

## **The Women's Warehouse**

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*Available ... Warehouse space.*

*Panoramic city and harbour views from spacious rooftop sundeck.*

*Four storeys and a basement, with plumbing and wiring.*

*Suitable for large group of women into music, conferences, electronics, food, newspapers, martial arts, meditation, film, needlework, drama, screen-printing, carpentry, motor bikes, snooker, magic, painting, other women, massage, politics, dancing, and ... collectivism!*

*Women only need apply.*

It may read like the Opera House of the Sydney Women's Movement, but no quantity of white paint can disguise the fact that it's an ex downtown-chicken market that has been granted a new lease of life behind its imposing rusty rolladour facade.

Like members of some secret, outlawed society, we come and go through the tiny trapdoor at all hours of the day and night, bearing with us the paraphernalia of our numerous enterprises. The neighbours peer curiously at our activities from behind their fruit boxes, and wonder at our motorbikes lined up outside, at our vans and trucks, and at our seemingly endless variety of faces, and most of all, they must puzzle over what unorthodox enterprise we are running and how on earth we make it pay.

It's the purpose of this article to answer these and many other questions relating to the herstory of the Women's Warehouse. Some probing questions shall be ignored here however, because, like all pioneers, we have a healthy regard for maintaining a low profile, whilst exploring new territory. We recognise that we are attempting a venture we have little experience with, on a scale we have no experience with, putting our organising faith in a loose collective process that all the experience in the women's movement still fails to completely prepare us for.

The diverse nature of the experience requires that any discussion of the warehouse, either as an idea or as a redbrick reality, by any one woman, be considered the subjective experience of that woman, in this case, me. I ponder whether it is possible for any woman who has been involved in the warehouse experience to be anything but subjective, because the warehouse came upon us so suddenly that we have been discovering what the warehouse is and what it means to us as we have been creating it. The desperate desire felt by women for space of their own has manifested itself, with varying ferocity, in the setting up of spaces specifically meaningful to women ... women's centres, refuges, health centres ... anywhere we can get elbow room or a toe hold. Sure, we've been sharing the warehouse dream among ourselves for years, but it meant many different things to different women, and it still does, now that we have it. My understanding of the warehouse experience reflects this personal experiential quality of the warehouse. To understand this is also to glimpse the area of experience where most frustration can occur and energy is demanded ... the one unanimous assumption at the warehouse ... that it is an exercise in the process of collectivity.

When and how the warehouse then?

It was late April '79, the end of another month of searching the streets of Sydney for a space, any space, small enough for a women's coffee shop perhaps, or big enough for

ANYTHING! Some of us had been looking for months, and despairing from time to time at the lack of money (we had none) and the lack of energy (we were running out).

When we saw the warehouse, and saw beyond its lack of plumbing, wiring, paint and glass panes, to its potential, we acted upon our conviction that Sydney needed a large women's-only space, and pooled our meagre resources to buy a month's rental, called together all the women we knew who looked a bit claustrophobic, and held our first meeting on May 4th.

Who the warehouse?

From that first meeting, and meetings and functions since, it is clear that the warehouse is frequented by women with access to the amorphous "women's movement". So we ask ourselves how the warehouse can reach out to other women. We've talked about this, about the "image" of the warehouse, about elitism, but we have no more ideas than does any women's movement-based group regarding our appeal and relevance to Sydney women generally. Our heart-of-the-city location, whilst convenient because so central, denies us the chance to reach women on a local community basis, an advantage community health centres have in the suburbs. The onus has therefore been on the women themselves to seek us out. But what can we do to widen our contact and let women know we are here, and how and whether our work relates to them: Perhaps this huge public relations problem can only be dealt with over a long period of time, which our four months in operation has precluded. When the all-pervading issue has been to create and consolidate and survive! WITH WHAT resources we already have, it has been difficult to contemplate reaching out to the broader women's community.

Of the women who have been involved in the warehouse so far (it varies from day to day, from one to one hundred and fifty), one can't generalise about their work or commitment. Some of these women work on individual "projects", others work in groups. Some women come once every now and then and some have become regulars. Some have become involved in the overall concept and functioning of the space, others have much more specific interests. There are women at the warehouse who have been around the "movement" for years, and those who live on the edges of it. What we share is a determined desire for a women's-only space to move around freely in, and a hope that more women will come and share this space with us.

The effect that having such a space has had so far upon the women involved probably relates proportionately to their level of commitment. To women who have set up a 9 to 5 routine for themselves the warehouse is inextricably linked with their work, whilst to others it is a place to go once a month to hear music. In the long term we'll be able to measure the effect of the warehouse on the women involved by the creative energy it has stimulated. Already this is indicated by the number of group and individual activities that have started up only since the warehouse began.

