

Creating Places Conference, Tate Modern, 8th July 2003
Chief Executive, Arts Council England, Peter Hewitt

(The content of this document may contain some errors as it has been transcribed.)

'Artists at the heart of sustainable communities' (SLIDE 1)

With the backing of Government, the new Arts Council England is placing greater emphasis than ever before on support for artists. Through investment directly in their work, but also in supporting the infrastructure which allows artists and their creativity to thrive. Workspace and studios are a key element of this infrastructure.

Art can be a thing of beauty and wonder in itself. But there are strong and growing arguments for the importance of art and artists in terms of the broader interests of society. Britain's artists are becoming significant players within the knowledge and social regeneration economies.

There is wide recognition that the creative industries – of which the visual arts are an important part – are now a major economic sector. Government statistics show that: 'the creative industries grew by an average of 9 per cent between 1997 and 2000, compared to an average of 2.8 per cent growth for the whole economy' (source: DCMS website). A recent report by the Greater London Authority's Economics Unit backs this up (source GLA website). It found that the creative industries are the fastest growing sector of the capital's economy. One in five new jobs in London are in the creative industries.

Urban and rural regeneration, triggered by the decline of traditional industry and agriculture, is seeking new growth sectors. In a rapidly changing economy, ideas, knowledge and creativity are the raw materials for new products and processes. This places artists closer to the economic mainstream. Studios represent an important bridge linking art to the wider economy :

- as an industry in itself;
- as an important stimulant to regeneration;
- as an image enhancer to attract professional recruitment and inward investment;
- as a draw for a new cultural tourism;

Studios, first and foremost, offer artists a base to work in. But they are well placed to do many other things. They can be:

- a marketplace for the sale of art and artistic services;
- venues for audiences to visit;
- centres for formal or informal education.

They can also be a base for the training and development of local arts businesses, linking the skills of artists to the wider economy.

Visual artists are, in general, not principally motivated by economic gain. As a result, though, of the greater emphasis now been given to the *professional* development of artists – through undergraduate courses and through training and support mechanisms available to serious practicing artists – their contribution to the economy is increasing. And, there is potential for further growth.

Recent Arts Council research into open studio events – where a group of artists open their studios to the public during an agreed period of time – helps to illustrate the economic potential of studios. Its analysis of just 32 such events across England found that collectively they amounted to a major cultural attraction. The 3,000 artists taking part attracted 250,000 visitors and made over £1.5 million in sales. A separate report focused on the East England region found that 50% of visitors to open studios events had an interest in purchasing or commissioning work. (n.b. new ACE publication on Open Studios was given to all conference delegates at registration)

As well as bringing economic benefits, art is increasingly seen as a means to community regeneration. Closeness to the ground gives studios an important advantage here, enabling them to connect with community-based activity, strengthening the role played by art at a neighbourhood level.

Studios offer a base from which artists can help to animate neighbourhoods and create new skills and confidence in local people. They can be an important centre for learning, education and skills development, for artists and for the wider public. Artists are an important part of any residential or working community. They bring with them a wide range of craft, technical, creative, educational and cultural skills.

The networking and the exchange of ideas and information between individual artists which takes place within collective studios empowers and energises artists. It allows sharing of skills and the development of artist-led projects which contribute to a vibrant neighbourhood and are essential to a healthy visual arts sector.

Artists have always been interested in the character, quality and sense of place. They often act as regeneration pioneers, taking over and bringing new life to unused buildings which have outlived their original function and which are looking for their next cycle of use. By bringing together in areas of deprivation a range of new cultural and creative activities, and a critical mass of engaged and active people, artists' studios create the conditions for renewal and reinvestment.

Studios in temporary buildings can act as lightning conductors for regeneration and private development money. There are many well-documented examples – Hoxton being a recent case in London - where artists studios have helped to regenerate and re-brand areas or neighbourhoods and have stimulated cultural activity and tourism.

The downside of this has been that artists have often been displaced as property values rise. We are, however, entering a new era of ambition and professionalism within the arts which is clearly signalled by recent developments within the artists studios sector.

Key within this is the recognition that artists should no longer be victims of the renewal process which they help to initiate. Artists are now looking to stay put and reap the benefits. They are developing structures, strategies and opportunities which will guarantee their presence within neighbourhoods for the long term. The studios sector is coming of age.

This new maturity and ambition has in part been fuelled by investment from the Arts Capital Lottery. Since 1996, Lottery funding has enabled studio organisations from all over the UK to upgrade and in some instances purchase their buildings.

In 1997 ACME studios (which Jonathan Harvey will talk about) used the opportunity provided by the Lottery to get its first foot on the property ownership ladder. It was able to purchase and renovate two buildings – 44 Copperfield Road and the former Fire Station, Gillender Street - in London's East end (**SLIDE 2**). This was a significant moment in ACME's evolution, marking the point at which the permanent occupation of buildings became both a goal and a realisable possibility.

