

## Can anything be done to stop the exodus of artists from London?

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Earlier this month, Hackney lost a local institution. After 16 years, Cremer Street Studios – home to 90 studio spaces and 120 artists – closed its doors for the last time. The reason? The building is to be converted into apartments.



The

Cremer Street story is not uncommon. The booming residential market and liberalisation of planning regulations have driven hundreds of artists and designers out of their studios and indeed the capital in recent years as warehouse after warehouse is repurposed or redeveloped for flats.

The same happened in previous economic cycles, with artists blazing a trail from Brick Lane to Shoreditch to Hoxton and then ever further north into Hackney and beyond. This time around, however, it seems the trail is petering out, with fewer and fewer affordable enclaves now available to cash-strapped artists.

The question is: will campaigns such as Studiomakers, endorsed by renowned sculptor Antony Gormley, be able to stop the exodus and “build a bridge”, as he puts it, between developers and artists?

Given the numbers being driven out, it would have to be some bridge. In 2014, the Greater London Authority (GLA) produced a report forecasting that over a five-year period, 3,500 artists were likely to lose their places of work.

That might not sound like many – around the population of a couple of big, inner-city schools – but it represents a huge proportion of London’s visual arts scene. The report estimated around 11,500 people to be working from studios in 298 buildings. In other words, 30% of existing provision is to be lost.

## Financial concerns

At the crux of the matter is affordability. Only 17% of the studios identified by the GLA were owner-occupied and the average rent for the tenant artists was just £13.73/sq ft a year. Given that the rent for equivalent co-working or light industrial space in London can be at least £30/sq ft, it is easy to understand where the problem lies.

“I think people are being forced out,” says Niall Ingham, a senior surveyor at CBRE who previously managed Grainger’s portfolio of live/work studios. “Obviously Old Street and Shoreditch are no longer affordable for start-ups, let alone artists.”

The distinction between the two underscores just how bleak the outlook is for artists. Many developers put a great deal of effort into providing incubator space for start-up firms, but the provision of studios is largely done by charities. The reason is simple: if a start-up does well, a landlord can double the rent. If they fail, someone else will take the space. Artists, on the other hand, are likely to remain poor and continue to require a subsidy.

Someone who has more experience of the needs of London artists than most is Duncan Smith. An artist himself, Smith is the artistic director at studio provider the [Association for Cultural Advancement Through Visual Art \(ACAVA\)](#) and acting chair of the National Federation of Artists’ Studio Providers.



Artists in the street: rising costs are forcing artists out of their studios

“Entrepreneurs, if they can get started, become part of the general economy and therefore what is needed at first are incubator units,” he says. “That’s not true of artists. Artists mostly remain poor. And even if they’re successful for a period, normally their income goes down again.”

This is why they tend to gravitate to cheaper areas. Unfortunately, these are becoming few and far between, so they are taking pockets of space where they can rather than colonising previously down-at-heel locations and turning them into true creative hubs.

“It’s actually rather worrying for those of us who have seen the best creative minds of a generation getting together,” says Smith. “Some would claim the new hub is out in Woolwich now, but the truth is people are being dispersed. We’re having to develop studios wherever we can.”

Indeed, artists are increasingly having to quit the capital entirely. Take the once London-focused ACAVA, which opened its latest studio building this month in Stoke-on-Trent, providing 43 studios at £7.75/sq ft.

Closer to London, similar projects have been established up and down the Thames Estuary in Essex and Kent and as far out as Southend and Margate, which are benefiting from the accompanying regeneration and gentrification that a vibrant artistic community usually brings.

London, on the other hand, is on the cusp of an artistic brain drain. The paradox is that the very people who have made the areas what they are do not themselves benefit.

“London has changed so much over the last 20 years,” says Gormley, talking exclusively to *Property Week*. “You can’t go anywhere without there being cranes. Maybe that’s no bad thing, but we need to think about who and what we’re doing it for. What makes cities vibrant? It’s things being made that have never been made before; thoughts that have never been thought before.”

