



GrubStreet

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A NARRATIVE ARTS CENTER for BOSTON at 50 Liberty Drive

GrubStreet's Vision

Boston has been a city of writers, readers, thinkers and innovators since our earliest days. In the 19th century, as the saying went, you couldn't throw a stone without hitting a writer. We're a city that built one of the country's first public libraries, where Maria Stewart, a black abolitionist, gave the first public talk by a woman on politics and women's rights; where the Old Corner Bookstore – an early literary center – published the likes of Stowe, Thoreau, Emerson and Longfellow; where such storied writers as Phillis Wheatley, Louisa May Alcott, Elizabeth Bishop, and Robert Lowell lived and worked, and where the computer and internet revolutions were born at our great universities, and at the Route 128 technology companies.

Today, we Bostonians are still bursting to write, read, think, and create. It's no accident that GrubStreet, an idea which started with eight students twenty years ago, has grown into the nation's largest and most productive creative writing center, or that bookstores like the Harvard Book Store are at capacity nearly every night, with crowds eager to hear from the diverse fiction writers, poets of all ages, and public intellectuals of our day. The narrative arts are on fire in this city. Live spoken word and storytelling events routinely sell out. A new podcast garage in Allston is attracting crowds, and all over town artists and innovators are practicing their TEDx talks, eager to communicate new ideas.

In the 21st Century, with the rise of digital communication and with a growing understanding of the need to hear all voices, the writing world is more democratic, more racially and ethnically diverse, and more alive than ever. Everyone wants to participate. It is estimated that between 600,000 and 1,000,000 books are published each year in the United States, with more than half of these self-published. In fact, when asked what one thing Bostonians strive most to create in a recent citywide cultural planning survey, the second most frequent answer was "stories." In cities like New York, Minneapolis, and Seattle, there are state-of-the-art presenting spaces for celebrating and creating with words. Not so in Boston. Though we have one of the most robust and lively writing and reading communities in the country, there is no major public venue or large, central place where readers, writers, and thinkers from diverse backgrounds and communities can gather on a daily basis to create and share work.

In a city bursting at the seams with ideas and talent, we propose to build a 21st century narrative arts/storytelling center: a democratic, accessible, active space for people of all ages, race, ethnicities, and backgrounds to connect and to learn from the crafted words of the most famous writers and thinkers of our day, as well as from each other. The partners in creating this dynamic center are GrubStreet, the nation's largest and most inclusive creative writing center, currently based in downtown Boston; Harvard Book Store, one of the country's most venerable and successful bookstores; and Mass Poetry, which organizes major festivals and ensures poetry is part of the daily fabric of the city. Taking up residence in the new



neighborhood on the waterfront, not far from the historic Fort Point district, the new center will be steeped in history, but also imbued with a creative, youthful energy that encompasses and highlights diverse communities and talents. It will elevate Boston and the waterfront by creating a major new civic and cultural destination. This partnership builds on GrubStreet's ongoing collaboration with the city of Boston in public storytelling and literary celebration, our steadfast foundation supporters, and our close collaboration with many other organizations in the visual, music, and literary fields.

A Narrative Center bookstore, cafe/wine bar, writing classes, community writing/reading lounge, and performance space

The heart of our narrative arts center is the facility at 50 Liberty itself. GrubStreet will act as the umbrella organization, housing Harvard Book Store and Mass Poetry as co-anchor organizations. On the ground floor, we envision a beautifully designed bookstore, with a café featuring locally sourced food, coffee by day, and wine by night. There is nothing like a well-curated bookstore and the lure of delicious food to add soul to a neighborhood, and to foster a community of residents, local writers, students, and visitors from near and far. In the center of the bookstore, we imagine an Espresso Book Machine, which creates perfect-bound paperbacks in minutes, visible from the street. People walking by will stop and watch as books, either custom-ordered or written by a local author, emerge as if by magic, from the machine. There will be an event space for 200+ people inside the cafe/bookstore. Walking past us in the evening, you might see teen poets from Mass Poetry or Mass LEAP performing their slam pieces, debut authors reading from their novels and hosting book launch parties, or an expert-driven, interactive roundtable discussing the most pressing topics of the day: racism, the state of our democracy, climate change, and the rise of artificial intelligence. In the warm months, the activity will spread to our sidewalk, where we'll set up tables and chairs for the public to enjoy reading, people watching, socializing, and sipping coffee by the water. The participants will be as diverse as the city's neighborhoods themselves, as GrubStreet draws on our current work in teaching teens and adults across greater Boston to bring a multi-racial audience. We are committed to removing barriers to participation and will continue to work to ensure access, especially for communities that have been marginalized.

Writing not only connects and intersects people from all walks of life, but also with every other art form. We imagine hosting events featuring music and visual art celebrating authorship and words. Local musicians might interpret a novel or visual artists might illustrate a scene from a short story, hanging their work from walls of the cafe. We imagine hosting readings, spoken word events, and book parties. A couple on a date might "go out to a book" the way you might go out to a movie. A new comic novel might be presented by musicians and actors, the result of an experimental collaboration between writers and performing artists.

