

The groundfloor of Chisenhale Studios in late 1980. Derelict throughout the previous decade, the building was transformed into a functional studio space by hard-working artists

STUDIO REVOLUTION

The studio is the artist's creative arena. Laura Gascoigne investigates the ways and means by which they are found

'Don't put your daughter on the stage, Mrs Worthington,' cautioned Noel Coward, and parents whose children have just enrolled at art school may be wishing they had taken similar advice. If so, they'll be heartened to know that in today's multi-tasking, flexi-timed job market, art school graduates are apparently in great demand. Why? Because they're trained to 'think outside the box'. As creative, not to say proactive thinkers, artists are just what the enterprise culture ordered.

In the past few decades, the definition of 'artist' has changed not just conceptually but practically, and a major contributor to this change has been the revolution in studio provision. The romantic stereotype of the lonely artist shivering in his garret is a thing of the past, his ghost laid to rest by the rise of modern studio communities which have provided not just a base, but a lifeline and launch pad for a whole generation of art school graduates.

Like many others, the studio revolution began in the late 1960s, when a group of artists including Bridget Riley, Peter Sedgley and Albert Irvin RA colonised warehouses at St Katharine's Dock, Wapping, with room for 100 artists. They formed an organisation called SPACE - Space Provision, Artistic, Cultural and Educational - which rented the buildings on a temporary basis from the Greater London Council. 'The name of the game was really legalised squatting,' says Irvin, and by 1970 the Council had moved them on to make way for redevelopment. But a core group moved east to occupy other vacant properties: an old clothing factory in Martello Street, still run by SPACE, and a former Jewish School in Stepney Green, where Irvin's studio remains today.

It was, says Irvin, 'the first incursion by artists into the East End', spearheading a mass-migration eastward and producing one of the highest popula-

tions of artists in Europe. In the years that followed, empty factories were taken over and transformed into hives of creative industry by self-help organisations started by artists for artists. In 1972, two art graduates from Reading, Jonathan Harvey and David Panton, on the lookout for cheap East End accommodation, formed the artists' housing association Acme. In 1983, another young artist, Duncan Smith, hunting for studio space in west London, founded ACAVA (Association for Cultural Advancement through Visual Art).

In the past 30 years, these artists' organisations have mushroomed into the big three studio providers in London. SPACE and Acme now control around 400 studios each, ACAVA around 200. From self-help movements, they have become key players in the property market, collaborating with local authorities, property developers and even, in Acme's case, the Crown Estate, advising artists

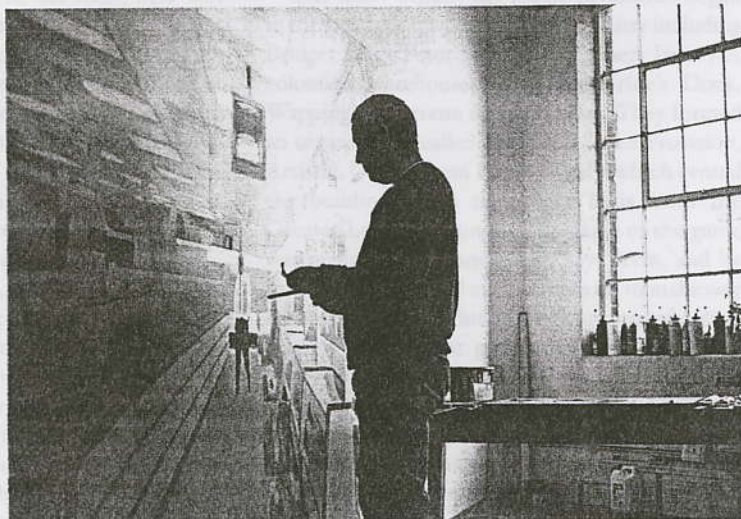
around the country on following suit. 'We have learnt to be developers,' says David Panton. The name of the game now is cross-subsidy: 'making money in one place to plough it back into something else.' With soaring property prices and the supply of industrial buildings drying up, studio providers have to stay ahead. In 1997, Acme won Lottery funding to buy the freeholds on two of their studio blocks, thus getting a permanent foot on the property ladder. Their next step is to build from scratch. ACAVA led the way in 1999 with their brand-spanking-new studio block on Blechynden Street, w10, home to twenty artists (including SPACE pioneer Bridget Riley).

