

Tenants call on charity owners of artists studios to save them from closure

Local artists based in West Park Place artists' studios in Dalry, Edinburgh are coordinating with others in Scotland in a bid to save their studio spaces from closure.

The 'Save Our Studios' campaign began in Edinburgh in May and originally focused on the studios located in two industrial buildings on West Park Place in Dalry. The studios are home to over 50 artists and small creative businesses.

The campaign has now grown to encompass additional studios threatened with closure and address other management issues uncovered at studios across the nation.

The studios are all run by charity Workshop and Artists Studio Provision (Scotland) (WASPS), who either own or lease the buildings in question. WASPS is the largest operator of artists' studio spaces in Scotland, with studio spaces in Edinburgh, Glasgow, Aberdeen, Dundee, Inverness and beyond.

A group representing artists at several Scottish studios this week launched a national grassroots campaign due to what they claim are "livelihoods being lost... as many artists across Scotland are being priced out or forced out of their studios by WASPS."

The campaign seeks to save studios from closure and protect

the rights of working artists. It features five key demands addressed to the board of charity WASPS, namely to: stop the sell offs of studio buildings, cap rents at inflation levels, scrap electricity surcharges added to studio fees, provide transparency related to rents and charges and include artist representatives within the organisation's governance structure.

Visual and public artist Yvonne Weighand Lyle is based in the West Park Place Artists' Studios in Dalry. She explained the artists' frustrations and said: "WASPS have been generating thousands of pounds from our studio fees every month for decades. Yet the buildings are crumbling, and do not even have basic amenities such as accessible toilets. Several artists have been temporarily evicted from their studios due to structural defects in the building. WASPS have been responsible for maintaining these buildings for the last 28 years. What on earth have they been doing with all that profit?"

Gorgie Collective Chair Katriona Gillespie leads a community-embedded artists' collective based in Gorgie-Dalry. She said: "We knew things were in bad shape at West Park Place in terms of the threatened closure. We have now learned that other artists are reporting a pattern of mismanagement at studios across Scotland.

"There are concerns in several cities about the affordability of rents and surcharges, building maintenance issues, threatened closures and an ongoing lack of transparency, which are combining to create a very stressful environment for artists trying to eke out a living at a really difficult time. We are acting collectively to protect the rights and practices of Scottish artists."

Cllr Ross McKenzie, Independent Councillor for Sighthill-Gorgie, strongly supports the artists' campaign. He said: "I am alarmed by reports from my constituents about how they have

been treated as WASPs tenants and worry that this is indicative of a wider problem of gentrification, with profiteering and the interests of property developers put above the needs of local communities.

“It is astonishing that current building owners WASPS, having bought the West Park Place site for £1 from Edinburgh Council just two years ago, now feel entitled to take all that accumulated wealth away from the tenant-artists at West Park Place, and from our under-resourced artists community here in Gorgie-Dalry.

“I know that unscrupulous property developers have long seen our area as a place to make easy money, but it is shocking to see such attempted asset-stripping by a national charity that supposedly supports artists.”

A spokesperson for WASPS said: “It is incorrect to suggest that Wasps is selling off buildings and profiteering from increased charges. Wasps is a registered charity and not-for-profit organisation, and all income generated is reinvested in the maintenance and operation of the network.

“Wasps undertook more thorough surveys of West Park Place on conclusion of the purchase and found that the costs to bring the building up to standard are prohibitive. As a charity Wasps has to ensure that each building pays for itself through rental income, and if we were to continue with West Park Place rents would have to be increased to unaffordable levels. This is why Wasps has been seeking alternative accommodation for our tenants, not far from West Park Place. An identified alternative will be able to provide working accommodation for our tenants at West Park Place and Albion Road studios, the latter property recently changing ownership and Wasps’ lease ending. Furthermore, Wasps is committed to reinvesting any proceeds into alternative studio provision within the city.

“We understand the emotional connection our tenants have with

their buildings, and we have undertaken a great deal of work to make West Park Place compliant in the short term, but in the long term it is not feasible to invest in a property that has come to the end of its working life. We are in constant communication with our tenants and are in the process of inviting a representative group to visit the new building in due course. We thank our tenants for their patience thus far and appreciate their feedback on what is a challenging but necessary transition.”



