

# Tori Abernathy

## Portland Renters' Assembly now in session

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In February, local artist and activist Tori Abernathy decided to use her latest installation piece "Make Yourself at Home"—exploring ideas of home, construction and placemaking—as the first venue for a new series of gatherings she called the Portland Renters' Assembly.

Part presentations by local housing advocates, part group story-sharing and brainstorming, the Portland Renters' Assembly has moved beyond Abernathy's temporary exhibition, taking place in a different part of the city each time. The focus, Abernathy explains, is on educating the average Portland tenant who may not yet know how to access housing rights activism. It's also about empowering tenants through the sharing of personal stories. I sat down with Abernathy



Tori Abernathy

recently to talk about Portland Renters' Assembly, housing justice and the activist role of Portland's arts community.

**Ann-Derrick Gaillot:** Tell me what Portland Renters' Assembly is.

**Tori Abernathy:** It's a gathering of people who are united by the burden of rent, and we aim to, in part, educate people on housing justice issues and what their rights are. But more of our focus is just building solidarity around the concept of what it might mean to be a renter, in Portland and in general. We are more focused on building a better understanding of what the different struggles that people encounter might be in an effort to understand best how to move forward together. It's really guided by the people there. That's something that in our planning meetings we were really careful about—to make sure that we can just educate people, and the fact that they can get involved, but also not to derail the focus of the assembly away from it being a space where people can share their stories and their experiences, because ultimately that's most important thing.

**A.G.:** From my perspective it feels like being a renter is just a given and that's just how things are.

**T.A.:** Yeah, it's very naturalized, right? But it's

not necessary. What we're concerned with is the idea that housing should be a human right and we need to shift consciousness in that direction so that policy can change in accordance with that value. So I think that's a big aspect of what we're trying to do is just to have people unfold their stories so they can maybe start to understand how some of these situations are not the best and that other people are experiencing similar hardships so that we can move towards having a bigger population of people that feel that it's unjust in general. And I think that it is true that people are talking about rent a lot and people understand on a very basic level that there's something wrong with that. So it becomes a way to talk about a lot of shared issues like debt as a force, racism as a force, a lot of things.

**A.G.:** Was there anything that came out of the first two assemblies that surprised you even after all of the research you've done?

**T.A.:** I've definitely learned a lot from the speakers that we've had come. The format is such that we usually have speakers at the beginning who give presentations on topics that are related to the issue and then we open it up for the assembly portion, which is people sharing their stories and general discussion.

In the moments where we break out into people sharing their stories, that has been some of the most emotional yet safe space for people to share these things. That has been really impactful for me. You can really explain what happened to you and I think it's super cool to see that happen.

**A.G.:** From what you're saying it sounds like what's most important in Portland Renters' Assembly is making the issue of rent and changing the system seem a little less scary for people and something that everyone can do. Are you guys trying to make it easier for people to get involved?

**T.A.:** That's a value that we have, so yeah. It's not the only thing we're trying to do, but it is a priority. We are very committed to that sense of it being accessible, that's not just a buzzword, and I think that's the biggest strength of what we're doing in relation to other types of activities that are going on. It's why so many other groups are wanting to be involved now, because they see the success of that.

We are also thinking of how we can develop as a group in a way that kind of extends outside of just the assembly itself. There have been ongoing projects that have started to percolate outside of the assemblies.

**A.G.:** How did you decide to start this?

**T.A.:** I had the opportunity to do this exhibition ["Make Yourself at Home"] and I had been thinking about this exhibition for a long time, and it wasn't enough. It was already

conceived of as an environment for people to inhabit—the actual exhibition itself—based on what it was inspired by. It was intended to kind of shift that into a more feminine, less brutal space than the construction site, basically, and playing on the idea of the host versus the builder. So it was already kind of going in that direction and then it was a very easy jump from this to the event. Then there need to be events around these issues. OK—how are they organized and on what terms? So it was just like figuring that out, and I think I just also kind of really wanted to share. There are certain people who are really inspiring to me, like I wanted to share the stuff that Ibrahim Mubarak (with the homeless organization Right 2 Dream Too) was doing and to kind of bridge that gap between his community and other communities like the arts community. That's something I'm always interested in doing. So yeah, it was just like that basically, all those things coming together.

**A.G.:** Can you tell me more about bridging the arts community and the housing justice community?

**T.A.:** As an activist and an artist I feel like the most important thing for me or the biggest motivation that I have is trying to expand our subjectivity such that we can dream bigger about what's possible in the future. And specifically together, not about our own lives. We don't have a problem with that, but we have a problem with envisioning a better world for all of us. Basically it's very important for me to find ways to bring people together and as an artist it's just exciting to think about how to do that in ways that actually impact people. Because you can tell someone they should care about this stuff but they're not gonna listen to you. So you have to kind of show them so they can come to that on their own terms. It's just like in connecting those communities people see the humanity and that it's important.

Next series of Portland Renters' Assemblies will begin again in July. Visit [portlandrentersassembly.info](http://portlandrentersassembly.info) for more information.

