

Acme's Work/Live Review: 2017-2022 programme

10 April 2024

Contents

Part One - Introduction and background	3
Acme's work/live programme	3
Acme's Glassyard work/live studios 2017-22	4
Allocation Process: 2017 Glassyard case study	5
Artists on the 2017-2022 programme	6
Part Two - Did the work/live programme achieve its intended purpose?	7
1. Lessen artists' financial hardship	7
2. Improve artists' circumstances	8
3. Enable artists to make mid-term career plans	13
4. Provide transformative impact	16
5. Ensure artists are better placed to sustain their work in future upon completing the work/live programme	19
Part Three - Next Steps: Acme's work/live programme for 2024	22

Part One - Introduction and background

Acme's work/live programme

Acme has provided **work/live support to artists in London** since our inception in 1972.

We currently operate **22 work live studios over three sites**: Glassyard, High House and Fire Station. **4 studios are used for partnership residency programmes** and **18 are currently allocated to our 'arm's length' work/live programme**.

Over the past few years we have been examining and assessing Acme's work/live studio provision.

This review particularly draws on the experiences of artists coming to the end of their work/live tenancies in our Glassyard building, with interviews conducted with Glassyard work/live artists in 2022.

These findings informed how we **have reshaped our work/live programme for 2024 and beyond**, to better respond to artists' needs and provide stable, yet flexible, tenancies that encourage professional development and are allocated as fairly as possible.



A work/live artist studio at Acme's Glassyard building, 2022 © Robert W Mason, courtesy The Acme Archive.

Acme's Glassyard work/live studios 2017-2022

In 2017, Acme invited applications from artists to move in to **six new work/live studios at Glassyard, Stockwell SW9**. The studios are situated on the first floor, above two floors of non-residential Acme studios in a building integrated within student accommodation. The opportunity offered artists a work/live studio for five years at a fixed price of £825 pcm.*

This was consistent with Acme's pre-existing Fire Station work/live studios and to bring these opportunities together with High House work/live units as one Artists Housing Programme.

The programme's main benefit was to provide both **low-cost rent** and **security of tenure**. Rents for the work/live studios were set in relation to each building's non-residential studio price, location, wider context and quality of the units. This put Glassyard as the most expensive, with High House as the least.

The original proposal for the programme priced the units as follows:

Site	Number of units	Size of unit (sq ft)	Proposed monthly rent	Rent per sq ft, work/live studios	Rent per sq ft, non-residential studios (2017-18)
Glassyard	6	550	£825	£18	£14.91
High House	4	561	£560	£11.98	£9.40 & £10.33
Fire Station	8**	550	£720	£15.71	£11.56

The programme's intended purpose was to:

1. **Lessen artists' financial hardship**
Targeting artists with a financial need for affordable studios and housing in London.
2. **Improve artists' circumstances**
Targeting artists with a practical need for better suited space and/or increased time to make work.
3. **Enable artists to make mid-term career plans**
Based on the financial security and predictability of a five-year tenancy and fixed rent.
4. **Provide transformative impact**
Including access to London, the ability to remain in London or removing other significant obstacles (e.g. accessibility).
5. **Ensure artists are better placed to sustain their work in future upon completing the work/live programme**

*The Glassyard work/live programme initially offered occupancy from 2017-2022. This was extended when artist tenants' work opportunities were halted due to the Covid-19 pandemic and, rather than a simultaneous move-out date for all studios, we are allowing for a staggered exit dependent on individual circumstances.

**Acme offers a total of 12 work/live units at Fire Station, with four used for artists on our partnership residency programme and rented without Acme subsidy.

Allocation Process: 2017 Glassyard case study

Applications

Artists had six weeks (31 March - 12 May 2017) to apply for a work/live studio. During this time, the work/live page on Acme's website received:

- 5,215 unique page views
- 1,096 application guideline downloads
- The longest average viewing length (2 minutes 7 seconds) of any page on the site

We received **120 completed applications** (20 applicants per unit), with a **1 in 10 chance of being shortlisted for interview**.

Shortlisting decisions were made on eligibility criteria, financial and circumstantial need, and then on the strength of the argument made in the personal statement for how the studio would support the artist and their practice.

11 interviews took place, three were with artist couples. The interview panel was comprised of one Acme staff member and two external selectors.

