

DESIGN

Fighting the Good Fight for Art



Tara Mulholland/International Herald Tribune

A view from Second Floor Studios & Arts, an affordable arts space center in south London based in a former dockyard on the banks of the river Thames.

By TARA MULHOLLAND
Published: June 20, 2011

LONDON — “A woman,” Virginia Woolf wrote in 1928, “must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”

Arts Beat

Breaking news about the arts, coverage of live events, critical reviews, multimedia and more.
[Go to Arts Beat »](#)

Arts & Entertainment Guide

A sortable calendar of noteworthy cultural events in the New York region, selected by Times critics.
[Go to Event Listings »](#)

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Sarah Priddis
Matthew Wood, the founder of SFSA.

But in long-overlooked South London, home to Goldsmiths College, one of the most prominent universities to protest the government cuts, a counter-movement is taking place.

In an old industrial shipyard on the banks of the Thames in Greenwich, a group created by former Goldsmiths students, Second Floor Studios & Arts, is hoping to address the lack of affordable space for artists.

Fast forward 83 years to a wider field of artists in London, where property prices are the second most expensive in the world (after Monaco), according to Knight Frank’s 2011 Wealth Report, and her observation holds stingingly true.

Unlike some European countries, like France and Denmark, Britain does not make specific social provisions for artists, and the government’s cuts to financing for the arts here have reduced subsidies to a bare minimum.

In terms of living and working space, meanwhile, once-cheap London districts like Shoreditch, the birthplace of Charles Saatchi’s “Young British Artists” of the late 1980s and home to influential contemporary art galleries like the White Cube, now heave with vintage stores and loft spaces, unaffordable for artists without sizable means.

“Right now, the economic climate for artists in this country looks particularly bleak,” read a report in the British newspaper The Guardian, which started a Culture Cuts blog in January to track how the national government’s spending cuts are hitting the arts world.

- RECOMMEND
- TWITTER
- LINKEDIN
- SIGN IN TO E-MAIL
- PRINT
- SINGLE PAGE
- REPRINTS
- SHARE

SOUND OF MY VOICE
IN THEATRES 04.27.2012
[Click to View](#)

Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

[Log In With Facebook](#)

What's Popular Now

[The Benefits of Bilingualism](#)

[Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs](#)

UNCONVENTIONAL CHIC **LACOSTE**

DISCOVER NOW
THE NEW LACOSTE WOMAN

TicketWatch: Theater Offers by E-Mail



MOST E-MAILED



1. PAUL KRUGMAN
[Lobbyists, Guns and Money](#)

2. DIANE ACKERMAN
[The Brain on Love](#)



3. [Surgery for Diabetes May Be Better Than Standard Treatment](#)

MOST VIEWED

"You cannot afford the cost of living in London and trying to be an artist," said Matthew Wood, who founded the initiative in 1997 in a '60s office building in Greenwich with his then-business partner, Kelvin O'Mard, as a response to their own struggles to find affordable studio space in London. "You end up working just to pay your rent and you have no time to develop your practice."

SFSA, a bit down from the Thames Barrier near central London, is a conglomerate of low-priced studios and other facilities equipped for sculptors, glassmakers, printers, jewelers and even a latex fetish-wear designer (but not those in the dramatic arts — "they make too much noise," Mr. Wood said). Since 2009 it has aimed to keep artists in London and draw new ones to the city.

Created in partnership with a property company, the development houses around 150 artists "from 18 to 78," Mr. Wood said, with more than 250 studios — self-contained and with natural light — ranging from 190 to 1,500 square feet, or 20 to 140 square meters.

The smaller spaces cost less than £160 a month, or \$260, all costs included. To put that in perspective? The average rent per month for a one-bedroom apartment in Greenwich, according to the online rental site Nestoria.com, is about £1,100.

"Balancing living costs and setting up as a new maker can be quite tricky," said Emma Yeo, a headwear and accessories designer who has shown her work at Selfridges and during London Design Week and who has rented an SFSA studio with two other designers since January. "For me, most of the studios in London would have been out of the question."

