

'Hackney, I lost you': the London creatives priced out of their studios

Photographer Jenny Lewis started her project to highlight the area's creativity - but many of her subjects have since been forced to move out of their workspaces by rising costs and the pace of east London's redevelopment

Jenny Lewis

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Fred Butler, accessories designer

"Stepping off the bus into Dalston for the very first time in 2001, I not only found work experience but a whole a new life experience. This is where I planted my roots, and where I have recently witnessed the canopy of high-rises bionically shooting up. The shadow of redevelopment has literally been cast over the multicultural magic of Ridley Road.

"A Shoreditch stampede flooded in from the city at the weekend, stopped out, and has not gone home. The artists' warehouse studios are now a flicker of PC screensavers between partitioned walls. It's the future; it's survival of the fittest. It is history in the making, and it's taking over - too quick, too soon. It is out of control, and I couldn't hold on. Hackney, I love you. I lost you."

Tony Hornecker, artist

"One October night 13 years ago, I ventured up a dark Kingsland Road, deep into Dalston (an area I'd never even heard of) in response to an ad I'd seen in Loot [the free ads newspaper]. The Garage, as she was to become to be known, was little more than a roller shutter door and a plywood roof, wedged between two old factories. It was to become my home, my work, my life and more frequently, my income. A brave frontier amidst an alley littered with crack and prostitutes, long before lattes and lavish oyster bars. Now she will become a stack of empty, soulless flats, and I will simply move on. To a new frontier, with my beloved treasures strapped to my weathered back."

Louise Riley, artist

"I had moved out of my studio in London Fields about three weeks before this picture was taken [in May 2013], so I guess I was one of the first to leave. My rent had gone up by £88 a month in 11 months: that may not sound like loads, but it was to me. It was a choice between living fine and living anxiously.

"I have been working from home ever since. It means that my daughter's home is always a bit chaotic, which makes me feel very guilty, and I battle with scale, as I would like to work much bigger than I can. But I am still making work and I feel like life is long and that I will find space, time and money again - but perhaps not in London, where I can't really breathe. I am hatching a plan."

Jen and Mike Gabel, performance artists

“We are not only losing our studio but our home as well [this weekend, Mike and Jen are having a sale of all the possessions they have gathered in their 14 years in London, before heading to Canada]. We are not leaving London by choice. What has happened to us and countless others is just an example of what’s happening all across London – the placing of profit and wealth over art and culture. When iconic venues continually close to make way for unaffordable flats, emerging artists and creatives lose the ability to develop their craft because they only work to survive. Our city will suffer creatively. By leaving, we are choosing to thrive instead of survive.”

Paul Reynolds, curator

“I have decamped from my live/work space in the former factory, Simpsons of Piccadilly, to a space three times the size for roughly the same price, but a bit further away: Barcelona. The savings, quality of life and space gained have enabled me to launch Maison Marcel, a private live-in museum experience. So you see, there is a silver lining to every cloudy tale.”

Rose de Boreman, designer

“I’m a textile designer and ceramicist, working from a studio on Hackney Road above a family-run framing suppliers called D&J Simons that was established in 1900. It’s a beautiful room with huge windows along one side and concrete floors. The building has many unusual features from what looks like a 1950s decoration job, such as veneered wooden walls and bakelite lift buttons. My space is extremely affordable, thanks to the Second Floor studios initiative who negotiated a good deal from the owners. I share this floor with an animator, furniture designer, musician, artist and documentary photographers.

“The Simons family own many buildings on Hackney Road and nearby, which are steadily being developed into flats above shops. The warehouse next door has been knocked down and rebuilt in this way; the Acava studios on Cremer Street are imminent; and ours is earmarked as next in line once that development is finished. I would need to move much further out and probably downsize should I have to leave. But it might still be three or four years before they finally get around to working on our building.”

Josh Baum, poet

“When you see the Waitrose vans driving round the corner, you know the end is coming.”

Dan Holiday, artist

“I moved into the Mangle Studio space with seven other creatives around 1998, when it was three units and just about habitable – the roof was always a little leaky, as was the skylight. It had only one tap and an old row of outside toilets. After one year without heating we got a boiler and radiators. A few people went and a few others took their places, so there was always interesting art, design, printmaking, and photography going on.

“Our original landlord sold the whole yard to a big real-estate company who didn’t really want us there, but kindly allowed us to stay for a rent increase and the loss of a third of the space. The rent slowly increased over the next few years with many of our original neighbours moving on, but it wasn’t until a new landlord took over, just in time for our lease renewal, that we had to go our separate ways due to another rent hike. I am now in Leyton. We had 16 pretty good years and are still doing our thing, just in different places.”

See more of Jenny Lewis’s portraits at Hackney Studio. Follow Guardian Cities on Twitter and Facebook and join the discussion

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