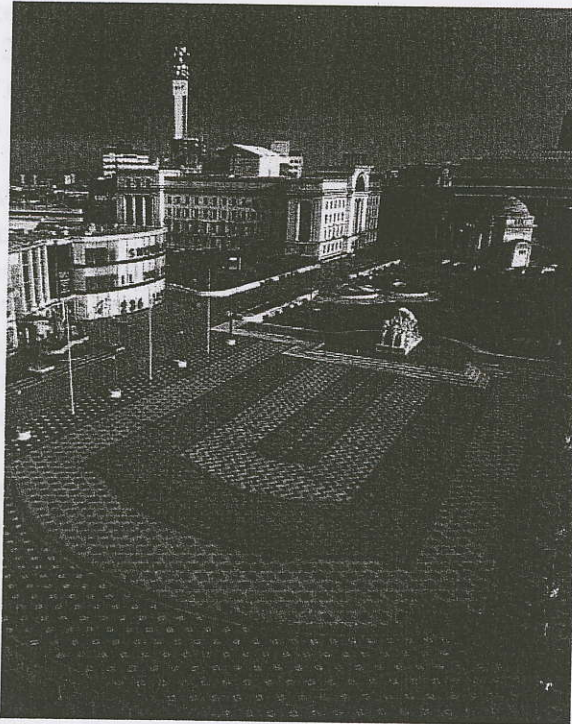


THE CONTRIBUTION OF CULTURE TO REGENERATION IN THE UK



A report to the Department for Culture Media and Sport



Graeme Evans, Phyllida Shaw & Keith Allen

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4.3 Acme Studios, London

Established in London in 1972, Acme Studios supports the development of fine art practice by providing low-cost accommodation and studio space for professional and 'start-up' visual artists. Starting with two derelict shops in Bow, it has now supported over 4,000 artists. Acme provides live/work programmes, artists' housing, an international agency programme and advice/consultancy work and currently manages 11 buildings, including former meat pie, cosmetics and cigarette factories, mainly in East and South East London, housing 360 non-residential studios, 25 units of accommodation and 4 to 5 year Live/Work residencies for 20 artists with and without disabilities. Sites are in inner urban areas, which are often the subject of subsequent regeneration such as in Stepney, Tower Hamlets, Southwark and Hackney.

Acme effectively uses vacant properties in derelict areas in the transition, often taking several years, from degeneration to successful regeneration. Acme also conserves and protects premises for employment and production use, and ensures a mixed-use of economic and social activity. In 1997 Acme was able to access lottery funding at a critical time to move from the management of vulnerable leasehold property to the acquisition of sites to start to build a permanent infrastructure. With property values soaring in London and suitable ex-industrial property at high values because of residential potential, Acme developed a variety of strategies to sustain and expand its provision of affordable workspace. For example, in 2000 Acme purchased a major studio site in Orsman Road, Hackney (48 studios - 26,500 sq.ft.) as low-cost studios for artists. To ensure that the whole project was financially viable, by cross-subsidising the studios, it was necessary to develop a small part of the site to create eight work/live units for open market sale. The part new-build work/live units (ranging in size from 900 to 2,200 sq.ft.) were completed in summer 2001 and all 8 units have been sold within a year.

The work/live units were designed and built in marked contrast to the very many, so called, 'live/work' schemes currently being marketed. Such developments often drift into residential use, against the planning policies of local authorities who wish to maintain employment use and are often unsuitable as workspace. Acme however ensures that the purchasers of the work/live units at Orsman Road which include painters, photographers, designers and choreographers, have all bought to occupy their units as genuine workspace with ancillary accommodation.

Not only has Acme achieved units of high-quality which meet the needs of these artists but, through the sale of the units, have generated capital to make the studio project viable as low-cost space. Such an exercise, which exploits the mechanisms of the property market, though time-consuming and complex, provides a useful mechanism to help achieve affordable and sustainable space for cultural use in perpetuity at a time of escalating property prices.

Supporting quotes:

'Since 1972 Acme has been a byword in the surviving parts of industrial London as an organisation willing to manage short life property for use as artists' studios' (Thorne, R. Architecture Today AT118: 58)

'It is something of a truism to say that artists are leaders in the process of urban regeneration, and that where they go, fashion, money and commercial development follow' (Kit Wedd *Creative Quarters 1700-2000*, Museum of London 2001, p.153/4).

'Jonathan Harvey (co-founder of Acme Studios) makes the point that local government's recognition of the role played by artist-led regeneration has come late in the day. Until recently artists were treated with some suspicion by local government: at best, as solutions to vacant property problems. Generally it is only within the last few years that local and national government have come to acknowledge the importance of 'the cultural industries' in raising the status of run-down districts... As the case studies pile up of inner-city areas transformed into vibrant cultural quarters, there seems little reason to doubt that planners will look ever more keenly on the presence of artists in their areas, seeing art as a significant indicator of regeneration potential' (ibid.)

Impacts

<i>Environmental (physical)</i>	Occupation/Re-Use of redundant buildings, Public Art and Environmental Improvements
<i>Economic</i>	Workspace and accommodation for artists, job retention and start-ups; property/area values and area improvement for housing and amenities

(Sources: Jonathan Harvey in *Creative Clusters*, Sheffield; 2002; Wedd, K et al., 2001, *Creative Quarters: the art world in London 1700-2000*. Museum of London)

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