

The Value of Artists' Studios

Their role in the UK's cultural infrastructure and contribution to sustainable communities

THE CONTEMPORARY VISUAL ARTS IN THIS COUNTRY have never been so successful. They are highly valued for their ability to engage, inspire and transform individuals and communities. If we value art, we must value artists. The NFASP aims to ensure there are appropriate, secure, accessible and, most important of all, affordable facilities for the long-term which will mean that artists can continue with their practice and contribute to culture and vital and creative communities for the benefit of all.

This briefing note describes the affordable studios sector, how it came about, some of the key issues affecting the sector and highlights the new opportunities being developed through innovative partnerships, resulting in long-term, affordable studio provision. It explains the role of the NFASP in supporting and developing the sector and highlights the ways in which Government and policy-makers can help secure the sector.

Affordable studio providers and their role

- 147 providers of affordable workspace manage 270 buildings across the UK, supporting around 6,000 artists¹;
- Some 58% of all studio space nationally is to be found in London. There is high, unmet demand for affordable workspace for artists and creative businesses in the capital and across the country;
- Studio organisations represent an extraordinarily diverse range of approaches to workspace provision and are a vital resource which supports art and artists at the basic level of research and production;
- All studio organisations provide benefit to the public: over 90% run open studios events; over 50% provide exhibitions and education and outreach programmes which engage with the public; the majority of tenant artists of all studio groups are involved in exhibitions, teaching and public projects outside their studios;
- Commercially available studios in London are two to three times more expensive than studios available from affordable studio providers²;
- Only 61 buildings are freehold, 210 (77%) are leasehold;
- There are more than 5,000 artists on waiting lists for studios across the UK; and
- Despite apparent success, studios are under threat. A significant number of buildings are 'at risk', jeopardising the future of hundreds of artists' studios, and therefore the future of hundreds of artists, within the next ten years.

¹ Register of studio groups and organisations in the UK, NFASP, May 2008

² Commercial workspace provision for visual artists – a comparison with the affordable sector, Michael Cubey, Acme and Capital Studios, February 2006.

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Although of widely differing scales, structures and ways of working, artists' studio groups and organisations make a vital contribution to the development and success of the visual arts in the UK through their fundamental support for artists and art.



Yorkshire Artspace's new eco-designed studios at Manor Oaks in Sheffield

As well as providing space for artists to research, experiment and make work, affordable studio organisations and their tenant artists make a significant contribution to the well-being and sustainability of local communities; they work with a wide range of partners encouraging innovation and creativity across social and regeneration agendas.

For artists to be able to deliver these benefits, they need space in which to work at a rent they can afford. Affordable studio groups and organisations provide low-cost studio space to visual artists who are generally on low incomes and remain on low incomes for much of their working lives.

Affordable studio providers charge rents that are, on average, one third of open market prices. In doing so, they subsidise the visual arts economy in England by roughly £16 million a year. This support is vital in

underpinning the visual arts – a successful and highly valued part of our contemporary culture³.

Background to the studios sector

The affordable studios sector has developed over the last forty years. Collective action by artists to create multi-unit studio buildings can be dated back at least to the formation of SPACE and the leasing of a redundant warehouse at St Katharine Dock near Tower Bridge in London in 1967. Since then the artists' studios sector has expanded throughout the United Kingdom with many thousands of artists being supported through the self-help action of individuals and groups reacting creatively to opportunities within the property market to achieve low-cost space.

Now, over 40 years later, there are at least 147 studio organisations and 270 studio buildings across the UK, providing affordable studios for over 6,000 artists.

Studios under threat

Despite this apparent success, the studios sector remains vulnerable. In recent years, rising land values and new development schemes have had an adverse effect on the provision of affordable workspace for artists.

Having played a major role in regeneration, artists' workspaces have been squeezed out of many inner city areas. London's Hoxton is a clear example of this. Now a focus for numerous art galleries, fashionable bars and restaurants, Hoxton rents have increased to such an extent to make them unaffordable for the very artists who stimulated interest in the area in the first place.

