

Gold and silversmith
Jennifer Martin's
studio space.



NICHOLAS BUILDING
MELBOURNE / AUSTRALIA

INTERVIEW WITH

STEPHEN MCLAUGHLAN
ART GALLERY OWNER

NICHOLAS BUILDING RESIDENT FOR 16 YEARS.

INTERVIEW GEORGIA FRANCES KING • PHOTOGRAPHS DAN MAHON

When did the Nicholas Building become full of creative studios? It was a prestige office building in the '20s and '30s, then as other prestige office buildings took over, it became less prestigious, and through the '50s and '60s it was part of the fashion centre of Melbourne. Couture designers and milliners were key tenants. These days graphic designers, T-shirt designers and desktop publishers are also residents.

How has the building changed since 1926? It got a four-storey extension in 1976, but it was a sideways extension. So 10 levels – 11 including the basement – were built on a slightly bigger site in 1926. They kept an existing two-storey building next to it. They then pulled down that existing building, and built a four-storey building with two basement levels.

What was the building first used for? The basement and the first floor were the main Coles store from about 1926 to 1976.

And the other eight or nine floors above it? My understanding is that it was a speculative office building, and that the Nicholas family took the naming rights.

Who were the Nicholas family? All I know about Nicholas is that Alfred Nicholas is the Nicholas as in 'Aspro'. The company is often considered to be the inventor of aspirin. And like so many wealthy business people of any period, they became celebrities and patrons.

Are there any famous artists in the building? Many of the fine artists in the building with a bit of success keep a low profile.

→

EXIT

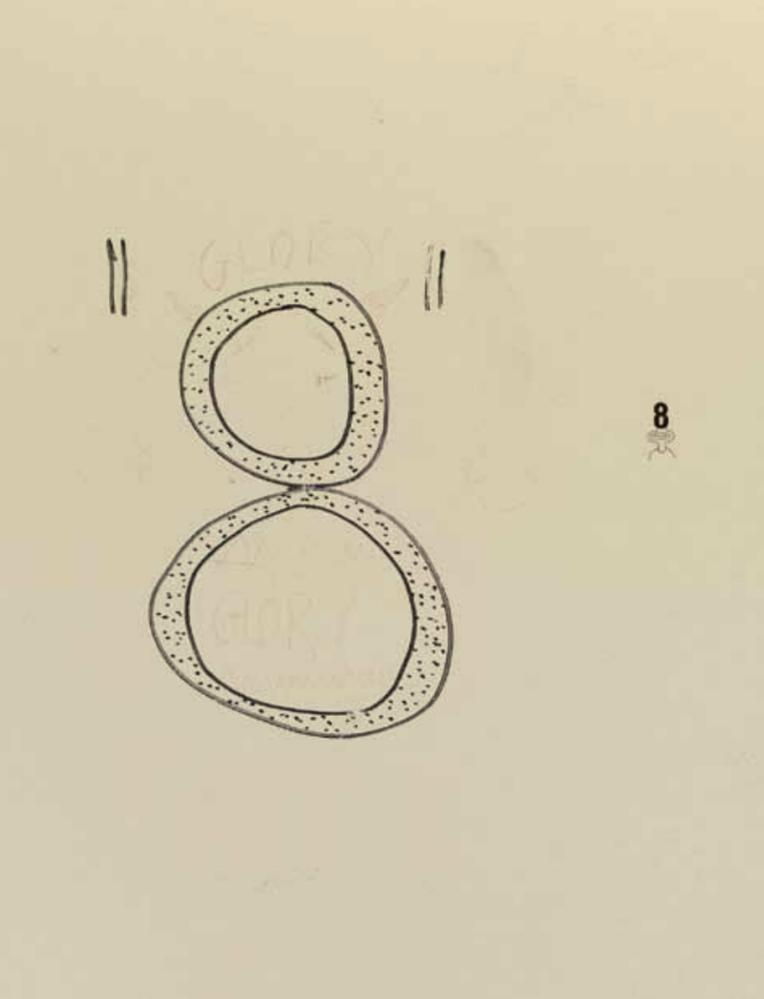
FIRE
HYDRANT
& HOSE
HOSE



*This page: Interviewee
Stephen McLaughlan's
gallery space.*

*Above right: Filmmaker
Nathaniel Lindsay.*

*Jeweller Natalia
Milosz-Piekarska's
studio space.*



Left page, top: Jewellers Natalia Milosz-Piekarska and Karla Way in their shared studio space.