The point isn’t lost on the GLA. “London’s immense success has led to growth and development and the opening up of new parts of the city,” says deputy mayor for culture Munira Mirza. “But that has pushed out the fragile, sensitive souls who create art and culture and vibrancy. All those things that make London so attractive to developers are in danger of being squeezed out. In the next five years, unless we intervene, there will be a huge loss.”

Not just culturally. Visual artists working in clusters are to a certain extent the engine room of the wider creative economy, which contributes well north of £20bn annually and a sixth of all new jobs.

## Next wave

“I think of artists as the R&D department of the creative economy,” says Smith. “They’re the creative people in studios doing stuff not for the profit but for the idea. Those ideas then get picked up and are turned into industry. The web designers, the games creators... those things all started out in artists’ studios but then turned into viable businesses. You need the artists that are going to generate the next wave of creative businesses.”

What’s more, as with tech clusters (think Silicon Roundabout) or biomedical hubs (the soon-to-open Crick Institute), when artists cluster, the result is usually more than the sum of its parts. So it is ominous that artistic hubs in places such as Hackney or Walthamstow (or ‘Awesomestow’, as Turner Prize winner Grayson Perry described it in his 2013 Reith Lectures) are being dispersed.

The issue has become so serious that this month, not one but two campaigns were launched in the space of a week in a bid to boost studio numbers.



The first, launched by arts charity [Outset](#) with the support of the GLA, is aimed squarely at the development and property industries. [Studiomakers](#) is asking developers to include affordable space (around the £12–£17/sq ft mark) for artists in their new developments and seeking to persuade landlords with space to fill to offer it up for studio use.

The sell is that artists bring vitality to a development and that if a property company works with a registered charity it can avoid paying business rates on the area let to artist occupiers.

“Traditionally, developers have been the enemy of artists, with their desire to get maximum revenue for a plot of land, but we need to attempt to build a bridge in order to make places more exciting,” says Gormley. “Architecture is as much about building a community as it is about the building itself. Every building should be a model of how we like to live and every building should contain poetry in its genes.”

On the day of the [Studiomakers](#) launch at Gormley’s studio just north of King’s Cross, [Outset](#)’s director

Candida Gertler says she had two calls from developers eager to get involved. “Developers are interested in architecture and that is only one step away from art, and we’ve found they are sensitive to and open to the arts,” she says. “Many are keen to come on board. It has to be an alliance of spirit and we have to engage every sector for it to work. We’ve had amazing feedback from the property sector.”

Indeed, proptech firm Second Home was involved in working up the Studiomakers campaign and believes the case it makes is compelling. “Artists give London its soul and that’s worth fighting for,” says co-founder Sam Aldenton. “We need to preserve that, and that means creating a business case for artists in our city.”

The campaign, however, has its doubters. Smith is blunt. “It was done in Paris and it didn’t work. For a long time, it was a requirement of building a development that a studio had to be provided. But they ended up being used by heavy drinkers, which artists often get confused with – bohemian types.”

More fundamentally, Smith says that the Outset campaign doesn’t address the clustering issue. If a developer provides space for a number of artists, then it has a chance of succeeding, but if it is just a room or two then the artists will be working in isolation and might as well be working in a garden shed, he argues.



“Creative people do not just spontaneously come up with stuff – they spark off each other,” he points out. “We get people moving in who have a perfectly decent studio at the bottom of the garden but say they’re going mad. They come here and find other people just as mad as them.”

Then there is the second campaign, which launched two weeks ago today and is fronted by the [Open Workspace Providers Group \(OWPG\)](#). The group represents organisations as diverse as the listed Workspace Group and charity the Bow Arts Trust, and while its remit expands beyond studios, artists are very much at the forefront of its thinking.