Once completed — the developers are two years into the five-year project — the South London colony will comprise 180,000 square feet, making it one of the largest art communities of its kind in Europe and the largest in Britain. Vacant warehouses will be turned into 300 studios and workshops, an art-education center, a fine-art print studio, a jewelry studio, a ceramic studio and 3,500 square feet of gallery space.

SFSA is not the only studio development in London. Down the road is Art Hub, started in 1999, which rents out open-planned studios (as opposed to self-contained) starting at £260 a month and organizes courses for artists. In artsy Hackney Wick in North London, a cluster of centers — like Mother Studios, created in 2001 by the artist Joanna Hughes — rent studios starting at £80 a month. But Mr. Wood's project is perhaps one of the most ambitious in its goals of attracting artists and turning art spaces into a viable business venture.

1 | 2 | [NEXT PAGE »](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on June 21, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune with the headline: Fighting the Good Fight for Art.

- [SIGN IN TO E-MAIL](#)
- [PRINT](#)
- [SINGLE PAGE](#)
- [REPRINTS](#)

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

- [Art](#)
- [Colleges and Universities](#)
- [Greenwich \(England\)](#)

Ads by Google

what's this?

[Download Google Chrome](#)

A free browser that lets you do more online. Download instantly!
www.google.com/chrome

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



[ARTS »](#)

[OPINION »](#)

[HEALTH »](#)

[WORLD »](#)

[OPINION »](#)

[BUSINESS »](#)

4. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR
[The Rich Get Even Richer](#)



5. [Learning to Drive With A.D.H.D.](#)



6. WELL
[The Chocolate Diet?](#)

7. [Private Schools Mine Parents' Data, and Wallets](#)



8. FRANK BRUNI
[Rethinking His Religion](#)



9. GRAY MATTER
[Why Bilinguals Are Smarter](#)



10. [Why Won't They Listen?](#)

[Go to Complete List »](#)

[Show My Recommendations](#)



Making the case for running shoes

ALSO IN HEALTH »

- [Do women like child care more than men?](#)
- [Calories are everywhere, yet hard to track](#)

nytimes.com

HEALTH

ADVERTISEMENTS



Introducing Business Day Live

GET A FREE NOOK SIMPLE TOUCH™ The New York Times nook
 When you sign up for a one-year NOOK subscription to The Times. [LEARN MORE »](#)

Ads by Google

what's this?

[Up To 70% Off On Wall Art](#)

Bring Swank Into Your Home With Our Modern & Chic Wall Art. Buy Now!
www.Made.com/Art



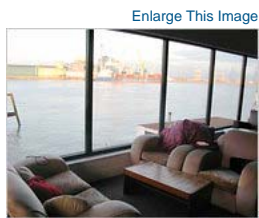
DESIGN

Fighting the Good Fight for Art

Published: June 20, 2011

(Page 2 of 2)

Prices are kept low, but health and safety regulations are strictly adhered to. "We have to certify everything we build," said Mr. Wood, a whirlwind of energy who pointed out new features at a whiplashingly rapid pace on a tour of the site. "Heat sensors in every studio, linked to a security hut. All the fire exits we've had to put in!"



[Enlarge This Image](#)
Tara Mulholland/International Herald Tribune
Inside the cafe area of the arts space.

ArtsBeat

Breaking news about the arts, coverage of live events, critical reviews, multimedia and more.

[Go to Arts Beat >](#)

Arts & Entertainment Guide

A sortable calendar of noteworthy cultural events in the New York region, selected by Times critics.

[Go to Event Listings >](#)



[Enlarge This Image](#)
Courtesy the artist and GV Art, London
"Liquid Ground I," a photographic print mounted on glass by Helen Pynor, an artist renting a studio at SFSA.

[Enlarge This Image](#)

Other art centers in the community are linking up to Mr. Wood's studio complex. Ravensbourne College, the design school that sits across the river, gives artists who rent studios at SFSA access to its professional development courses. In return Mr. Wood plans to let Ravensbourne students work in his project's print studios, which are set to be finished in September.

The complex rents spaces for local artists and aspiring artists to teach or study courses and organizes open-studio days so artists can see each others' work. In addition, SFSA has created a studio prize, starting in September, with the nearby University of East London, which will award one of its masters-degree students in fine arts a free studio at the complex for one year.

