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# The space of change: Artists in the East End 1968-1980

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# Artists in the East End 1968 -1980

**Nick Green**

Nick Green details the shift from industry to art in examining the origins of East London's studio blocks

Phenomena generate myths, and like any phenomenon, a mythology has grown up around the East End arts scene which clouds the facts, ignores the complexities and leans heavily upon over-simplification. That much, one might expect. More worrying is that the very process of creating the legend distorts the history, recent though it may be. An example: Butlers Wharf, on the south bank of the Thames, immediately East of Tower Bridge, has attached to its newly scrubbed yellow brickwork, one of those ubiquitous blue plaques, giving a one sentence synopsis of the building's history. The wharf used to be spice warehouses, we are told, lay derelict for a while, and was then converted into shops and restaurants. What this sanitised version of events fails to mention is that Butlers Wharf lay derelict, or semi-derelict at least, for the best part of a decade, and that for several years in the 1970s, it was home to three hundred or so artists, punk musicians and designers amongst others. Put it another way. In its lifetime, that building has had three uses: as a spice warehouse until the early 1970s; as a clandestine 'artists' colony' for most of the 1970s; and restaurants and shops in the latter half of the 1990s. It was empty for much of the 1980s, the subject of planning wrangles. The point is that although it has been a tourist attraction for less time than it was an artists' colony, this aspect of the existence of the building is simply ignored. It is easy enough to take a politically motivated stab at why: that the artists and their colleagues were eventually evicted to make way for a more profitable use would not look good when publicly presented as historical fact. More likely I suspect, and more prosaic, is that whoever wrote the script for the blue plaque, two decades after the event, simply didn't know.

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## The question

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By the time the artists were forced to leave Butlers Wharf in 1979, the East End was already home to several hundred artists. In the two decades since then, the number of studio blocks and artists has grown apace, to the extent that the most public manifestation of this phenomenon, the bi-annual East End 'Open Studios', whereby the East End's artists open their studios to the public for a few days over a month or so, now attracts national press coverage. The local authorities have begun to sit up and take notice. And this begs a question: why are there so many artists in the East End? Why not Lewisham say, or Deptford?

The stock response is 'low rents and lots of redundant industrial property', but this is not the whole story. True, there are other places in London with cheap property, industrial and otherwise but, significantly, not in anything like the same concentration as in the East End, and that is indeed one clue. But when we try to analyse the broader context and history of how this corner of London came to be saturated with cheap property, the picture which emerges owes its existence as much to the needs of global capital as it does to the opportunistic creativity of artists. As significant were the dynamics of change from an industrial to a post-industrial district resulting in swathes of empty industrial property, as well as the willingness on the part of local authorities to support any initiative which might ease the trauma of that transition. And, importantly, contingency plays a part.

This article, which is based on research in progress, explores the origins of the phenomenon, sketching the history of roughly the first decade from 1968, when the East End was going through traumatic changes, and an artists' cluster first emerged near Tower Bridge to set forth on the early stages of its evolution. The article attempts to understand and explain the urban context which made it possible for the East End to make this rather unlikely switch from a failing industrial district to an area much of which, three decades later, is within a ten minute walk of an artists' studio block. It does not therefore address the undoubtedly important contributions that artists and organisations such as the Whitechapel Art Gallery, Free Form Arts Trust and Art of Change have made to the East End at a social/cultural level, and, to an extent perhaps, at an economic level.

The primary focus is on two organisations, SPACE and Acme, for the simple reason that these are the two original studio organisations. Their geneses serve well as case studies from which we can draw broader conclusions about the origins of the East End as a focus for artists' studios. Indeed until

1980, the point at which this article stops in terms of its description of the substantive history, there were very few other 'independent' studio blocks in the East End. First though, we shall address an all too familiar London problem: how to define it, or in this case, a part of it. We then step back in time and set the scene with a brief look at the history of the East End from the Second World War, in terms of its industry and housing, before turning to the history of the East End as an 'artists' district', when we shall look at the histories up to 1980 of SPACE, Acme and other artists' groups which were established in the 1970s. Next, a more theoretical position is adopted, covering a broader time frame, first with respect to the geographical history of the artists' studios, then in terms of the development of a more general theory of the phenomenon which brings us more-or-less up to date. Conclusions are eschewed - this is after all a dynamic and on-going phenomenon - and instead tentative speculation as to what might happen next is offered.

