

## **Temporary art spaces: A conceptual framework**

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## **Abstract**

This chapter offers a conceptual framework to explicate the current configurations of temporary art spaces in the United Kingdom (UK), and how they seek to support the interests of artists as self-employed individuals. The chapter begins with a review of the literature on artists' (temporary) spaces. Next, we present a conceptual framework of the dimensions of temporary art spaces and explore how they support or hinder entrepreneurs in the cultural and creative industries to create and sustain their businesses and their wellbeing. The framework questions notions of temporary art space design that are often taken for granted by putting the most fundamental facets of the space (time and use) under a microscope. It can be used as a basis for future research into temporary art spaces and as a way to design better spaces that prioritise artists and their ways of working.

## **Introduction**

Thirty-two percent of the creative industries workforce is self-employed (DCMS, 2021), thus acting on their own account and risk as entrepreneurs (Gorgievski & Stephan, 2016). Self-employed artists are finding it increasingly difficult to access affordable, convenient, and suitable workspaces that meet their needs and allow them to produce work in their artistic practice. At the same time, the UK high street is in decline with shops closing at an alarming rate and empty commercial buildings becoming a recognisable feature in town and city centres (Butler, 2021). Temporary art spaces offer a solution to both problems by filling empty spaces which are between commercial tenants, often at little to no cost to the artist. The building owner can gain from the security and economic benefit of having a space temporarily filled, while localities benefit from a sense of vibrancy and additional cultural value. The benefits of temporary art spaces are well documented and endorsed by policy makers and arts organisations (Bolsetti & Colthorpe, 2018).

However, what remains problematic is both the compensatory nature of temporary spaces, which neglects lasting and permanent solutions to the problems that artists face, and the jilted power dynamics, which favour landlords and developers above the artist. Little academic attention has been devoted to supporting artists who occupy temporary art spaces and how such support may differ based on the configurations of the spaces on offer. Similarly, the academic literature does not indicate whether temporary spaces benefit or limit artists based on the arrangements of the space. Temporary spaces are diverse and vary based on time and different types of artistic practice, yet these nuances in their configurations and diversity are often neglected. Consequently, our understanding of how

temporary art spaces help or hinder artists to develop and sustain their businesses and their wellbeing is limited. This chapter makes contributions to the emerging study of temporary art spaces by providing a framework through which to understand the range of configurations across two essential dimensions: time and usage, and their potential impact on artists. We will begin with an overview of artist spaces and temporary art spaces, exploring why these spaces are important and examining their limitations. We then present our conceptual framework for understanding temporary art spaces and how they can help or hinder artists' work and wellbeing, providing examples from arts organisations in the North of England.

### **What are artist spaces?**

Artists inhabit different types of physical spaces for the purpose of inspiring, creating and presenting the product(s) of their artistic practice. These spaces look like shared or private studios, galleries within museums or art spaces, public places, such as murals on the side of buildings or sculptures in parks, and sometimes the artists' own home. Places of presenting artwork can be separate to places where work is created, but now often these places are linked. Artists use studio spaces as places to research, experiment, create and present their work. They use them to teach new skills by hosting workshops and classes, and to learn new skills from other artists with whom they might share a space. Studio spaces can become gallery spaces, and host opening parties and events.

Historically the artist studio has been afforded the position of the "unique space of production", (Buren & Repensek, 1972, p.51), which is as important to the constitution of art as both the materials that compose it and the gallery which, traditionally, presents it. It is a secure, safe and enclosed place where artists have the freedom and space to experiment and create (Tuan, 1977), where ideas begin, and things are born. Within studio set-ups, artists can share ideas and create a sense of community and kinship with fellow artists, especially as they operate in a role that can be isolating and lonely (Bain, 2005; Bain, 2004). Beyond idea and relationship building, the studio also becomes a marker of identity for the artist as a physical place that has an intimate relationship with their work and is intertwined with their practice (Bain, 2004; Kelly, 1974; Skrapits, 2000; Zakin, 1978). One distinct way this happens is through recognising the art studio is more than a place of production, but an archive for the artists' past and a catalyst for their future trajectory (Sjoholm, 2014).