"Central St. Martins and the Royal Academy, they scoop up all the prizes," Mr. Wood said. "It's nice to give the University of East London an opportunity."

All of which, in this once dirt-poor area south of the river — what the writer Angela Carter described as the "bastard side" of the Thames — generates a striking sense of change, and one that appeals to local artists.

Louise Pavey, a graphic designer who lives in Greenwich, rents a studio at SFSA to do printmaking. "I looked at Art Hub, which is next door, but you have to rent a studio space to use the facilities, and the studio spaces are really expensive. So I just thought I was never going to be able to have my studio. It's nice to know that there are things like this, you find them and you find a real community."

The sense of community is crucial, say many of the artists working here.

"Artists have similar concerns, experiences and challenges even if our practices are radically different, and it's great to be able to talk about all of that," said Helen Pynor, a photographer, sculptor and installation artist who has a solo exhibition, "Breath," showing at the Baker Street

RECOMMEND

TWITTER

LINKEDIN

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

SINGLE PAGE

REPRINTS

SHARE



Log in to see what your friends are sharing on nytimes.com.
[Privacy Policy](#) | [What's This?](#)

[Log In With Facebook](#)

What's Popular Now

[The Benefits of Bilingualism](#)



[Why I Am Leaving Goldman Sachs](#)



Ads by Google

what's this?

Offices to Rent from £239

Fully Furnished & Ready-to-Go! Furniture + IT + Telecoms.
[Regus.co.uk](#)

Clean your Mac

Award-winning Clean-up utility for Top Performance of your Mac!
[MacKeeperapp.ZeoBIT.com](#)

The Open University™ 2012

Make 2012 The Year You Change Your Life! Download A Free 2012 Guide Now
[www.open-university.co.uk](#)

Virtual tour for business

Trusted Indoor Photographer Add a virtual tour on Maps
[www.panobiz.org](#)

Art Class all media

in Rotherham, Doncaster £5.50 a session with discounts
[www.greenwoodart.co.uk](#)

Up To 70% Off On Lamps

Bring Swank Into Your Home With Our Modern, Designer Lighting. Buy Now!
[www.Made.com/Lighting](#)

[Advertise on NYTimes.com](#)

TicketWatch: Theater Offers by E-Mail



MOST E-MAILED

MOST VIEWED



1. PAUL KRUGMAN
[Lobbyists, Guns and Money](#)



2. DIANE ACKERMAN
[The Brain on Love](#)



3. [Surgery for Diabetes May Be Better Than Standard Treatment](#)



4. OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR
[The Rich Get Even Richer](#)

5. [Learning to Drive With A.D.H.D.](#)



Haze @ HZVStudios

A hat created by Emma Yeo for her autumn/winter collection. "Balancing living costs and setting up as a new maker can be quite tricky," she said. "For me, most of the studios in London would have been out of the question."

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Sarah Priddis

A cityscape painted by Sarah Priddis, who rented a small studio at SFSA in September.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



SFSA

The cabinet makers Jamie Gledhill, left, and Bruce Watson in a studio at the complex.

[Enlarge This Image](#)



Tara Mulholland/International Herald Tribune

The site of SFSA, which houses studios and workshops.

gallery [GV Art](#). And, she added, "I love the location of the studio right on the Thames. I have constant stimulation every time I look out the window."

Those who rent spaces at SFSA are a mix of local and international artists, a few highly successful like the photorealist painter Jason Brooks, but most working some kind of job to support their art.

There is an application process, and Mr. Wood admits he has had to turn many people down — "a lot of people are just looking for cheap office space," he said. But, by and large, the key criteria are to be a practicing fine artist and to use the space, he said.

The artists renting spaces seem to agree that Mr. Wood's energy and his hands-on approach are the reasons the SFSA is a success.

"I like having Matthew as our advocate," said Gary Drostle, who specializes in large-scale mosaics and sculptures and has been renting an SFSA studio since 2001. "It is so different from dealing with 'landlords' in the past. You really feel that he is there for us, on our side, and understanding of the difficulties we have trying to make it in the art world."

