

## BUILDING ■ Industrious aesthetic: work-live studios by Robert Barnes

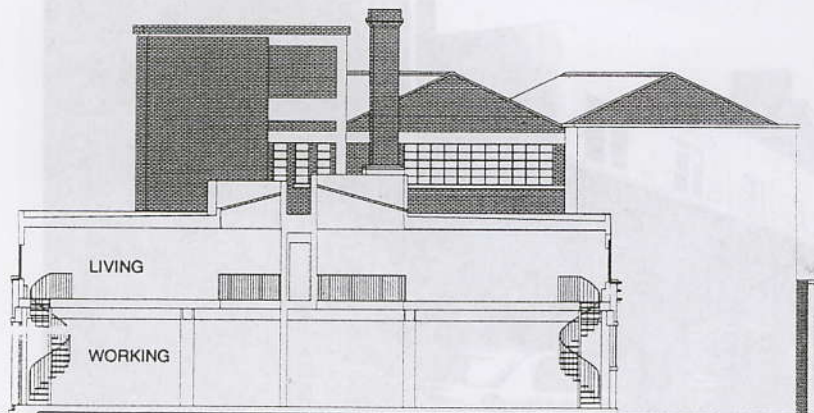
*Robert Thorne on an innovative scheme of artists studios. Photos: David Grandorge.*

*Above* Rooflights daylight the living spaces and, via voids cut in the former roofslab, studios below. *Section* Studios are back-to-back with a central escape corridor.

Of those who subscribe to the gospel of mixed use, few achieve it. At the outset many fall foul of the planning system's continued worship of zoning or financial institutions' abhorrence of the complex legal arrangements. Others have only a shallow interest in a long-term result and are content to feign belief in mixed use as a way of gaining yet another residential development. The work element in live-work is often fragile and transitory.

What has happened in Orsman Road, just south of the Regent's Canal in Hackney, is a small scale but genuine mixed use venture. Designed by Robert Ian Barnes Architects, the scheme has been slipped into an area where until now old-fashioned zoning has ruled supreme: an industrial strip alongside the canal, backed by a hinterland of interwar council flats. What has been permitted is not live-work but work-live, with the emphasis on workspaces which happen to have some accommodation attached.

The negotiations which allowed this to happen arose from a special set of circumstances. Since 1972 Acme has been a byword in the surviving parts of industrial London as an organisation willing to manage short-life property for use as artists' studios. In a sense it has acted as the broker between the fading world of the workshop and factory and the emerging world of the large-scale artist. Neither Pollock, Rauschenberg and their imitators nor the

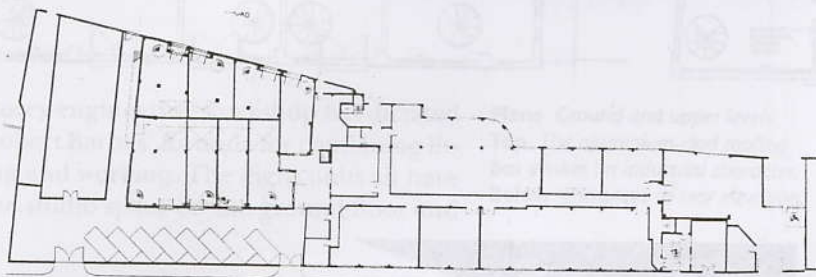


**Robert Barnes writes:**

*The Acme Studios project represents a step forward in the scale and funding of artist studios, providing eight work/live units attached to a larger studio complex within a former cigarette factory in east London. The work-live studios, formed by adding a top floor of living spaces, are being sold – by priority to artists – as shells on 125 year leases. This will provide capital for the purchase of the freehold of the entire site, securing the continued use of the rest of the premises as studios.*

*The design is characterised by simple form and distinctive materiality – a mill-finish aluminium box – to define a building in an existing situation. The box has its own surface articulation with large expanses of glass to flood the deep-plan interior with light. A lightweight steel and timber structure sits on the reinforced concrete frame of the original building. Four units face Orsman Road and four face Mill Row, to the rear with its drive-through parking yard secured by galvanized steel gates. Each unit has its own ground-level entrance leading directly into the studio space. Voids allow generous light from large Reglit rooflights to reach the deep-plan studio spaces. Galvanized steel spiral staircases give access to the first-floor living quarters which are ready for decoration, with capped services. Galvanised steel bridges with mesh floor and open balustrades complete the industrial aesthetic.*