Applicants' age range (out of 120 applicants, 9 chose not to give their date of birth)	
20-29 years old	37
30- 39 years old	37
40-49 years old	16
50-59 years old	16
60-69 years old	4
70 + years old	1

Number of years making work as an artist	
Less than 5	4
Between 5 and 9 years	57
Between 10 and 14 years	27
Between 15 and 19 years	13
Between 20 and 24 years	11
Between 25 and 39 years	5
40 + years	3

Disability, access and health considerations

14 applicants stated they had a disability and **four applicants** indicated they would need an accessible unit.

One adaptation request was made to have access to a bath. Other health circumstances cited were migraines, arthritis, anxiety and depression.

Sharing the studios

31 applications were for two people to share. These were all sharing as couples except for two - one to share with a sister and one to share with a part-time assistant. **One couple** had a child.

Artists on the 2017-2022 programme

Artist beneficiaries

10 artists were selected for the programme, including one couple with a child.

One studio changed tenants during the programme. The other five studios remained occupied by the original selection.

Age at point of allocation	
30- 39 years old	4
40-49 years old	3
50-59 years old	3

Number of years making work as an artist	
Between 10 and 14 years	5
Between 15 and 19 years	2
Between 20 and 24 years	1
Between 25 and 39 years	2

Disability, access and health considerations

One of the successful applicants described themselves as having a disability. Their access requirements included using a wheelchair and crutches for mobility.

Sharing the studios

Three of the studios were allocated to sole occupants, three to couples. One of these couples lived with a child (three years old at the start of the programme).

Part Two - Did the work/live programme achieve its intended purpose?

Alongside internal analysis from Acme, **Glassyard work/live tenants were interviewed in 2022** to assess the effectiveness of the programme and look for areas of improvement.

1. Lessen artists' financial hardship

The three sole occupants all had annual incomes of under £13,500 at point of application. The three couples all had joint annual incomes of between £25,000 and £37,500.

When asked **how their financial circumstances had changed from when they applied for the work/live programme to when they were interviewed in 2022**, two of the eight responses chose 'significantly improved'; three 'mildly improved'; one 'about the same'; and two responded that it was complicated to answer due to the impact of Covid-19.

In response to the question of **whether they could afford the monthly rent**, five of the eight respondents said 'yes, most of the time', while the remaining three said 'yes, comfortably'.

When asked whether the work/live studios were **fairly priced**, all eight respondents agreed with three artists strongly agreeing.

For most of the artist tenants, **this affordability resulted in more time to spend on their artistic practice** rather than on other income-generating activities:



You don't have to do as many odd jobs to be able to pay the rent. We also teach so we were able to teach less, which is nice for our practice.



For us, the price of having [both] an external studio and [this work/live studio] was the same price as just renting a flat elsewhere.

However, **the perception of affordability differed depending on whether artists were sole tenants**. When the rent felt less affordable, artists did not experience the same sense of freedom in how they used their time.

This was the experience of one of the sole tenants at Glassyard:



(Artist) ...it's definitely reasonably priced for what it is. Definitely. Any kind of comparison with anything else, the affordability of it stands out. But at the same time, it's a lot of money to find myself. I just can't constantly get that much. It feels like I could just about do it and tread water. I wouldn't be able to save anything, so it felt like a bit of a treadmill in that way. I'm earning quite well in London - I will earn up to £200 a day doing technician work, so it feels like you should be able to... but I wasn't putting anything away. I wasn't looking to the

future. That was the hard thing, coming to terms with that.

(Acme) So you'd say [the rent] wasn't low enough for you to make that extra step of being able to invest - whether that's invest in yourself financially through savings, or whether that's invest in your practice, your career?

(Artist) Definitely.

One of the artist couples at Glassyard said:

“ Especially because we're sharing and we're sharing costs, it is affordable. And it's given us a huge break in terms of what it's supposed to do - to give you a chance to focus on your practice. We both earn money from other things besides our art at times. Part of our income comes from that, but it's meant much less of a percentage has had to come from that.

