struggle for affordable space.

The New New York plan - a city-state initiative to reimagine New York City's post-pandemic future by improving economic mobility, modernizing infrastructure, and transforming how and where New Yorkers live and work - called for bold, cross-sector solutions to reactivate underutilized commercial space across the city. While zoning reforms have expanded allowable uses to include retail, performance, and light manufacturing, cultural activation has emerged as an impactful complement. By transforming empty windows with art, design, and community programming, these efforts not only bring visibility to dormant spaces but also reveal their potential as vibrant, inclusive hubs of economic and social life.

2 LAFAYETTE

At the edge of Lower Manhattan's African Burial Ground and Commons Historic District sits 2 Lafayette Street, a city-owned office building housing several municipal agencies. For years, three ground-floor storefronts sat unused - despite the building's central civic location and daily foot traffic. In 2024, the Mayor's Office of Policy and Planning (MOPP) identified this underutilized space as an ideal test case for one of the New New York plan's central goals: reactivating vacant storefronts through public-private partnerships that strengthen communities and stimulate cultural life.

To move this pilot forward, MOPP engaged NYC Create in Place (NYCIP) to coordinate a cross-agency collaboration that brought together the Department of Citywide Administrative Services (DCAS), which manages the property, and the Department of Small Business Services (SBS), which holds licensing authority over city-owned spaces. Together, these partners navigated the procedural, legal, and operational complexities required to unlock the space for public use.

With the city framework in place, NYCIP and MOPP brought on two experienced cultural organizations to lead a temporary activation: Art on the Ave NYC, known for transforming vacant storefronts into temporary, community-centered art galleries; and Chashama, a nonprofit that repurposes unused real estate across the city into artist studios and exhibition spaces, particularly for underserved artists.

By fall 2024, Art on the Ave NYC had launched a small-scale activation in one of the north-side storefronts with two artists-in-residence. The success of that experiment led to an expansion of the pilot: by January 2025, they transformed a second, east-facing, and much larger space into a working studio, gallery, and community hub. In May 2025, Chashama joined the activation with the opening of the third storefront as a satellite site for the Community Access Art Collective (CAAC), a group of artists with lived experiences of mental health challenges and housing insecurity.

What followed was a quiet transformation. In just eight months, 2 Lafayette became a lively, open-door arts space hosting Black History Month talks and exhibitions; youth art and leadership workshops; sound baths and wellness programming; a “bring your child to work” painting day for city employees; events for survivors and families impacted by gun violence; and programming partnerships with city agencies like the Department for the Aging and the Department of Youth and Community Development.

For many artists involved, in addition to access to free, temporary workspace, the visibility brought direct results: artwork sales, commissions, curatorial invitations, and new residencies. JJ Gonzalez Acosta, who exhibited with Art on the Ave NYC, was later commissioned by a judge in the Surrogate Court (which operates out of a building adjacent to 2 Lafayette) to paint six portraits of female Supreme Court Justices. Those portraits now hang permanently in the courtroom - a tangible example of how access to space can spark recognition and career advancement.

This pilot project shows what’s possible when city infrastructure, policy coordination, and cultural vision align. By demonstrating how city-owned property can be repurposed through interagency collaboration and trusted cultural partners, the 2 Lafayette activation offers a scalable, replicable model - bringing the New New York vision to life through creativity, community, and shared public space.

CONCLUSION

The activation of 2 Lafayette Street demonstrates how city-owned spaces, long overlooked or underused, can be transformed into vibrant cultural hubs through intentional cross-agency collaboration and community partnership. Through coordinated efforts, agencies like MOPP, DCAS, SBS, and NYCIP came together to open the doors - literally and bureaucratically - for trusted cultural organizations Art on the Ave NYC and Chashama. Together, they turned three vacant storefronts into a temporary gallery, artist studios, and public gathering spaces that brought new life to the area while creating tangible economic and creative opportunities for local artists.

“Every space has potential,” says Barbara Anderson, founder of Art on the Ave NYC. “Here you have an example of something that works on all levels - all of a sudden, a shuttered storefront becomes something else entirely. It’s not just about cultural activation, but about how creative projects can generate community impact”.

More than a one-off success, the 2 Lafayette pilot offers a replicable model for how public infrastructure can be reimaged - proving that when the city works together with its cultural sector, underused space becomes public value.



SOURCES

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<https://edc.nyc>

Image 1: *2 Lafayette workspace.* Gabriella Medina / NYC Department of Cultural Affairs.

Image 2: *Anthony Smith. Untitled, 48" x 36" acrylic paint on stretched canvas.* Gabriella Medina / NYC Department of Cultural Affairs.