

# Bohemian rhapsody

A new studio-space initiative is consigning traditional images of dingy artists' garrets to the past, says David Spittles

**T**RADITIONALLY, struggling artists have relied on finding cheap places to live and work. Long before trendy developers discovered places such as Spitalfields and Shoreditch, housing associations and charities were providing low-rent studio space for artists — a key factor in the emergence of London as the world capital for contemporary visual arts.

However, because of the inner-city property boom, artists have been at risk of being priced out of the market. Even though planners try to keep the workspace ethic alive by insisting on a certain number of live/work units at residential developments, they often get snapped up by media types.

Acme, the UK's biggest studio-space charity, says that once live-work units have been bought, continuation of usage isn't guaranteed. David Panton, of Acme, comments: "Usually there is no planning protection for the work element and over time properties revert back to purely residential use."

Currently, Acme provides about 500 studios in 12 old industrial buildings in east and south-east London. Rent levels are between £4.60 and £5.50 per sq ft per annum. Work/live studios for resident artists typically cost £70 a week, including heating and lighting. Because of its charitable status, Acme gets mandatory rate relief on its buildings, which helps to subsidise rents.

In a move to address the problems faced by artists, the organisation has shifted direction by purchasing buildings it once leased and developing its own studios for rent and purchase.

Its first acquisition was a former LCC fire station in Poplar, E14, which was converted into 12 work/live units and six non-residential studios, offering simple, open-plan spaces of about 550 sq ft with a small kitchen and bathroom, white walls and pine floorboards.



Art for artists's sake: Acme provides about 500 studios like Barbara Tyrell's, above and Perminder Kaur below, left, in 12 old industrial buildings in London

The intention is to give artists more time to concentrate on their professional careers rather than simply working to survive. There is no obligation on artists to make their work public.

"It is the artists' need for studio space that drives the whole design and philosophy of our work/live schemes," explains Panton. The living elements are necessary but ancillary.

"It means artists are able to operate in a self-contained way, but the collective dynamic of 12 artists working and living in close proximity provides many opportunities for collaboration and support."



**'It's allowed me to forget about the issue of a roof over my head'**

**HELENA** Ben-Zenou (above), 31, is one of the resident artists. She pays £60 a week. "It has been incredibly beneficial. It's given me freedom and allowed me to forget about the issue of a roof over my head."

Ben-Zenou says the area is a perfect location for her subject. She paints urban landscapes of the immediate surroundings. "There's such radical change going on," she says.

Acme recently bought a major site at Orsman Road, Hackney, where it had been leasing studios since 1983. Part of the redevelopment involves building eight work/live duplexes which will be offered for sale, thereby cross-subsidising 48 rented studios at the site. Completion is due next month.

The work/live units have been created by adding an additional floor to an existing single-storey workshop which dates back to the 1930s when the building was a cigarette factory.

Skylights have been opened up and spiral staircases lead to the residential element in the new aluminium-clad structure. They are generously sized

units (ranging between 904sq ft to 2,198sq ft) with prices starting at £210,000. All are being offered in shell condition. Monty Freeman, of estate agent Bailey Cox and Edwards, says the work is likely to cost at least £20,000.

The leases stipulate that the studios can be used for work only on the ground floor. The district valuer will assess the rates bill once the units are occupied.

"They are not luxury lofts masquerading as workspaces," says David Panton, of Acme. "They are quite stark shells." Potential buyers will have to demonstrate their artistic leanings, but the units are not being restricted to painters and printmakers.

"It could be someone who wants to set up a recording studio. We're keen to frighten off the loft dwellers."

Acme has a waiting list of 530 artists searching for space, although turnover is quite brisk. Call 020 8981 6811.

Also in Hackney, ACAVA, another specialist organisation, has opened 50 studios at 1-15 Cremer Street. Phone 020 8960 5015 for details.

