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Easel does it



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Art can thrive in the unlikeliest of places, as seen in the unique studio Space 118 that nestles among Mumbai's dishevelled warehouses

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By **Shashi Baliga** | **Special to GN Focus**



Art collector **Saloni Doshi** set up **Space 118** (pictured above) as a budget studio for upcoming artists in the heart of Mumbai's **Mazagaon area**

Image Credit: Supplied

The setting is one of Mumbai's most unglamorous; warehousing, a mainstay in the Mazagaon area, is not the most exciting of businesses. The street you're trying to navigate is riddled with slums, belching trucks and errant cyclists. The massive plain steel gate is unrelieved by a signboard or any decorative element. You hesitate as you enter: can this be the artists' nook you're looking for?

Turns out it is: art can flourish in the unlikeliest of settings. A belief that drove entrepreneur **Saloni Doshi** (32) to set up **Space 118**, a quiet green oasis where artists work undisturbed by the urban monstrosities of the world outside that steel gate.

It is a decision that baffles many, for almost anyone who is sitting on a swathe of land in space-hungry Mumbai will succumb to the temptation of handing it over to a builder. But **Doshi**, an art collector whose family is in the warehousing business, saw it as an opportunity of another kind.

She spruced up a dusty building, broke it up into units of 300 and 500 square feet and began renting it out to artists who could not afford a studio of their own in Mumbai.

In a city with some of the highest rental rates in the world, Doshi offers a 300-sq ft room for as little as Rs15,000 (about Dh1,070) a month. That's if it's taken for more than six months. Artists who want it for less, say three months, only need to give Doshi an artwork of their choice in return. "Friends joke that I've started philanthropy rather early in life," she laughs. It is her way of doing her bit for art, a pursuit that gives her immense pleasure.

How did she strike upon the idea? Every great city has such studios, she says. "In London, you'll find them in Shoreditch and the East Village; in New York, it'll be Chelsea and Brooklyn. In India, Baroda has tonnes of them." Baroda University is famous for its fine arts work and alumni.

Though she doesn't advertise or publicise Space 118, Doshi's studios are booked till next year. "My target audience knows," she says. She has artists come here from all over the world as well as from Mumbai itself. Aashna Jhaveri, for instance, lives with her family in suburban Andheri, but says she needs the space and quiet she finds at Space 118. The next step, says Doshi, is to offer residencies, so that artists can find a place to stay as well.

She's upping the ante on a personal level as well. Though she has a double honours degree in Politics and Economics from Mumbai's St Xavier's College, a Master's in Media and Communication from London School of Economics, diplomas in Art Criticism and Social Communications Media, she is currently reading for a diploma in Indian Art Appreciation as well.

Clearly, the part-time student, part-time entrepreneur, part-time collector is always on the lookout for the next big thing.

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