

Wandsworth Arts Village, London

Temporary studio space for early-career artists: a pilot project

FORTY EARLY-CAREER ARTISTS have been given the opportunity to rent affordable studio space on a temporary basis at Wandsworth Business Village in south London. This exciting pilot project was initiated by the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers (NFASP) and property specialists Workspace Group with developers Glebe Joint Venture Partnership, and is being delivered by artists' studio provider and educational charity ACAVA (Association for Cultural Advancement through Visual Art).

Wandsworth Arts Village (WAV) opened in November 2008 and provides low-cost studio spaces, communal workshops and a gallery/project space to support artists in the research, production and presentation of high quality contemporary art for the public.

BENEFITS TO ARTISTS AND COMMUNITIES

The project is located close to Wandsworth's town centre and features a small gallery, Studio One, where local people can experience art works and creative projects at first hand. The gallery is curated and run by the artists, providing

KEY FEATURES

- 7,000 square feet of space for studios, gallery and workshops
- Low-cost studio space for 42 early-career artists
- Building managed by an established, charitable studio provider bringing credibility and expertise
- Development of a creative community in the heart of Wandsworth
- Arts activities for and involving the public: open studios, exhibitions, workshops and projects
- Developers and property owners delighted with artists' responsible and creative use of building
- Addresses a Wandsworth Council arts development priority



Shop front at Wandsworth Art Village, providing Studio One gallery space

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valuable experience as well as opportunities for debate and exchange amongst the artists and with the public. To date the gallery has mounted a monthly public exhibition and is the venue for critical discussions and training sessions to support the artists' creative and professional development and community engagement.

With the support and collaboration of ACAVA, Workspace and Glebe, Wandsworth Council's arts team and the local Town Centre Partnership, the artists are engaging in a range of exciting creative and cultural projects for members of the public within and outside the building, including educational activities with the local community and schools. They are holding regular Open Studio events, have been part of Wandsworth Arts Festival in May 2009, and are in discussion with Wandsworth Council and the Disability Arts in Wandsworth Network (DAWN) about other projects.

The early-career artists have formed themselves into a vital creative community and have been instrumental in establishing the project from the outset. Their involvement has meant immediate full occupation and a strong sense of mutual support and collaboration amongst the artists in the studios, as well as helping to keep costs down and improve the space and facilities.

Building on this commitment, ACAVA has been providing training and work experience for the new studio community in aspects of studio management, fundraising, community engagement and education work, helping to pass on knowledge, develop skills and nurture the studio providers, educators and arts managers of the future.

In addition to their benefits for culture and education, vibrant creative communities such as the Wandsworth Arts



Artists transforming the former business village

Village have a proven worth in regeneration agendas, and their activities bring art and life to an area. The long, everyday working hours and weekend use of many artists' studios gives presence and natural security, and the productive use and care of buildings avoids the blight and antisocial behaviour often associated with vacant sites.

SPACES FIT FOR PURPOSE

The WAV building is approximately 8,000 square feet (745 square metres), including circulation space, and can accommodate over 40 artists in a mixture of shared and individual spaces, plus the gallery and workshops.

The building was originally divided into multiple units for a variety of business uses. Whilst in need of refurbishment, the layout of the building was eminently suitable as artists' studios and planning permission wasn't needed for change of use. It met with all of the codes and compliances so that little work was required to bring it back into productive use. The affordability of the eventual spaces was further aided by the ability of the artists themselves to improve and adapt the spaces to their own needs, even impressing the building's owners.

The artists themselves are engaged in a wide variety of practices, from traditional painting techniques, through photography and printmaking, sculpture and installation, video, sound and electronic media, to live art and performance. Studios on different floors lend themselves to different practices, and the small shop front of Studio One provides the perfect gallery space to attract public attention to the work that goes on inside the building.



Interior of artist Charlie Day's studio

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GETTING THE NUMBERS RIGHT

Prior to the launch of this pilot, the NFASP researched the demand for temporary studio space and what would be affordable for early-career artists. This particular project was conceived with their needs in mind and eligibility was limited to those who were within the first three years of their careers. Artists had to be resident, or have studied in London, so that the project could help to fill an existing lack, rather than create new demand from outside the capital. In other circumstances or locations, temporary studios could serve to attract artists into a particular area or community.

Workspace/Glebe were generously able to offer the building at a peppercorn rent to ACAVA who, as an arts educational charity, are eligible for a mandatory 80% reduction in business rates due to the public benefit arising from their activities. Both of these were major contributing factors in keeping the final costs to artists to a minimum, and enabling them to contribute more to the local community. The licence fees charged to the artists are around one sixth of those charged for an average commercially-available workspace. As no rent is charged by the landlord, the £5 per square foot charged to the artists is sufficient to allow space to be set aside for exhibitions and public workshops and still cover all other costs. These include the 20% business rates, service charges, insurance, water rates, internet provision, cleaning materials and other consumables, signage, maintenance, security, and the initial building, repair and legal set up costs. ACAVA does not make a profit, but covers its management and administration costs.

