

FEATURE: ARTS BUILDING



The studios at Leven Road

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— Jack Fortescue examines the business case for housing developers and local authorities to invest in space for artists.

Building partnerships

With impending cuts to public funding, building new arts venues will be challenging as resources are focused away from cultural provision and towards more obvious strategies for job creation and economic growth. In this difficult climate, Acme Studios will open more than 100 purpose-built artists' studios over the next two years in addition to 71 new-build studios, which have recently been completed. The studios came about through partnerships with the public and private sector. Elements of these developments could be utilised by other arts organisations to create space for a range of arts practice. Acme Studios was started by artists in 1972 as a response to the lack of affordable housing and studio space for artists in London. It currently manages over 400 studios, work/living spaces, and residencies and awards for artists. The demand for artists' studios is strong today with waiting lists far exceeding the available space. In order to meet demand, we have developed new ways of securing buildings.

SPACE TO THINK

Central to successful partnership projects is the understanding that being an artist is a profession. It is rare for an artist of any kind to make their living entirely from their art, but their practice is still their job. If being an artist is a job, then an artist's studio is a workplace. Many artists live near their studio which makes them part of the local workforce. While support for the arts may vary, all local authorities share a desire to create and maintain local jobs. The challenge is to convince planning, regeneration and economic development departments that there is a large local workforce in need of facilities: in this case, artists needing affordable studios. A typical argument for building a theatre might be that there is a strong demand from the public - the end user. An argument for building studios could be a strong local demand from arts practitioners - for research, development and production.

Part of the decision-making process by a

local authority in granting planning permission for new developments is to assess the impact on the local area. This planning gain mechanism, often enshrined in a section 106 agreement (see AP178), can be used to secure new health centres, playgrounds or arts venues. The Leven Road studios in Tower Hamlets are part of a section 106 agreement for an affordable housing development. The council recognised that studios would provide workspace for local people in a challenging area. The developer, Swan Housing, worked with Acme to create purpose-built, accessible units on the ground-floor of the development. The studios opened in 2009 and were all occupied from day one, with 60% of the tenants having previously worked or lived in the local area.



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LOCAL NEEDS

While local authorities understand the need for new homes, they also want to avoid job losses, and so often insist on non-residential space as part of new building schemes. This is known as re-provision. It can lead to blocks of flats with ground-floor units designed for shops or offices that are sitting empty and gathering graffiti. For the council there are no new jobs or boost to the local economy, and for the developer there is the ongoing cost of managing empty units. In Peckham, Barratt Homes were refused planning permission for a major development because it contained no commercial space. Rather than speculatively build retail/office space, Barratt spoke to Acme which offered to buy the commercial space and fill it with working artists. In order to ensure rent levels remained affordable, we purchased a 155-year lease on the studio block at a fixed price - for less than the construction cost. Building artists' studios

instead of offices resulted in less profit for Barratt, but it offered a guaranteed pre-sale on all the commercial space and provided a great marketing opportunity. Castle House was renamed 'The Galleria,' and the chance to live alongside a community of artists meant all the residential units were quickly sold.

When Telford Homes wanted to redevelop a factory into a mixed-use site, the inclusion of artists' studios in the scheme was key to persuading the council to rethink its approach. Although the new development will contain less commercial space per square foot, the 49 artists' studios and the additional commercial space will provide more jobs than before. Hackney Council now fully supports the scheme.

Opening channels of dialogue with those responsible for planning, designing or building has worked for us. Arguments about the demand for space and the sound business sense behind creating space for artists could be replicated by arts organisations looking to create space for dancers, actors, writers or musicians. Lack of suitable arts space may be a problem for your organisation, but it could be a solution for a local authority or housing developer.



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This week Jack found Julie Umerle's paintings in 'Cosmos or Chaos' at Studio 1.1 both comforting and a little bit unsettling. He is looking forward to seeing Weimar-inspired cabaret in 'Ein Abend Mit Ruby' at the Soho Theatre.