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Sydney Fringe Festival gets its own space at last

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Sydney's development boom has mostly been a bust for independent artists. Soaring rents and disappearing ex-industrial and commercial space has made many artists itinerant in their own city.



Room to play: Musician Billie McCarthy and artistic director of the festival Kerri Glasscock. Photo: Nick Moir

But a Sydney Fringe Festival initiative may – in the short term at least – offer independent performing and visual artists a large-scale venue in which to work, and provide a hub for audiences.

The Sydney Fringe Festival will partner with the Chinese-owned Hailiang Property Group (HPG) to create this year's Fringe Festival hub in the former FedEx Warehouse Complex on Euston Road, Alexandria.

Eventually the site will become 400 apartments, duplexes and shops, but until the bulldozers move in it will be transformed into one of the largest arts complexes in Sydney, and home to the festival.

"I had no idea until I went in there how large 7000 square metres

actually is," says Kerri Glasscock, artistic director of the Sydney Fringe Festival.



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HPG approached the Fringe after observing how it had activated dormant spaces in the inner west over recent years.

"Also, they didn't want the site lying empty while they were waiting for the various approvals," says Glasscock. "They wanted it to have a good use."

What's in it for the developer?

"The finished development will have lots of public artwork and they want an essence of cultural identity at the site from the beginning," says Glasscock. "There is a fundamental desire to have a cultural identity for the space that will flow through to the finished product."

It also means artists will, for this year's festival at least, be able to stretch their ambitions.

"For the first time, we have an opportunity to have a consolidated hub for the festival, with four performance spaces, our offices, a bar, exhibition space and enough room for artists to do the kind of large-scale or immersive work they've only been able to dream of," Glasscock says.

Singer, storyteller and self-confessed "habitual ranter" Billie McCarthy says the space shortage is also exacerbated by the "lockout" laws and the sensitivities of a new breed of inner-city dweller.

"There are fewer venues to perform in and less time to play in them," she says. "Underground venues have popped up but for most musicians in Sydney, they've lost a lot of work. New spaces, like this one, are vital for artists in Sydney."

Tamworth-born McCarthy comes from a country music family but her own cabaret for Sydney Fringe Festival, *Billie McCarthy Takes Up Space*, includes jazz, soul and electronic music. "It's a non-traditional, crazy storytelling cabaret about navigating Australia as a fat woman," she says. "Australia still has this stereotypical beach culture idea of beauty, but very few women actually look like that. I'd like to offer an alternative beauty using humour and strength. In the show, I get to do my two favourite things: I get to rant and I get to sing. Never choose dignity over humour."

The events in this year's Sydney Fringe Festival will be announced at a full-program launch in July. Already in place is a 30-day Kensington Street Festival Village opening in September, which will host two

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street festival village opening on September 2, which will host two pop-up performance spaces, one dedicated to comedy, the other to theatre.

The Fringe Kids program, which coincides with the first week of the school holidays, will include former *Play School* host Monica Trapaga's circus-themed show *The Boy Who Was Born with a Moustache* and a collaboration between Lah Lah's Big Live Band and the Australian Youth Orchestra to be performed in the Sydney Town Hall.

The Sydney Fringe Festival plays at a variety of venues from September 1-30.