A second home

For working artists, space in a studio complex means far more than just a roof over their heads. For college leavers, the big studio providers offer professional training and information on funding and jobs, as well as the chance to take part in local community projects. Young sculptor and installation artist Sophia Clist, who has a studio at Blechynden Street, cut her teeth as a working artist on ACAVA's community projects. She owes her present employment as set designer to an ad she spotted in an ACAVA mail-out. Even Gavin Turk, the YBA who made his name with the infamous blue plaque he submitted for his Royal College of Art show in 1991, wouldn't swap his studio community for solitude. Since college he has shared an ACAVA building in Charing Cross Road with filmmakers, two painters and a textile artist. The mix makes for an fertile relationship: 'You benefit from seeing how diverse the art world is.'

As well as running annual open studios, some of the bigger complexes accommodate galleries with adventurous programmes. Chisenhale Gallery, started twenty years ago by the Art Place Trust as part of its Chisenhale Studios complex, but now independently funded and run, has built an international reputation for innovative programming. Most its directors have gone on to 'higher' things. 'It's a brilliant training ground,' says ex-director Judith Nesbitt, now Head of Exhibitions & Displays at Tate Britain. 'You learn how resourceful artists are and what it's possible to do on a tiny budget. There's nothing complicated about it - it's just "come up with your best idea and we'll find a way to deliver it". It's the least institutional of

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Martin McGinn at work in his studio in Britannia Works, provided by SPACE in east London



ACAVA's Blechynden Street studio complex, one of eight buildings the studio provider has in different parts of London places, an environment in which artists feel very much at home.'

Going solo

A parallel development to the studio revolution has been the rise in artist-run shows in empty buildings. Mark Fairington, a Chisenhale tenant for fifteen years, thinks the two are connected and that insecurity has honed artists' entrepreneurial instincts: 'You might be in a studio for twenty years, then suddenly you're out. It's forced artists to develop a pragmatic approach to using spaces while they're available. Since the YBAs started finding buildings and putting on shows, artists have become incredibly flexible, finding places that contextualise the work, connecting to ideas outside the white space.' Fairington's current exhibition, *Dead or Alive*, is showing at the Oxford University Museum of Natural History.

Artangel, the ground-breaking arts commissioning organisation founded by James Lingwood and Michael Morris ten years ago, is the fairy godmother of 'contextualisation'. Since it hit the headlines with Rachel Whiteread's *House* in 1993 it has been making artists' dreams come true in real-life settings: last February, Michael Landy's

Break Down at C&A, Oxford Street; this autumn, Richard Wentworth's alternative information bureau at King's Cross. Lingwood believes that 'artists have always been incredibly resourceful. In the past you had a clear hierarchy. High modernism celebrated the *tabula rasa* of the white-walled museum: that was the primary model - everything else was secondary. It's still the dominant model for most kinds of art, but not all kinds. We don't exist in a different world to museums and galleries, nor do the artists with whom we work. We work in parallel, and sometimes the tracks criss-cross.'

With the old support systems still in place - galleries, awards, art societies - today's artists ought to be spoilt for choice. Yet the balance between making art and making a living is as hard as ever. Cheap studio space is crucial to the equation, but artists are being priced out of the market they created. If London is to remain a vibrant arts capital, its studio providers will need to exercise all their ingenuity. Gavin Turk's studio is about to be redeveloped. Will he be putting up a blue plaque? Hardly likely: 'It's going to be a nice big shiny glass office,' he says. All the more need for a reminder to developers that there's artistic life behind the glossy façade.