The OWPG push is targeting Boris Johnson’s successor as London mayor and demanding the

extension of business rates relief from charities to registered providers that demonstrate a clear social impact in their local area. Other recommendations include protection for workspace from the pressure for housing development – something that has been eroded as a result of the government’s reforms to permitted development rights – as well as provision in the planning system to force developers to provide space for new businesses, including artists.

As the OWPG acknowledges, not all of these demands are within the mayor’s remit, and it seems unlikely that central government will step in to dictate terms on behalf of a bunch of artists. As a result, Smith remains convinced that working within the current planning system, in particular using the section 106 regime to require developers to include sizeable provision for studio space, is the way forward.

## Housing vs studios

“I think often where developers are collaborating with us it’s because they’re forced to,” he says. “Most developers are doing what they’re supposed to in a capitalist economy and maximising their profits. But sometimes – especially if there is some intervention from the local authority – it’s possible to twist their arms a bit.”

The problem with the developer contributions route, however, is that it means artists’ studios going head to head with affordable housing. At a time when the housing crisis is at the top of the political agenda, you can see why workspace for artists might lose out.

“Affordable housing is at the top of the government’s list,” says Gormley. “Studio space shouldn’t be a rival to that; it should go alongside it. I understand we need houses and shops and offices, but we also need artists’ studios.”

So the problem with finding the economic headroom for artists’ studios in London isn’t just that the required space can usually be put to more profitable use; it’s that it is also competing with the compelling case that can always be made for additional housing.

But unless the crisis in studio provision can be addressed, the capital risks losing a key part of its economic and cultural DNA – and one that made it such a vibrant, attractive city in the first place.

## Eddie Peake: the young artist’s perspective



Eddie Peake has seen London’s cultural landscape change beyond recognition. Lack of affordable studio space has driven many of his artist friends out, some of them abroad to more accommodating cities such as Berlin. Describing the situation as “appalling” and worsening, he is worried that art-school graduates may never get a foothold in the capital.

At 34, Peake enjoyed a successful career even before graduating from the Royal Academy with a master’s degree in 2013. Known for his performance art as well as video, photography, painting, sculpture and installation, he has exhibited at the Barbican and Tate Modern as well as in other galleries around the world.

Born and raised in London to artist/writer parents (he is the grandson of Mervyn Peake of *Gormenghast* fame, and the great, great, great grandson of Charles Darwin), he considers himself lucky to be able to afford his studio in Peckham, where he has been for nine months.

But he hasn’t always been so fortunate. After art school, he made his work in his bedroom or collectively with groups of people in squats, and at one time moved back into his parents’ home, preferring to rent a studio than a flat. When that setup became impractical, he rented a flat and went without studio space for 18 months, before finding one in Hackney Wick. But that didn’t work out either – it was sold to developers to be turned into expensive flats and he had to move out.

Despite bumps in the road, he is keen to point out that his life and career are in no way indicative of those of most artists. “My situation doesn’t represent the majority of artists,” he says. “I’m lucky I’m able to afford a studio. The cost of studio space in London is extremely prohibitive for most artists but somehow they find ways to exist.”

As for London’s changing cultural landscape, Peake says he feels like he is in a foreign land. And a lot of that comes down to property. “Every building is either a coffee shop or a block of flats inhabited by people from the City and that is a violation of what artists, of what creative people, should have at their disposal.”

He adds: “Clearly the government’s priority isn’t to protect the vibrant, cultural foundation of the city, and I wish I had the answer. Rent caps and subsidies are a possibility, but I don’t know if that’s feasible for landlords. If studios could be rented more cheaply, we’d have a very different, more positive, situation.”

The ideal, he says, is to have a studio with loads of space, large windows and good ventilation. But he points out that artists don’t ever expect ideal circumstances – “we’ll make use of what we can”.

The idea of working from a commercial property might make artists feel ill at ease, but it is something

they are probably going to have to get used to, he adds.

“Those in property are primarily concerned about their profit margins,” he says. “Artists tend to be anti-establishment and there’s something jarring about it; we have contrasting and polarised agendas. But if artists are offered a studio, they’ll take it.”

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