

The artist's studio faces extinction in the capital if the property market continues to price artists out. But change might be afoot, reports **Hugh Pearman**, as he proposes six possible solutions. Illustrations by **Ping Zhu**

Artists in the plan



Goodness knows how many practising artists there are based in London overall. We know that in 2014 some 11,500 of them operated from studio workspaces in nearly 300 separate buildings. But there are fewer of them all the time as London's booming residential property market snaps up the kind of fringe post-industrial premises – especially in east and south London – that have previously been a natural milieu for artists. Last year some 9,000 students graduated from the capital's BA and MA arts degrees and a lot of those are joining the queue for these ever-scarcer studios. Depending on their chosen discipline, the need could be for anything from a share of a desk to a fair-sized chunk of an industrial unit.

It's generally accepted that artists – and the 'creative industries' generally – are vital to the economic as well as the cultural life of London. Their annual contribution to the capital's economy is £21.4 billion. That includes everything from architecture to advertising via all the manifestations of design and crafts, music, computer games, theatre, film and drama, but also the disciplines of fine art, sculpture, photography and video/sound art. The creative community makes plenty of spin-off work for others, ranging from joiners and welders to those working in the galleries and cafés that spring up in arts communities. And it is a sector on the rise, accounting for some one in six of all new jobs.

This is not an activity that suits your standard spec office block, even though some artists might colonise empty ones. It typically demands basic, flexible – and of course low-cost – space. The prediction is that more than a third of existing London studio space will vanish by 2024, with most of it happening right now as various short-term leases end and artists are kicked out. The good news is that there is plenty of activity in all quarters trying to put things right. Nobody – apart from overseas speculative investors – wants a dead city of dormitory or empty apartment blocks, with no creative lifeblood.

From Chelsea and Hampstead to Shoreditch and Peckham, artists have always been good at sniffing out previously undervalued locations – that's why they have traditionally been a bellwether for the developers. But where's next? Is anywhere left? And what's it like when you're just starting out? I talked to artist Roman Sheppard-Dawson, who graduated in 2015 from Central St Martins. His course was 4D Fine

(time included) such as video installation and performance. He is presently working as an assistant to a painter in Finsbury Park, who in return offers the use of a desk for his own work in the evenings. Luckily the place, Park Studios, has been run by an artists' collective since 1992 and has a long lease from Haringey Council. A bigger studio complex close by has now been lost to apartments – a typical sign of the times.

What all artists need, he points out, is very basic: a secure place to progress the work (and if physical, to store it when finished), plus (for most) a sense of like-minded people nearby. And time, he adds. Enough time to breathe. 'I would love to have my own studio. The idea that a 4D artist only needs a laptop and a phone is only partly true. Nothing beats having a home – to have a space that I could really call my own and build my practice around. We can't all be nomads for ever.' Then there's the cost of being an artist even in Outer London. 'You need to be making nearly £1,500 a month to cover accommodation and studio, before you buy anything else. So to be able to do your own work you also have to find employment that is not quite full-time.'

But the problem of scarce and costly space is no less real for those artists who have managed to become self-supporting entirely through their work. Of course there are workshops artists can rent temporarily, grants available if you are lucky for project-specific work, and art school tie-ups with studio providers. What can we do, though, in the face of an onslaught of property developers? Here are some ideas.

1. Find developers who actually like artists

More enlightened property developers have twigged that people would rather live in a place crawling with real, working artists than your standard sterile housing block. Hence projects such as Fish Island Village in Hackney Wick, where social housing landlord Peabody has teamed up with workspace provider The Trampery and several good architects to make a double-decker arrangement: flats above, 'creative industry' workspace at ground level.

Fish Island is the industrial area between the East Cross Road and the River Lea that has in recent years blossomed as a community of artists and designers: since Fish Island Village will redevelop a six-acre chunk of this community, the aim is to provide the right sort of space for it. Set

first creative-focused development of its kind in the UK'. It will include 62 studios, ranging from 200 to 2,000 square feet, open-plan workspace with 50 desks, a 1,000-square-foot shared fabrication workshop, and facilities for 500 people working onsite, with the cost of the workspace intended to be kept affordable.

Similar thinking is in evidence at the Royal Albert Wharf development in the huge Royal Docks. Bow Arts is building RAW Studios there – 40 new affordable studio spaces, which are at ground level again, opening up to the dockside. Bow Arts is broadly doing for Notting Hill Housing (the social housing developer here) what The Trampery is doing for Peabody at Fish Island Village. With rents starting at £215 a month for part of a subdivided space, it's looking pretty good as a start. There'll also be a social and events space, the RAW Lab. True to the present drive towards properly mixed-use developments, there'll be office workers there, as well as artists and residents. Bow Arts, a big player in the artists' studio business here since 1994, with eight sites in total, has already completed a smaller development of 20 such studios at Ice House Court in Barking.

2. Find new sources of studio finance

Studiomakers, an initiative launched last year by arts charity Outset Contemporary Art Fund and supported by the Greater London Authority, has set itself the task of teaming up with developers to 'design-in' affordable studio space. The desired end result is close to the Trampery/Bow Arts models outlined above, but strategically earlier in the process, raising money to make a fund that can ensure a continuing supply of affordable studios into the future.

