

# **Cultural Metropolis**

## **The Mayor's Priorities for Culture 2009-2012**

### **Response to consultation by Acme Studios**

#### **Who we are:**

**Acme Studios** is a London-based charitable housing association which provides affordable studios, work/live space, housing and residencies for over 600 artists.

Established in 1972, the geographical centre of our activities has been East London where we have played a significant role in helping to establish the area as a world-renowned centre for visual arts production.

Many of the 5,000 artists who have benefited from our support have gone on to achieve national and international reputations, including nine Turner Prize winners.

In addition to the provision of affordable space, we also operate a major residency, awards and community programme which provides rent-free space and bursaries for selected artists, and a major international residency programme enabling government agencies and foundations from all over the world to send their artists to London for periods of research.

We have worked for many years to support the development of the affordable studios sector in England, including leading on the establishment of the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers.

In recent years we have pioneered the use of planning-gain to create sustainable and affordable studio space, working in partnership with commercial and social housing providers, brokered and supported by local authorities and development agencies.

Acme is a regularly funded organisation of Arts Council England.

## **Our response to Cultural Metropolis:**

The focus of our response to *Cultural Metropolis* is the area of our activity, knowledge and experience i.e. the contemporary visual arts and specifically the provision of affordable studio space and other programmes which support art and artists at the level of research, development and production.

### General

Acme Studios welcomes the Mayor's initial vision for his cultural strategy which promotes the crucial importance of culture to the vitality, health and economic future of our capital.

We applaud the Mayor's aspiration to develop a bold vision and his commitment to be brave in funding decision-making. We support his commitment to value the intrinsic worth of culture over the other contributions that culture makes.

We support the document's endorsement of the recommendations of the McMaster review.

We welcome the commitment to encourage artistic expression, and to foster and support London's artists and the economically important creative industries.

We are reassured by the vision which celebrates London's position at the heart of the contemporary visual arts world and the understanding that this reputation has been achieved through the activities of artists and the burgeoning gallery infrastructure which makes their work public.

From the perspective of the contemporary visual arts we feel that our voice is well represented by the appointments to the new Cultural Strategy Group.

## Support of cultural infrastructure

*Cultural Metropolis* asserts that to maintain London's position as a world-class city we need to maintain a strong infrastructure. We feel it important that the cultural strategy's approach to infrastructure includes not just where art is displayed, but also where it is researched, developed and produced. The private spaces that artists rely upon to make their work are usually hidden from view and, at worst, taken for granted. The great public spaces for contemporary art which are rightly celebrated throughout *Cultural Metropolis* rely upon the large network of affordable artists' studios which support art and artists at the most fundamental level of production.

The success of British contemporary visual art, and London's key role in this story, has depended on the subsidy and support created by the independent and largely self-organised and self-funded studios sector. We urge the Mayor to ensure that his cultural strategy is informed by an understanding of how the fragile ecology of the affordable artists' studio network operates so that support is focussed and timely.

We recognise that the Greater London Authority and the London Development Agency do not have significant cultural budgets, which makes it doubly important that culture is factored into the strategic thinking in other GLA policy areas – such as planning.

In this context we endorse the commitment to work with London's boroughs and other organisations involved in planning for London in sharing best practice, understanding the wider strategic picture for culture and supporting use of the planning system to secure a vibrant cultural offer. We are reassured that the London Cultural Planning Group is scheduled to produce a detailed guide to planning for culture based on expert case studies in early 2009.

*Cultural Metropolis* does not specifically reference the use of section 106 agreements in the planning context. There are now a number of existing, successful and sustainable models developed in the last few years where affordable artists' studios have been created through the use of section 106 agreements and planning gain (e.g. Acme Studios' development with Southwark and Barratt Homes at the Galleria in Peckham; the 100% affordable partnership with Swan Housing in Leven Road, in Tower Hamlets;

and the projects in Harrow Road and Stratford High Street which have been proactively brokered by the London Borough's of Brent and Newham respectively). We would recommend that these should be explored further as case studies for the benefit of the studios sector as a whole.

The acknowledgement that music venues face a challenge from new urban developments is not extended to include other cultural infrastructure, including affordable studios, which have also suffered from the delivery of regeneration and major infrastructural schemes. Intervention where appropriate to secure or re-site cultural infrastructure threatened by new transport developments is welcomed, but the arts and cultural landscape needs to be clearly mapped so that where possible last minute intervention can be avoided.

### The Olympic project

We welcome the work with the LDA on the Legacy Masterplan for the Olympic Park and the commitment to examine the interests of artists and how their need for studios in this part of London might be integrated into planning for the site. However opportunities within the site itself are limited. The cultural strategy needs to value the vitally important concentration of affordable artists studios' located within the host boroughs beyond the Olympic site, particularly in Hackney and Tower Hamlets, whose existence continues to be threatened by the ongoing process of regeneration in general, and exacerbated by the Olympic project in particular.

We would draw the Mayor's attention to a recent study commissioned by the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers to look at the potential impacts of the London Olympics on studio provision. *Artists' Studio Provision in the Host Boroughs: a review of the potential impacts of London's Olympic Project* was published in December last year and highlights the value and strengths of the sector, but also its innate vulnerability. It also sets out the necessary actions to be taken to ensure that where appropriate existing provision is secured and that new studios are written into the plans for the future of East and South East London after 2012.

We greatly appreciate the concerns already expressed by the Cultural Strategy Group at its first meeting in response to this study and the commitment to look at this issue and to see what can be done to mitigate.

The 2012 Olympic Games are quite rightly seen as an opportunity to enhance our cultural landscape and *Cultural Metropolis* encourages artists to get involved. However, artists' enthusiasm for the Cultural Olympiad will be difficult to maintain if the Olympic project itself appears to threaten their ability to function through the loss of their studios, the very places where their creative lives are centred.

### Artists' studios and the grassroots

*Cultural Metropolis* recognises the importance of grassroots culture in giving the city vibrancy and creative energy, providing fresh opportunities and boosting our quality of life. The document locates artists' studios and artists' networks within this grassroots world. It may not have been possible within the scope of the document to begin to map the critical linkages between the places where art is made and where it is displayed. We hope that the cultural strategy as it develops will acknowledge the critical supply chain that links the production of art to the galleries and museums where it is shown.

Jonathan Harvey, Co-Director, Acme Studios, 23 January 2009