Architecture: the live-work studios of New York’s artists

By Emily Nathan

In 1989, five months after the Tiananmen Square massacre, Cai Guo-Qiang built a model shanty town similar to the makeshift tents erected by the Chinese student protesters, loaded it with gunpowder and set light to the fuse. The resulting nine-second explosion transformed a material usually associated with violence and destruction into a stunning pyrotechnic display of golden light.

The Chinese, New York-based artist continues to use gunpowder today. His brand of exploding art requires large, government-authorised environments that can withstand big shocks and are structured to allow smoke to safely disperse.

It is perhaps strange, then, to discover that his studio is not located in a remote warehouse, but near his home. In New York, at least, there has been a marked increase in professionally designed home studios. These spaces function as workshop, gallery and event space. They can also bridge the public and the private, increasingly acting as the face of an artist’s brand as well as their oasis.

Cai Studio, marked by a bright red door, is located on a narrow residential street in the East Village, on the ground floor of a building that was once a public school. In addition to housing a small exhibition space, the studio hosts visits from schools, lectures from museum patrons and dinner parties.

Unlike the factory-like studios favoured by artists such as Jeff Koons and Takashi Murakami, Cai insists that his workspace must remain comfortable and domestic. “The garden plays an important role,” he says, “letting fresh air and sunshine into all its surrounding offices. But the most special place in the studio is the kitchen, where the entire studio gathers over the lunch table, where we serve the best home-cooked Chinese meal in all of New York.”

Cai’s original renovation, 10 years ago, was overseen by a friend of his who worked at Pei Cobb Freed & Partners, but the dimensions of his work have increased radically since then and a current expansion project is being directed by Shohei Shigematsu and OMA New York. When the new studio is finished, it will make use of the building’s various open areas and multiple floors, incorporating an underground library with a periscope that looks out on the
There will also be a bar and a Japanese tea room underground,” Cai adds. “There will be bamboo growing from the tea room to the current garden on ground level, and the tea room will be reserved for spiritual training, a place to keep quiet.”

There is, of course, a significant difference between a space intended primarily for public use and a home studio. Many artists choose a smaller architects’ firm and a more modest budget. As Brazilian artist Vik Muniz points out, celebrated firms such Selldorf Architects and Herzog & de Meuron are responsible for some of the world’s most stunning spaces for contemporary art, but they operate on a scale that might not be suitable for a more modest private design.

This is echoed by architect and Yale professor MJ Long, whose projects include the studios of Sir Peter Blake, Frank Auerbach, and the late RB Kitaj. “None of my clients wanted ‘high-visibility’ studios,” she says, noting that her designs generally cost between £30,000 and £200,000. Even the most celebrated artists, she adds, “lead private lives – although they were happy to have spaces into which they could invite friends, and prospective buyers, at will.”

Muniz, who splits his time between New York and Rio de Janeiro, hired Basil Walter Architects, a firm based in New York, to convert a 6,000 sq ft warehouse in the Clinton Hill neighbourhood of Brooklyn. His work has involved a variety of materials, from toxic waste to real diamonds, so he conceives of his studio as a “research and development lab” that must both adjoin and remain physically separate from his living area, allowing him “to connect with the world outside with a good level of privacy”. As an open-format studio-loft, it preserves the building’s original industrial exterior, but the inside is framed by stretches of windows and a giant skylight, and a retractable translucent wall divides the studio from the living room and kitchen.

A few years ago, Muniz came across a photo album documenting the studios of successful artists working in the 19th and early 20th centuries, from Edouard Manet to André Breton. “The spaces were all so similar,” he says, “with taxidermy, extensive libraries, art from friends and peers, and amazing light. The fact that an artist normally entertains a lot of people in his studio inevitably makes the space a personal stage where he can display not only his work but also everything that inspires it.”

Evoking those earlier spaces, Muniz’s studio is crammed with 19th-century sculptures, surrealist objects, and glass cabinets displaying optical toys, bones, and minerals. The walls are lined with books; a muted television is switched on most of the time. “Art has to be connected to life in its most mundane details,” he says. “With all the distractions of having kids and dogs bursting into your studio the moment you are about to make your lifetime masterpiece, I still believe that the artist has to make art from a place he can call home.”

The New York home studio of Chinese artist Xu Bing is a former bakery in a street filled with bars and tattoo shops in Williamsburg, Brooklyn. Bing insists that using a “big name” designer would badly serve the goal of creating a studio, which he describes as “a very personal matter” – so he employed local architect David Hu. Located next to a graffiti-scarred storefront that sells comic books, Bing’s space, which he has occupied for 18 years, is indistinguishable from its neighbours at street level. But inside, a long hallway leads to a network of tiered, overlapping rooms on multiple storeys that fit together like a jigsaw puzzle. There are long horizontal windows placed at various heights on the walls, and the bakery’s former brick oven – a few steps lower than the entrance level and tiled in the original red stones – has been transformed into a workshop and storage facility.

A large, glass-walled box built on top of the oven structure, which is accessible from the main space by a set of stairs, houses the studio’s kitchen and a number of bedrooms – all of which look out on a garden of grapevines, peach trees and bamboo.

“Life and art can happen at any moment,” says Bing. “If I go to the studio based on what the clock says, what am I supposed to do if I don’t have any feeling or thoughts right then?”

This view is also embodied in the home studio of Lawrence Weiner, which is located on a quiet West Village street in downtown Manhattan. It shares with its neighbourhood a clean brick façade, a modest doorway and a number of windows facing the street, but a closer look reveals some unexpected surprises. The window casings, for example, are made from pieces of an industrial unloading dock. Overseen by New York architecture firm LO-TEK, known for its unconventional use of recycled industrial materials, such details are woven seamlessly into the multi-storey abode. “All forms of work require a mise en scene,” says Weiner, explaining that his home studio was built to feature “five staging areas in a vertical format” and that he sees no need to separate his art from his life. “I sleep where I work,” he says.
As Muniz reflects, most artists' first studios are located within their living spaces simply because they cannot afford to pay the rent on two properties. That said, he adds, “no matter how you succeed in your career, you will always be nostalgic for the time when your working table and your bed were next to each other”.

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This article has been subject to a correction

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