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## Defining terms

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Defining the 'East End' is not easy. To an extent, it is defined by the artists themselves - the edge of the artists' networks comprising the edge of their 'East End' - but even then the boundaries are, and must be, blurred. Borough, ward and postcode boundaries could all be used, and all would be equally arbitrary and, in all probability, inaccurate. The East End's boundaries must therefore be considered as 'soft' boundaries. Davies (1990) notes a number of definitions which have been used over time, although none prove entirely satisfactory for us. Davies himself defines the East End as 'the area stretching from Shoreditch and the City in the west to the River Lea in the East, and from Hackney in the north, to the Thames in the south' (Davies 1990, p6), but this is too narrow for our purposes. Our 'East End' includes artists' studios both north and south of the Thames, west and immediately east of the River Lea. Broadly, it covers the borough of Tower Hamlets, the southern half of the borough of Hackney, a small part of Stratford and the docklands areas of Bermondsey and Greenwich

Besides the problem of what we mean by the 'East End', we have the more abstract question of what we should call this phenomenon: a 'community', a 'cluster', a 'concentration', an 'agglomeration', or some other word or phrase more specifically geographical, like 'neighbourhood' or 'quarter'? The word 'community' carries considerable intellectual baggage, including such unwieldy questions as what we mean by a 'community', and of whether a 'community' is necessarily spatial. Unpacking that baggage, I think,

would not help us here. ‘Neighbourhood’ and its synonym ‘quarter’ refer to a particular locality which can reasonably be defined in terms of the activity going therein. But the East End has many activities, and to call the East End the ‘artists’ quarter’ or ‘neighbourhood’ would be rather less pertinent than calling it the ‘light-industrial quarter’. The fact that the East End has many artists does not define it as *the* artists’ quarter or neighbourhood, and those two definitions can be put aside. That leaves the other three, which though ugly and prosaic, do at least have the advantage of being relatively easy to define, referring as they do to specifically spatial attributes. ‘Cluster’ implies a relatively dense grouping compared with the other two, so that had better be kept for later use. And of ‘agglomeration’ and ‘concentration’ we can discard the latter by virtue of its implicit internal uniformity. So we are left with ‘agglomeration’, which although one of the ugliest words in the English language, is almost ideal for our purposes since it means, according to my Oxford English Dictionary, to ‘accumulate in a disorderly way’. That, it turns out, is precisely what the East End has done with artists. And within this agglomeration, we can talk of smaller, denser clusters of artists, such as those near Old Street, or Brick Lane.

While we are on the subject of definitions, it is worth making the point that the focus is on the ‘visual arts’ - which I have taken to include painting, drawing, sculpture and installations, both in and outside a gallery environment. I have chosen this sector as the primary focus simply because it is a fascinating urban phenomenon, and a significant chapter in the story of the evolution of the East End. But the East End has its origins as an industrial district, and that is where our story begins.

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## Industry and housing in the East End, 1945 - 1975

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The history of the East End is inextricably linked to the manufacturing industries, the docks which kept them supplied with raw materials, and the people who worked in them. Our story starts during the Second World War, with a brief look at the East End’s housing and industry, for it is here, in the post-war decades, that we find the early clues which can help us understand why there are now so many artists in such a small area.

By the time the war began, manufacturing industry was starting to leave the East End, London’s population had peaked at just over 8.5 million, and the forerunner of the shipping container was already in use for the transport of wine, even if its ultimate significance for the future of the London docks had not yet been realised (Forshaw & Abercrombie 1943;

Weinreb & Hibbert 1983; Pudney 1975).

At this time, the East End had many factories: cheap clothing in Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, shoes and boots in Hackney, tobacco products in Shoreditch and Stepney, heavy engineering in Poplar, biscuits, jams and pickles in Bermondsey, brewing in Stepney, furniture in Shoreditch, Hackney and Bethnal Green, printing and paper in Shoreditch, heavy chemicals in Poplar and Bermondsey. With the exception of the industry in Poplar and Bermondsey, both relatively close to the River Thames, the East End's industrial base was not in heavy industry, but in light industry. But the 1943 County of London Plan envisaged a continuing decentralisation not just of industry. Even then, the future of St Katharine's Dock was under scrutiny, Forshaw and Abercrombie's view being that the docks would continue to function as the nation's primary port for the foreseeable future, and so would not be 'directly affected by the plan' (1943). In truth, the future of the docks looked increasingly uncertain, as the war, and then mechanisation and containerisation took their inevitable toll. In the space of fourteen years, from 1967, all of London's docks closed, leaving Tilbury docks, 26 miles downstream, with an effective monopoly of London's sea-borne trade, and swathes of redundant warehouses on either side of the Thames from Beckton to the City. London's manufacturing industries, like its docks, also experienced devastating changes: employment in London fell from 4.3 million in 1961 to 3.5 million in 1989. Of the lost jobs, 800,000 were in manufacturing, while unemployment rose tenfold from 40,000 in the mid-1960s to 400,000 in 1985 (Hall 1998). If the collapse of the Docklands was dramatic, their physical regeneration as an annex to the City, and the accompanying political shenanigans have been no less so, generating plenty of analysis in the process.

