

## The Fire Station - 'Work/live' rather than 'live/work', guaranteeing employment use

### History

Acme Studios is a charitable housing association dedicated to supporting art and artists through the provision of affordable space to work and live. Established in 1972, Acme began its work pioneering the use of short-life housing for use by artists as low-cost work/live space. Over 400 houses, mainly in East and South East London, were transferred to Acme by the Greater London Council, Department of Transport and a number of London local authorities. Many of these became permanently occupied by artists because the development schemes for which the houses had become temporarily available before demolition were cancelled. As a result artists and their families settled in East London in the 70s and 80s, greatly contributing to the community of artists for which this part of London has become known throughout the world.



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*The Fire Station, Poplar, E14*

With the reduction in the wholesale redevelopment of large areas of London during the 90s, the availability of short-life housing stock for use by artists significantly reduced, and Acme's principal activity became the provision of affordable non-residential studios. The mid-90s saw a return to creating combined living and studio space with the organisation's concern to help the many artists who could not afford somewhere to live, let alone to work. After a detailed consultation process with artists the resulting 'work/live' model first saw practical form with the acquisition and development of the Fire Station, partly supported by funds from the National Lottery.

Since then Acme had developed a number of work/live schemes: at Sugar House, E15 in partnership with an RSL, as new-build units as part of a larger studio development in Orsman Road, N1 and as an important element of its major international residency programme.

Acme's experience of developing and managing work/live space for artists is unequalled and encompasses issues of demand, affordability, design, planning and rating.

### **The Fire Station: an overview**

Twelve fully-accessible, self-contained work/live units for artists, selected nationally, on fixed-term residencies, providing low-cost space to boost careers and alleviate financial and practical pressures. Key features of the project include:

- 2 bursaries (free work/live units and £5,000 each) including a bursary for a disabled artist
- Guaranteed employment use for 'live/work' designated space
- Over 40 artists have benefited from significant professional development opportunities over the first 10 years
- A permanent self-supporting cultural resource

### **Background**

Often 'live/work' is simply another word for 'loft-living', a piece of marketing that has more to do with lifestyle aspiration than deriving from a genuine need for people to work from home. The philosophy and design of the majority of live/work schemes places the emphasis on the residential element; the workspace is often small and, over time, may cease to be occupied for genuine employment use.

The driving force behind Acme Studio's work/live projects is the need for artists to have adequate studio space. The living element is necessary but ancillary to that of the studio. Acme deliberately refers to units as 'work/live' because it is the artists' professional practice, their need for a studio, that determines the design and philosophy of the scheme.

**"If I was asked to devise an art award, it might consist of a house and studio; maybe like Acme Studios...at the Fire Station, in Bow in East London; that seems a good model."**

Jeremy Dellar, Frieze, Nov-Dec 2005

### **Breathing space**

The Fire Station, E14, was the product of many years of planning by Acme to create the first permanent, fully-accessible, low-cost combined working and living spaces in the UK. The original fireman's flats on the upper four storeys were converted into 12 work/live units – simple, open, self-contained space (averaging 550 sq. ft.) including ancillary kitchens and bathrooms. Artists are selected from a national submission to take up fixed-term residencies of five years on the current programme. Rents are currently £400 a month inclusive (£8.75 per square foot per year), the same as a rent for an Acme studio and considerably less than rents charged by most other studio providers.

Acme sees the programme as a breathing space which allows artists to concentrate on the development of their work by greatly reducing or removing other practical and economic pressures. This is further supported by two bursaries which provide artists with a work/live space free of charge for two and a half years, plus a stipend.

## Planning permission

The former LCC Fire Station was located in an 'employment zone' and the London Borough of Tower Hamlets insisted on maintaining employment use on the site. Commercial developers who promised 'live/work studios' could not guarantee that these studios would not become purely residential properties over time. Understanding that Acme's artists would genuinely be focused on working, with the living space incidental to that use, Tower Hamlets granted planning consent to create work/live units, made 'personal' to Acme i.e. if the building was sold, the planning consent would fall away. The units have been continually occupied since the programme began over ten years ago and over forty artists have benefited from the significant career development the opportunity offers.



“The programme offers physical space, time and financial help, but with no pressure to fulfil specific criteria. This is the great strength of the residency.”

Ben Cove, Fire Station artist

*Robert Holyhead in his work/live unit at the Fire Station, Programme 3 (2005-2010). Photo: Derek Brown*

## Career Development

The artists selected for the work/live residencies represent a very wide diversity of practice and age. Some of the artists are at a relatively early stage in their career development, whilst others have substantial reputations, but see the Fire Station as an opportunity to pause and re-evaluate. The programme provides support at critical points in artists' lives regardless of age or career history. Artists involved in the Fire Station programme have gone on to other residencies, exhibited nationally and internationally, sold work to major galleries and won awards such as the Turner Prize.

## Further information

The Fire Station has its own website detailing current artists and their work – [www.firestation-artists.org.uk](http://www.firestation-artists.org.uk). A publication, *The Fire Station Project, Programme 1 (1997-2000)*, describes the project in more detail and gives an introduction to the work of the first twelve resident artists. To receive a copy of the publication or to find out more about Acme's work/live projects, please contact:

**Acme Studios**, 44 Copperfield Road, Bow, London E3 4RR  
T 020 8981 6811 E [mail@acme.org.uk](mailto:mail@acme.org.uk) W [www.acme.org.uk](http://www.acme.org.uk)

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