

Artist's quarters

ART DISTRICTS London and New York are the two powerhouses of the international art world, supporting galleries, auction houses, museums and, of course, artists. The areas where the latter congregate quickly gain a reputation for style, innovation and creativity – prompting the arrival of dealers and property developers. Based in London and New York respectively, **Ben Luke** and **Kathryn Tully** compare how the artists' areas in the two cities have changed over time



LONDON

It is astonishing that until 2000, when Tate Modern opened, London lacked a national museum of modern art. Instead, 20th-century art was housed alongside British art in the Tate Gallery, now Tate Britain, on Millbank. When it arrived, Tate Modern shone as a beacon for London's newfound conviction in the kind of art that had long been the object of ridicule and derision.

Tate's success is just the most visible manifestation of this phenomenon. Across the city, public venues present world-class exhibitions of new art, while major commercial spaces now rival them in the scale and ambition of their shows, and the crowds they attract. Meanwhile, since its founding in 2003, the Frieze Art Fair has become one of the world's top art fairs.

All this is the result of a perfect storm of events and circumstances around 20 years ago, combining the prominence of ambitious curators like Tate's Nicholas Serota in public institutions; the presence of radical conceptual artists at art colleges; Charles Saatchi's eye for controversial art; and the revitalisation of the Turner Prize by Tate and Channel 4.

But at the heart of it were the artists themselves, and the area of London that housed them. In 1988, Damien Hirst staged *Freeze*, an exhibition of fellow Goldsmiths students, in a disused Docklands building. Many of those students, like Sarah Lucas and Michael Landy, and like-minded artists of the same generation like Tracey Emin and Gillian Wearing, became known as the Young British Artists

(YBAs), and gathered in a then unlikely crucible for cultural renaissance – the East End districts of Shoreditch and Hoxton.

In *Lucky Kunst*, his memoir of the YBA era, Gregor Muir, now director of the contemporary gallery Hauser and Wirth, remembers arriving as a penniless critic in a Shoreditch suffering from the economic inequalities of the Margaret Thatcher era. "People forget this, but it was cold, it was horrible, there were rats, it was disgusting. You got lost there very quickly because there wasn't infrastructure like in other areas of London. It literally had been abandoned," Muir told me.

Often without access to basic amenities, artists squatted and created studios within abandoned warehouses and industrial units, whose scale was crucial. "For artists, it was about space for production and places to exhibit their work, and that really became vital."

Among the now seminal events of the early nineties was *Fete Worse Than Death* in the largely derelict Hoxton Square. Organised by the late Joshua Compston, it featured anarchic stalls and performances by artists including Hirst and Emin and Lucas. "That early scene was a part one, as it were, which saw much more hardened, more squat-like activities on the part of artists, who were very efficient at taking over spaces come rain or shine," Muir says. "Then you had a much more trendy culture that followed from about the mid-1990s on, where Shoreditch would appear on the cover of *Time Out*, so it became like downtown New York." It was then

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that a more official art scene began to develop. "It became at that point far more noted for galleries and a deepening picture that would extend all the way down to Cambridge Heath Road and Vyner Street [in neighbouring Bethnal Green], which took up a lot of the people who had been pushed out by developers."

Shoreditch remains an art centre today, but it lacks the creative buzz it once had – essentially because only the most successful artists of the early nineties were able to remain living and working there. The East End is still the dominant zone for London's artists but they are now more widely distributed.

"It's only after you've seen something like a Shoreditch or a Hoxton that you learn what the process has been so you can do it slightly differently next time," says Munira Mirza, Advisor for Arts and Culture to London Mayor Boris Johnson, who helps define culture's presence within regeneration projects in London. "It is important to try to strike a balance between ensuring

that the character of the place and the things that made it successful as an area of regeneration can remain in some form, but without stultifying it and trying to keep it as a museum."

Mirza is particularly focused on the area around the 2012 Olympic Park. "Hackney Wick has the largest concentration of artists anywhere in Europe. We've been working with the LDA (London Development Agency), on cultural planning for that area, which recognises that lots of artists choose to live there, with low-cost housing and studio space. What we're exploring is whether we could purchase a building, and involve artists and cultural organisations so that they remain a feature of that area as it grows and develops."

She is conducting a review of studio space in London in response to concerns that there may not be enough provision, particularly for young artists, in the wake of the Olympic developments.

"London is a place of change and growth," she says. "We can't stop it from growing – it wouldn't be realistic, or desirable, actually. But we do recognise that artists are at the forefront of improving an area, unless they get priced out quite quickly. And whilst a lot of artists will be comfortable about moving and being nomadic, keeping them there is valuable for the area."

