

## Richard Morrison: The mayor must stop London's artists moving to cheap-rent Berlin

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Did they really shoot people for tax evasion? This dark but delicious question crossed my mind in a dark but delicious place: the vaults below Somerset House in London. For more than 150 years until 2013 they were occupied by what was the Inland Revenue. I was expecting rows of ink-stained desks, but at the end of one corridor there's a door marked "Rifle Range". And yes, behind that door was where Her Majesty's tax inspectors honed their shooting skills. I would love to know whose effigies they used as targets.

If you think that sounds incongruous, you will be even more surprised by what's now inside. The rifle range is occupied by a post-punk musician called Julie Campbell, who trades under the stage name of LoneLady. It's surely a vast improvement on her previous studio space — a rat-infested warehouse in the grim shadow of Strangeways Prison in Manchester.

LoneLady is actually far from a lone lady. She is one of more than 100 musicians, artists, designers and makers renting studio space on the lower floors of Somerset House for as little as £100 a month, a small fraction of commercial West End rents. This week Somerset House announced 25 more lucky inhabitants. When the transformation of all the vacated tax offices is complete, there could be up to 300 arty types beavering away below the majestic 18th-century buildings. And not just below the buildings. The vaults also extend under Waterloo Bridge, and those atmospheric spaces are being rented too.

This subterranean collective of creatives — who can exchange ideas in a common room that still contains the Inland Revenue’s billiards table — is nothing if not eclectic. In one enclave I found Anna Meredith, a leading young composer, putting the finishing touches to her music for an imminent US tour. Along the corridor someone is weaving textiles. There are “experimental architects”, fashion designers and an artist who specialises in “turning DNA into tangible objects” (silly me, I thought sex did that). And there’s a whole community of craftspeople called Makerversity, whose Dickensian warren is ram-packed, as Jeremy Corbyn would say, with machines.

It’s great that Somerset House, with its links to Inigo Jones, Canaletto and the Royal Academy, should be restored to its 18th-century use as a hub of artistic talent, with the Courtauld Institute in its main buildings, the great courtyard regularly used for concerts (as well as the winter ice rink), and now this basement army of talents who have already given the venue’s exhibition programme an edgier feel. It explains why Somerset House’s visitor figures have soared to 3.2 million a year.

There is, though, an even more important reason to celebrate this initiative. It comes at a time of real danger. Artists in London have traditionally been very canny about finding disused industrial buildings to use as work-spaces. Increasingly, however, such spaces are being snapped up by developers for conversion or demolition. Nothing wrong with that, when London is so chronically short of housing, but an unfortunate by-product is that (according to the Greater London Authority) 3,500 artists will lose their places of work between 2016 and 2019.

Somerset House is not the only organisation trying to help. For more than 20 years the excellent Bow Arts charity has been creating studio space across east and south London, sometimes working with developers who want to give their housing estates a trendy ambience. Bow Arts now has 500 artists in its studios, and its two websites ([londonsartistquarter.org](http://londonsartistquarter.org) and [artiststudiofinder.org](http://artiststudiofinder.org)) are essential tools for any graduate artist or designer who wants to work in the capital.

Yet even these admirable projects can’t cater for all the thousands looking for studio space. Last October the mayor of London, Sadiq Khan, floated the idea of a “creative land trust” — based on a scheme in

San Francisco — that would help to buy buildings and turn them into studios. We were promised that a task force would make recommendations by the end of 2016. There has been none yet.

Hmm. The mayor needs to kick some butt, because the need is urgent. For the past 30 years, going back to the rumbustious heyday of Damien Hirst and Tracey Emin, London has been the most exciting place for anyone interested in the flux of avant-garde art and design. That scene is an integral part of the mix that makes London so attractive a city in which to live, work and recruit the brightest minds — and hence a big factor for global corporations deciding where to locate their headquarters.

All that could change. Berlin, with its cheaper rents and reborn cultural vitality, is becoming the heimat of choice for many young musicians, writers, designers, architects and artists. Brexit has made many others question whether London will become an isolated backwater — as dull and second-rate as it was in the 1950s. Campaigning for artists to be given cheap studio space isn't special pleading. It's about looking after the heart and soul of the world's greatest city.

Pop has no Mass appeal

Hurrah for the Pope! Those are four words I never thought I would type, but my heart leapt this week when Pope Francis lambasted music in many Catholic churches as “mediocre, superficial and banal”. I'd go further. There are few experiences more likely to drive me to atheism than attending High Mass in some great Italian or French cathedral, replete with the most wonderful art and architecture, and finding the musical content comprising an out-of-tune priest crooning some infantile 1960s pop hymn into a microphone.

Happily, if a trifle ironically, I can assure the Holy Father that the magnificent repository of Catholic Masses and motets written by Palestrina, Lassus, Tallis, Haydn, Mozart, Bruckner, Monteverdi and their like is alive and well — and performed every week in the cathedrals of an obscure breakaway sect called the Church of England. Thank God for Henry VIII, as they probably don't say in the Vatican.