In 2017, when Acme acquired a lease for six new work/live studios at Glassyard, we developed a policy that would bring our three sites of work/live under one consistent approach - **the Acme Artists Housing Programme**. The following risk factors around the price point of the studios and Housing Benefit eligibility were identified in our proposal:

Financial risk	Risk mitigation for artists
<p>There is a statistic which puts artists' average annual salary at £16,000, however our own survey puts the average annual income of our tenants at £12,000. This would mean that a Glassyard unit would cost 82.5% of their income, Fire Station would cost 72% and High House 56% of their total income. This is a lot higher than the Rowntree foundation's Living Rent advises, or the rule of thumb that suggests rent should be 30% of your income. If artists run into financial difficulties it is not known how Lambeth will evaluate this type of unit for Housing Benefit (or the housing allowance of universal credit as it will be).</p>	<p>We could consider stating a minimum, as well as a maximum, income in the eligibility criteria, clearly print the annual cost of the rent charges where we ask for applicant's income details and ask applicants to declare that they have judged the unit to be affordable for them. We will draw up an income guide for Acme staff and if an applicant is proposing to spend more than 75% of their income on the unit, we can then discuss this via telephone.</p>

One Glassyard tenant required state assistance to pay their rent, via Housing Benefit.

2. Improve artists' circumstances

The work/live studios were used in a variety of ways. As well as computer-based clean work (such as video editing), other uses included converting of the bathroom into a darkroom,

creating a DIY sound recording booth, setting up a Foley studio, a film set and large scale painting.

“ ...it was the first time I've ever lived in a place that treated me as an artist.

Tenants reflected on the **positive impact of being allowed to make work openly** and the **encouragement they felt** from having the space and environment to do so.

“ ...it encouraged me to do what I wanted - tactile things, not just digital.

“ The most supportive aspect of this opportunity was having the freedom to make what I do and to actually know that you've got people supporting you doing that. And it was allowed. It's not some sort of dirty secret you can't tell the landlord!

“ We could be in a flat, wherever, but I think just knowing that we're in this artist space has been significant.

Artists who used the studio as their principal workspace also spoke of **the impact of living so close to their making process**.

“ I love being able to leave things out that I'm working on and be able to come back to them just being around. I've always made things slowly, I like to look at them and come back to them.

“ I want to be closer to the work, so living closer to the work has helped with that. I want to be more like a caveman with it. There's a rational side to my brain that always makes me put some reason into the work - we can't help that because it's language. But living with it this closely has allowed me to shorten that space between how I apply myself and how I react because it's at hand all the time, even when I'm doing the washing up... And so, in a way, to summarise it, the Glassyard is the cave.

“ I find living so close to the work really, really interesting. And I think all artists, whatever sort of work they make, should attempt to do that at some point.

Another artist observed that **their work/live studio contributed to their sense of identity as an artist**:

“ Even if I don't do any artwork for a week, I still feel like I'm completely an artist. Immersing myself in the space... I'm constantly looking, even just moving things around and just looking. So I think my sense of identity as an artist is definitely stronger. And I would never doubt that, even when I was busy with paid work.

Much of the impact described owes itself to **the context in which the living space is situated** and that **the landlord is actively supporting the production of art.**

When asked if the work/live space was **suitable for their needs**, there was a mixed response.

The physical space of the work/live studio...	
suits my needs	3
suits some of my needs	2
is a difficult compromise	3
is not suitable to my needs	0
other	0

An example of **where compromise arose** was mentioned by occupants of a studio which functioned as their family home. Now, both parents work in studio spaces elsewhere. This couple reflected on how they had originally hoped they would use the space for both working and living but, in practice, they found the space lacked the flexibility they had imagined. The lack of doors was cited as a key difficulty:

“ I wish we had a door. I think that’s why it can work for people who are solo because they’re just with themselves, whatever they’re doing. But for us, being creative for me, is about having my thinking space. It’s not been that - there’s a lack of privacy.

...it’s blurred between professional life and family life, and parent and non-parent life.

The request for doors within the units was also raised by an artist who regularly works with turpentine and plaster. They described wanting to close the door at the end of the working day to leave the fumes in the working space:

“ That’s when I felt, ‘I wish I could just close the door so that I don’t have to keep breathing the smells.’ Or, when I work with plaster it goes into the air and then somehow it gradually settles down on all the surfaces.