Now, regeneration associated with the Olympics threatens to undermine the presence of artists' groups and the cultural identity of the Olympic Fringe area which embraces Hackney Wick and Fish Island, where thousands of creative practitioners live and work.

³ Ibid.

London's vibrant, diverse and influential culture has been promoted as a significant aspect of London 2012, but the very studio organisations that have contributed to that vitality are under threat from commercial developers exploiting the opportunities the Olympics present.

A study into the potential impacts of the Olympic project on artists' studios in the five host boroughs, commissioned by NFASP, highlighted a problem which has always faced affordable studio providers – the lack of long-term and secure property⁴.

In the Olympics area, in particular, there appears to be a significant, unmappable, amount of informal, short term studio space-making in with formal and informal groups organising space for themselves and in a variety of more (and often less) beneficial arrangements, especially since the economic down-turn and the availability of empty property. Whilst this presents welcome opportunities for temporary workspace, the danger is that when the economic tide turns, artists will once again become victims of their own success and be required to vacate property to make way for redevelopment.

The same situation applies across the country, this insecurity means many studio groups continue to face an uncertain future. At the same time, demand for affordable studio space continues to outstrip supply, with long waiting lists for studios in London and elsewhere.

A major issue is that few studio buildings are owned and permanent. In early 2005, when Acme published the first England-wide survey of studio groups and organisations, some 80 per cent of the total space was rented. And the leases of many spaces were due to expire within five to seven years, with the potential loss of up to 800 artists' studios in England. The picture has changed very little over the last five years and, in fact, is potentially much worse.

Frequently, this situation is compounded by a lack of recognition of the public value that they deliver, in part because many organisations are not making evident what they and their member artists do.

Whilst there is support for creative workspace and new facilities are being built, generally such space is inappropriate and too expensive for artists. Artists are primarily engaged in their practice for its creative, cultural and philosophical value and although they are often highly successful micro businesses forming a vital part of the overall creative ecology, their career paths rarely follow a traditional business growth model.

New opportunities for developing studios

New opportunities do exist, in major development areas like the Thames Gateway and regeneration and housing growth areas across the country. Within mixed-use developments cross-subsidy or planning gain can be exploited to achieve affordable workspace – developments such as Acme's Galleria studios in south-east London, their Leven Road studios in Poplar, east London developed in partnership with Swan Housing Group and studios at Harrow Road, north London, developed with Catalyst Housing Group demonstrate this. Barbican Arts Trust Group in London have also secured new studios through planning gain. Outside London, partnerships with the housing sector have stimulated new studio developments, for example in Sheffield, where Yorkshire Artspace has worked with Sheffield's housing renewal programme to develop studios in neighbourhoods – at Knutton Road as part of a mixed-use development, and eco-designed studios at Manor Oaks, built in partnership with Green Estate.

Some local authorities have also taken the initiative to develop artists' studios in temporary space in town and city centres, helping to stimulate activity within town centres and acting as a catalyst for future regeneration. Gateshead

4 Artists' Studio Provision in the Host Boroughs: a review of the potential impacts of London's Olympic Project, December 2008, page 9.

Council has developed The Shed, workspace in a former bed shop for some 36 creative practitioners and Essex County Council has partnered with studio provider ACAVA to develop affordable studio space for artists in Harlow Town Centre. It is vital, however, that such initiatives pave the way for long-term strategies for securing affordable artists' workspace at the heart of our communities and are not simply using artists as a stop-gap to occupy empty property until the economic tide turns.

Awareness of these opportunities, particularly new studio developments with the housing sector, and experience of how they might be realised is severely limited. NFASP aims to raise the profile of these new schemes and promote them more widely to ensure there are secure, facilities for artists for the long-term enabling them to contribute to culture and communities.

