

## **Space Race Now: Chris Downie:**

Urban redevelopment is slowly forcing creative people, dependent on work space, out of the city. This development is an international phenomenon which overseas artists have overcome through their co-operative efforts. Civic authorities in those centres have been quick to realise the importance of maintaining an active cultural nucleus within the city and have responded positively to this need.

With these overseas models in mind a group of Sydney artists joined together this year to form an organisation to find cheap working space. Aptly this organization is called "Creative Space." It was felt that artists were facing a crisis situation. Due to the enormous increases in rentals, suitable working space was becoming more and more difficult to acquire, especially in the city. This situation was seen to be causing the gradual dispersal of the art scene, and along with the government's proposed new city development schemes, it was felt that things could only get worse. It became obvious that now was the time to act, to make artists' needs known, whilst there was still empty space existing in the city, for there are at present many empty spaces in the city, indeed sometimes entire buildings are lying vacant.

With this knowledge in mind, plus various shared experiences in the difficulties and disappointments of searching for studio space, and after much discussion, a committee was formed to study the possible ways and means by which artists may approach the problem of getting space. These efforts generated considerable response in the art community and soon members of staff and students of East Sydney Tech, Sydney College of the Arts, and the Alexander Mackie College of Advanced Education School of Art were involved. It was soon found that the needs of the art community extended far beyond the painting studio to include such areas as film-making, theatre groups, performance artists, new art, puppeteers and musicians. Even poets needed space.

All this led to a general meeting of interested people at an East City studio where the present committee was elected to direct and organise proceedings from this point. The first thing was to gather information regarding the needs of the art community for space, in order to be able to present a case, and secondly to inform those who control such space of these needs. Consequently a number of letters were sent to various government bodies, including the Premier's Department and the Lord Mayor of Sydney, and also the large groups and corporations within the private sector who own property in the city, Groups such as the Visual Arts Board and The Artists' Representation Organisation were also informed of steps so far taken, and the aims of Creative Space.

At the next general meeting which took place on August 14th, 1979, Bridget Riley, who was visiting Australia, agreed to address Creative Space on her involvement as a founding member of the London S.P.A.C.E. Organisation. This meeting was enthusiastically supported by representatives of disparate groups of artists out of a common concern for the space problem. Bridget's lucid descriptions of the London model clarified many of the issues and problems and also contributed to a spirit of co-operation, confidence and understanding.

The committee for Creative Space is continuing its survey of the space needs of Sydney artists but this survey is nowhere near complete as artists continue to register their space needs almost daily. Creative Space is also continuing to compile a file on empty buildings in the city area. Negotiations with the various government and private bodies who own these buildings are being initiated. As these bodies become increasingly aware, it is hoped that the Creative Space venture will develop.

At this stage, the committee feels the necessity for an organisation such as Creative Space has been amply proven and that its establishment can only be of benefit to ALL artists in this city. It is presently supported by at least 250 artists of which 150 are currently looking for working space. Amongst these supporters are a number of well-known Australian artists who, although not seeking space themselves have indicated their support by the promise of a substantial donation.

Creative Space is a non profit-making, non political Organisation which finds working space for artists within the inner city. It aims to attain for creative purposes and at cheap rates, any suitable space which is presently unused within the public or private sector. Finding and securing these spaces will assist artists and enable them to continue working in their field.

One of the main aims of Creative Space is to influence the attitudes of those who control the space, and especially space which is lying dormant. Speculation and redevelopment within Sydney have brought about a very fluid situation whereby buildings, often remain empty for long periods of time. Many of these buildings would make suitable working space for artists with no alteration whatsoever. It is strongly felt that the renting of such spaces would have many advantages not only for the artists but also for the owners. Space which otherwise may be untenable can be utilised and in this way the rates and upkeep paid for even if the building did not produce a profit. By the mere fact of the building being occupied, destructive vandalism and deterioration through neglect would be thwarted. Other advantages for the owner include the generation of much public good-will. Experience overseas has shown that the movement of artists into a run-down area of the city has been responsible for the regeneration of that area and has proven invaluable in raising public awareness of the arts by allowing the PROCESS of Art and not simply the final product to be seen and appreciated.

Even short-term leasing arrangements may prove viable. As part of its aims Creative Space undertakes the relocation of artists in all sorts of long and short term space arrangements. It will also provide for the collation and dissemination of information about available space. This is especially helpful to the young artists, ex-students and those who have recently begun a career in Art, as it allows them access to low cost studio space, opportunity to be working in close proximity to other artists and a way to be immediately involved in the art community.

Improved communication being one of the major goals of Creative Space letters were sent to similar organisations overseas and much information and support has been received. Already strong links with the S.P.A.C.E. organisation London and the Visual Arts Ontario have been established. It is hoped that these links will lead to establishing a definite arrangement with the international Artists Studio Exchange Programme. Further possibilities include the establishment of an Australian exchange

programme between country, city and interstate, plus the provision of exhibition space.

So far in the development of Creative Space, application for grants from the Visual Arts Board or any other funding body has been avoided. The general feeling is that Creative Space should be seen as an independent organisation founded by artists, for artists, to represent the needs of artists. It is obvious that at some stage in the future administrative funding will become necessary, but it is hoped that until such a time arrives all work involved can be carried out on a voluntary basis.

At the present moment the committee is going ahead with the business of establishing Creative Space as a limited liability corporation, having already secured the voluntary assistance of an honorary accountant and solicitor to facilitate this. There is gradual improvement in the communication and understanding of the aims and objectives of the C.S by key government bodies who are beginning to show positive interest. The committee continues to record and identify the various needs of artists and to investigate ways and means whereby suitable spaces can be made available to the members. The committee looks forward to the time when a number of C.S members begin to accommodate the first building.

Enquiries regarding Creative Space are welcome and should be addressed to Chris Downie, 79 Kensington Road, Summer Hill, 2031

**Source: Art Network, November 1979**