

Payback time for artists

Studios have been credited for leading the regeneration of several blighted inner-city areas. Finding backers to build more has at last found its way on to the government's agenda



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PROPERTY

Once-grim industrial inner cities often owe their regeneration to the artists that take studio space in urban neighbourhoods no one dares inhabit – and who are then followed by bars, restaurants and eventually offices and residents.

The typical payback the artists get for bringing new life to a neighbourhood is to be priced out of the area's property market once it becomes popular.

While this is a phenomenon that has caused the displacement of artists in Miami, New York and Paris, they were pleasantly surprised this week that the issue has found its way on to the agenda of government and Arts Council England.

Estelle Morris, the new arts minister, and Peter Hewitt, chief executive of the Arts Council, joined artists and developers at the Tate Modern museum this week to discuss how artist studios and workspace provisions affect regeneration. All agreed that making space available and affordable was important if art and artists are to have any influence on regeneration.

However, few of the speakers knew how to do this. Ms Morris said it is an issue she has put on the agenda in her new role. "I want to be sure individuals have their own space to innovate and do their art not only for their own sake but to help future economic development," she said.

Private companies that develop space for artists do exist, such as Acme Studios in London and Wasps Artist's Studios in Scotland. But executives there say funding is difficult to come by – the lottery money they used to benefit from is drying up – and they need to find new and novel ways to fund their projects.

It is difficult to obtain private sector money



At work: developers of artists' studios are struggling to obtain funding to build more units Larry Williams

because the projects are not designed to make the maximum profit because the tenants tend not to be particularly high earners. Yorkshire ArtSpace says artists in North Yorkshire earn an average £10,000 a year.

Jonathan Harvey, co-director of Acme Studios, which has helped more than 4,000 artists find affordable workspace in London and manages 400 studios and 40 houses for artists, says the difference between the rent he charges and the rent he could charge for the space he owns is £1m a year.

Mr Harvey, who is an artist by training, says the demand for affordable studios is so great that his projects are not speculative because he has a waiting list of at least 500 artists who will fill the space as soon as they are built.

Acme, like many developers, has been able to negotiate favourable leases now that the property market in London is soft. But the days of buying an unwanted industrial building on the cheap and turning it into artists' studios are over.

Indeed, Michael Craig-Martin, an American trained artist who has worked in England since the 1960s, says new loft developments in Leytonstone or other parts

of east London, which at one time would have been considered marginal neighbourhoods, now "are high-priced operations. In this market cheap property is no longer available."

So Acme has found creative ways to meet its goals, as have developers with whom Mr Harvey has held talks with. He is negotiating with a developer who wants to build a residential building in south London. To get permission, the developer has offered to build affordable workspace, which it will let to Acme for half the development cost.

Acme would take responsibility for the artists' studios that would be adjacent to the new residential development. Acme and the developer were brought together by the planning commissioner.

Least developers think providing artists' space is an easy way to get planning permission for new developments, Mr Craig-Martin says while artists don't expect handouts, they are choosy about the location of the space they work in.

"Art is an urban activity and needs the kind of urban activity you get from being around a mix of people," says Mr Craig-Martin, a professor emeritus at Goldsmiths College, University of London.

Another caution to developers came from Ian Wall, chief executive of EDI Group, the private development group set up by the city of Edinburgh. "Developers don't care a cuss," he said to appreciative laughter from the artist-filled audience. "They will use artists as a fig leaf to get to planners," he said, adding communities that want artists should not rely on developers.

Mr Craig-Martin, who works in a studio in St Katherine's Dock, east of the City, says he is frustrated that little if any of the tax incentives handed out to urban developers has found its way to fund space for artists, particularly when art can help regenerate a neighbourhood.

Besides, artists have a keen nose for property, so funding space for them would likely lead to a regenerated neighbourhood.

"You can't be an artist and not be interested in property," he says. "As an artist, you spend your whole life trailing property."

It is that obsession with property that helps artists to see the value in blighted areas before anyone else does. If you want to know where the next newly regenerated neighbourhood will be, "follow the artists. They are always right," he says.