Sarah Priddis, who rented a small studio at SFSA in September, agreed. She had stopped painting for nearly 10 years because of the time and space constraints imposed by a full-time job and no studio.

"I met Matthew and walked around the site feeling inspired and buzzing about the idea of painting again," she said. "His plans for the site are visionary. He doesn't see an old dilapidated warehouse. He sees 300 studios, print rooms, gallery, arts cafe, installation spaces. It's wonderful to be a part of it."

The development is undergoing a major growth phase this year, with the creation of 60 more studios, a fine-art print studio, an education suite and a gallery. Trees are being planted in the quadrant by the Thames outside the studios, where resident artists picnic and hang out in the summer.

Crucially, in today's economic climate, the development is now covering its costs.

"You tell people you're running an arts project and your normal business person's reaction is going to be 'Oh my God, it's going to be a disaster,'" Mr. Wood said. "Yes, most artists don't have a lot of money. But when you hub a lot of them together, then actually you can do something."

He said that starting the venture as Britain nose-dived into a financial slump was actually beneficial in terms of finding a partner to back it. "It's a numbers game for us as well," he said. "£80,000 for a big shed per annum is a lot of money and no one knows what to do with it. Put a number of units in there and suddenly you're turning over a lot more money. It's all about convincing people."

The development, which is nonprofit and puts all money made back into SFSA, is now running at a profit. So Mr. Wood set up a new branch of the venture in collaboration with the property company Telford Homes, which will provide 14 studios where artists can live and work for a five-year term at around £450 a month.

"The price point is very important," Mr. Wood said. "We have a massive number of artists in London, hundreds come every year, so it's supply and demand. It's a bit like in that baseball film, 'Field of Dreams': 'If you build it, they'll come.'"



6. WELL
[The Chocolate Diet?](#)

7. [Private Schools Mine Parents' Data, and Wallets](#)



8. FRANK BRUNI
[Rethinking His Religion](#)



9. GRAY MATTER
[Why Bilinguals Are Smarter](#)



10. [Why Won't They Listen?](#)

[Go to Complete List >](#)

[Show My Recommendations](#)



Making the case for running shoes

ALSO IN HEALTH >

[Do women like child care more than men?](#)
[Calories are everywhere, yet hard to track](#)

nytimes.com

HEALTH

ADVERTISEMENTS



Introducing Business Day Live

INTRODUCING BusinessDayLive
CATCH IT DAILY. PROFIT DAILY.
nytimes.com WATCH LIVE 10:30 AM E.T. >

Ads by Google

what's this?

[55/YO Mum Looks 35](#)

Mum Reveals Shocking Trick for Erasing Wrinkles! Doctors Hate Her
[RevitaSkincare.net/AntiAging](#)

A version of this article appeared in print on June 21, 2011, in The International Herald Tribune with the headline: Fighting the Good Fight for Art.

SIGN IN TO E-MAIL

PRINT

SINGLE PAGE

REPRINTS

Get Free E-mail Alerts on These Topics

- Art
- Colleges and Universities
- Greenwich (England)

Ads by Google

what's this?

Download Google Chrome

A free browser that lets you do more online. Download instantly! www.google.com/chrome

INSIDE NYTIMES.COM



ARTS »



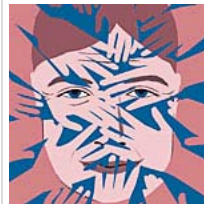
The Real Estate Mogul as an Artist

OPINION »



Room for Debate: How to Save Syria

HEALTH »



For Longer Life, Stronger Social Connections

WORLD »



Across Africa, Steady Steps Toward Democracy

OPINION »

Draft: A Picture of Language

A teacher in Homer, N.Y., changed the way students learn grammar with the invention of sentence diagrams.

BUSINESS »



A Rough and Bawdy Ad Magnet

Home | World | U.S. | N.Y. / Region | Business | Technology | Science | Health | Sports | Opinion | Arts | Style | Travel | Jobs | Real Estate | Autos | Site Map

© 2011 The New York Times Company | Privacy | Your Ad Choices | Terms of Service | Terms of Sale | Corrections | RSS | Help | Contact Us | Work for Us | Advertise