

How art is transforming property developments

Creatives are bringing life to areas waiting to be transformed.

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On the ground floor of a two-storey building in St Leonards, Sydney, artist Debbie Mackinnon is month-by-month, year-by-year, turning what used to be a commercial florist into an artist-run gallery and studio. Pointing to the walls, under which the glass of the original shopfront remains, Mackinnon highlights the measures she's taken to transform the space.

“When I first took the space on five years ago – with an 18-month lease – I didn't want to spend money on Gyprocking the wall, so I made a frame and just stretched this shade cloth, which I bought from Reverse Garbage [a shop that sells safe industrial and domestic waste materials].”



Artist Debbie Mackinnon: 'There's no security, but is life ever secure?' Peter Braig
The gallery, me Artspace, is one of the creative enterprises in St Leonards supported by developer TWT, which owns a number of large blocks in the suburb that are awaiting redevelopment. TWT rents the old florist to Mackinnon for below-market rates to engender a creative scene in a suburb that previously lacked any discernible identity. TWT is not alone in leasing property awaiting redevelopment to artistic enterprises. An old industrial park in Sydney's inner city Alexandria was the home of Sydney Fringe for the past two years – a result of a partnership between HPG Australia and Sydney Fringe. The chief

executive of Sydney Fringe Kerri Glasscock says these kinds of opportunities are a result of a city undergoing rapid change.

“We are living in a city where we have a lot of development going on. We are also in a city where space is at a premium for the creative community, so there’s a synergy there automatically. But more than that, developers are increasingly needing to engage with the community that they are building into, and I think they are looking for ways to do that in a very real and wholesome way,” says Glasscock.

These kinds of partnerships have emerged amid a backdrop of [declining public support](#) for the arts from funding bodies such as Create NSW and the Australia Council and a [fractured](#) local government environment.

In contrast to Melbourne, where the Victorian government has given artists long-term control over properties such as the Collingwood Artist Precinct and Abbotsford Convent, Sydney artists remain dependent upon the goodwill and time frames of private developers. In Perth, peak arts body Artsource, with support from local and state governments, has facilitated temporary studio spaces in underutilised buildings.



The Sydney precinct where property developer TWT has leased space to artists in buildings it plans to redevelop. Peter Braig

As industrial warehouses in these capital cities are converted into gleaming apartment blocks, the spaces where creative practice can flourish are shifting. Professor Ien Ang, from the Institute of Culture and Society at the University of Western Sydney, has mapped these changes and studied the results.

“[Artistic] production is being edged out,” she says, “and the City of Sydney is really worried about that. A lot of artists have already left and they are wondering, ‘How do we get them back?’”

New lease of life

This is not the first time that property developers and Sydney artists have collaborated. From 2008 to 2012, Frasers Property invited Brand X to activate the old rum store at the Carlton and United Brewery site on Kensington Street in Chippendale, turning what is now the location of A1 Canteen, Olio and Bistrot Gavroche into a multidisciplinary art space.

Marcus Chang, CEO of Kensington Street Holdings, says, “To soften up Chippendale once the brewery had moved out, we thought instead of space just sitting there, why don’t we get activity going, why don’t we start breathing life into an old manufacturing area?”

Fraser Studios provided space for local artists as other arts organisations such as Liveworks and venues such as Lanfranchi’s were already being pushed out of Chippendale. The collaboration was a win for the developer and the artists who were able to use the space. As Chang highlights, the project changed the way in which artists and property developers saw each other.

“Not all developers are greedy pigs, even if we do things a bit differently, it’s not always about the dollar; it’s about giving something back in return for goodwill.”

Chang estimates that the spaces could have been leased for \$150,000 to \$200,000 a year, but were leased to artists for free. In St Leonards, TWT estimates it has sacrificed \$1 million in lost rental earnings. What made these collaborations successful, however, was not only the space, but the in-kind support that Frasers and TWT provide.

On April 12, TWT hosted a block party for all the creative enterprises it supports, allowing neighbours to meet and collaborations to form. With the nearby construction of the Crows Nest metro, it remains unclear how much longer the artists will remain. TWT has sought approval for a major redevelopment to these sites, which will include three towers between 67 and 101 metres tall, but in February, North Sydney Council [rejected](#) this application.

“People are realising if you let unfettered commercialism reign there’ll be nothing left.”

— Professor David Rowe, Western Sydney University

The lack of security does not concern Mackinnon, who is currently on a month-to-month lease.

“There’s no security, but is life ever secure? I feel like the universe will deliver up something else.”

Multitude of users

In Alexandria, although Sydney Fringe will no longer have access to the space in 2019, Glasscock remains optimistic that the successful partnership will convince HPG and other developers to create space in the finished development for artistic uses. Over in Chippendale, while no studios remain, the completed Central Park precinct has \$8 million worth of public art that was a condition of development approval by the City of Sydney council.

To provide certainty for artists, developers and the public, Ang’s colleague at Western Sydney University, Emeritus Professor David Rowe, argues that future governments need to adopt a flexible framework for cultural provisions in finished and unfinished developments.

“It’s going to be synthetic: public here, private here, benefactors there, community somewhere else, individual artists, businesses big and small.”

Indeed, Chang highlights the need for a multitude of users in any successful development:

“Workers in ties down to blue-collar workers, artists, everything. You’ve got to have a broad spectrum, that’s what makes things interesting in cities, especially inner cities.”

To facilitate this, however, Rowe argues that councils and governments will have to take a greater role in committing new developments to supporting the arts. “Now people are realising if you let unfettered commercialism reign there’ll be nothing left.”