There was also a request for Acme to **continue to think about how our spaces can support artist families** alongside couples and sole tenants:

“ Going ahead, I think it’s really important that Acme supports families - that everywhere should be more supportive of families. But it’s not really ideal for a family. Work/live is designed with quite a fixed idea in someone’s head of what an artist is and how it’s going to be used. I think it’s seen as a male thing. It’s like you are there with your work, you don’t need anything else, you don’t need comfort. I think in terms of the amount of workspace it’s good, but the amount of living space, that’s been hard.

You would always want to make sure that the opportunity stayed open [for

everyone]. You know, if you wanted to have a kid that you would be like, 'Yeah I can make it work.' And that you wouldn't feel like, 'Oh, this isn't the time.' You should be able to feel like you can make those choices if you want to.

Time for their practice

Asked about **whether they had more time to work on their practice and develop their arts career since living at Glassyard**, three of the eight respondents said they strongly agreed, two agreed and two said they had about the same amount of time.

“...it becomes a self-generating thing because if you can spend more time on your practice, your practice starts to yield more... It's like you're allowed to create an investment in it.

“...because it's much more affordable, we're able to make the choice to say, 'Okay, we're going to work a bit less on something else so we can have more time for our practice'.

“I was able to live and give priority to my creative practice more. In other circumstances, I had to take on more work that would eat my time.

“...that's the biggest asset, you know, a resource. It allows the choices that we have made, to put more of our time as a resource into the practice.

The studio building and Acme

The Glassyard is a partnership between Acme and a developer that provides **student accommodation, affordable studios and six work/live studios**. All of the artist studios are on the first floor and accessible by lift.

The self-contained work/live studios are designed to **combine artists' studio and living space**. Approximately 50sqm in size, each unit's living area doubles as a working studio with ancillary spaces for a kitchen, bathroom and sleeping area.

Seven out of eight respondents said they experienced Acme to be very supportive as a landlord, while the other respondent found Acme to be sometimes supportive.

All respondents agreed that **repairs and tenant issues were dealt with in a timely and caring manner**.

There was **general praise for Acme as a landlord**, especially in relation to artists' experiences or perceptions of how 'bad' landlords are typically:

“...that the organisation would listen to you, that takes a bit of getting used to - in a

really good way.

“ How often do you get a friendly landlord who, you know... the repairs are always done, you just have to ring up and it always gets done. That doesn't happen in the outside world.

“ Once you have this kind of system with a landlord that cares, it becomes very beneficial to your practice in the sense of having security.

“ It's not like when you're renting somewhere and the landlord is only interested in getting money from you. You're in an ambience of other artists and everyone's on your side. You're on a little island of like-minded people. That is the major thing for me, benevolence, and so much of the world outside is not benevolent.

Thanks were expressed for **Acme's Property Management team**:

“ We've always felt safe that something will get sorted out if we have an issue.

“ Acme themselves are really good at taking that pressure, the stressful aspects of it, out for us when there are building issues, leaks etc.

Four of the studios emphasised **noise disruption** whilst living at Glassyard:

“ The only thing for us that was really tough mental health-wise was the first year. We had these issues with the students and couldn't really sleep.

“ I mean, you expect that living in a studio building. And people are pretty good about not doing stuff late at night. It has informed us that the insulation in this whole building is not great.

“ You've got a kitchen built against the wall and you get all the noise. You hear everything. And they're not being noisy on purpose. It's not a complaint. It's just, you do hear everything. And you get all the noise from the corridor because our corridor gets used the most as it's got the laundry and the washroom.

One reason behind the noise disruption was due to **the context of being integrated within student accommodation**. Noise travelled through shared walls and up from the back courtyard.

Acme responded to these complaints by **coordinating discussions between work/live tenants and the management company**. New measures were adopted, including a procedure for tenants to communicate with security when noise was happening, sound proofing added to the shared wall of studio 201 and a curfew to prevent groups of students gathering in the courtyard late at night.

“ Psychologically, the sound of somebody at their practice or drilling or whatever is not as disruptive to me, as long as they're not insensitive. The trickier part, I think, has been us interacting with the students, because the students don't have any sense of boundaries. And they're not even aware that we're artists in the building. So that, I think, has psychologically been harder for all of us to cope with.