So, for the first time in its urban history, the East End is not an industrial area. From being the industrial heart of London, it has found itself obliged to look for a new role in a post-industrial world, a role for which its past has left it ill-equipped. But if the East End's most famous role has been that of industrial hinterland, it has been almost as well known for its housing problems, and it is to these that we shall now turn our attention.

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## Housing

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The Second World War accelerated a process of decentralisation of the population from the inner London boroughs. This had been in existence for some years beforehand, mostly through local authority-led slum clearance programmes and the development of the London suburbs by private developers.

Overcrowding remained rife though and, within the Administrative County, redevelopment was intended to reflect the community structure of London as Forshaw and Abercrombie had described it in the 1943 plan. Their proposals for developments which would both respect the old community structure but provide a decent physical environment were, in some measure at least, carried through. The focus of house building during the 1950s however, remained the rehabilitation of the existing housing stock, and in 1955, the Conservative government launched a massive slum-clearance programme which would run until the mid-1970s (Hall 1988).

But the reservoir of sites cleared by wartime bombing had dried up by the mid-1950s, and although slum clearance could continue, it was becoming painfully clear that the capital's housing problems were unlikely to go away in a hurry. And it was by now quite apparent that Patrick Abercrombie's 1945 population projections for the County and the London Region as a whole were appalling underestimates, based as they were on 1930s assumptions that the birth rate would continue to fall (*ibid*). The London County Council was drawn to the conclusion that it would have to look beyond its county boundaries to the outer boroughs if it was to house its population (Tennant 1998).

However, it was also clear that the existing metropolitan structure was inadequate to the task of making these changes, geographically wide-ranging as they would necessarily be. So in 1960, a Royal Commission presented its conclusion that 33 new boroughs should be formed subsuming the outer suburban districts to create a new 'Greater London', overseen by a Greater London Council. This better reflected the physical extent of the capital, for which it would produce a new strategic plan. Despite resistance from the LCC and the boroughs, the Conservative Government followed the Commission's recommendations and passed the 1963 Local Government Act which, two years later, brought into being the Greater London Council (1998).

In 1965, the idea of having a strategic authority functioning at a metropolitan level was quite novel, and inevitably problematic. Far less stable than the LCC, which saw just two changes of political control in 76 years, control of the GLC had twice changed hands before its first decade of existence. The nature of the transition from the LCC to the GLC served to confuse matters further, as the GLC found itself the unwitting inheritor of a prickly bundle of moot issues and temporary powers - which served merely to underline the contradiction between the role which the GLC was intended to serve, and the statutory authority available to fulfil that role. By 1967, it was already clear that the GLC could either pursue the power it required, or simply cut its strategic coat to suit its statutory cloth (Young 1977).

The emphasis therefore shifted from new council housing to housing associations and a programme to sell thousands of council houses was implemented (1977). Again though, there was not enough time to get the policies properly off the ground, for while getting expanded aid to housing associations was not particularly problematic, more time than that available was needed for the housing association sector to mature enough to be able to deal with a programme of that magnitude. And the GLC, now a decade old, appeared to have failed in its task of solving London's housing problem (although it is worth making the point that this is a problem which remains with us two decades later).

The history of London's post-war housing up to the mid-1970s then has two main threads. In the first instance, there was the more-or-less systematic policy-led reduction of industrial and population density on the back of slum-clearance programmes and the need to rebuild a war-torn city. The East End was at the heart of this programme. Second, there has been the relatively new phenomenon of gentrification (for more detailed analysis see Butler 1996; Smith & Williams 1986; Zukin 1982), which, it is argued, has been the spatial manifestation of processes which include the decentralisation of capital from what have historically been London's industrial areas. Again, the East End has been at the very core of this process, most notably in Hackney and Islington in the 1970s, the Docklands in the 1980s, and now Hoxton and Shoreditch in the 1990s. And since we have come up to date, albeit unwittingly, perhaps it is time to sum up.

It is clear enough that the East End's history, while rich and diverse, has rarely been happy. The last three decades have been marked by unprecedented upheavals at the hands of a rapidly changing global economy which no longer favours the location of manufacturing industry in western cities.