This page, top right: Jeweller Vikki Kassioras has run an Open Studios event for the past six years. Open Studios encourages artists to open their studios to the public a few evenings every year.

←

What do you do here? I run an arts gallery.

What kind of people rent studios in the Nicholas Building? For years, there were plenty of half-empty, run-down classy buildings in Melbourne, and they were lucky to get tenants. And the kind of tenants they attracted were the ones who could only justify low rent, and weren't too fussy about absolutely how clean the windows were, or if the lifts were reliable or whatever. The Nicholas building is pretty much the last of them, and it now has more artists than ever.

Who else is on your floor? When I first moved in here, there was a speech therapist teaching elocution, the gay and lesbian accommodation service, a wig maker, a chiropractor, a masseur, gem cutters, an Aboriginal art gallery and a jeweller. Next-door is Mark Ferrie, a graphic designer, and the bass player in the Rockwiz orchestra. He also toured with Nick Cave in his original band, and at times his current group, The Mercurials, rehearse here.

Who else surrounds you? There is Claire Whitney, an artist/printmaker. Another space is the base for a

photojournalist who's currently in Afghanistan doing freelance journalism for the ABC. There are design consultants, an animator lady who does a lot of animation components for people's websites and rock videos. The masseurs have been there about 20 years, and probably because they're very good at what they do. Celebrities visiting town that need such a service often go there. You can sometimes bump into Patti Smith, Marianne Faithful, Donovan or Bob Dylan.

Who owns the building? Apparently at one stage it may have been owned by the Anglican Church. One of the church elders bought it off them until a year or so ago, when the building changed hands. The church theory might be wrong, but that story gets repeated, and often, in enough detail to make it sound correct.

Who leases the studios then? A real estate company. Because the building is full, not many rooms become free and then go back to the agent. In many ways, the two lift attendants [Joan and Dimitri] are the keepers of the keys; the ones who know which rooms are available. They provide a bit of basic information to a potential tenant and then get them in.



Left page:
Graphic designer
Tin, one half
of design duo
Tin & Ed and
Isobel Knowles,
an animation
artist, share
a studio space.

Above: Artist
Tai Snaithe's
collection
of work.

←

Are the spaces shared? There's a lot of sharing and subletting. I say this half jokingly, but there is truth in it: some artists think they really need a studio then rent one only to find they're lazy buggers with nothing to say. Having moved all of their painting equipment into the corner, they can't be bothered unmoving it, so they advertise to share. And the person they share with effectively ends up using the room and never sees the original person. I have a feeling there is quite a lot of sharing where one person is active and the other is no longer active.

How many people are in the Nicholas Building? It's 11 levels including the basement, about 10 studios on each floor, two people in each studio... so about 200. It's a rough guess based on my floor.

Do the artists collaborate? Yes, sometimes. For instance, when the designer I use was touring I wandered the building looking for a graphic

designer and found one. There are plenty of people when you need one.

Did you have to renovate the space before you came into it? Yes, a little. It's heritage-correct to cover things up as long as you don't destroy them. So one wall in my space is new. I spent a lot of effort, creativity and money knocking it into shape.

Has the building been used in films or video clips? All the time, partly because the kind of people who are in the building know people in bands. People are always doing photo shoots in the corridors. When you go down to the third or fourth floor and there's a sign that says 'Detective Agency', people presume it's from the 1940s. But no – it's actually from a rock video shot five years ago.

Why do you think the Nicholas Building is such an iconic Melbourne building? It's a microcosm of what many treasure about this city: a vibrant, diverse, and in many ways arcane combination of the creative and the mundane. +