

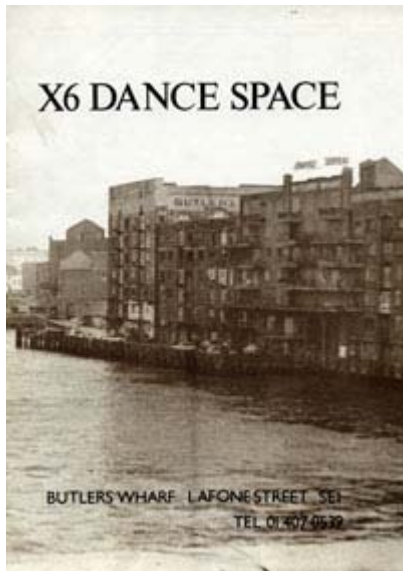
BUTLERS WHARF

SYNOPSIS

The Butlers Wharf story charts the classic case of artists as pioneers who find low-cost studio space in neglected inner city areas, move in, preserve and renovate causing rejuvenation within a few years, thus drawing attention to the area and 'lifestyle' possibilities, ultimately being forced out by the property market. It describes the establishment of a community of independent artists in studios by the Thames, rendered homeless again through development, leading to the formation of Chisenhale studios in Bow, 1980.



INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND



[X6 Dance Space - Butlers Wharf](#)

Now a distant memory, but for a decade Butlers Wharf fronting the river Thames by Tower Bridge was the largest colony of artists in London.



[Butlers Wharf Studios](#)

It looked for all the world like a film set of grim Dickensian horror, looming out on the riverside, and with barred windows and rattling gantries above the narrow cobbled street Shad Thames which threads through the middle of the wharves. Butlers Wharf in Bermondsey, forming a 14 acre complex of ageing Victorian warehouse buildings, lies on the South bank of the Thames just across from St Katherine's dock and immediately downriver from Tower Bridge.

The wharf was built towards the end of the 19th Century to store the influx of dry goods and spices being imported from the Empire and was finally closed in 1971 when the London Docks became uneconomic, through containerisation of cargoes and de-casualisation of the docking workforce, which led to their relocation outside London further down the Thames at Tilbury.

Consequently by the early 70s, like much of the rest of London's and other port and manufacturing cities' 19th and early 20th Century industrial buildings, especially riverside warehouses, they were made redundant, and left vacant.

The owners of Butlers Wharf, the Town and City Properties Group Ltd, decided to rent out the wharves as individual storage and light industrial space in order to offset costs and prevent the buildings becoming vandalised.

Alongside several small commercial concerns including spice grinders, waste rag merchants, a pet food factory, several joinery firms, a porcelain factory, a loom-maker and of course the John Courage brewery, among those first tenants were a handful of artists who independently realised the potential as studio space, and indeed spacious but technically 'illegal' living quarters

CHRONOLOGY OF THE ARTISTS INTO BUTLERS WHARF

The occupation by artists dates back to 1971 when 'A' block, fronting the river was first colonised, and in all seven of the warehouses were ultimately used by artists between 1971 and 1980.

Over the next four years artists proceeded to fill up 'A' block, moving on in later years to blocks 'B', 'C' and 'D', 'X', W11 and part of 'P', also a separate building in Maguire Street. By the end of the 70s, aside from the organised studio groups of [Space](#) and [Acme](#) Butlers Wharf became in the process, albeit ad hoc and piecemeal, the largest and most divergent community of artists in London, including painters, sculptors, printmakers photographers, dancers, performers and crafts people.



[Keir Smith and Simon Read in their shared studio space.](#)



[Richard Wilson in his studio.](#)

Each artist separately negotiated a short lease and rent, dealing in the process with the cavalier agent for Town and City, Mr Woods who, exploiting the laissez-faire attitude of the owners positively relished renting out useless warehouse space to a breathtaking variety of

To highlight just one artist from this period we can look at Stephen Cripps, pyrotechnic sculptor, who tragically died at the age of 29. He was a significant artist who perhaps personified the Butlers Wharf ideal.