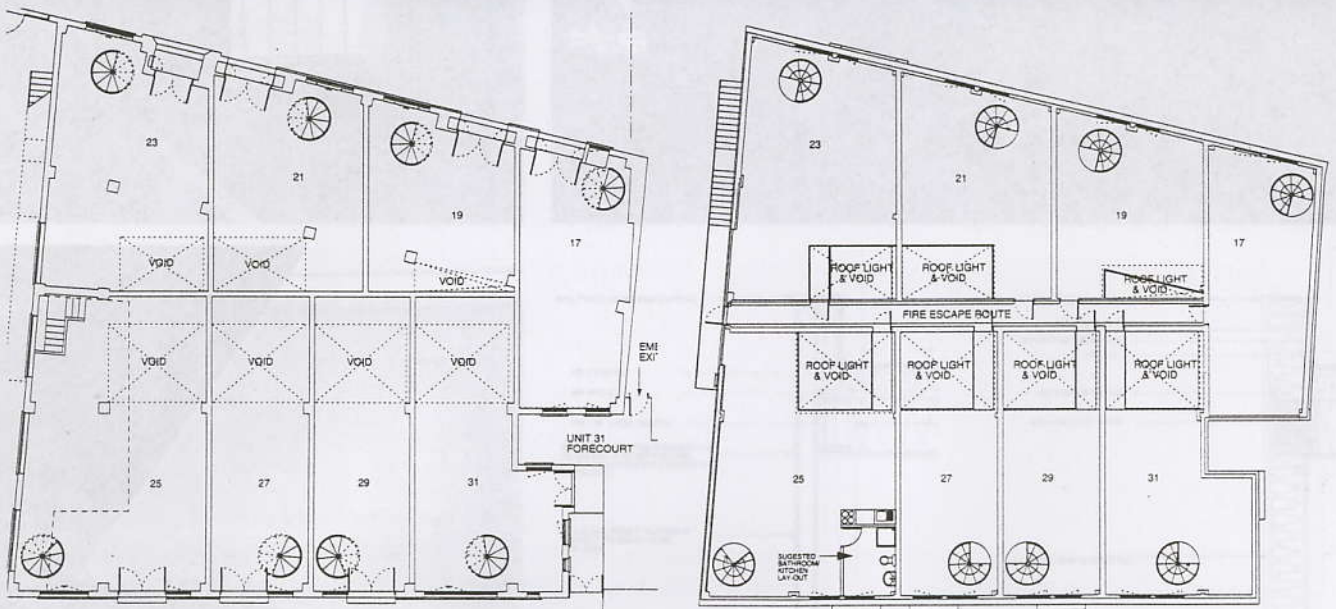
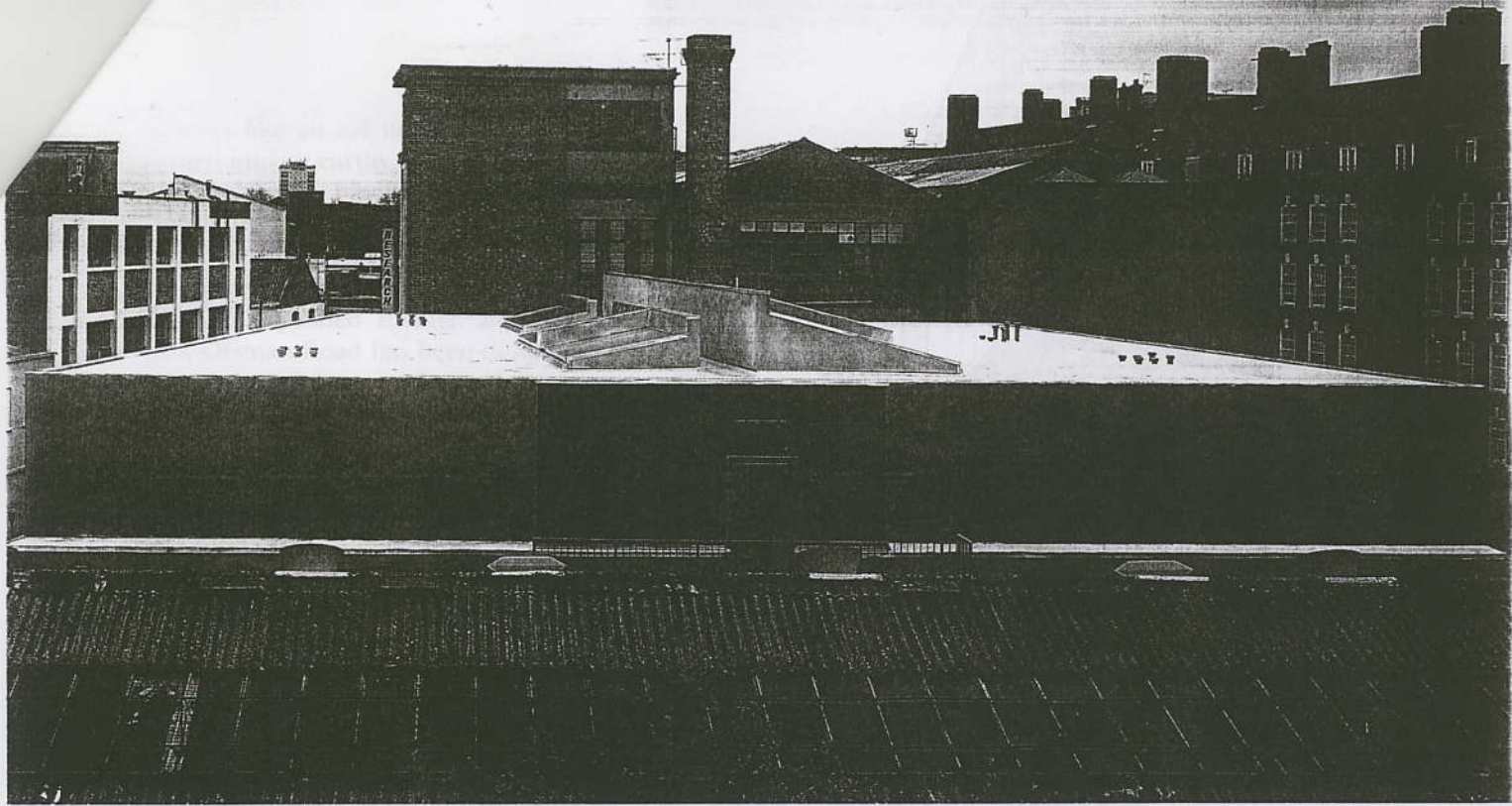
**Right/bottom** Orsman Street unit entrance and oblique view. **Site plan** Work/live units at left.



