WATCH THIS SPACE:  
THE CREATIVE POTENTIAL OF UNUSED SPACES IN THE PERTH CBD

To understand the driving concept behind Emma Buswell’s solo exhibition at Moana Project Space, Under Development, cast your eyes down from the balcony of Moana and onto Hay Street. Dotted between the shop fronts you might begin to notice the empty shells of former stores, gutted and unused. You might also begin to notice the ‘For Lease’ signs plastered on some of the office buildings. These ‘For Lease’ signs cover the Perth metropolis and point to what some might see as a troubling issue. Lately, articles in The Sunday Times and West Australian shout headlines decrying a lack of demand for inner-city office buildings, linking it to the economic downward trajectory of what is colloquially called the ‘Mining Boom’. Joe Lenzo, The Property Council of Australia’s Western Australian executive director states: ‘over the last 12 months or so demand for office space in Perth has disappeared. Our forecast is that demand won’t pick up for the next year or two so expect higher vacancies in the Perth Central Business District (CBD) for the next couple of years’.

These headlines and the decreasing demand for office space could be seen in a negative light, however, artist Emma Buswell invites you to reimagine these spaces and their possibilities. These same edifices, whether they are superstructures or Art Deco office buildings, could instead become places of activation, of renewal, so adding to the CBD’s social and cultural currency. To quote Architectural Researcher Merten Nefs, ‘It can be said that unused terrains and buildings are necessary for urban renovation. In these empty lots the city reinvents itself; they are playgrounds of urbanistic innovation and cultural breeding grounds’ Buswell herself intuits these Terrain Vagues; these inactivated, unused spaces can be transfigured and embraced by creative industries and their members in answer to the search for an affordable house, studio space or an Artist Run Space (ARI) in the Perth Central Business District (CBD).

This concept is not novel, ARIs and non-profit organisations internationally (such as New York City’s ‘No Longer Empty’, ‘Creative Time’, or ‘Cargo Collective’ from the Netherlands) have been identifying the potential of vacant and unused urban spaces for the last 20 years. In Perth, ‘Spacemarket’ has been doing just that since their inception. They have been responsible for the renewal of MANY 6160 in Fremantle and Moana Chambers in Perth City, among others. How apt then that Buswell chose Moana Project

people and those who work in the design or media industry'. For all the hypotheticals and idealism, Under Development is ultimately about being positive and seeing the upside to a negative situation, and positivity is always a great investment, no matter what the current Perth economic climate. In order to ACTivate these spaces, we have to act, and what better time than now.

Caroline Forsberg is an arts writer currently residing in Perth, Western Australia.

Emma Buswell is a Perth-based early career artist. In 2013 Buswell established a gallery in the disused offices of a Perth skyscraper. In 2014 she was selected to participate in the Venice Biennale Professional Development Program at the Australian Pavilion. Under Development is her first solo exhibition.

One of the spaces that Buswell is looking into is the Gleddon Building, a 1937 Art Deco office building on Hay Street, which has been classified by the National Trust of Australia. As you pass this building on the street, you may be struck by its architectural references to the Art Deco buildings in New York City. However, you may also notice the 'For Lease' sign, which has been stuck to the building for a surprising length of time. Buswell is portraying this building as a solution to the lack of affordable gallery rentals in Perth, an answer to revitalizing the urban space in Perth, and why not? Why not take advantage of the opportunities that this negative property growth in Perth is creating? It could be presumed that the real estate market in Perth may be looking to take a gamble on new concepts for, as Buswell states ‘big business no longer holds the monopoly on available space in Perth’.

Where there is uncertainty, there is opportunity - something that can be seen in the dual nature of Buswell’s exhibition’s title ‘Under Development’. Buswell sees this period of economic insecurity as an opportunity to make something that has creative and social currency. As the Architectural Researcher Uwe Rada argues ‘this new luxury of emptiness internationally is attracting “space pioneers”, creative people such as artists, handicraft
Emma Buswell  

In the End all That’s Left Will be Clay for the Reshaping and Stones and Glasshouses 2015  
acrylic on board, aluminium, concrete