[Studio with garden shed \(the living space\) at D6 Butlers Wharf, Shad Thames, London 1978.](#)

To quote from a monograph on his life published by Acme in 1992, "He salvaged objects from the scrapheap, redeeming them from a fate of erasure on the far edges of marginal history. During a mid-Seventies party organised by artist Anne Bean at the Wharf, for example, a small mechanical record player played as it crawled its insectile path through partygoers and performers such as Jayne County and the Electric Chairs, Michael Nyman, The Rich Kids (their first gig), Sid Vicious and Nancy Spungen, Bruce Lacey, Andrew Logan, Midge Ure and various members of The Jam, The Buzzcocks and Siouxsie and The Banshees.

Like the replicants in Ridley Scott's *Blade Runner*, these moving sculptures were energised with hybrid false memories of an imaginary past combined with the new and fantastic surge of finite life which Cripps gave them.

His studio - the central bay at

individuals.

It is important to remember that because the Town Planning use was designated as 'warehousing', technically all other uses contravened this, and through occupation for studio use both the company and the artists were colluding in turning a 'blind eye' to the law.

Hence for a very cheap rent, artists through the particular lease mechanism, which involved going to court, waived all rights of security of tenure, thus rendering themselves in the future liable for summary eviction should the company wish for any reason.

Most of the conversions were done at the artists' expense, installing electricity and plumbing themselves, and doing the decoration, glazing and partitioning. The early pioneers were successful in obtaining Arts Council studio conversion grants, which averaged about £400 per artist, not a princely sum but covering at the very least the material costs and any difficult technical items. In the early 70s the Arts Council in fact initiated programmes for supporting directly individual artists - there were major and minor bursaries and grants for assisting with artists living and working expenses, and studio capital costs were a major separate programme.

In all over 200,000 sq ft of fantastic space became exploited for artistic use. Many now famous artists worked there, and Butlers Wharf was equally famous, or notorious, during the Punk period in the late 70s, for some of the biggest and most riotous all-night parties in London.



Butlers Wharf studios

Butlers Wharf with its huge shutters opening out onto a priceless view of the Thames - was filled with arcane and abandoned scrap. These studios occupied abandoned warehouses and were rented on six month lets for the ostensible purpose of storage. Of all the artists who worked and surreptitiously lived in them, only Cripps came anywhere near to fulfilling the storage requirement. Along with a welding pit and a collection of Chinese, Burmese, and Indonesian gongs, there was a dentist's chair, a light made from a car manifold stuck into a swingwheel and studded with church and synagogue lights, two halves of a fighter plane cockpit and a garden shed in which Cripps slept, kept warm and watched *Apocalypse Now*, *Damn Yankees* and *South Pacific*.

David Toop *Stephen Cripps- pyrotechnic sculptor-a mongraph* published by Acme 1992 (1)



The Acme Gallery, 43 Shelton Street, Covent Garden, London after a Cripps performance. April/May 1978

Artists At Butlers Wharf - (a partial list)

Block A Sixth Floor

Peter Logan - Sculptor
Andrew Logan - Sculptor - Designed Biba
Roof Garden in Kensington Store (ex Derry & Toms
Department Store)
Diane Logan - Milliner
Derek Jarman - Filmmaker - Held The
Alternative Miss World at the Wharf- filmed part of
Sebastiane there - filmed the Sex Pistols there- Film
Jubilee had the Wharf as a background
The Mad Boat Builder

Fifth Floor

Stephen Buckley - Painter
Claire Smith And Liz Pannett - Painters

Fourth Floor

Simon Read - Photographer
Keir Smith - Sculptor
Mikey Cuddihy - Painter
Roger Kite - Painter
Gillian Ingham - Painter
Ian Tyson - Printmaker
Jo Llewellyn - Weaver