However, there are certain clues we can take with us into the next section. Most significantly, the East End has been in a state of flux since the Second World War, and especially so during the 1960s and 1970s. The East End's predominant industries - furniture, clothing, printing, are not 'heavy' industries. The infrastructure they have left behind is in the form of well-lit, spacious factories, while the docks left behind a huge legacy of empty warehouses. The newly-formed Greater London Council was racked by political in-fighting, and failed to implement anything like a coherent housing policy, but it did encourage the development of housing associations. Indeed few people in 1965 would have predicted the onset of gentrification in the East End. But fewer still would have predicted that the



area would become home to the majority of London's artists.

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## Artists, factories and warehouses

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In the late 1960s, most artists in London worked from home, and the notion of many artists working together under one roof, even if in separate studios, was not one that had become common currency. Nineteen sixty-eight, when Bridget Riley won the International Prize for painting at that year's Venice Biennale, was a year of upset, most famously manifest in the student riots in Paris. But the art world in London was itself becoming more fractious as the gallery system came under fire, and art began to develop a broader base, particularly in terms of conceptual and community art. A simultaneous decline in patronage had left many artists increasingly unsupported, amongst whom was a friend of Riley's, Peter Sedgely, himself in need of studio space, and whose dealer had recently succumbed to the general malaise (MacRitchie 1996). Perhaps unsurprisingly, an old idea of Sedgely's - the generation of an artists' community - resurfaced at about this time, and on Riley's return from Venice it was discussed at her home in west London (Riley 1998).

That such an initiative should have come from Riley and Sedgely is not, with hindsight, such a bolt from the blue. The seminal exhibition, *The Responsive Eye*, held in 1965 at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City, had made Riley internationally famous in the art world, while her visually disturbing black and white canvases quickly and controversially became a model for the latest fabric and fashion designs (Kudielka 1992). Riley herself was feted by the New York art world - the Abstract Expressionist Ad Reinhardt took her under his wing - and when she visited New York for the exhibition, she took the opportunity to visit other artists, including Elsworth Kelly and Agnes Martin, in their studios (Riley 1998). Sedgely also visited New York somewhat later, and of particular significance for both of them were the studios, including those of Kelly and Martin, situated in redundant warehouses at the Battery, on the lower west side. In fact, Kelly and Martin were two of the last artists to have studios there, since the whole area was about to be redeveloped as Battery Park City. Both Riley and Sedgely were inspired by the idea of working in this way, Sedgely long having cherished the idea of generating an 'artists' community', a notion which he had borrowed from Vincent van Gogh.

So their project went ahead, and in 'a moment of enthusiasm' they visited a warehouse which had been offered to Sedgely. It formed part of the

Marshalsea Prison, originally closed down in 1842, and sited just north of St George's Borough High Street in Southwark. Completely derelict, and with a nervous landlord seeking an economic rent, the building was briefly used, but proved in the end unsuitable. No bad thing perhaps, for a better alternative, immediately east of Tower Bridge, awaited them (Riley 1998; MacRitchie 1996).

St Katharine's Dock was closed by the Port of London Authority (PLA) in 1967, and the story of how it came to be the East End's first artists' studio block owes a lot both to coincidental social contacts, and persistence on the part of those who initiated the project. Initially spotted by Sedgely and Riley after an evening out with some friends, it rapidly became apparent that warehouse buildings such as those at St Katharine's Dock might be just what they were looking for (MacRitchie 1996). An actress friend of Riley's, Irene Worth, knew the head of the PLA as a 'dining acquaintance'. Riley and Worth wrote to him asking for a meeting at which they could discuss the possibility of renting St Katharine's Dock, or at least a part of it, for use as studios. They discovered that the Greater London Council had recently acquired St Katharine's Dock from the PLA, and, although the GLC had put the Dock on the market, they did not expect to sell it for some years. The GLC was also aware that empty, St Katharine's Dock would be an easy target for vandalism (Riley 1998). So after a meeting with the then Head of the GLC, Desmond Plummer, attended by Riley, Worth and Tony West - who was Professor of Urban Studies at Reading University - Riley and Sedgely were given permission to occupy the Ivory Warehouse and Match Shed on condition that they relinquished their Squatters' Rights and started their own company. This they did, and SPACE - Space Provision Artistic, Cultural and Educational Ltd came into being (Riley 1998; MacRitchie 1996). They took on a three-year lease of the semi-derelict premises, with every floor covered in pigeon guano, and without even the most basic amenities. Even so, offers of help came in fast enough, and a core group of Riley, Sedgely, Peter Townshend, Irene Worth, and Tony West and, slightly later, Heather Lee and Richard Leechman became established at the heart of SPACE (Riley 1998).