“ We had this guy, he would be on Zoom really loud every night from about two until six in the morning. It took a very roundabout way to get the problem solved because there was no way of even identifying who he was due to the lack of shared entrance or hallway. You can't go and knock on their door. The sound insulation is quite bad in here.

“ The problem is not that they are having parties. It's just not being able to go next door - I can't go and knock on the door. It always has to be through the security... so there's no way we can have a dialogue with the students.

Our interviews with the artists also demonstrated how **noise disturbance can be experienced differently by individuals**. One of the work/live tenants recalled:

“ It's very quiet in there, that was really nice. I just remember that place, the stillness of it all. It's very still because it's quite sheltered by the building. I didn't mind the noise from the students really.

The other major factor behind noise disturbance was cladding improvement works taking place on the buildings which face Glassyard, on the other side of Oak Square. This impacted the studios whose windows opened on to the square:

“ I grew up on [a busy road] and I got used to that. But this is very disruptive. It's very aggressive, the type of noises here.

“ It is a lot, it really is. It starts at seven in the morning and doesn't really stop until midnight. The night security for the scaffolding are on their phones all the time. The builders shout to each other across the scaffolding. The noise is continuous.

3. Enable artists to make mid-term career plans

“ I think everyone once they arrived here had this, kind of, 'freeing up' of space and stress in a way to be able to focus.

The theme of **stability and continuity** was referred to frequently in our interviews with artists.

Seven of the eight respondents agreed (six strongly) with the statement that **the length of the programme (five years) provided stability**. All agreed (five strongly) that **the fixed rental**

charge had enabled them to plan ahead.

- “ Because we were able to stay here for many years and knew that we didn't have to worry about looking for something, we were able to focus a lot more on our practice. That's been a major impact on our work because we've been able to spend more time on it. That's the thing that was probably the most significant.
- “ I got a lot of work finished that was just lingering on before I came here. I actually managed to sit down and go 'right, I'm going to finish this now, I'm going to really concentrate and finish it.' That was very useful.
- “ It gives you a set amount of time to do things. For me, I just wanted to sort out some of the things I needed to and then create a situation, or a platform, to move on from.
- “ The fixed rent price was useful for planning and budgeting ahead – especially now that all the other costs are going up.

This increased stability in both living and financial circumstances was cited as having a **significant impact on the artists' quality of life:**

- “ Not having to think about moving, you don't really realise how taxing it is until you end up in a situation where you don't have to do it. You feel something lifting from your shoulders and you didn't realise it was there.
- “ I've never lived in one place for this long in my life. That's probably been one of the most significantly beneficial aspects, you have this continuity and, you don't have to constantly think about looking for a new place, which takes huge amounts of resources and mental space. The continuity of being able to live not just in a country, but in one house, is really tremendous, so much less stress.
- “ The stability of it and the financial considerations really are very important for your mental health.
- “ In London, it is extremely rare to be able to know that you're not going to get kicked out, that the rent is not going to go up, that you actually can stay for that amount of time. This is absolutely exceptional, it's very significant.

Artists felt that **the core conditions of the programme (the stable rent, trustworthy landlord and length of tenancy) were reliable and created a sense of stability.** One artist drew a parallel with this and the concept of privilege, in that it provided a period in which the recipient can ignore the worries they would otherwise feel and make choices from a place of relative security.

“ **With stability comes confidence and trust - you can trust that you're not putting yourself at risk if you decide to make that investment for your practice. If you need to buy a new computer, you can afford to do the things you need to do for your practice because you know how much your rent is going to be. And because you know how much your rent is going to be and you know that there's not a big surprise coming around the corner, well, you don't know but you can assume that there's unlikely to be that kind of drama. You get a sense of what you'd imagine privilege might feel like, because you just didn't have to think about it.**

The length of the programme, the intention that artists moved in at the same time and - where possible - remained for the duration, also created a **sense of community and safety**:

“ **It's nice that we all arrived at the same time because we all got to know the place at the same time. There was no hierarchy of who's been there longer. I really liked that actually, it felt much easier to go in and we discovered it together. It was nice, we helped each other out.**

“ **It is a good thing to move in with other people at the same time, there's no different levels of ownership.**

“ **It's been a lovely group. I think that's one of the things that I will be the most sad about [finishing the programme] apart from the stability, is to not be neighbours with these people.**

However, it appeared that **the need for contact within the community differed**, especially between those living alone and those in a couple.