Block C

Mike Baumgarten Architect and Malcolm
Poynter Sculptor
Maurice Agis Inflatable Sculptor Alexis
Hunter - Painter

Block c

Ian Chapman Sculptor
Maggie Chapman
Denise Harris Painter
Robert Mcpartland Painter
Jimmy Marcus Filmmaker
Nigel Noyes Printmaker
Sue Jenkyn-Jones

Fourth floor

Ann Bean Performer
Chris Maynard Writer
Peter Clossick

Second Floor

David Lobb Bootmaker

Block W First Floor

Susan Mitchell Mixed Media
Emma Cameron Embroidery
Diana Evans Painter
Pamela Andrew
Trisha Austin Sculptor
Allan Parsons Painter
Jonathan Page Painter
Flora Husband Painter
Gail Sagman Painter
Diane Martin Painter
Francis Martin Painter
Maura Flatman Painter
Dennis Beere Sculptor
Nadia Ming Sculptor
Paul Bernson Painter
Manny Faigenbloom Carpenter
Alec Peever Letterer
Nigel O'Niell
Alan Lancaster
Susan Mitchell
Emma Cameron
Catherine Howard Fabric Printer
Kate Hardy Painter
Dale Walker Sculptor
Cynthia Wilde Painter
Jo Stockham - Painter

Second Floor

Brian Cleaver Mixed Media
Jane Curtis Painter
Kieth Bowler Painter
Rosamonde Hatton Painter
Eugene Palmer Painter

Third Floor

Richard Wilson Sculptor
Ingrid Kerma Painter
Charles Hustwick Painter
Francis Cottell Painter
Michael Richards
Hazel Langhurst Sculptor
Giles Thomas Painter
Peter Webster
George Blacklock Painter
Paul Burwell

Ground Floor

Faith Gillespie Weaver

Block D Sixth Floor

Michael Heindorff Painter
Stephen Cripps Pyrotechnic Sculptor

Fourth Floor

Rachel Clark Painter
David Fairbairn Painter
Daniel Hahne Painter
John Fuller Sculptor
Tony Kynaston Painter
Richard Lanham Performer
Di Livey Painter
Lynette Lombard Painter
Kitty Reford Painter
Mike Tebb Sculptor
Penny Mellor Painter

Third floor

Chris Dawson Sculptor
Alan Cox Printmaker

Michael Reagan
Alistair Brotchie

Fourth Floor

Maurice Aegis Inflateables
Peter Clossick
Bill Lewis

Block X Sixth Floor

X6 Dance Space 5 Artists - Fergus Early -
Jacky Lansley - Maedee Dupresa - Mary
Prestidge - Emily Claid

Third Floor "X3"

Bob Linney & Ken Meharg Printmakers

9a Maguire St

Sue Beere
Peter Mccarthy

PROPERTY BOOM, POTENTIAL SEEN - THE RIVERSIDE THAT WENT TO BLAZES

By 1979 the bubble just had to burst. As in New York and Chicago, the fate of redevelopment had already befallen [St Katharine Dock](#) opposite, which saw many buildings including the Space Studios vacated and demolished to make way for the Tower Hotel luxury yacht marina. Besides Space's main building, artists Robyn Denny and Dante Leonelli both had independent studios in the St Katharine wharves, and were also forced to move on in the process.

By late 70s presence of artists had contributed enormously to the rejuvenation of the area - so much so that the regeneration potential of cultural activities was appreciated by the local authority Southwark, who proceeded as a protective measure to designate the wharf as a conservation area.

Riverside warehouses to be preserved



Butlers Wharf was thus destined to be "discovered" all over again, to become 'yuppie' apartments and Italian restaurants.

At approximately 4 am at the end of August 1979 an electrical fault started a fire in the ground floor workshop of furniture makers. Most of A block was destroyed, and demolition of the affected areas commenced next day, still with some artists resident in the upper floors. This catastrophe suddenly alerted not only the occupants, but the owners and the fire authorities to the real risk of loss of life.