The project garnered a lot of publicity, not all of it friendly. Some art critics fiercely opposed the whole idea, Riley recalls, not least because the initiative of SPACE sat in direct opposition to the traditional notion of the solitary artist toiling heroically away in a freezing garret. Some artists and indeed art schools also criticised the idea, although their motives seem less clear (Riley 1998). An over-riding fear that artists would be incapable of self-organisation ultimately proved ill founded. While Peter Sedgely worked behind the scenes in an administrative and management capacity, Bridget Riley visited

people, drumming up support (1998). The Arts Council provided a £3000 grant for lighting and partitions, and Henry Moore, who had just won an award which required that half the prize be given to a 'good cause', decided that SPACE fitted the bill, and the studios were consequently equipped with heaters (Riley, 1998; MacRitchie, 1996). Max Rayne also gave money, as did the bankers Kleinwort Benson, contacted through friends of friends (1998).

So in only a short period, roughly ninety, mostly self-selected artists had established a base there, and the idea of an artists' 'community' became a reality. Yet, by 1971 the artists had to move on as the Dock was handed over to property developers for conversion. But early criticism that the project was *too* accessible failed to stick, and perhaps it was this fact - that anyone could have a go - which encouraged others such as Jonathan Harvey and David Panton, who founded Acme Housing Association in 1972, to take their own initiatives.

Indeed, the very fluidity which had proved so favourable to the germination of SPACE proved equally beneficial for Harvey and Panton. But whereas the studios provided by SPACE - by now in several buildings in Hackney and Stepney - presupposed that the artist had somewhere to live, Harvey and Panton, fresh from Reading University, needed both living and working accommodation. And by 1972 the GLC was pursuing a housing policy which encouraged the establishment of housing associations. Harvey and Panton, faced with the choice of either squatting or following the legal path of forming a housing association, had stumbled upon the existence of GLC-owned short-life housing which was often earmarked for demolition, and chose the latter course of action. Already aware through friends who had moved to London in the previous year or two that forming a housing association was a possibility, they gathered together the seven people required, and established Acme. Their initiative proved more successful than they had expected, and it was only a short while before the GLC, keen to off-load more housing, left Acme with a surplus on their hands. Although they had not intended in the first instance to provide a service for others, seeing the foundation of Acme as a survival mechanism above all else, Harvey and Panton realised that there were plenty of other artists in need of live-work accommodation, and moved from self-help to service-provider. Crucially, Acme never said no to a property, reasoning that even if its condition was too poor for other housing associations, artists had the practical skills to make something of the property. And it is worth making the point here that many of the changes to property made in the early 1970s were made under a far more relaxed planning regime than today's, a regime the fluidity of which no doubt contributed to Acme's early success (Acme 1997).

Unsurprisingly perhaps, artists moving into Acme houses did not always get a friendly reception from their neighbours. The local authority had in all probability forcibly removed the previous inhabitants. Further, there was a more pervasive suspicion of strangers moving into the area on the part of a local community which found itself increasingly beleaguered by circumstances quite outside its control. This made the environment a hostile one for artists moving in, who were of course one representation of the very forces which threatened the pre-existing communities' survival. For its part, the GLC appeared to turn a blind eye to these changes, and in so doing, avoided any controversy which may have arisen from them (1997).

By the mid-1970s then, there were some five hundred artists in the East End, working in about dozen studio blocks, or in refurbished short-life housing. Mostly they were distributed across Tower Hamlets and by the Thames in old warehouses in Wapping and Shadwell, Rotherhithe and Bermondsey. Significant amongst those south of the Thames was Butler's Wharf, immediately east of Tower Bridge and directly opposite St Katharine's Dock. A complex of warehouses, Butler's Wharf was semi-redundant by the early 1970s and became colonised by, amongst others, artists, dancers, printers, sculptors, furniture makers and musicians. Like Acme and SPACE, Butler's Wharf relied upon the economic weakness of a declining industrial quarter to further its own ends, but unlike Acme and SPACE, there was no formal structure, nor organisation. Those in occupation paid rent to an agent of the landlord on an individual basis, and were given more-or-less free reign to work as they pleased, building partitions where necessary and so forth. Ultimately though, this anarchistic existence came under threat as the owners decided that the time was ripe for redevelopment. Although a group of artists sought legal help, and even presented proposals for establishing one part of the complex as permanent artists' studios, their proposal was rejected, and the remaining occupants - at its 'creative peak' Butler's Wharf had an estimated three hundred people working in it - were forced in 1979 to seek alternative accommodation, as the property boom of the late 1970s and early 1980s caught up with them. A group of artists looked north of the Thames, and found in Bow an old veneer factory which was owned by Tower Hamlets. Seeking to avoid the tribulations which had beset them at Butlers Wharf, they established themselves as a registered charity, took out a formal lease with Tower Hamlets, and in 1980 set up Chisenhale Studios and Gallery, both of which are still going strong, albeit as separate organisations (Agis 1998).