“ **I think if you have a lot of couples, they're in a little bit of a bubble. Even though they're friendly, there's not as much of a need to relate. I think me and [another sole tenant] used to feel a bit lonely, because when we bumped into each other we talked a lot.**

Every artist, regardless of whether they lived alone or as a couple, noted **the lack of communal space at the building**. Acme maximises on studio size to provide the lowest rent possible, which means that communal space is not included in its buildings. Some artists observed that the building's design didn't allow for the possibility of bumping into one another easily:

“ **What we missed quite a lot is a common shared space. That is a need for all the artists in this building.**

“ **The one thing that we miss in this building is a communal space. I know that the entrance could be one but, because it's an entrance, it isn't really. And communal space is the one thing that creates community without having to come in and do public programmes. In that sense, architecturally, some kind of**

communal space, I think, would be beneficial but not necessarily in the form of public programmes.

“ ...because there's no kind of 'common room', if we want to be as a group it has to be arranged and someone has to decide who is going to be in the room and then get everyone together. So there wasn't that kind of communal 'thing' that I was hoping for.

4. Provide transformative impact

“ On several levels, we were quite desperate before coming here.

The circumstances of the artists prior to moving to Glassyard varied, however **each was facing difficult choices that threatened their ability to work.**

One artist used a wheelchair and crutches to walk and described how they struggled with stairs in their previous living accommodation, which had steps in the entrance and hallway. They were not recognised as the tenant of the property (it was an informal sublet of a council flat) and therefore were unable to get a disabled parking bay, often having to park far away. They had been searching for alternative living solutions but described the jump to market rents as 'intimidating'. **They thought they would have to move out of London.**

This artist also struggled to find adequate workspace. They had studios in two buildings that were demolished, until eventually finding a studio with another provider. However, the space was damp and problematic for their film equipment:

“ I never felt safe or acknowledged as a disabled artist in [that damp and problematic] space.

All eight respondents to our survey stated that **joining Acme's work/live programme had allowed them to live in London when they otherwise couldn't afford it.**

Five said **their living circumstances** had significantly improved, one that they had mildly improved, one that they had stayed about the same and one mildly worsened. Three artists felt that their working circumstances had been significantly improved, two mildly, one about the same and one mildly worsened (one was n/a).

One artist interviewed recalled applying for the programme at a time of great upheaval:

“ It was like a storm of things.

They had been living in a friend's mother's spare room to reduce their outgoings while studying. In the last year of their studies, their father died. The artist decided to move into their father's

London council flat but the property needed to be cleared and they had nowhere to move their studio belongings. So, they moved their things and themselves into the flat:

“ **But then the council didn't want me to stay there, so I was trying to fight that while trying to make sense, trying to figure out, what I was going to do next and what to do with [my father's] stuff. And I'm going through it all at the same time. As that was coming to a head, I was basically a year into that, and I saw the potential work/live studio opportunity. So I went for that. It was pure need really...**

I wanted to stay in London for the friends and the community of people that I was with. But I was finding it difficult. So I had a bit of a conflict. I remember thinking I could leave but then I was working on shows in London, so it still made sense for me to stay in London at the time.

Another example of the **various and complicated circumstances faced by artists applying for the work/live studios** is demonstrated by an artist who, born and raised in London, had been living and working in Spain. After Brexit, they were required to return to the UK and:

“ **It just felt like the situation was quite impossible.**

The opportunity to move to Glassyard supported this difficult transition back to the UK:

“ **That's the thing that Acme are brilliant at, you know, that they can keep artists functioning in London. Even for somebody like myself, who has some kind of career and makes a living out of making art. Without the opportunity from Acme, I don't really know how I could have functioned in that way in London, because it's becoming so horrendously difficult...**

...I know how much this sort of thing would cost on the edge of central London, in the free market. I'm old, and wiley, and I couldn't afford it. So the price point is unbelievably, amazingly good. The fact that it's fixed is insanely good.

