

ARTS OR STORAGE

**A collaboration
between Neal
Campbell and Jane
Morrow, surveying
artists' working
conditions in Belfast.**

Vault Artist Studios, Marlborough House, BT1 3GG

7- 11 August 2025

The title of this exhibition - the last to be held in Vault's Marlborough House Gallery before the organisation is forced to move once again - is taken from an estate agent's brochure, which boasted of space that would be 'suitable for arts or storage purposes'.

In early 2025, then-Vault General Manager Neal Campbell viewed that building, one of many, as a potential future studio location. The implication of the brochure's heading - that artists and/or/as art workers were worthy only of space deemed suitable for storage by other prospective tenants - stung. Indeed, the building in question had previously been occupied by another studio organisation from 2018-2019, when they were displaced by would-be developers, but has not been occupied or renovated since. Chunks of the roof lie on the third floor.

The project Arts or Storage is a visual and written survey of the conditions that artists in Belfast work in, building on the previous, independent work that Neal and I have both undertaken in documenting, managing, curating and researching artists' workspaces.

For some years, Neal has been crossing the streams in his day job and photography practice: capturing through a series of vignettes the shifting spaces that arts organisations are forced to adopt and adapt to. But with Vault and five other organisations poised to relocate before the end of 2025, several others on month-to-month contracts, and one hallowed entity allowed to exist in situ all the way up to December 2026, the time to document these premises is now. The next ones may be worse.

Alongside the visual documentation, our project has taken in tours of buildings in the city and interviews with its artists. Following a call-out on social media, appealing to those who are working in unacceptable conditions, many artists expressed concern about being perceived as complaining about the spaces that arts organisations and their administrators can provide.

For Neal and I, having occupied, and continuing to occupy roles with those responsibilities, our project is not designed to implicate anybody – these conditions are bigger (and badder) than all of us. None of this is about blame, at least not at departmental levels that any of us can properly affect. Though it's not for a lack of trying. Maybe the politicians are right, and the arts don't speak the language of lobbying well enough. Maybe we don't speak the language of property law well enough.

If one were feeling both whimsical and thorough (who in the arts has the time or headspace for either; we exist in states of hurry and fury), there would probably be enough here for an A-Z: access (widespread lack thereof); bakeries (a recipe for disaster as neighbours, given the regularity with which they go on fire); buckets (positioned under leaks); elite (the arts: elite for whom exactly? Because we're overdrawn on our overdrafts); faeces (human, on both the front shutters and on the roof); funerals ('we loved it here and we'll really miss it, despite its faults'); furry walls (see 'mould' below); hypervigilance (based on previous experience of fire ripping through your building, destroying everything that you have built in terms of programme and operations); leaks (in both very obvious and very mysterious places of both very obvious and very mysterious origin); lights (broken or non-existent but definitely un-fixed); mushrooms (growing on windowsills, but even they died under the circumstances); mould, Mould, MOULD (literally everywhere); melted sockets; moving costs (unexpected and unallocated); needles (discarded); no desk ('for me, because an artist needs it and they're paying for it'); nine (month leases, after which tenants get rights, which are simply NOT ALLOWED); novelty (wearing off - 'a bit like camping, but in my workplace'); one solitary mouse poo (remaining in a cutlery drawer, following a visit from pest control); post-apocalyptic scenes (from our studio windows); pigeons (throughout); radiators (lots of); rents (escalating); reserves (depleted); responsibilities (unclear, but definitely not the landlord's, yeah?); rot (dry, and throughout); roofs (collapsed, covered in faeces (see 'faeces', above)); regeneration (proposed); sewage (leaking, thankfully from another part of the building); smells ('I think something might have died in here'); trees (forcing their way through gaps in windows); toilets (unspeakable, throughout); urine (on our doorsteps); value (public aka how many people or complex social problems did we fix this quarter?); water (drinking - unavailable); window frames (crumbling); winds (high, and threatening to rip through our studio windows destroying everything we've been working on); wires (live (?), and sticking out of places they shouldn't be); wrecking balls ('we have two years before it's flattened'). We've heard and documented them all.

The severity of these issues, and the acuteness of the timing for some 250+ artists in our city, creates an opportunity to add portraits of these buildings to organisations' advocacy efforts. Never waste a good crisis, eh? We've tried telling, now for the showing. The abject beauty of these images though... that endures. Lucky that we're in the business of aesthetic appreciation. We manage expectations by telling prospective delegations of peers that our buildings are the worst things about our organisations.

We joke about our 'roof gardens'; and our rear aspects being used in photoshoots for fashion spreads that require something... *derelict*. The quotes that accompanied our studio visits are shocking. Thank god we're funny. It's an established intergenerational trauma response to laugh through the horrors of this place. But it's also poignant that, despite all of this, we are already grieving these spaces where we've made our work and our livelihoods and our friends and communities.

What wouldn't make for good photographs are the hastily reworked spreadsheets, pulling budget lines from artists' and community projects to cover removal and renovation costs. What cannot be made visual is the acute and enduring anxiety that this level of precarity creates. The bone-chilling cold, the palpitations, the sleepless nights and the widespread alcohol dependency. The three-times-higher-levels-of-mental-ill-health-amongst-artists-than-the-general-population statistics. The need to JUST GET OUT OF HERE, to see inspiring exhibitions or best practice anythings elsewhere, that remind us why we care at all, and why we put everything into it, sacrificing our already paltry savings if we ever even had them, as well as our relationships with others and with ourselves.

But what of storage? It's important to consider here too (it's in the title). Somewhere that you consign things that are nice to have, but you maybe don't need right now. I mean... you simply couldn't part with them, but you'll come back to them later, once you've sorted out all of the more immediate things, right? You'll definitely come back to them. Right?

Soon, these spaces will become just memories, and - without urgent, profound reassessment and radical corrective measures - the entire arts infrastructure with them.

Jane Morrow, July 2025

About Neal:

Neal Campbell is a photographer with a studio in Vault's Shankill Mission building. He is co-founder and former chair of Belfast Tool Library, and has recently taken up the position of Cultural Development Manager at EastSide Arts, following eight years working with Vault. From Vault's first premises in the Bank building, to Tower Street, Marlborough House, Shankill Mission and 39 Corporation Street, Neal led on the search for premises and in making those premises comfortable, collegiate and habitable for Vault's 100+ members, growing the organisation into the largest provider of affordable studios in Northern Ireland.

About Jane:

Jane Morrow is a visual art curator, writer, researcher, educator and advocate. Amongst several other jobs, she is Co-Director and Strategic Vision & Development Curator of PS². Her practice-led PhD (Ulster University, 2024) focused on the precarity of artists' labour and workspaces in Belfast. Jane is currently supporting numerous artists from across the UK and island of Ireland through ongoing mentorship. She is also the Secretary of the International Art Critics Association (Ireland).

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