### **What are temporary art spaces?**

The need for and use of temporary spaces is intertwined with the changed position of artists in society. Artists of the past held esteemed positions through links to academies, where they were provided with grand studio spaces (Bain, 2005). As artists' position in society began to shift to that of outsiders or struggling bohemians, so too did their studios shift towards lofts in forgotten areas of town (Bain, 2005). Now, as rent costs rise and places such as London that have been seen as cultural centres lose their fringe areas through gentrification and commercialisation (Bolsetti & Colthorpe, 2018), artists have immense difficulty finding suitable space for their work. Artists face accessibility issues to permanent studio spaces by either being priced out by high rents, or simply living in an area without access to viable studio spaces. Working from home is often not a suitable working environment because it does not meet the space requirements or equipment needs conducive to experimental work.

In this context, spaces that are temporarily used by individuals or collectives to inspire, create and present the product(s) of their artistic practice compensate for the limited accessibility to permanent spaces. Temporary spaces have existed in some form across the UK for around fifteen years (Brooks et al., 2021), although this is an estimate as unreliable data and fragmented reporting by organisations makes it difficult to quantify. Temporary art spaces are not just a UK phenomenon with well-established schemes in European cultural centres, like Berlin (Colomb, 2012) and Ghent (City of Ghent, 2018). While temporary spaces are not a new phenomenon, they are increasingly used as a mechanism to support artists and their practice in the UK. Despite this, they are academically under-researched, with existing literature on artist spaces focussing solely on the benefits they provide for neighbouring communities (Florida, 2012) or the negative associations with gentrification of neighbourhoods (Grodach et al., 2014).

We suggest that artists can benefit from temporary art spaces in several ways: by assisting in the production of work, through facilitating experimentation and the development of their personal practice, by creating a sense of community and avoiding loneliness, and by supporting artists in remaining as authentic public actors.

Temporary art spaces are new civic spaces that allow for affordable experimentation and learning. For example, Empty Shop CIC runs TESTT (The Empty Shop Think Tank), a large artist studio and events space above the bus station in Durham city centre, designed

as a place where Empty Shop can run pilots relating to vacant properties. TESTT, as the acronym suggests, is a place for new and experimental ideas to be tested before some are taken forward and others abandoned. Hudson & Donkin (2019) suggest that the temporary nature of the space is the very thing that allows it to be “a new civic space, a new vista of utopia which tests out art and models of social and aesthetic forms (some of which are taken forwards, some abandoned)” (p.194). This type of space provides an environment where risks can easily be taken with no repercussions from any potential failures (Carnegie & Drencheva, 2019).

When temporary art spaces are used to highlight social issues, allowing artists to be authentic and to promote issues important to them and their identity, they can also begin to build links to local communities. In 2014 architecture social enterprise Studio Polpo engaged in a programme of performances in an empty space in Sheffield titled OPERA (Open Public Experimental Residential Activity). During these performances, co-producers from the public were invited to spend a night in the space, which had been set up as a residential property, and discuss alternative ways of living and “further collective action in vacant buildings” (Orlek et al., 2014, p. 705). In this way the temporary space was used to raise awareness and encourage conversation around issues of housing and empty spaces in town and city centres, and to build links between the artists occupying the space and the local community.

### **What are the limitations of temporary art spaces?**

The multiple uses and benefits of temporary spaces are clear, however, there remain several drawbacks which could impact on artists and make the programmes across the UK difficult to implement and maintain. While temporary spaces allow artists to take risks and experiment, their unstable and precarious nature can also create anxieties around the uncertainty of the space, which can be destabilising for artists. Among artists, there are high levels of poor mental health, which may be a pre-disposed condition, or the result of isolating working environments (Moore, 2014). It has also been suggested that the “increasingly temporary arrangements and high uncertainty” of temporary spaces could have further detrimental effects on the mental health and wellbeing of artists (Carnegie & Drencheva, 2019, p. 13). Artists also experience feelings of loneliness from periods of isolation and a tendency towards alienation (Bain, 2005; Bridgstock, 2005) which can be countered through

fostering a sense of community. But by creating a community based around a temporary space there is risk of destabilising, displacing and ultimately destroying the carefully crafted community dynamic when the space is no longer in use, all of which extracts personal time, money and energy from the individual artists working there (Brooks et al., 2021), affecting their future resilience.

Finally, the power dynamic of temporary art spaces is rarely in favour of the individual artist or art collective (Harris, 2020). Building owners can remove artists from the premises at their behest, despite any remaining works in progress or events that are outstanding, thus potentially damaging artists' wellbeing and work.