Key messages concerning artists' studios

We know from research studies referred to elsewhere in this briefing, from our experience and our contacts with our members and other studio providers and artists' groups that these key messages concerning artists' studio provision are applicable across the capital and elsewhere in the UK:

- Demand for long-term affordable studios remains buoyant, as evidenced by growing waiting lists, sustained levels of demand and feedback from artists;
- Studio providers demonstrate good practice in developing models for medium and longer term use of light industrial and similar buildings. Also they have a number of development and management models offering property owners and public agencies the certainty of 100% occupancy in well managed workspace, for lower income workers;
- Artists and studio providers contribute to the local economy, to place making and to the vitality and distinctiveness of local and community life. They contribute greatly to the wider cultural reputation of some boroughs and their local authorities;
- Delivery agencies and other public bodies, RSLs and commercial property owners have established mutually beneficial long term arrangements with a range of studio providers. These include Swan Housing, Telford Homes, Poplar HARCA, Look Ahead Housing and Care and Sheffield City Council; and
- Affordable, sustainable studio provision is not consistently or adequately represented in Local Development Frameworks, or in legacy planning for major regeneration areas, reflecting its low policy status and priority within economic, regeneration and policy departments. At best, artists' studios might be covered by statements of intent or priority relating to creative workspace, but they are a different proposition and unless otherwise catered for, require special mention.

Securing studios for the future

If we value art, we must value artists. Ensuring there are appropriate, secure facilities for the long-term means artists can continue to make work and contribute to creative and vibrant communities for the benefit of all.

There are significant opportunities for securing and developing new and more sustainable artists' studio spaces as part of developments across the UK.



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Exterior of ACME studios Leven Road building showing ground floor artists' studios

To capitalise on these we need:

- Recognition and promotion within DCMS and other Government departments, particularly Communities and Local Government of the value of the artists' studio sector, which delivers cultural value by supporting art and artists at the level of research and production and, through the diverse activities of studio providers and artists, wider social and public benefit as well (NFASP can provide case studies);
- Recognition of the need for capacity building and organisational stability for the wide range of small and informal studio providers who provide essential support to artists at a range of career stages, including artists who have recently graduated and are experiencing severe financial difficulties in maintaining their practice;
- Recognition that, if empty property including shops is to be used for artists' workspace and related activities, provision needs to be retained at the heart of our towns and communities once the economic down-turn is reversed and property prices begin to rise. Authorities should be encouraged to put formal procedures in place for the use of temporary space and to see it as an opportunity to develop and maintain future cultural provision (NFASP has developed guidance notes on temporary space as artists' studios and case studies);
- Recognition that artists have different requirements from those of more commercially orientated creative industries, both in terms of the physical space requirements and the rent levels they can afford to pay. Development strategies need to acknowledge this and put in place appropriate mechanisms to ensure affordable artists' space is protected within mixed-use schemes;

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- Advocacy with Communities and Local Government to encourage policies that support cultural activity in areas such as planning legislation in support of cultural uses, business rating decisions on a mandatory and discretionary level and local authority 'best value' considerations for the long term use or asset transfer of building stock, all of which would contribute towards the sustainability and increased provision of affordable artists' studios, as well as the associated facilities and activities that this sector provides for the public;
- Advocacy with senior figures in local authorities and regeneration agencies to ensure that planning and policy frameworks make specific reference to the need for affordable artists' studios as well as for more commercial creative workspace;
- Advocacy with the Homes and Communities Agency and with social housing providers and commercial housing developers in order to promote a range of successful partnerships which have secured permanent, affordable studio space in London and which have been achieved through a variety of mechanisms, but which remain relatively unknown.



Gateshead City Council's Starter for Ten creative workspace project, The Shed

The role of the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers (NFASP)

NFASP is the professional membership organisation representing the interests of all those engaged in providing affordable studio space for visual artists.

We are the voice of a sector that has grown over the last 40 years to include mature, multi-building organisations providing studios to hundreds of artists, as well as embryonic groups just establishing themselves as artistic communities. We offer a range of support and advisory services to our member studio organisations which provide affordable studios to some 6,000 artists nationally, often with an equal number on their waiting lists.

We campaign to sustain and increase this essential infrastructure upon which so much artistic activity and cultural production depends.

To receive this document or information in another format, contact us on:

Tel: 020 7426 0067 Email: ask@nfasp.org.uk

www.nfasp.org.uk

NFASP, Unit 5, Toynbee Studios, 28 Commercial Street, London E1 6AB