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Artists' studios: endangered species?

by Michelle Draper

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In the 1970s, artist Michael Craig-Martin rented two studios in a warehouse overlooking the Thames in London, for the bargain price of £10 a week. Now, his former studio spaces have been converted into multi-million pound luxury apartments. While these much sought after residences are delighting residents who can afford them, the loft conversion trend has worrying implications for the artistic community. Craig-Martin, who spoke at a conference yesterday aimed at addressing the problem of diminishing spaces for artists, is among those concerned.

Born in Dublin in 1941, Craig-Martin grew up in the United States but has lived in London for the past 37 years. Up until the mid to late '80s, he recalls, there was an abundance of disused industrial property that artists' studio providers like Space and Acme, were able to acquire and renovate for minimal cost, and then lease to artists at affordable rates.

'My belief is that one of the reasons why London became, and has been, such an important and creative city, is because there was this availability of space centrally,' Craig-Martin says.

However, as property prices soar in response to the demand for such spaces – especially in London's East End, which has long been the home to a thriving artistic community – the availability of studios for artists is becoming worryingly short.

'This whole source of property has totally disappeared,' observes Craig-Martin. 'So the effect of this is to drain the city of the possibility of having artists living and working [in the city].'

Yesterday's conference at the Tate Modern, *Creating Places*, brought artists - including Craig-Martin - and Acme co-directors Harvey and Panton, together with professionals in the fields of regeneration, property development and planning, to explore the role of the artist studio and workspace provision in regeneration. For, as Craig-Martin points out, if artists are being squeezed out of studios, this will impact on the strength and vitality of an artistic community like London's. How can good work continue to be created if there is a lack of appropriate (ie spacious and light) and affordable space from which artists can work?

'If you look at what happened to Paris in the post-war period, [it] became too expensive for artists to live in Paris, [and] Paris stopped being a centre for the arts,' Craig-Martin says, adding a similar situation is occurring across the Atlantic.

'In New York, no young artist can afford to live in Manhattan now,' he observes. 'So

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they all live in Williamsburg or Brooklyn,' the latter, he adds, a place where people his age would 'sooner have died' than worked in.

'This [trend] is going to have – and I think has had – an impact on the creative base of those cities.'

Craig-Martin, who taught artists including Damien Hirst during his time teaching at Goldsmiths College, admits that while problems like studio provision no longer directly affect himself, he is worried about the situation facing young artists today.

'If it hadn't been for the kind of provision that there was [for studios] when I was in my 20s and 30s, I might not be here now,' he says, indicating the point he has reached in his career.

But Craig-Martin emphasises that the issue of finding studio space for artists is an incredibly complex one. One such complexity, he points out, is that there is a danger of confusing the provision of spaces for the 'creative industries', with the very particular needs of visual artists like sculptors or painters.

While creative industries, including graphic design, fashion and digital media organisations, can prove their viability through revenue generated by their business, this is not necessarily the case for artists.

'It may take five years of painting in order to arrive at the paintings that somebody wants [to buy],' Craig-Martin explains. Art, especially in the early years of one's career, is done largely in a speculative fashion, he says.

Therefore, Craig-Martin warns against lumping the needs of artists in with other creative industries when it comes to looking at future policies for provision of artists' spaces.

David Panton, who co-founded Acme with fellow Fine Art graduate Jonathan Harvey in the 1970s, is currently focusing renewed energy on finding spaces for artists. He also spoke at yesterday's conference and is scheduled to chair an upcoming event to be held in Sheffield, *Creating Spaces*, which aims to draw together other organisations like Acme around the UK to begin to actively address the issue of artists' studio provision.

According to Panton, it's not only escalating property prices contributing to the squeeze on artists' studios, but increased planning restrictions and regulations. In the past, he recalls, it had been relatively cheap to convert studios, and funding sources to draw on had been straightforward – from local authorities and arts councils, for example.

However, in the past five to six years, Acme has had to re-think the ways in which it acquires property.

'We have had to [develop] much more proactive strategies,' he explains. The advent of Capital funds available through Arts Council England impacted to some degree on the way Acme operates, he continues, adding that he took about six months time out to write an application for funds, based on a business plan rather than simply money being applied to a building as an end in itself.

'We have come to develop studios now, where principles and techniques are imported from other areas of property development,' he says.

While Panton explains Acme has in a sense become a developer, the crucial difference is that any subsidies arising from commercial development of part of a site are fed back into studios to make them more affordable.

Craig-Martin suggests that more support needs to be given to organisations like Acme, who are well-placed to seek out new ways to provide artists' studios given their lengthy experience in the field.

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Panton admits that some form of political support in terms of policy developments could go some way to addressing the issue, as well as any funds through regeneration or arts councils grants that could minimise rental costs. But, he emphasises, these are not enough.

'One can no longer rely on those sources being the only way in which you can create artists' studios. You have to develop independent mechanisms of your own.'

The 'Creating Spaces' conference, aimed at workspace managers, will take place on July 22 at Persistence Works, Sheffield. For more information contact coordinator Mir Jansen on 0114 2761769 or email mir@yasprogramme.demon.co.uk



Michelle Draper

Michelle lived and worked in Rome and London as a freelance feature writer for two and a half years before returning to Australia to take up the position of Head Writer for Arts Hub. She was inspired by thousands of years of history and art in Rome, and by London's pubs. Michelle holds a BA in Journalism from RMIT University, and also writes for Arts Hub Australia.

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