In the next section we will introduce and explore a conceptual framework through which to understand past, current and future configurations of temporary art spaces.

### **Temporary art spaces: a conceptual framework**

What is currently missing in the academic literature on temporary spaces is when artists in these types of spaces experience specific benefits or limitations based on the arrangements of the space. We offer a framework of configuration of temporary spaces based on two dimensions: openness and time in operation and discuss how these dimensions can help or hinder artists' work and wellbeing (see Figure 1). Openness refers to the extent to which the space is open to the public versus its use as a closed and private studio space for the occupying artists. Time in operation refers to the amount of time that the space is occupied by artists. Based on our framework, we identify four ideal types of temporary spaces: short-term open, short-term closed, long-term open, and long-term closed. In this section, we elaborate on each one of the dimensions and provide examples with temporary art spaces operating in the last ten years in the North of England, which have been facilitated by different organisations<sup>1</sup>.

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<sup>1</sup> The examples given are based on information that is publicly available, compiled by the authors through news articles, the organisations' websites and through the authors' personal experiences within certain spaces. It is possible that the information that is publicly available does not fully reflect the finer nuances, details and uses of the space which may not have been documented. This could be due to the nature of temporary space work within arts organisations which often results in a large amount of work taking place without being fully documented, recorded or archived by the organisation. This is not an oversight but rather speaks to the difficulties and restrictions around the amount of time and funding that the organisation is able to dedicate to recording the spaces as opposed to delivering the temporary art space offering to the artists it serves. While the temporality of the spaces is set, how open or closed a space is has been reviewed qualitatively using information available online and is therefore subjective, using the authors' interpretation of the information publicly available. It is also worth noting that the spaces' positions in the framework is flexible, and those spaces that are still open may change their position after the time of writing.

## **Open and closed space**

Despite the many variations in the materiality of spaces, a common dimension is the degree of openness of the space. Open spaces are those which regularly open to the public for events, exhibitions, performances, or workshops. They are spaces in which artists work on their practice but also regularly facilitate wider participation from visitors, contributing to the important footfall numbers that are factored into council reports and funding bids. They do not need to be entirely open to the public during artist working hours, but opportunities for the public to attend the space make up most of the time that artists spend there.

An example of an open temporary art spaces that operated almost entirely based on public exhibition, events or workshops is East Street Arts' (ESA) Art Hostel as a thirty-four bed, backpacker style hostel in the heart of the Leeds City Centre, where each room was designed by individual artists or art collectives. While it functioned as a commercial, hospitality space, it also acted as an exhibition for the commissioned rooms and offered event and exhibition space in the basement and lobby/kitchen area. The Art Hostel is no longer in its original location on the historic Leeds Street, Kirkgate, but its arrangement was so successful, hosting around 10,000 guests over 2 and a half years, that it was moved in 2022 to a larger, permanent home. The success of pop-up spaces that are open to the public often results in their demise, as the increased interest in a building or area that is generated by the pop-up lures developers and prospective commercial buyers (Harris, 2020). An open space means that there will likely be more communication and dialogue between artists' and local communities, limiting loneliness and providing outside exposure of their work, potentially broadening future opportunities to create within a locality. Open spaces may also limit opportunity for experimentation as any art (production) must be neat, safe and fit for the purpose of the public entering the building.

Closed, private spaces are those in which the main activity is undertaken by artists either in isolation by themselves or with one another, without participation or visitation from the public. The main way that closed spaces are utilised are through artists' private studios which often operate in temporary spaces in a similar way to their traditional orientation in more permanent studios. In closed spaces, artists are often in a room of their own, or occupy a desk in a shared and open plan space where there is still opportunity to collaborate and work together with other artists, and exhibitions or events with the public still happen but are not part of the main programming or activity which takes place in the space.

