

LIVING CREATIVELY

Thanks to rising rents, more and more people working in London's creative industries are opting to become property guardians. But with minimal rent for maximum space, **Joanne Christie** went to find out if there's a catch.

Creative careers do not often come with a pay packet that allows for a spacious pad in Central London, especially not in the early stages. For many, their chosen career path is more likely to start with an unpaid internship than a £40,000 signing bonus and they face a constant struggle between the need to be in London to forge a career and the reality that it's just too damn expensive to live here.

Most of us would, quite rightly, view an advert for a large double room in Zone 1 for £300 a month, bills included, with a certain amount of scepticism. But that's not to say such spaces don't exist, it's just a matter of ditching the letting agencies and turning to property guardian firms instead. There are a number of companies running property guardian schemes in London, managing empty buildings for their owners. They recruit property guardians to live in these empty buildings to protect them from squatters and decay. It's a slightly unconventional way of living, but for many it has proven a good way of getting a cheap place to rent in the capital.

According to Doug Edwards, general manager at property guardian firm Ad Hoc, property guardianship is a win-win

situation to the problem of empty buildings. "It benefits the client because they get low cost security for the building that prevents thieves or squatters from entering the property. It benefits the guardian because they get very cheap living in London. They get to live for somewhere between £200 and £300 a month."

Charlie Hotson, a 24-year-old actor, is among those placed by Ad Hoc. His first property was a bedsit in Lewisham, where he lived for nine months, and he has recently moved to a one bedroom flat in Hoxton, for which he pays £250 a month, plus bills.

"My flat is about five minutes from Old Street tube so it is an amazing location. Before I did this, it was quite difficult to find somewhere that was affordable for me. Acting is a bizarre business and it is very difficult to find work at the moment. I work for a promotions company as well and I do always have work every month, but the amount can vary," he says.

Hotson, who was the understudy for stage show *Woman in Black*, says being a property guardian has given him the



financial freedom to pursue his acting career. "Having the opportunity to live somewhere that is so cheap gives me the chance to travel to different places to have auditions and get proper headshots - that kind of thing. It allows me that flexibility to have more money in the bank to be able to do the things that are necessary to progress as an actor."

But there are drawbacks to going down the guardian route, most notably a lack of security for guardians themselves. Guardians are not tenants and do not have the same rights that come with assured shorthold tenancies. They can sometimes get as little as two weeks' notice to leave a property, though most companies do try to rehouse them in another empty building.

The living spaces —although equipped with essentials such as hot water and electricity — can sometimes be a bit basic and having things like landlines and satellite television connected can prove problematic.

"When I moved in this place was a bit grubby, it needed a bit of work doing, but it wasn't a big issue for me," says Hotson. "I'm saving so much money by living here so I don't mind doing a bit of painting."

Although Hotson lives by himself, most of the empty buildings managed by property guardian firms are larger spaces and guardians usually have to be willing to live in shared accommodation.

But George Torode, a 35-year-old artist and photographer who lives in a former school near Waterloo with 18 people, says while communal living has some drawbacks on a practical level, for him it is part of the appeal.

"Heating is one problem so it is not so good in the winter. We have oil heaters because there is no central heating and as it is quite a big space it is hard to maintain heat. You can also face a long walk to the toilet, depending on how you are positioned."

"But I like the communal element. It is a social experience rather than just renting a property. There is quite a community of artists here. We've been lucky enough to be here for five years and people who come don't tend to leave.

"It is nice to be in a property with lots of other artists. We've all exhibited together in the past as well so we influence each other quite a lot. We are not a collective but we have worked together as group."

Torode, who was placed in the building by Camelot Property Management, has two rooms in the building, one of which he uses as a painting studio.

"Without this, renting the space I need would be a long arduous battle with smaller spaces that cost a lot more money. I'd have hardly any time for painting as I'd have to work more to pay rent on a studio and a property to live in. Camelot has definitely made it a lot easier for me."

Bob de Vilder, one of the founders of Camelot, says the opportunity to live in an atypical living space has attracted many artists to property guardianship, so much so that the firm now runs a yearly art competition, for which the prize is a year's free rent.

"We do have a fairly wide range of people but there is quite a big group of artists, such as painters and sculptors, who use Camelot buildings for studios to work in. Most of the time we can provide big spaces with rooms that are good for painters who need a lot of space and light. We have created affordable houses in former fire stations and schools in the inner city of London," he says.

With rents in London soaring, demand for guardian places is understandably high, but de Vilder says the economic crisis has led to

a marked increase in the number of buildings becoming vacant, which is good news for those looking to inhabit them.

"The crisis has definitely created a lot of requests from owners of buildings that would not have been handed to us in normal economic times," he says.

"A building owner will not choose vacancy over renting a building or selling it but it happens to them anyway and they need to keep their building safe and secure when it does happen."

In a sense, guardians are unofficial security guards for the properties they live in and depending on how many live in a property, there are sometimes rules about how many nights they can spend away from the property to make sure the building is always inhabited.

"When there were the London riots some kids tried to get into our property and we all had to club together and stand strong and defend the place and sort it out. So we do have that sort of responsibility," says Torode.

Most of the time, however, their role is simply to make the building look lived in, says Nik Voigt, a 30-year-old filmmaker who lives in a former office building in Soho.



Property guardians often have free reign to make the residence feel like home

"I've been doing it for three years now and I've never had a problem. As a licence fee payer I am basically a glorified security guard from a legal perspective but I've never actually had to do anything to protect a building," he says.

Voigt, who was placed in his property by Live-in Guardians, is now in his third property and says the rent savings have allowed him to work on a more flexible basis.

"Before this I was living in a shared house in Angel paying about £600 a month, but at that point I had a full-time job, which fell through.

I decided to go freelance but then I was under a lot more pressure financially.

"Living in London is quite stressful as it is. You get caught up in the rat race and creativity for me is something I've just got to let happen. If I feel like I'm being hounded for money all the time I don't feel like I can express that in any way."

"You do sacrifice a bit on home comforts and security, but if you can travel light, are flexible and can live with other people then it is a really good way to live in London." ■