An artist couple on the programme had a young child at time of application. **They were at a delicate crossroads in their careers and facing a difficult decision about where to live.** Both were gaining recognition and success for their work, which they were keen to pursue but they needed a fixed address to apply for a school place for their child. One half of the couple had grown up in the area near Glassyard and their mother still lived nearby, alone. The artists wanted to remain close to her, but were struggling to find anything they could afford in the area.

“ **...if I think back to the application, we really needed to find a way to make it work with having really limited incomes, and having a small kid, and being self employed in a creative sector. It's like, how can you do it in London?**

We were really up against it, because we had nowhere to go. We were both scrapping around for work, and then trying to do shows if possible, where possible. We didn't really have any options. We wouldn't have been able to afford to rent somewhere.

We were starting to think about where [their child] could go to school. The place we were living, there was only one or two options. But here, within a mile there's a bunch of really decent options.

So, I think a lot of the reasons were very practical, not necessarily professional. I remember going into it knowing that five years wasn't that long, but very grateful that it could be at least five years.

The impact of **precarious or poor living and working conditions can threaten an artist's ability to keep working**, both practically and mentally. One artist explained how moving into an Acme work/live studio not only improved their living conditions but also gave them an improved sense of self-respect. **Their confidence grew and they experienced less self-doubt** about themselves and their work:



It's amazing how much your living conditions affect your sense of who you are and what you've achieved.

This experience has given me an enormous increase in my wellbeing and my mental health. It's given me confidence and a sense of being a 'grown up' in the way that I work and I live.

Before I moved here I felt quite depressed about 'how long do I have to live like this?' I finished my MA in 2005 and so at the time [of application] it was almost 15 years later. A lot of people are having pretty grown-up, good lives and holidays, and I didn't have anything. So I felt really behind.

My studio has always been quite nice but my living conditions were always horrible. It was a studio flat but tiny, tiny. It was above a Brazilian restaurant and every time there was a football match, they'd go crazy and my room would shake. It was a horrible, horrible place. I was only living there because it was so convenient for getting to my studio. I was living right opposite the studio. I had a part time job and I really wanted to keep my living and my studio close to each other. So that it was easy for me to go to the studio and then go to my job and come back and, if I have energy, go back to the studio and do something. It was not a work/live space but it's very close. It was convenient but the living conditions were depressing. It was seriously depressing.

I'm a grown-up but I was living like a student. I couldn't invite people for dinner and, you know, I felt like I never experienced normal life.

When your living conditions are poor you start questioning everything. 'What's wrong with me and why am I still living like this?' But having a good standard of life has stopped me going to that negative, questioning thing. So on that level my mental health and confidence is much, much better. I finally feel like a grown up, living in a grown-up space.

We are artists but we still want to have a decent quality of life.

5. Ensure artists are better placed to sustain their work in future upon completing the work/live programme

All eight respondents to our survey agreed (four strongly) that **their career had benefitted from time spent living at Glassyard**. Seven artists agreed that **they were in a more resilient position to sustain their work going forward**.

Although we cannot demonstrate whether this resilience will sustain once artists have left the programme, **our interviews provided examples of progression already being felt:**

“ I think it has impacted more things that we cannot see... It's about the indirect impact of having more time for your practice, being able to apply for more grants and being able to do more projects. So, in the last three years, we've been successful with grants and bigger projects and you can attribute that to this, if not directly. But totally, we are in a different place than we were five, six years ago.

“ I think I've achieved quite a lot of the things that I wanted to achieve when I was applying. A lot of the things I said I would do, or wanted to do. And finding the beginning of a long-term plan of doing ambitious work. It feels like it all happened. Although, it's not like I have suddenly become successful but I feel like I'm gradually, you know, ticking a box.

“ Being here during this period of time, I would say, in terms of what we applied to do, I think we've kind of stayed on track. I was able to make shows and do exhibitions, and then doing more teaching has become stable, even though it's still not great! It doesn't mean that we could buy a place or anything like that. But, you know, it's a way that there's an income which wasn't there before. So there are things that have happened from being here that definitely wouldn't have happened otherwise.

“ I started working on this collaborative photography project... that seems to be one of the most fruitful things that I did while I was there. I think we've done four exhibitions now with the project and it's going quite well. It's very much been a fruitful couple of years of work.

“ For someone like myself, who’s just been trying to stay in the game for the last couple of decades, having this space to come to, to have the solitude, to focus, to have time, it’s enormously beneficial. It’s incredibly important.