While a temporary art space may spend much of its life closed to the public, it is unusual to find one which operates almost entirely on a closed basis. This is likely due to public attendance, participation and community involvement in artist-run initiatives being a major

part of the charitable missions of many temporary space hosting organisations. Despite this, it can be beneficial for artists to have a private space, shared with other artists, where they can develop their practice. This is often seen in permanent artist studios which often take the more traditional form of creative space as separate from exhibition space. London based pop-up space provider, 3Space, launched a large temporary space in the former headquarters for London Scottish Bank in central Manchester, over a period of 10 months from 2015-2016. Although the building housed several commercial endeavours and events which made it open to the public (3Space, 2022) it also provided a home and private studio and makerspace for three artist collectives. This type of space differs from the dual open/closed space (discussed below) as the area where the artists' work is distinctly separate to the public/presenting space. It allows artists to experiment and be messy without needing to make the space palatable and presentable to the public. This might also influence the length of time that the space is open for as, on the one hand, the space may not have visibility to potential buyers, but on the other hand, the space may not be viable for continued upkeep by the brokering arts organisation if the space has little outward community and public impact. While the closed space configuration can provide a concentrated place to produce work, it may also create difficulty around artists interacting with one another, perpetuating alienation, and poor artist wellbeing.

As openness is a continuum, some temporary arts spaces operate a dual function of spending most of their time closed to the public, but regularly opening to allow the artists working there to present and exhibit their work. This dual, open/closed model is not unusual for temporary art spaces as supporting organisations seek to help artists in their private practice but also meet their goals as a charitable organisation to bring footfall, community interest and participation to their cultural endeavours. Examples of temporary spaces with dual function are Castlefield Gallery's New Art Spaces programme and NewBridge Project's Carilol House.

The NewBridge Project's Carilol House in Newcastle upon Tyne opened in 2017 and during its two-year lifespan provided studio space for up to 80 artists at a time, had a co-working space for collaborative work and project, workshop and event space (The NewBridge Project, 2022). The art space was built around the idea that the local community and the artists' who live there should have place where they can develop work and help to improve their locality together. Similarly, Castlefield Gallery's New Art Spaces operate a dual model across their current sites in Warrington, Bolton and Wigan. For instance, the artists who have worked in New Art Spaces Warrington, a cavernous former Marks and Spencer store in the town centre, since its opening in early 2020 have used it as a place to create and experiment in their practice privately, setting up makeshift workspaces on the shop floor and often creating site-specific work with the end goal of exhibiting in the space to the public.



Dual spaces allow artists the freedom to produce, develop and experiment in their practice, and also provide them a framework and purpose for the work by opening the space regularly to the public.

### **Time in operation**

The time that an artist or arts organisation can spend in a temporary art space is mostly a question of when a new commercial tenant will take over the space, likely turning it back to its original use of retail or office space, or sometimes demolishing the building entirely to create something new. Sometimes the spaces may be less temporary than anticipated. While most temporary spaces are active for a few months, Navigator North, an artist-led organisation in Middlesbrough, took over a temporary space at Dundas House almost ten years ago and remain in that same space today, paying only for utilities. Similarly, but on a smaller basis, Castlefield Gallery offered artists an initial six-month space agreement for what was previously a large, four storey Marks and Spencer shop in Warrington town centre, and the artists remain present in the building today, over a year later. Some organisations may also take over a space for many years but have specific time limits on how long individual artists or art collectives can spend in that space, so as to maximise the number of artists who work with them. For the purpose of this chapter, we will focus on the overall time that a temporary art space is in operation.