Though the scale of such studio developments will vary with circumstances, larger developments give economies of scale, and the number of artists greatly affects the social



Artist Carol Mancke and visitors at an open studio event

dynamics. Around 24 artists is the number felt by many studio providers to be a good number to enable cohesion and diversity.

The building is leased to ACAVA for an initial period of 18 months though, in the current economic climate, this is likely to be extended. It was not considered viable to take on a lease for a shorter period, as set up costs are largely independent of the length of the lease, so this would have increased the cost to the artists.

CREATING ARTISTIC COMMUNITIES

Feedback from artists within and outside the project emphasises the value of live, artistic communities in which to work. This is particularly important for artists at the early stages of their careers, when a mutually supportive environment can be a crucial factor in helping them to survive and thrive as creative practitioners.

This extends far beyond the principle of a 'network', into the day-to-day sustenance of artistic practice and enquiry through creative, practical and intellectual exchange. Practical support is available in the shared workshop areas where space, tools, skills and experience are available to mutual benefit. Other support is available through the contact, common activities and exchange among artists, which extends opportunities within and beyond the immediate group into the local community and wider world.

RETAINING CREATIVE TALENT

Wandsworth Arts Village offers a model whereby property that is awaiting redevelopment can be made available for cultural uses. In this pilot, some of London's recent art graduates and early-career artists have been able to take up a first studio space in the capital at an affordable rent.

Without this kind of support, such artists could struggle to find an affordable space, face years on the waiting list of an artists' studio provider or, potentially, give up their practice. This is a situation that is mirrored in cities, towns and rural areas all over the UK and yet an increasing number of suitable properties stand empty and ripe for this kind of creative intervention. Experienced and reliable organisations such as artists' studio providers can help to resolve such a dilemma and help to retain creative talent in an area.

INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

These temporary studios are specifically designed to support emerging artists who could not otherwise afford a studio. The project provides the crucial bridge that will allow such

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artists to fulfil the promise of their education and make an immediate contribution to society and their local communities through art and creative practice. These are the very artists who will create the art of the future, making it available to the public in exhibitions and activities throughout the capital and the nation.

They will also be some of the teachers, project leaders and facilitators of future generations of creative people and the wider public, contributing to individual and social well-being and development. Without such projects, many artists face losing the momentum of their education and other opportunities that they have worked hard at, whilst struggling to fund the research and practice from which art and creativity comes.

ABOUT THE PROJECT PARTNERS

The project demonstrates the imagination and foresight of Workspace Group plc, a leading provider of flexible business accommodation and Glebe, a dynamic property investment and development company, in recognising the benefits of sharing their space in this way. They and the NFASP hope that this pilot provides a persuasive example of the benefits of granting access to temporary space for cultural and social uses. We hope it will encourage landlords and developers alike to work with studio providers in making unused space available for artists to work in, rather than leaving their buildings empty or prematurely decommissioning property that is earmarked for later development. In this way, property can be kept in productive use, at no risk to the eventual scheme, and no cost to the property's owners.

ACAVA is an experienced educational arts charity and studio provider, and has worked for 30 years with a wide range of visual artists to provide educational, developmental and creative opportunities to members of the public. They have extensive experience in providing artists' studios in temporary and permanent buildings, as well as an inspirational track record of supporting early-career artists.

NFASP is the national representative body for all those engaged in providing affordable studios for artists. We are the voice of a sector that has grown over the last 40 years to include mature, multi-building organisations providing studios to hundreds of artists, as well as embryonic groups just establishing themselves as artistic communities. We offer a range of support and advisory services to our member studio organisations which provide affordable studios to some 6,000 artists nationally, often with an equal



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Key partners in an early site visit

number on their waiting lists. We campaign to sustain and increase this essential infrastructure upon which so much artistic activity and cultural production depends. As part of our remit, we are developing case study material on a range of models and ways of developing artists' studios, which will be published on our website.

NFASP AND THE LONGER TERM

NFASP aims to see schemes like this working with other studio providers, developers and property owners across the UK. We hope that successful projects such as WAV will increase awareness of the value of artists at the heart of our communities and encourage planners, property owners and developers to seek opportunities to develop longer-term or permanent affordable artists' workspace, as well as to make more temporary space available for cultural uses now. The established affordable artists' studio sector grew out of initiatives like this one, and the NFASP is keen to ensure that the lessons learned and benefits of this earlier phase of evolution are put into practice.



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