Such a conviction reflects those nineties artists' achievement: they helped change the fabric of an entire swathe of London, but also contemporary art's value in urban society as a whole.

[New York's] bubbling, vibrant community of artists ... will always find ways of owning and defining its urban terrain



Opposite:
Live East, Die Young
graffiti art in London

Below left:
Cops and robbers style
graffiti on wall in Lower
Eastside Manhattan

Below right:
Eleven Spring Street in New
York's Nolita district, which
was regularly decorated by
street artists

NEW YORK

To speak of how New York's art communities have shaped the city seems somehow disingenuous when all of its five boroughs are teeming with world-class museums, galleries, auction houses and art fairs. Indeed, finding a district that has not been profoundly influenced by artistic endeavour is a stretch. New York has always inspired great artists and attracted great art, which has sustained its reputation as an art capital of the world.

Still, artists have always colonised certain New York neighbourhoods and made them their own, and they in turn have sucked in many more of their contemporaries. Chinese artist and activist Ai Weiwei recently described the creative energy of Manhattan's East Village, where he spent 12 years in the eighties and early nineties living in a basement apartment, surrounded by fellow artists. To him, the East Village felt "like a volcano, with smoke always billowing out of the top."

The rapid gentrification of Manhattan's SoHo and Greenwich Village, which from the 1960s onwards, forced resident artists to move to cheaper neighbourhoods such as Manhattan's East Village, its Lower East Side and Brooklyn's Williamsburg, is well known. Today, hedge fund managers, not artists, inhabit SoHo's famous lofts, while just across the East River in Williamsburg, over 30 galleries show a dynamic roster of local and international artists.

But these neighbourhoods, once wild, new frontiers on the artistic fringe, are also being taken over by

the art establishment. Artists started moving into the Lower East Side, a poor immigrant neighbourhood, in the 1970s and small community galleries began springing up in the district's dilapidated tenement buildings. Today, along with swank restaurants, bars and boutiques, the area is home to around 40 galleries, including many tiny spaces featuring emerging artists. It once was a world apart from the scene in Chelsea just a little further uptown, where most of the cavernous, high-gloss galleries belonging to the city's elite dealers that show world renowned artists can be found.

However, that has been changing fast, particularly since the New Museum focusing on contemporary art opened on the Bowery in 2007. It was the first new art museum to be built downtown, on a street once famous for its homeless shelters and flop houses. It became both an endorsement of the vitality of the Lower East Side's contemporary art movement and a highly visible sign of the sort of rapid gentrification and real estate development that could easily suffocate it. The banner demanding, "Where have all the junkies gone?" that hung outside the Bowery offices of the *Village Voice* at the time, said it all.

Now Chelsea galleries are moving to the Lower East Side and bringing their superstar artists with them. Sperone Westwater Gallery, the latest to take the plunge, moved just one block north of the New Museum in September. This brand new Norman Foster-designed building, complete with a gallery space that slowly moves



up and down between the top four exhibition floors, is not your average Lower East Side gallery. And Bruce Nauman, whose new solo exhibition *For Children/For Beginners* is currently on show there, is not your average Lower East Side artist – he represented the US at the 2009 Venice Biennale and won the *Lion d'Or* for best national participation.

Still, the rapid pace of redevelopment that has always characterized this city has never managed to stunt the energy of New York's art community, its ability to adopt new places, or to repurpose existing ones. As this article went to press, a new mural was going up on a large wall on the corner of

Houston Street and the Bowery. The wall in question formally housed a Shepard Fairey mural, which the artist, who shot to fame after creating Barack Obama's iconic presidential campaign posters, only completed earlier this year. In New York's urban landscape, even famous art is continuously replaceable.

And recently, New Yorkers have been frantically trying to figure out the location of the *Underbelly Project*, an astonishing guerrilla underground art exhibition in one of the city's abandoned subway stations. It features works by 103 street artists from around the world, who were secretly escorted into the station for one

night each to adorn its walls.

The organizers showed the space to a few journalists at the end of October, but as the project is illegal, this was done on the condition that the organizers' names, the location of the station, or even how they got in were not disclosed. The entrance has since been blocked up again, to create what the organizers describe as "an elusive private treasure of contemporary art".

The project was a clear snub to New York's art world establishment, but also a thrilling example of how the city's bubbling, vibrant community of artists that Ai Weiwei so admired will always find ways of owning and defining its urban terrain.