Everywhere in this creative space, we will celebrate words in ways that will surprise and delight. A few ideas: stenciling text on the windows of the first floor, visible from the harbor; creating the city's biggest Idea Paint wall, where people can respond to daily prompts with a few words, stories, or poems, which we can archive through social media to create a history of the city's thoughts. We might also install giant magnetic letters on the walls to be arranged and changed daily by staff and visitors, and create pop-up events that capture big moments in the city's life, such as a World Series win, in the words of residents and writers.



Upstairs, we envision a dynamic flexible space featuring classrooms, a kitchen, a community lounge, and an assembly space capable of seating 100 people. Anchored by the robust educational offerings at GrubStreet and Mass Poetry – who annually serve thousands of students of all ages, backgrounds, and income levels – the space will be alive with activity, connection, and creativity both day and night. Bostonians will gather in our classrooms for writing and storytelling classes of all genres: fiction, nonfiction, memoir, op-ed, blogging, podcasting, spoken word, playwriting, and screenwriting. Writing classes (some free and some tuition-based) and multimedia performances will take place daily, welcoming a diverse public all year round. The upstairs space will also serve as a performance lab, offering space to rehearse TED talks, hold student-run open mics, and host conversations about our city.

Why the Seaport? A center for people from every racial and economic background

The Seaport faces well-known challenges in serving all people in this city, especially people of color and people from low-income communities. A narrative arts center here would draw and attract people from every racial and economic background, making this neighborhood a destination for everyone to contribute to the city's intellectual life and creative literary energy. We imagine a space where people from all the city's neighborhoods will come to create, perform, and enjoy storytelling. In this new larger space, GrubStreet will be able to expand our work to ensure that writers of color, writers from immigrant communities, low-income writers, LGBTQ writers, and writers with disabilities participate fully, take classes and present work, and also provide crucial leadership to shape the center and the narrative arts more broadly.

The center will be a destination of national significance, drawing diverse visitors from across the country and globe. In the past year alone, Harvard Book Store has hosted such internationally-renowned diverse cultural icons as Patti Smith, Orhan Pamuk, Salman Rushdie, Karl Ove Knausgaard, Roxane Gay, and many others. The bookstore has presented celebrities such as Khizr Khan, Art Garfunkel, and Alec Baldwin, and such prominent young writers as Chloe Benjamin, Angie Thomas, and Tavi Gevenson. Harvard Book Store will bring this activity to the Seaport, providing extraordinary cultural programming for residents, workers, and attracting thousands from Greater Boston and beyond.

The literary community in Boston is bursting with life and possibility. Given a proper home and venue that is open and committed to welcoming all people, the sector will explode with infectious energy, encouraging more and more participation. Reading and writing, after all, are for everyone. A 21st century narrative arts center that is committed to equity and access will add new dimension, meaning, and soul to Boston's newest neighborhood.

The presence of a nationally renowned independent bookstore also fills an important gap in downtown Boston, providing highly curated content, and guaranteeing high-profile visits by authors on tour. In addition, the bookstore and cafe/wine bar will provide a lovely space to browse and spend time with friends, local residents, and people from all neighborhoods.

Literary Life on the Waterfront

Beyond the physical confines of the center, we will create collaborations using many of the locations in the Seaport, both on land and in the water. Poetry and prose readings will add a new, rich, and lively element to Harbor Cruises. A "Seaport Improbable Places Poetry and Story



Tour” will bring visitors to surprising locations to hear vivid tales: works about crime and incarceration read at the Court House, poetry about beer at the Harpoon Brewery, stories about children and youth at the Children’s Museum. We imagine collaborating with the colleges of art to create origami flower gardens with poems inside, placing them on the public green or along the harborway; we will hang banners along the waterfront with short poems in calligraphy and vibrant colors. We plan to host readings by famous writers at available larger venues: the ICA and the Seaport World Trade Center. We will also enliven the entire neighborhood by bringing two major writing conferences to the Seaport: GrubStreet’s annual Muse and Marketplace Conference, the number-one rated writing and publishing conference in the country, and Mass Poetry’s Poetry Festival. GrubStreet’s conference hosts well-known literary giants as well as the most exciting emerging talents; recent presenters include Walter Mosley, Isabel Wilkerson, Ann Patchett, and Colum McCann. Our conference also presents an acclaimed writers of color track and takes on the crucial issues of race and power in the broader literary and publishing fields. The Mass Poetry Festival creates an intense immersive experience for diverse poets, poetry lovers, and the general public. More than 250 poets do group readings, participate on panels and contribute to performances combining poetry with music, dance, and visual art. During our respective conference seasons, we envision partnering with local business and hotels, putting up tents in the public green, and attracting thousands of people to the Seaport to learn and create.