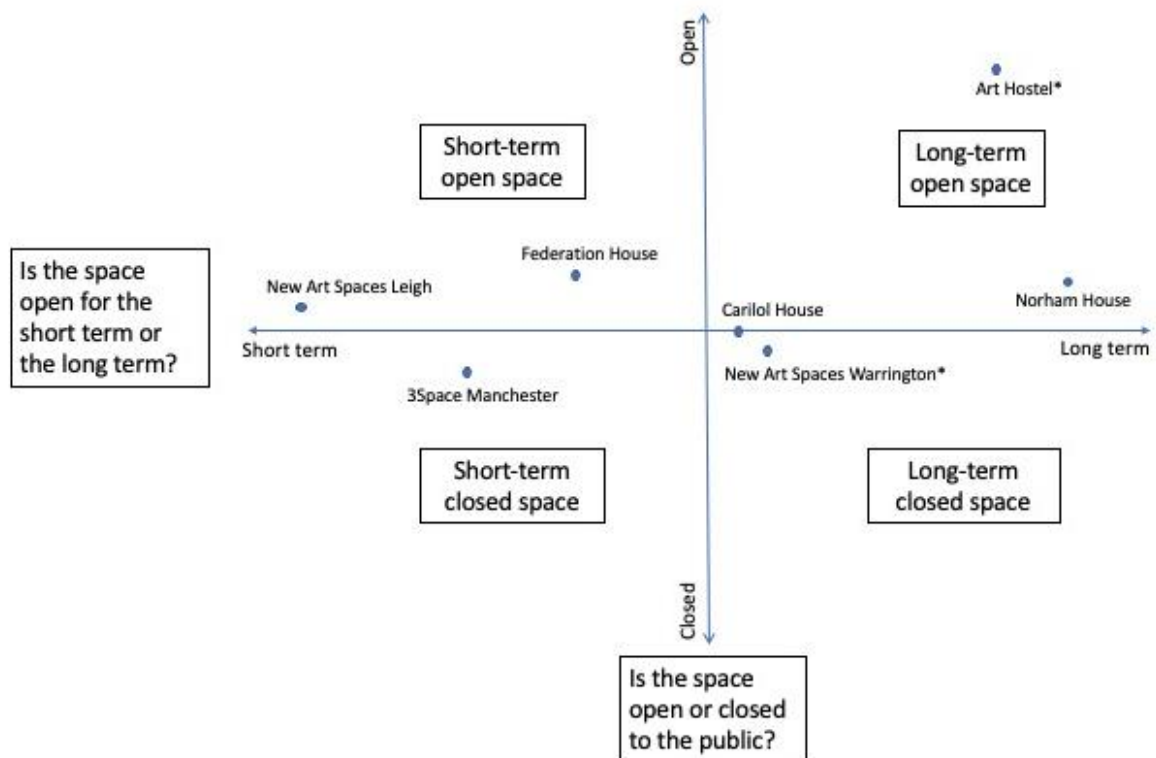
The temporality of these spaces can be problematic in a landscape where the power dynamic is firmly in the favour of landlords who can give notice on a property at any time, levelling the same flexibility that is marketed to artists as beneficial to their practice against them (Harris, 2020). The amount of time that an artist spends in a temporary space can often be uncertain, subject to sudden change and is independent and unsympathetic of how far into a project or piece of work an artist might be. This is due to short-term contracts and quick break clauses between arts organisations and property owners being the norm within the temporary space market, to enable property owners to bring in commercial tenants at short notice. East Street Arts' website (2021) states that temporary spaces "allow for experimentation" and "offer incubator options for new projects", while Castlefield Gallery (2021) describe their New Art Spaces as offering a "unique testing ground for experimental and large-scale creative project development". These two temporary space providers point to the impermanence of the spaces as allowing for, on the one hand, a pressurised and time-sensitive environment in which creativity, particularly when work is project-based with fast turnaround times, can flourish, yet also a no-pressure space where mistakes are allowed to happen. This paradoxical relationship with the temporary space, and the

contradictory ideas posited on it by the arts organisations, could provide a fractured and confusing relationship between the space and the artist. Temporary art spaces currently provide much needed and mutually beneficial opportunities for a number of stakeholders during these times when property is expensive and difficult to come by. But, recognising the differing periods of time that is spent in these spaces and how this creates further opportunity or tension for artists is essential to understanding temporary art spaces. In this section we offer a few examples of temporary art spaces which have been and are currently operational for different periods of time.

Short-term use of a space allows artists to develop resilience, produce more experimental work, and reach new audiences. Some temporary art spaces last little more than a week, but this shortness of time means that their relatively small impact is not well documented online or in the literature. Instead, the precarious nature of temporary art spaces is highlighted in Castlefield Gallery's 2014 launch of Federation House, the former, eight storey Cooperative office building near Victoria Train Station in Manchester. The space housed "exhibition spaces, artist workspaces, an experimental theatre space for developing new work, a film making and screening space, and classrooms for training events" and saw 700 people attend its opening event in 2014, with talks from cultural leaders in Manchester and nationwide (Castlefield Gallery, 2014). Federation House was provided to Castlefield Gallery with a five-year lease but after just one year in the space, notice was given and the artists moved out. This relatively short-term arrangement, disguised initially as a longer-term solution, points to the precarity of temporary art space agreements, where Neo-liberalism's cruel optimism tricks artists into believing that the flexibility of temporary spaces is in their best interests, when in fact it may impede their future progress (Harris, 2020). Despite this, during its short time in operation Federation House was a place where lots of different types of artists could come together and interact, forming a welcome addition to Manchester's thriving artist scene and proving opportunity, if brief, to the city's artists.

