



rent assistance

NIC BRUNSDON IS PUTTING THE LOVE BACK INTO PERTH'S FORGOTTEN SPACES.

WORDS NICOLE THOMAS

For someone who describes himself as a “bit of an accidental everything I never wanted to be”, Nic Brunsdon seems to be doing all right. The architect slash lecturer is adding a new slash to his oeuvre with his and partner Beth George’s Spacemarket: an initiative that matches “disused spaces with useful people”. In other words, Spacemarket gives emerging creatives a chance to rent spaces on the cheap by finding empty Perth real estate that’s seen better days.

Spacemarket also seamlessly meshes in with Post-, the architectural wing of the company. Or, as Nic puts it, “We put Post- where it needs to go and do things really mindfully, and Spacemarket is this thing that’s ticking away.”

This very casual description of Spacemarket belies the epic nature of its largest venture yet – MYRE Freo. Located in Fremantle’s old Myer department store, it’s 20,000 square metres of raw ambition, plus blood, sweat and tears. With the first and ground floors of the building just completed, a bevy of local retailers and craftspeople are already inhabiting the open-plan spaces.

“Just on the ground floor we’ve brought 70 new independent West Australian retailers to Fremantle. With the production floor that’s another 30, so we’ve got about 100 new businesses in Fremantle being exposed to the public, which is just brilliant,” Nic says.

Next comes a drive-on cinema – complete with roller skate ladies. Yes, really. Despite the novelty value, Spacemarket’s aim is a little more long-sighted. By finding cheap and unused spaces within the city for new businesses, Spacemarket is investing in the future of its hometown by nurturing young talent. And, as a cherry on the cake, it’s sustainable. Oops, let’s say ‘responsible’.

“I hate the word sustainable!” Nic says. “It’s a buzz word that has lost all meaning. I like the word responsible... I think responsibility to each other, to ourselves and to the earth is actually a much better way of putting it.”

And it’s this spirit of ownership that lies at the core of Spacemarket. The business started after Nic returned to Perth from Melbourne in 2010, searching for an office space that rivalled his \$50-per-week inner city space in the Victorian capital.

“I kept seeing these empty windows and dusty boxes and started knocking on people’s doors, asking, ‘What have you got up there?’” he says. Cue a real estate epiphany, followed by a meeting with the City of Perth and a sprinkling of serendipity: Spacemarket was born.

Since then the practice has snowballed. Aside from MYRE Freo, 2013 saw the business team up with Senator Scott Ludlam to release the Why So Empty app, which allows locals to upload details of any empty spaces they come across. Spacemarket and Post- are also responsible for some smaller gems in Perth’s crown. The Moana Chambers building, for one, is an architect’s dream, with angular interventions that artfully reveal and hide the existing fabric of the historic interior. There’s also The Ward, which was an old maternity ward found by Spacemarket and morphed into around 30 artists’ studios for 18 months.

So far everything seems to be going to plan, but surely Nic had some reservations in the early days? Apparently not. “I’m a bit of an idiot. I’m an eternal optimist... I just work and don’t give myself too much of a chance to think about anything that could go wrong. And then when it does go wrong, I pretty quickly try and fix it. It’s working all right so far,” he laughs. ❁