pioneers of installation art conceived of their work as a way of filling vacant industrial floorspace – but this has been one major by-product of their influence. Over the years Acme has helped some 2,000 artists to avoid working at home by providing a more spacious, if unglamorous, alternative.

One of the buildings which Acme took over in the 1983 was the former John Player cigarette factory (used also for a time to make radar components), a tough, generously glazed 1930s block which has converted well for 67 studios. The chance to buy the factory, plus the engineering premises next door, unleashed the idea of providing not just studio space but some related housing as well. A deft calculation of the overall footprint satisfied the planners that the living element represented only ten per cent of the site and therefore was not a threat to employment space in the area.

The structure of the surviving single-

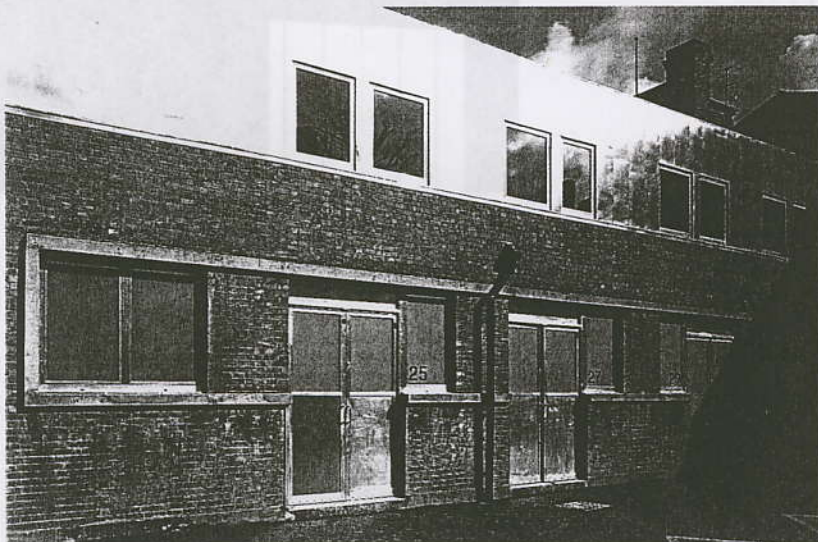


storey engineering workshop has dictated Robert Barnes' formula for combining living and working. The eight units all have the studio space on the ground floor and

**Plans** Ground and upper levels. **Top** The aluminium-clad rooftop box evokes an industrial character. **Below** Entrances to rear elevation.

living above, connected by a spiral staircase. Rooflights help throw daylight into the studios via a void in the first floor. The brick-clad workshop building is concrete-framed, apparently designed for an additional storey. But instead of continuing in the same idiom Barnes has opted for an aluminium-clad steel-frame box – still robustly industrial, as the street demands, but clearly serving another function.