An early success for StudiomaKers is the space for 50 artists they secured on a temporary basis in a former Clerkenwell printworks' basement, in collaboration with the Arebyte Gallery – and the developer is keen to include studios permanently in the new building that they will construct there. 'It's about trying to integrate creative spaces into the workspaces of the future,' explains StudiomaKers' project manager Yves Blais. 'The ecology seems to work.'

Outset's co-founder and StudiomaKers Director Candida Gertler is even more upbeat. 'A project of this size is not just something you can turn on. But it's a big step in the right



are grounds to be hopeful. The added value of having a creative community has already been validated – look at what happened in Shoreditch, and then Hackney and Peckham. The conversations we’re having with major developers are very fruitful.’

3. Transform an existing institution

Somerset House, that sprawling palace of administration dating back to Georgian times, contains an unexpected gem: Somerset House Studios. Launched last October and now receiving its second 25-strong intake of artists to make a total so far of 58, the studios offer reasonably-priced space in the heart of London. The studios are in some 36,000 square feet on two basement levels on the western side of the complex that used to be occupied by the Inland Revenue. When you go there you still find the tax inspectors’ carpets, snooker table and even rifle range (now converted to studios, so no shooting).

The studios opened last autumn and work on the ‘incubator’ principle – after two-and-a-half years you’re expected to move on and give others a go. There’s a strict vetting process and the idea is to mix up the genres – visual art alongside music, writing, fashion, film and emerging technologies, for instance, plus a further mix of younger and more established names. Mentoring is offered and there are communal spaces so you’re not isolated in your studio – and anyway,

decker space in a semi-secret canyon alongside the approach to Waterloo Bridge means you are bound to bump into fellow artists. Much of it is in a sunken street somewhat resembling J.K. Rowling’s Diagon Alley.

Somerset House Director Jonathan Reekie’s aim is not only to keep artists making work in the centre of London, but also exhibiting it, thus contributing to the cultural programme of the whole place. If it works there is space still to be had for more studios in Somerset House – the only problem is finding funds to convert parts passed over by the 20th century, never mind the 21st.

4. Have faith in politicians

OK, let’s not get carried away. But I get the strong impression that in London they are serious about this. It was the Greater London Authority that commissioned the 2014 *Artists Workspace Study*, which first analysed the problem, and under Mayor Sadiq Khan – who campaigned on this issue – they have set up an Artists’ Workspace Advisory Group including several of those already mentioned such as Studiomakers, Somerset House Trust and Bow Arts Trust.

In March this year the GLA’s Regeneration Committee added its voice in a new report, *Creative Tensions*. Chair Navin Shah pointed out the eternal paradox: ‘Culture has the power to regenerate, but it needs encouraging, enhancing and protecting, often from the threat of regeneration itself.’ The report supports the

Enterprise Zones with affordable housing and studios in the same place – and suggests Hackney Wick as the pilot zone because it has the greatest concentration of artists in Europe. It also supports the idea of a London Borough of Culture award every two years and points to the suburbs as an arts resource ripe for encouragement.

Senior Cultural Strategy Officer at the GLA, Kirsten Dunne – who commissioned the 2014 study – says this has to be tackled in a joined-up way, with local authorities, developers, artists and studio providers working together to effect change. On the agenda is the setting up of a Creative Land Trust that would provide financing for new studio spaces to be protected in perpetuity. Another is to build studio provision into the London Plan, the strategy document for the whole city that is due to be revised in two years’ time. Which brings us to...

5. Change the planning system

It doesn’t actually need more than a nudge because the relevant mechanism, called Section 106, already allows planning authorities to demand facilities from developers as a *quid pro quo* for granting planning permission for, say, housing and offices. Often this might include new or enlarged schools or public space or road improvements – but it could also be used for artists’ studios. According to Dunne some boroughs are already doing well here, among them Southwark, Haringey and Wandsworth. And the London Legacy Development Corporation, which manages the former London 2012 Olympic Park and immediate hinterland, is close to finalising a planning policy for Hackney Wick, insisting on ‘no net loss of artists’ workspace’ in new development – which would be good given that the artists already there tend to regard the LLDC with suspicion. All this planning-led stuff is actually quite achievable, but it will be much easier if developers are keen on artists in the first place (see No. 1). And finally, there is another option, one that plenty of artists have already taken.

6. Move out of London

Face it, artists don’t have to be here. Many move steadily further out but keep a foothold in the capital – Wembley and Tottenham Hale and Enfield crop up in conversations – or go elsewhere entirely. Sheppard-Dawson namechecks Glasgow, Sheffield, Newcastle and Birmingham as cities with thriving and much more affordable arts scenes. Of course there are others and they don’t have to be in the UK – Berlin is still a draw. But as he points out, London just has more galleries and key openings than anywhere else in the UK. As an artist you want to stay in touch with those. How much costly travel do you need, and do you really want to turn your back on all that in favour of the regional scene? There is no right or wrong answer. Regarding London, as we’ve seen, some good and influential people are on the case, who are determined to keep artists affordably working here. But it will take a few years for their plans to make a discernible difference. So leave by all means – but at least there’s a chance that, should you so choose, you could be tempted to return by