Long-term use of a space means that artists can move beyond the surface level to create deep-level positive social change in a community (Stephan et al., 2016). They can also develop their sense of belonging to a community by having more exposure over time. For example, the NewBridge Project's Norham House, in Newcastle upon Tyne, developed a deep bond with the local community during its seven years in operation from 2010-2017 (Whetstone, 2017). Norham House benefitted artists by providing studios, exhibition space, and workspaces like a dark room and a rehearsal room, and it supported the local community through the bookshop, gallery and regular workshops hosted there. It helped the local council to reinvigorate an area dilapidated by the 2008 crash, and brought enough footfall from the building users to eventually see the area return to retail use. The artists and other building users described leaving the building as feeling a sense of loss for a place that

they dedicated so much time and energy, especially as The NewBridge Project downsized when they moved to their next building at Carilol House, but also described feeling positive about the work that had been achieved there (Whetstone, 2017). Being able to linger for such a length of time in a temporary art space allowed the resident artists at Norham House to thrive and develop their practice in such a way that was free from the financial constraints and overheads of traditional, permanent studios. Norham House also created a community around the space where artists were able to work collaboratively with each other and local people, limiting isolation and increasing the spread of ideas and inspiration. However, when it was time to leave the building, it was not on the organisations' terms, but rather the terms of the building owners who gave a six month notice period. To cease seven years of work in six months is likely a jarring experience for the artists in the building. Artist Charlotte Gregory indicated that during those seven years at Norham House the people built a community and network of peers, and experienced a sense of loss when leaving (Whetstone, 2017).



**Figure 1: Conceptual framework for understanding temporary art space configurations**

Note: \* indicates a temporary space that is still open at the time of writing, thus changes to its approach, time in operation, and consequently placement in the framework are possible.

Through the dimensions which make up the framework we have identified four configurations of spaces which constitute the temporary art space landscape. The first configuration is one which is short-term open. These are spaces like Castlefield Gallery's Federation House and New Art Spaces Leigh which both had a dual function as offering

private space to their artists at some times, while being open as an exhibition, workshop, or practice space for most of the time. These spaces are characterised as being mostly open to the public but operating for a short period of time. The second configuration is short-term closed which can be seen in 3Space Manchester where the artist activity occurring there mostly took place behind closed doors to the public, and which occurred during the short term. The third configuration is long-term open, with spaces such as The NewBridge Project's Norham House, open for seven years with public bookshops and workshop space, and East Street Art's Art Hostel, fully open to the public in 2016, and moving to a new location in 2022. The fourth configuration is long-term closed with examples found in Castlefield Gallery's New Art Spaces Warrington and The NewBridge Project's Carilol House which both offer dual functions as open/closed space but mostly offer environments for artists to work privately.

## **Conclusion**

Temporary art spaces in the UK are taking on new importance in the post-Brexit and post-pandemic landscape. The world of artists is changing as a result of these new challenges. Individual artists' identity is challenged during a time when demand and availability for artistic work is scarce and increased feelings of isolation and loneliness are present (Szostak & Sułkowski, 2021; Stuckey et al., 2021). Uncertainty about the post-pandemic future has created tensions which are expected to manifest in increased mental health issues, particularly among artists who already suffer disproportionately with mental health when compared to the general population (Stuckey et al., 2021). As a combined result of Brexit and Covid-19 lockdowns, the UK high street is facing unprecedented change with retail and hospitality units closing rapidly due to a combined result of consumer preferences switching to online shopping, less in-person spending, Brexit related supply chain issues and staff shortages (Partington & Partridge, 2021). An increased uptake in temporary art space programmes across the UK would assist in revitalising high streets by increasing footfall to town and city centres and would help artists to find affordable spaces to make work and retain their artistic identity.

The conceptual framework posed in this chapter questions notions of temporary art space design that are often taken for granted, by putting the most fundamental facets of the space (time and use) under a microscope. The framework can be used as a basis for future research into temporary art spaces, and as a way to design better spaces which prioritise artists and their ways of working. There are a number of additional factors that could help us to refine our understanding of temporary art spaces in future research. These could include the types of practice that artists undertake in the space, the intersectional identities of the occupying artists, the location of the space (in relation to the rest of the country and in its

rural or urban locality) and the monetary cost of the space both for artists and for the arts organisations who sometimes invest in renovations and additional costs like key making and bills.

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