SPACE found, as Acme would, that demand from artists for studios far outstripped supply, and they set about acquiring leases on other redundant industrial properties. By the time of the first 'Open Studios' in 1975, SPACE had eight studio blocks accommodating over one hundred and fifty artists

across the East End: Columbia Road and Tabernacle Street in Shoreditch; Martello Street in London Fields; Stepney Green; Buxton Street between Spitalfields and Bethnal Green; New Crane and Metropolitan Wharves in Wapping; Bombay Wharf in Rotherhithe. To these could be added approximately eighty Acme houses providing living and working space for nearly one hundred artists, and a few 'independent' studios such as those at New Crane Wharf (separate from the SPACE studio there), Butlers Wharf, and the Barbican Arts Group at Sycamore Street just north of the City.

But the property boom which had resulted in the eviction of artists from Butler's Wharf also forced Acme to begin to occupy different types of properties, as local authorities tried to claw back what residential property they had left. Gentrification, particularly in areas of Islington and Hackney was by now an established urban concept, and residential property which had previously been set aside for demolition as a part of the post-war slum clearance programmes became a relatively valuable commodity again. Acme began to shift the emphasis of their portfolio, initially taking on ex-GLC property in west and south-west London, then taking on ex-industrial property in the East End from the early 1980s. The supply of short-life housing dried up, and Acme's own houses were either handed back to the local authority for demolition or, taking self-help to its logical conclusion, given to the artists on a permanent basis, resulting in the intriguing fact that there now exist entire streets of ex-Acme property occupied by artists. Ironically, their headquarters moved from Bow to Covent Garden in 1976, then back east to Bethnal Green 1983 (Acme 1997; Acme 1995).

By the end of the 1970s then, the artistic agglomeration in the East End had completed the difficult journey from completely new idea to 'going concern', the number of artists growing more-or-less exponentially year on year, and with the 'Open Studios' now a regular fixture. And in terms of the historical facts, we shall stop there in 1980, and turn our attention to the geography and dynamics of this new phenomenon, taking each in its turn, and bringing the story more-or-less up to date.

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## The geographical history

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The geographical history of the artists' studios in the East End has always been marked by its fluidity, but can nonetheless be roughly divided into three phases. The first is one of initial concentration near the river in the late 1960s and very early 1970s; the second is marked by a dispersal,

mainly to Stepney, Shoreditch and Bow, but with a few studios immediately south of the River, in the mid and late 1970s and mid-1980s, and the third has taken the form of movement north into Hackney and east into Stratford, and consolidation in all these areas in the late 1980s and during the 1990s. There are suggestions that the artistic East End may be on the threshold of a fourth phase in the form of a further dispersal of artists from the 'inner' East End of Tower Hamlets and Hackney, to the outer boroughs of north, east and south-east London, although at the time of writing most of the available evidence for this is based on speculation in the light of rising property prices in pockets of the East End such as Hoxton and Bow (Attfield 1997).

Much of this change can be attributed to two factors. First, the nature of the property, and second, the influence of the property markets on an area in the throes of a shift from an industrial to a post-industrial economy.

The greatest concentration of studio blocks in the East End is in the heart of what was, sixty years ago, the hub of London's furniture industry - Shoreditch and Hoxton. The legacy, much of it dating from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, comprised empty and apparently redundant industrial property. Furniture factories, carpentry workshops, print workshops, warehouses; all were victims of a decentralisation process which had its origins in the late 1930s and 1940s, and which became unstoppable in the 1960s and 1970s. Such property tends to be well-lit and spacious, with high ceilings, and large open floor spaces which readily lend themselves to sub-division into smaller units. These premises are also cheap to rent or lease. Ideal, in other words, for artists' studios. It is interesting to speculate that had the dominant industries in the East End been heavy - steel-mills or oil refineries, for example - then the East End would probably not have so many artists working there. Poplar, for example, whose industry was primarily heavy chemicals and heavy engineering, does not have the density of studios enjoyed by Shoreditch and Bethnal Green, nor has it in the past. Studio blocks can be found in old paintbrush factories, veneer factories, redundant churches, sewing machine factories, furniture factories, tinned food factories, printing works, and even a laundry and public baths. But all, note, are buildings which function at a scale which might be called 'large domestic'. Dockside warehouses too, such as those in Wapping and indeed at St Katharine's Dock, tended to be light and airy, but not absolutely cavernous, although there are now few studio blocks in the Docklands, despite the large number of warehouses there. In fact most of the studios lie north of the now-defunct LDDC's jurisdictional boundary not least by virtue of the rise in property prices in that area.