How the warehouse now?

How we are operating our activities is not based upon any clear model, but rather upon the process of collectivity. There is no recognised central group or hierarchical structure, neither is there even a set group of women who constitute THE collective, though there are "regulars" who, simply because of their ongoing involvement take much of the responsibility for decision-making and maintenance work. However, any woman is invited to share collective decision-making since the warehouse collective is simply those who turn up to the weekly meeting. Ideally this includes women from each of the collectives who have activities at the warehouse, plus any interested individuals.

Suffice it to say here (for this is no time to explore the problems of collectivity) that the main challenge confronting this borderless collective is the striving for balance between the need for organisational continuity (for paying rent, signing leases, arranging activities, etc) and the desire for flexibility and fluidity. At the same time we need to incorporate into this process an awareness of the potential danger in any unconscious holding on that can accompany the taking on of responsibility.

The dictates of survival (essentially the never ending search for money and energy) has dominated our first four months, at times, perhaps to the detriment of collective principles, but then this process is not a theoretical exercise. It is the actuality of exploring an idea in the real world, where regulations, money, and landlords really do try to pull strings, and show even less understanding of the slow-moving process of collectivity, than they do of our need for autonomous women's space.

Any woman or group can approach the warehouse collective with the aim of sharing the space, and, provided there is the space and the women agree to share the responsibilities, then their activities can become part of the warehouse. The same principle applies whether or not the women wish to use the space on a regular basis, or for a one-off function such as a conference.

How much the warehouse?

Rent-wise, we have surprised ourselves at our ability each month to pay-up, considering that most of the women involved live subsistently, and we are not in receipt of any government or private funding. So far all money that has gone into the warehouse has come from two sources:

1. Rent/donations from groups and individuals sharing the space.
2. Fund raising (dances, parties, dinners, etc.)

Financially we are self-supporting, spending most energy on raising the \$750 rent per calendar month. Needless to say, we are a non-profit operation. All money we raise goes into the maintenance of the space, or the groups that use the space.

As there is no salary output, our expenditure to date has been in the following areas ...

- paint, glass, wood, etc, for making the space livable.
- electrical and plumbing requisites (as only the ground floor had any wiring etc.)
- rent.
- capital equipment that we use collectively, eg. vacuum cleaners, chairs, tables, etc.

All of the work has been done on the cheap, with borrowed tools and volunteer labour. This financial reality implies a rapid wearing down of energy reserves, because the women are supporting themselves somehow, and also supporting the warehouse (with money, work or both). We often seem to rely upon the same group of women for money and energy, women who don't have financial security themselves and are working in other areas with women, such as refuges where energy output is excessive.

Our other insecurity arises from our leasing arrangements which have been considerably complicated because we are a collective with no hierarchy, a fact which upsets the hierarchical legal process. As regards security of tenure we have done all we can, but an old warehouse in such an area is always a "redevelopment" risk, though we have reason to hope that redevelopment will not be a problem for at least five years. The way we feel about the place at present it would take bulldozers to shift us, and that feeling is growing every time we have a gathering there and become more attached to the feeling of space.

What at the warehouse?

Physically, the space meets our requirements, for now at least ... but then, given an inch ... It is large and has numerous rooms of various sizes. It was like an open space we could shape to our needs and we've done much in the four months. Essentially we have created areas that accommodate those activities I outlined at the start. We have aimed at keeping much of the space open, so that it is as flexible as possible, however some groups with special needs (equipment, filing of records, etc) have their own rooms which they share when appropriate, and women are encouraged to share resources such as layout tables, silk-screening equipment, etc. Space is also kept open for multi-purpose use, eg. the music rehearsal space can also be used for drama and dance workshops. We are trying to apply the sharing principle of collectivity on all levels.

Already the space is being recognised by more and more women as a space they can utilise themselves, rather than a place that provides predetermined "entertainment" for passive consumption. With all this energy happening under one roof, it is inevitable that new activities will be initiated, and already established ones consolidated through the exchange of ideas and enthusiasm. As more Sydney women's groups (from health centres, refuges, at universities, etc) come to see the warehouse space as an extension or an annexe to their own space, then the more women will experience what can happen to their lives when they have a bit of space to grow in.

After a few weeks at the warehouse one begins to wonder how we did without such a space. Perhaps the answer is, that in some ways we didn't, or, if we did, we did it in a confined space and in isolation.

Any woman who feels like reclaiming some of the space in this crowded city is invited to come down and share our warehouse space and make it hers. We can be found C/- PO Box K456 Haymarket, or contacted through Women's Liberation House, phone 699-5281.