In 1999, in West London, ACAVA studios moved into a new Lottery funded building - with artists' studios, a training facility and a community arts resource - in Blechynden Street, North Kensington (**SLIDE 3**). From here, ACAVA is runs training courses in digital arts for artists and local unemployed people, and Artspace, an arts project for people recovering from mental health problems. A wide variety of artist-led workshops are held on ACAVA premises as well as in schools, colleges and other community based venues.

(SLIDE 4) Blechynden Street represents a landmark in the professionalisation of the artists sector in that it claims to be the first *purpose built* studios building. It shows what a professional working environment for artists can mean and encourages others to think that they should no longer have to put up with the kind of semi-derelict conditions often associated with artists' workspace.

Much Lottery enabled studios development has also taken place outside of London **(SLIDE 5)**. Since the mid 1990s a number of England's Core Cities (i.e. second tier metropolitan centres) have seen the emergence of regional centres of excellence for artists production.

(SLIDE 6) In Bristol in 1998, nearly 100 artists took up residence at Spike Island. Formerly a tea packing factory, its facilities cater for more artists than any other single studio building in England.

In 2001, Persistence Works in Sheffield became the UK's second purpose built studio complex **(SLIDE 7)**. It provides a permanent new base for 68 artists and makers. Studio artists and associate members are able to tap into administrative support, training, marketing and a wide range of work opportunities - including residencies and commissions. The studio organisation which runs Persistence Works – Yorkshire Artspace - acts as an agency putting commissioners in touch with artists and makers and offering a visual arts information service to the City. Outreach and education programmes and open studios events increase access for the community to the skills of artists and craftspeople. **(SLIDE 8)**

In Leeds and Newcastle, projects of similar ambition are currently in progress at East Street Arts and at the Waygood studios. This new leap forward in the professional environment for artists is a welcome signal - to artists and to the wider community – that our major regional cities have high ambitions for cultural and social development and that artists and other creative people have a key part to play in building the future.

In Liverpool, the soon to be European Capital of Culture, the arts will indeed be instrumental in building the future. Artists are already responding creatively to the changing landscape of the city . **(SLIDE 9)** A group of enterprising artists, led by Leo Fitzmaurice and Neville Gabie, have seen the evacuation of the city's tower blocks as an opportunity to find a temporary base for art. . **(SLIDE 10)** To mark this transitional phase in Liverpool's architectural and social history, they have forged a partnership with the local Housing Action Trust to enable artists to take up residence in some of the blocks, **(SLIDE 11)** including Linosa Court, as they await demolition. Working with and alongside the last remaining residents, their project, **(SLIDE 12)** *Up In The Air*, is helping to build a bridge between Liverpool past and Liverpool future.

Artists' workspace can be an equally important component in rural regeneration. A good example is Stroud Valleys Artspace **(SLIDE 13)**. Stroud Valleys has been able, with Lottery capital funding, to purchase its premises and is working with award winning architect Tony Fretton to create an impressive new cultural focus for the centre of this Gloucestershire market town. As well as providing a permanent base for 30 artists, Stroud Valleys will act as an important hub for artists and arts activity in the wider region.

(SLIDE 14) In June 2003 Stroud Valleys organised Site 03, a month long festival showing the work of nearly 250 artists in 25 venues. Over 15,000 people attended the festival, which provided a popular platform for local activity and a high profile focus for cultural tourism.

(SLIDE 15) Artists' studios, then, have come a long way in a relatively short time. It is a measure of their success and potential that so many of us have been inspired to come along to this event today. We all have a role to play to make sure that the gains of recent years can be built upon. Whether it be through funding, policy, partnerships or advocacy, it is in the interests of all of us to work together to create the conditions whereby artists and other creative people can build - and sustain – a place for themselves at the heart of our economic and social life.

Slides:

- 1. Peter Hewitt 'home' slide: Artists at the heart of sustainable communities**
- 2. ACME Station House Opera commission**
- 3. ACAVA exterior building shot emphasising good access**
- 4. ACAVA interiors of studios, plus courtyard**
- 5. Spike Island studios, gallery**
- 6. Spike Island open studios**
- 7. Persistence Works at night**
- 8. Persistence Works daytime**
- 9. Linosa Court tower block, Liverpool**
- 10. Will Self at Linosa Court**
- 11. work by Neville Gabie at Linosa Court**
- 12. work by Catherine Bertola at Linosa Court**
- 13. Stroud Valleys Artspace**
- 14. projections at Stroud Valleys**
- 15. Return to Peter Hewitt 'home' slide**