Southwark Council loathed the idea of another Katharine Dock - "like a zoo where you come to gawp at the jet set" as Ward councillor Peter Ward graphically put it at the time.

However, Southwark's intransigence did not put off restaurateur and developer Terence Conran, who together with Town and City director Basil Winham and the chief architect of the Louis de Soissons Partnership Max Gordon recognised Butlers Wharf huge potential and put forward a development proposal for a luxury marina, hotel, office and apartment blocks and a floating pub, espousing the idea that a more 'chic' class of tenant would pay much higher rents for the privilege of a view of the Thames.

A NEW conservation area is to be declared to the south of Tower Bridge and will include several old Victorian warehouses, a police station and magistrates' court.

Southwark Council's Housing and Planning Sub-committee decided on Tuesday to approve the new area which will complement a conservation area recently declared on the opposite bank of the River by Tower Hamlet Council.

The Tower Bridge Conservation Area will include But-

ler's Wharf, an area of large brick-built warehouses lining the river which Southwark considers to be of international importance.

The council hopes to find other uses for the warehouses such as small workshops, music rehearsal rooms and dancing studios. The cranes and other features of the dock would be kept and the riverside improved and floodlit.

Shad Thames, a narrow street crossed by several bridges linking tall warehouses on either side, is within the area.

Tower Bridge approach is also to be preserved along with the junction of Tower Bridge-rd. and Tooley-st., which is a mixture of municipal, commercial and residential buildings including Tower Hotel and Tower Bridge police station and magistrates court.

EXODUS OF ARTISTS - CHISENHALE

The GLC slapped dangerous structures notices on some of the warehouses, and demanded that the owners make the buildings safe, and bring them into line with current safety and fire regulations. For financial reasons, apart from anything else, this they were understandably reluctant to do, and because of the fundamentally 'illegal' nature of the artists' occupancy, Town and City took the opportunity to initiate what was to become the exodus of all the artists.
(3)

Those artists in A block immediately affected by the fire who did not make their own immediate alternative arrangements elsewhere, (to Suffolk in one case, or further eastwards in riverside warehouses) were offered on licence some space in another wharf at the rear of the estate.

Gradually many of the artists drifted away, but in late January 1980 all the remaining artists, now numbering about 60 from the original community of over 150, were sent notices to quit from Town and City, and formed the Butlers Wharf Association to harness resources and seek a solution to the pressing problem of eviction, and the need for new studio space. This group sought advice particularly from [Acme](#), [Space](#) and Artlaw, a specialist charitable body providing legal aid for artists.

One particular nucleus of ex-Butlers Wharf artists shrugged off this setback. Out of the ashes, (almost literally!) a group of 35 artists plus the 15 members of 'X6' Dance Space formed Art Place Trust to investigate new buildings, to establish a centre for artists combining individual workspace with a public area for exhibitions and performances.
(4)

Initially alighting on a disused printing works in Southwark, APT eventually struck a deal with the London Borough of Tower Hamlets to take a 25 year lease of a four storey 40,000 sq ft

The Council, whose leader Paul Beasley became one of Chisenhale's Trustee Directors (he also championed the major revamping of the Whitechapel Gallery together with the gallery director Nick Serota) gave them a four year rent-free period, the artists carried out all the repair and restoration work themselves, and by October moved from Butlers Wharf to their new home.

By September 1982 the studios were finished and fully occupied, and the main gallery space on the ground floor was in operation.
(5)



[Chisenhale Studios](#)

Chisenhale now comprises workspace provision to 40 artists with public access through their education programme to the studios, the Chisenhale Gallery, a large publicly funded space, and Chisenhale Dance Space, a resource for experimentation, research and training in a wide range of dance forms. It is currently working with the local Council to secure its long-term future.



former veneer factory, the Chisenhale Works, besides Ducketts Canal in Old Ford.

Chisenhale Studios

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