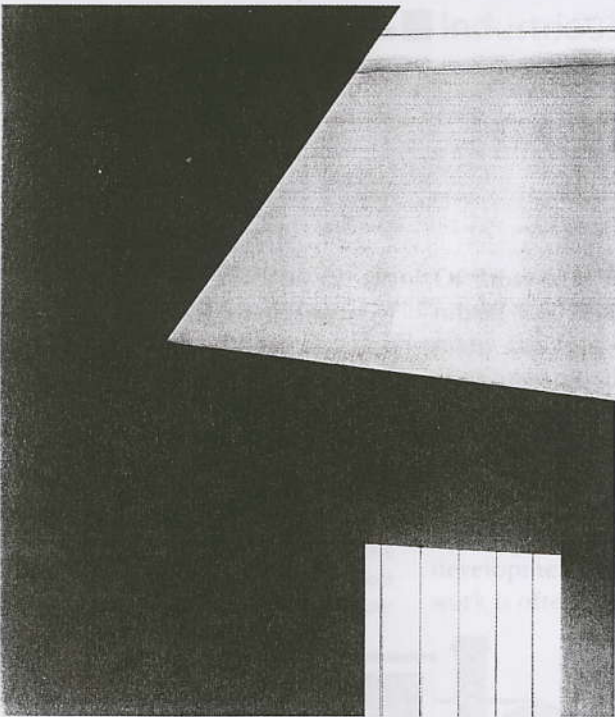
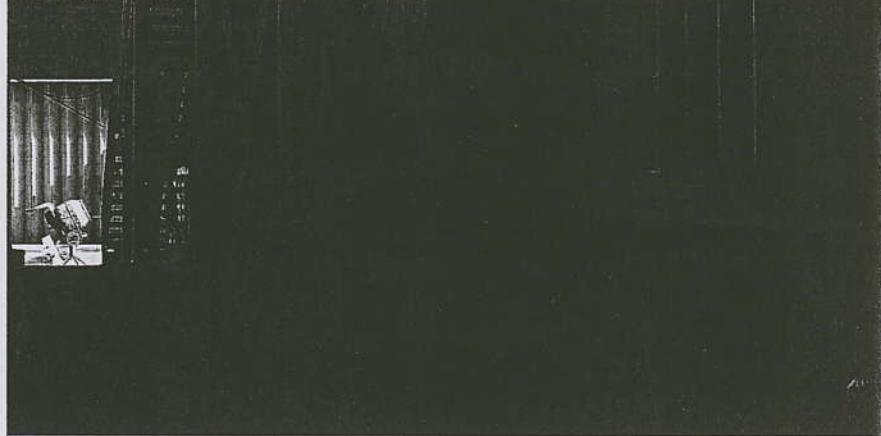
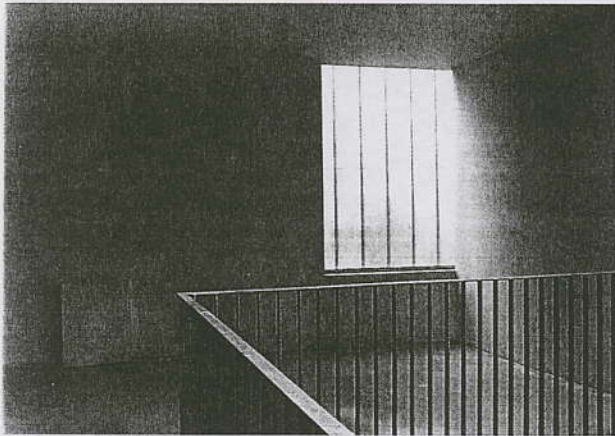
For artists used to a temporary existence in second-hand spaces, the novelty of these purpose-designed studios may be a shock. The units are being marketed in shell condition (at around £250,000) and no doubt will be colonised in a variety of ways. By contrast the exterior gives no leeway for individual expression. The aluminium upper storey is as smooth as a cigar case and would be disfigured by adaptation. Seen down the street, it



appears like an art installation that has floated into an earthy environment.

Many studio blocks in Hackney and elsewhere have enjoyed only a short artistic existence before permanent conversion to smart apartments. Thus the artistic frontier is pushed further and further east. Orsman Road has been designed to a formula which promises a more enduring mixed use life. Unless of course artists decide that a spare bedroom was good enough after all, or that the computer screen is more to their taste than a carefully crafted top-lit studio space.

Robert Thorne is a historian with Alan Baxter & Associates.



Above Upper-level interior; rooflight/window detail.  
Top right Escape stair on the west flank.  
Sections Glazed screen and aluminium-clad wall.

#### Project team

Architect: Robert Ian Barnes Architects; project team: Robert Barnes, Helene Roubinet, Silvia Filippelli, Eva Maria Benito, Helene Croissant; qs: Davis Langdon and Everest; structural engineer: Buro Happold; planning supervisor: Inman Safety Services; contractor: Sibmar Construction; client: Acme Artists Studios.

#### Selected subcontractors and suppliers

Cladding contractor: James McQuenny; glazed walls and rooflights: Reglit; spiral staircases: Crescent of Cambridge; metalwork: GB Metalwork; ironmongery: Trapex; aluminium windows and doors: Grove Windows; lightweight party walls: Gyproc.

