

Developing artists' studios in partnership with social housing providers

By Rachel Barnett

THE GROUND-BREAKING SCHEME at Leven Road, Poplar, London E14, is the result of a partnership between provider and developer of artists' studios Acme Studios and social housing provider Swan Housing Group. It is the UK's first 100 per cent affordable, mixed-use residential and artists' studio development. The studios opened in April 2009.

"We were certain that the presence of artists within our development would bring added life to the area and would help bring existing and future residents together through ongoing community projects."

*Steve Eccles, Development Manager,
Swan Housing Group.*



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Exterior of Leven Road showing ground floor artists' studios

KEY OUTCOMES

- Twenty-one self-contained studios were designed and built through consultation with Acme, forming part of an entirely affordable mixed-use development which includes 66 affordable housing units for rent and shared ownership
- The first example of such a scheme, the project has generated a new model of partnership between a social housing provider and artists' studio provider
- The inclusion of affordable studios formed part of the Section 106 Agreement guaranteeing the continuation of this cultural resource in perpetuity
- A new studio residency has been created. This supports an artist involved with socially-engaged practice, giving them the opportunity to develop significant relationships, through their work, with local residents and the wider community. It also offers a financial and practical breathing space, allowing an artist to focus on the development of their practice

BACKGROUND

Swan Housing Association, part of the Swan Housing Group, builds and manages quality homes at rents that people can afford throughout London and Essex. They acquired a site in Poplar, London, which included a building previously used for warehousing. The local authority, Tower Hamlets, specified that there could be no job losses as a result of the new development and wanted to promote employment growth and the needs of the local workforce through the Section 106 requirement. It is thought that 14 people were originally employed on the site.

Following Acme's experience with the Galleria development in Southwark, South East London, a similar model was proposed, guaranteeing the

housing association 100 percent occupancy of the commercial element of the site from day one. It also met the Section 106 requirement to continue employment on the site and provide community benefit. This shows an important and timely attitude change, recognising that artists' work is a form of employment rather than a lifestyle choice. The scheme ensures that local artists can work in the area, providing benefits for the wider community.

FIRST STEPS

A land agent who had been working with Acme for some time brokered the partnership, offering the development site to Swan with Acme as a potential user of the employment space. Acme's track record of delivering similar schemes and



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Acme Chief Executive Jonathan Harvey with artist Claire Morgan in her studio with Hazel Blears MP

CASE STUDY: ACME Leven Road Studios

their knowledge of the local area made them obvious partners for Swan Housing. Plans for 21 self-contained studios increased the original employment opportunities on site by 50 per cent. Built to Acme's specifications, the studios are fully-accessible ground floor spaces with natural light, oversized doors and 3 metre high ceilings - important considerations for artists creating larger works.

DEVELOPMENT

As Acme and Swan Housing are responsible for managing their own tenants, working together created opportunities for residents and artists. Establishing this successful partnership has also acted as a model of good practice, encouraging other developers to adopt similar schemes. The 100 per cent sale of all the ground floor units and their continued occupation added further benefits to the scheme. Swan recognises that artists' studios are a good alternative to commercial units, which can be difficult to sell or rent and are often left empty.



Tower Hamlets Studio Residency Holder Jan Hendrickse with local residents at the public opening of Leven Road

"The size of the studio is so valuable to me. My previous space was smaller, much colder, less private and more expensive per square foot. It is so much easier now I can have different areas in the studio for the different processes I need to do, and not need to rearrange everything constantly."

Claire Morgan, artist at Leven Road.

Acme is also working with Swan to develop and improve local open spaces. Working with the resident artists to regenerate the area, bringing an aesthetic element to the obligatory environmental improvement, shows how this ground-breaking partnership can be mutually beneficial.

FINANCE

Acme negotiated a 125-year lease on the studios from Swan at a fixed price, sufficiently below the construction cost to enable Acme to guarantee affordable rents in perpetuity. Acme drew on funding from Arts Council England's Grants for the Arts Capital programme towards the costs of this project, releasing capital to be invested in future schemes.

Studios are rented to artists on seven-year leases at a fully inclusive rent of £9.20 per square foot, per year (from April 2008). This covers repayment of loan finance and running costs and generates a small surplus to cover central management costs and to invest in further schemes. This financial model ensures that the project is self-sustaining and will deliver affordable studios and community-focused programmes in perpetuity.

CASE STUDY: ACME Leven Road Studios

FUTURE

The success of the project has led to further partnerships between Acme and social and commercial housing developers. Projects include Harrow Road with Catalyst Housing Group in Brent (2010), Stratford High Street with Genesis Housing Group in Newham (2012), and the Lesney Matchbox Toy Factory development with Telford Homes in Hackney (2012). These projects will result in further studios for the long-term, provided at affordable rent levels for artists at the heart of new residential developments.

BENEFITS

To artists:

- The cost of rent is below average for a London studio space, meaning artists can concentrate on developing artistic practice without having to take on part-time work which is necessary to boost income to cover an expensive studio space
- Leven Road provides the opportunity for artists to work closer to home, reducing travel costs and increasing productivity
- Working in the studios provides opportunities for artists to engage with the local community
- As the spaces are permanent artists can settle without the worry of disruption to their work

To social housing providers:

- There has been full occupation of the studio spaces from day one
- Working in partnership with Acme has improved the quality of services on offer to residents and the local community

- Quiet activity and well-managed spaces in contrast to empty commercial units, which bring security risks and invite anti-social behaviour

MORE INFORMATION

Founded by Jonathan Harvey and David Panton in 1972, Acme Studios is a London-based charity which provides affordable studio and living space, and residencies and awards for non-commercial fine artists. Through this provision it continues to make a vital contribution to art and to the development of artists' careers. Acme supports over 500 artists and manages over 400 studio units in 11 buildings across London. Acme is recognised as the leading studio development organisation in England and has helped more than 5,000 artists with this fundamental means of support. Acme Studios is funded by Arts Council England.

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