

Provision of affordable studio space is threatened by economic and political issues, explains **Val Millington**.

Space invaders



Val Millington
National Federation of
Artists' Studio Providers

The value of the affordable studios sector is being increasingly recognised. Currently around 150 groups across the UK manage 270 buildings providing affordable studios for over 6,000 artists. Although they are widely different in scale, structure and their ways of working, together these groups make a vital contribution to the development and success of the visual arts in the UK by supporting artists at the basic level of production. 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 create direct public benefit through, for example, open studios, exhibitions, educational activities and artists' professional development programmes, both in their own buildings and in their neighbourhoods and further afield.

The National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers (NFASP) is the professional umbrella body representing the interests of all those engaged in providing affordable studio space for artists. Our mission is to secure, improve and increase affordable studio provision in the UK. We champion and support the work that studio providers do and campaign to influence policy and decision-making in support of the studios sector and artists. Established in 2006, the Federation became operational last year and was recently granted three-year funding from Arts Council England in recognition of its strategic role. We now have 65 'Studio' members representing some 4,000 artists, and we offer 'Individual' and 'Network' membership for others with an interest in developing and securing artists' studios. Studio members range from small groups with less than a dozen artists, such as the new Platform Arts studios at Middlesbrough station, to larger-scale arts centres with studios such as Wysing Arts Centre near Cambridge and to multi-building studio provider/developers supporting hundreds of artists such as ACAVA and Acme in London and WASPS in Scotland. Despite these variations, most studio organisations have three key

requirements: security of tenure, access to finance, and professional development and capacity building. The Federation aims to address these with its membership by sharing ideas, models, good practice and expertise, and by campaigning on key issues.

Uncertain futures

A year ago, when the Federation was becoming established, rising property prices and new development schemes were the two most significant pressures on the artists' studios sector. These were squeezing artists out of many inner city areas, whilst property in rural areas was proving equally unaffordable. Whilst the recent downturn in the economy has slowed development, groups across the country remain vulnerable and their futures are uncertain. Many continue to occupy spaces on short-term leases or with no lease at all, while developers hedge their bets in the fluctuating property market. A major issue is that few studio buildings are owned and permanent. In 2004, when Acme undertook the first systematic survey of studio groups in England, some 80% of the total space was rented and the leases of many spaces were due to expire within five to seven years. Four years on, the situation is little changed. Also, despite the current support for developing infrastructure for the creative industries, there is limited understanding of the varying types of space and different rent levels required by artists as opposed to the more commercial creative industry practitioners. A consequence is that, in some instances, well-funded creative industry workspace remains empty while there is a significant unmet demand for artists' studios.

Development issues

The NFASP has recently commissioned research into the impact of London 2012 on artists' studios within the five Olympic boroughs. The East End of London is known to have the highest concentration of artists and creative practitioners in the UK and possibly in Europe. However, the research indicates that artists' studios are currently under threat owing to the effect of widespread regeneration and in particular the preparations for the Olympics. The NFASP is working with studio organisations such as SPACE (p6) and others in the visual arts sector to ensure that artists' studios can be built



The gallery at Mushroom Works, Newcastle

into the legacy of the Cultural Olympiad, and that artists are not permanently displaced as a consequence of the Olympics.

There are opportunities for developing new and more sustainable artists' studios, not just in East London, but within regeneration and housing growth areas across the country. To capitalise on these we need developers and planners to recognise the value of artists at the heart of our communities, and for planning policy and frameworks to integrate affordable artists' studios into their wider cultural, economic and regeneration strategies. Exciting new models are emerging which demonstrate how, within mixed-use schemes, cross-subsidy and planning gain (Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act 1990 — legal agreements between a planning authority and a developer that ensure that certain extra works related to development are undertaken) be exploited to achieve affordable workspace. Acme's Galleria studios in southeast London resulted from a partnership with Barratt Housing, where a planning requirement for the retention of employment use helped secure 52 new studios.

In Sheffield, Yorkshire Artspace Society is working with the City Council to develop neighbourhood studios as part of the City's housing renewal programme. In London, Bow Arts Trust is working with registered social landlord Poplar HARCA to provide live/work accommodation for artists. Local authority strategies are being evolved to support affordable artists' workspace alongside other cultural infrastructure in city centre areas such as Liverpool's Baltic Triangle and Brighton and Hove, as well as across entire counties such as Essex. The Quirk Review, too, may offer opportunities for studios to be secured for artists

through the transfer of local authority assets to community ownership.

Creative thinking

Meanwhile, artists continue to be opportunistic and create workspace solutions for themselves. Several new ones, such as Mushroom Works in Newcastle and Exeter Artspace, have formed as Community Interest Companies and, with support from social enterprise sources, are developing a more entrepreneurial approach to securing their futures. Recent changes in rating legislation requiring landlords to pay business rates on empty property, combined with the downturn in the property market, have unlocked another opportunity for securing space, albeit a temporary one. However, awareness of these opportunities and experience of how they might be realised is severely limited. The NFASP will champion these and other models. As our membership grows, so the Federation will grow and become a more powerful voice for the affordable studios sector, helping to champion its interests and meet its needs. If we value art, we must value artists. Ensuring there are appropriate, secure facilities for the longterm means that artists can continue to make work and contribute to creative and vibrant communities for the benefit of all. ■

Val Millington is Director of NFASP. t: 020 7426 0067; e: val.millington@nfasp.org.uk; w: www.nfasp.org.uk/ At the second NFASP conference, 'What's it worth? The cultural and social value of artists' workspace' (23 October in Liverpool), speakers from different perspectives will make the case for studios sector development in the context of regeneration and sustainable communities.