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## Theoretical models

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Our starting point is a simple Marxist model, which argues that capital's search for profit had, by the 1970s, rendered the London Docklands, and the manufacturing industries which they served, economically obsolete. In other words, the movement of manufacturing capital away from the inner East End boroughs created a 'rent gap' - whereby the relative price of inner-city land falls as that of more peripheral land rises - which offered the opportunity for economic restructuring of those areas. The obvious physical consequence of this collapse was, and remains, evident in the many empty warehouses and factories, and in the remains of the docks themselves. The GLC was at this time making short-life housing available to institutions such as Acme for use as live/work artists' spaces. Warehouses too proved ideal for artists' studios - cheap, well lit and spacious. And the sheer quantity and density of warehouses left enough space for the creation over time of a critical mass of artists with sufficient strength in numbers to become newsworthy, via such events as the Whitechapel 'Open' Exhibition at which local artists exhibit their work, and the 'Open Studios'. And the fact that the East End now has so many artists is arguably a simple accident of economics, exploited by people who made up for their lack of funds with a corresponding surfeit of creative energy.

But there are other theories, albeit few and far between, for how such areas - sometimes called 'creative mileux' - develop. Törnqvist (1983) argues that there exist four preconditions for a creative milieu: information, knowledge, competence, and creativity. In the foundation of SPACE, Acme, Butlers Wharf, Chisenhale Studios, all of these qualities are readily apparent. Creativity - 'the creation of something new out of all these activities' - is significant. The creative milieu depends on an effective channelling of the creative impulse. And *that* depends upon the effective synthesis of the first three of Törnqvist's preconditions, a synthesis readily apparent in the East End.

However, Törnqvist argues further that the creative milieu is chaotic and structurally unstable, a point echoed by Hall (1998), in whose view creative cities are uncomfortable places, notable for their intellectual and social turbulence. The East End is certainly all of these things. We know that the East End in the late 1960s and early 1970s was structurally turbulent, an area in particularly violent economic and social transition in a time of global change from an industrial society to a post-industrial society.

What stands out above all else then, is the fluidity and contingency of the urban, economic and social contexts from which the East End artists' community first emerged. The St Katharine's Dock project seems to have

been driven by a combination of necessity and ideology, in the form of Sedgely's need for a studio, and his desire to form some kind of artists' community. Importantly, he was not alone, and in Riley found an ideal working partner; while he remained behind the scenes, she 'fronted' the project, visiting people who might be able to help and drumming up support for their idea. And in their search for this support, they relied on social networks of which they were already a part. So their initial contact with the Port of London Authority was through a friend who knew the head of the PLA as a 'dining acquaintance', while other contacts such as Professor West lent kudos to their ideas. In the GLC they found a potential landlord with the flexibility to look favourably upon new and untried initiatives, and the pragmatism to make the demands necessary to encourage the artists to establish a firm footing for their project. The context then was one of fluidity, both in the property markets and the art world, which allowed such initiatives to happen. Even so, Riley, Sedgely and the others had to work within existing structures - setting up their own company for example, and in 1970 establishing themselves as a registered charity - which meant that their idea would not founder on its own instability. Indeed, a robust approach was essential to the survival of what was a fragile initiative in an unstable context.

If we turn to Acme, we also find that it was the initiative of two people, Harvey and Panton, who relied on information from pre-existing contacts to take their ideas forward. They were able to exploit a somewhat shambolic housing policy, which had recently switched its emphasis to the encouragement of housing associations. The area chosen, the East End, was in a state of flux. The situation in Butlers Wharf was also informal, and artist-led, as were those at New Crane Wharf and the Barbican Arts group.

Perhaps the most important point is that the development of the East End artists' agglomeration has been an organic, a grass-roots initiative which evolved, rather than a top-down policy-led initiative which was imposed, and it is this fact which gives it its strength and resilience, inefficient though such *ad hoc* processes may appear to be. And if we want to develop a theoretical model of its dynamics, we must look beyond the horizons of Marxist explanation, Törnqvist's four criteria for a 'creative milieu' and Hall's observation that such places are intrinsically unstable. For while Törnqvist and Hall capture the 'chaotic' essence of such a place, a more systematic conceptualisation of the underlying dynamics is to be found in chaos/complexity theory (Green 1998).