“ Our work situations have progressed in terms of stability and exhibitions and things like this. [My partner is] working with a really established gallery now, that’s a new relationship since moving in. [My partner] did [a major public gallery commission]. Those things were really supported through this.

Looking ahead to the end of their tenancies at Glassyard, three of the eight respondents said they anticipated remaining in London, four did not know if they would and one thought they would leave London because they couldn’t afford to stay.

“ Artists are people that generally don’t have pensions, and they don’t have health insurance schemes, and they don’t have mortgages a lot of the time because they can’t get them. And I think there is a real crisis about how artists in general can function as normal people in London.

One artist left the programme in 2021 as a consequence of the Covid-19 pandemic and their subsequent loss of employment. They left London to take up an artist-led, work/live opportunity elsewhere that offered them employment.

We asked the remaining artists what they might do next after their tenancy ended:

“ ...after being here for some years and having the luxury to focus more on your [practice], it makes you realise that you don’t want to go back to running around 10 times more just to be able to pay the rent. So, in that sense, it’s made it clear that we want to keep that model, which means that obviously we would like to stay in the area. That’s the ideal, but that’s not financially viable. So, we know that the choice we will make is between the area or the practice. We choose to practice.

“ Here I am, a lot older, with no kind of fixtures. On the one hand, that’s worrying. On the other hand, I have a completely different concept of my life now I’m in my 50s, and what the future is. What I need to do and what my role is, and, you know, potentially what work I leave in the world... So, I don’t know - I will always have an Acme studio if I can afford it

“ I have been trying to get a proper job. I have to say I’ve been trying my best but the problem is my age. If I put my age down on jobs, you don’t get interviewed. I’ve been shortlisted for jobs... you just think your age is getting in the way quite a lot. I am worried about where I’m going to go because there’s nowhere in London I could afford. It’s just very difficult. It’s like, my brain doesn’t even want to think about it but I know I have to.

“ I’m trying to plan for a future where I don’t have to have as many overheads, by making savings and things like that. So I would like to maybe find a building that I could work on, turn into a studio and create a life that doesn’t have a lot of overheads and have time to work on things I like doing. That’s why I do think it is important to create a transition in a way because otherwise it’s hard... the idea of being kicked out. I’m really aware that I wanted to go somewhere from this.

“ I feel there’s a push and pull to having this opportunity. Because you don’t have to compromise in so many aspects, which is incredible, but then you have that feeling like you’re not facing all your realities. And so I’m scared to leave here because what happens when we do have to pay double the rent? I’m able to have an assistant to help me because our rent is so much cheaper than a private let. We’re not in a position to be able to buy anything but I feel for London-based artists and I’m really committed to staying in London. I’m from this part of town, I don’t want to move to Margate, I want to stay here but it does feel precarious still.

“ I was thinking of other centres of art, like Glasgow, where there’s potentially more support or respect for people who have a practice. But then what does that mean in terms of having had a commitment to being in London for so long? Having established a practice here and working here. It’s weird.”

“ ...if we could find another residency like this to move into would we do it again? For sure... it’s worked for us really well.

Part Three - Next Steps: Acme's work/live programme for 2024

Space is fundamental to an artist, and not only for practical reasons. **Having access to a decent, affordable home alongside making space is the foundation for wellbeing.**

Acme's work/live studios **support artists to build resilience for their futures.** By fixing rents as low as possible (benchmarked against the Mayor's London Living Rent scheme), artists have more time to focus on their practice or accumulate savings.

The findings of this review have helped inform **a new approach to our work/live programme for 2024 and beyond**, with three key objectives in mind:

- Protecting and nurturing the future of artists in London
- Prioritising artists' long-term growth and development
- Offering principled and transparent conditions for occupation

Due to the small number of work/live studios Acme manages, these units cannot be allocated to an individual indefinitely. Instead, **they are designed to offer working artists a stepping stone to other housing arrangements, along with time and space for their practice.**

Moving forward, **we remain committed to offering an equal chance for all artists in need who are interested in our work/live units**, when demand for these studios is so high.



A work/live artist studio at Acme's Glassyard building, 2022 © Robert W Mason, courtesy The Acme Archive.