The manner of its evolution can be described by certain indicators which support the hypothesis that the East End arts agglomeration is a 'complex adaptive system' (CAS). Such systems - and it is reasonable to expect



a social system to fall within this description - tend to evolve in 'edge of chaos' environments which are sufficiently fluid to allow for change, but not so fluid as to be anarchic. This point is the urban equivalent of a 'phase transition', and I think it is reasonable to argue that the East End was, in the late 1960s and early 1970s, undergoing such a change. And it is at such a point where one would expect a CAS to evolve. The artistic social networks exhibit fractal properties of self-similarity - networks within networks within networks - and again, this is an indicator that we are dealing with a CAS. Further, the networks exhibit non-linearity in the sense that all variables - artists, galleries, studios, and schools for example - are inter-dependent. So a fieldworker observing such networks will change those networks - a concept familiar from quantum mechanics. They are also subject to positive feedback - a concentration of artists attracting more artists to an area, say, in a self-reinforcing cycle, and 'sensitive dependence on initial conditions' - whereby a small change in a system may have massive and unpredictable repercussions elsewhere. Of course, such a change might equally have no apparent effect, but that is the nature of an unpredictable system such as this. And this system is capable of learning. Acme, SPACE and the 'independent' studios have all shown their capacity to take on and respond to new information, which they may gather through research perhaps, or through social contacts. The system as a whole has thus been able to adapt to a constantly changing urban, social and economic context, and, rather in the manner of a living organism, has proved itself capable not only of learning, but of spontaneous self-organisation, and of growing, by shedding 'dead wood' - those who move out of the area perhaps - and by taking on new people who wish to become somehow involved. The artists agglomeration in the East End can thus be described as emergent, as having the capacity to generate from within its own internal dynamic new properties which we cannot necessarily predict. In short, it is akin to a living organism, growing and evolving to suit and cope with its environment. The question, of course, is what will it do next.

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## Things to come?

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This section is of course speculative, but the steady rise in property values across the East End suggests two main possibilities which are not necessarily mutually exclusive. As leases expire on studio blocks, to be renewed at higher levels, the artists in those blocks will find themselves faced with an all too familiar choice, although it may in the end prove to be no choice at all. If they cannot afford the new rent, they will be priced out of the market and

obliged to seek studio space elsewhere, probably farther East towards Barking and Dagenham, or in south-east London in areas such as Plumstead and Woolwich. Those who wish to, and can afford to, will either pay the higher rents, or buy the studio block outright.

Implicit in such a dual scenario is a simultaneous decentralisation or dispersal of artists, and consolidation of what might loosely be called the 'East End arts scene'. The process of consolidation, already underway in local authority supported initiatives such as 'Hidden Art of Hackney' and the proposals for art installations in the soon-to-be revamped Mile End Park, suggests an increasingly high profile for the arts in the East End as a regenerative tool, although the extent to which the cultural industries can regenerate an area such as the East End must be limited, even if they form a useful edition to the regenerative tool kit. Vision in Art (ViA) is a new initiative to offer a locally-based information exchange through both a manned 'one stop shop' and using the internet; in other words a formal networking mechanism to supplement and augment the existing and rather fragmented informal networks amongst visual artists, most of whom work in comparatively isolated conditions in studios which quite probably will be off the beaten track.

My suspicion then, and no doubt there are those who will disagree with this proposition, is that the visual arts in the East End are at a turning point in their history. Artists continue to move to the East End, but numbers appear to be levelling off, at roughly two thousand artists who occupy studios in studio blocks, plus those 'invisible' artists - estimates for their numbers range from five hundred to three thousand - who work from home, or from single studios. The opportunistic dynamism of the 1970s and 1980s has given way to a more hard-headed approach, as indeed it must if artists' studios are to survive in the increasingly economically competitive environment of the East End. At this point then, it looks as if we will, over the next five to ten years, see a less dynamic, but more secure and possibly smaller 'core' arts scene in the East End, enclosed by a more dispersed, less concentrated belt of artists to the north-east, east and south-east of the East End. The increasing use of the internet as a medium for both communication via electronic mail, and as a means of gathering and disseminating information will probably play a part in bridging the geographical space between artists, slowly at first, more rapidly as it wins more widespread acceptance. And the artists themselves will adapt to their new circumstances, turning them to their own creative advantage, as they have done over the last thirty years. But they would do that, wouldn't they?

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