

Live/work studios: a social enterprise for artists and communities

BOW ARTS TRUST'S LIVE/WORK SCHEME is a collaboration with registered social landlord Poplar HARCA and is a unique initiative offering artists and creative practitioners access to affordable live/work spaces. The project is designed to support artists and promote culture within communities using a social enterprise model.

BACKGROUND

Bow Arts Trust aims to support artists by providing secure, affordable studio space as well as offering opportunities for employment and community engagement. The Trust is committed to serving the residents of Tower Hamlets in London, one of the poorest boroughs in the country, through investment



Balfron Tower, now part of the Bow Arts Trust live/work scheme

KEY OUTCOMES

- This is the first scheme in the UK to develop a long-term partnership between the studio sector and a social landlord
- Although the location of the live/work units might change, the model on which they are based continues so the relationships between artist and community and between studio provider and landlord continues to develop
- Highly visible, small, self contained art projects are run in the community, such as bulb and shrub planting, to introduce the artists, raise the profile of the scheme, and instantly make a positive difference to the area

"Our residents are happy that artists with a genuine commitment to the local community have been able to make a home, albeit for a short time, in properties that were prone to squatting and associated anti-social behaviour."

Steve Stride, Chief Executive of Poplar HARCA

CASE STUDY: BOW ARTS TRUST POPLAR HARCA

in the cultural environment of the area and contributing to local regeneration projects.

As an organisation without regular public funding, Bow Arts Trust is committed to adopting a social enterprise model through all aspects of its work. Giving artists the tools and opportunities to be economically sustainable is key to the Trust's success in raising the profile of the arts and re-educating the public about the work of visual artists. The live/work scheme is evidence of this model in practice.

FIRST STEPS

As a nominated community partner of St. Paul's Way Community School, Bow Arts Trust was involved in supporting the school through a major rebuild. Also involved was social landlord Poplar HARCA and, together with a representative of local residents, all parties explored mutual opportunities to help the school and surrounding environment.

Bow Arts Trust proposed that Poplar HARCA give them some of the many empty flats in the area for artists to use as live/work spaces. This would be an opportunity to bring these empty properties back into use, for artists to acquire a much-needed place to live as well as space to work, and an opportunity for artists to be embedded at the heart of the community whilst also working to regenerate the local area.

Poplar HARCA agreed to the scheme across their entire district, understanding that artists form a natural community who will work towards the regeneration and aesthetic improvement of their environment. Another plus point was that there would be zero cost involved to Poplar HARCA residents.

Artists were selected based on a number of criteria, including their commitment to community engagement as well as their artistic practice. It was also important that artists' earning levels did not preclude them from living in social housing.

SOCIAL ENTERPRISE IN PRACTICE

Social enterprises are businesses with primarily social objectives whose surpluses are reinvested in the business or community. Social enterprise is a business model which offers the prospect of a greater equity of economic power and a more sustainable society, by combining market efficiency with social and environmental justice.

A project run by Bhajan Hunjan, a live/work artist is a good example. Bhajan taught printing techniques to Bengali women in the local community, and participants made bedspreads, cushions and other textiles. Bow Arts Trust then approached HARCA to explore the possibilities of using empty shop units in the area to sell the group's work. Not only does this help the further regeneration of the area it also empowers the community group as they move from workshop participants to businesswomen.

DEVELOPMENT

The artists inhabit homes that are awaiting refurbishment or redevelopment as part of Poplar HARCA's longer-term plans. To enable work to begin according to HARCA's schedule of work the artists agree to vacate them at the end of a fixed period. Another space can be taken up under similar terms at a different location within the area, maintaining involvement with the local community.

Bow Arts Trust, acting as landlords, undertake a full gas and electrical inspection of the empty property. They also fix all windows and doors and make sure that there is basic plumbing. The artists then have a period where, rent free, they can make their space habitable, as well as personalise it.

The financing of the scheme is evidence of the social enterprise model. The charges to artists are based on affordable social housing rates. The scheme intends to help artists thrive economically as well as artistically. Two-thirds of the artists' rent



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Artist Julie Fagin in her Bow Arts Trust Poplar HARCA live/work space

contributes to the running costs of the scheme and a third goes towards a community arts fund that delivers a programme of high quality, sustainable community art projects for local people throughout the borough.

FUTURE

With 25 units available at the outset the number had risen to 60 by July 2010. There is a registration list of over 200 artists looking for live/work units (July 2010). The scheme is part of a 10 year regeneration programme in the Poplar area which runs until 2017.

As more people become aware of the scheme and more funding is granted, high quality, large scale projects can be planned. The live/work artists generate £56,000 of community arts money each year which makes a significant contribution to any application for additional project funding.

To evaluate the scheme, an innovative diary template was designed which provides qualitative and quantitative data about the artists' engagement as residents, with the local community and with their own practice.

The latest development pioneered by Bow Arts Trust is a bespoke social networking website for all local artists - it is estimated there are 1,600 artists in the area. www.londonsartistquarter.org aims to reinforce this growing community by enabling artists to communicate about projects, practice, shows, and share experiences.

BENEFITS

Benefits to the community:

- One third of the rent from the scheme goes into a self-supporting community arts chest which directly supports community arts activity
- The live/work scheme provides opportunities for the community, especially young people, to raise their aspirations and access creative industry and other career opportunities
- The local community can enjoy a safer, more pleasant area with occupied buildings full of life and vibrancy

"I've lived in Warren House for over 25 years and only ever knew my next-door neighbours. Since the artists moved in I know nearly the whole building. It's such a lively and friendly community now."

Local resident

Benefits to the Registered Social Landlord:

- The project is a no-cost solution to the problems associated with empty properties; rates, anti-squatting measures, maintenance, policing, and anti-social behaviour
- The artists taking part in the live/work scheme make a sustained, consolidated contribution to the communities of the estates
- Working with the Bow Arts Trust helps Poplar HARCA to fulfil its mandate to support residents and work towards the regeneration of the area

Benefits to the artists:

- Studio and living costs are consolidated into one affordable space so artists can concentrate on their work without having to take on part-time work to cover studio costs
- The social enterprise model from which the live/work scheme operates helps artists succeed economically and therefore artistically
- Engaging with the local community helps artists to grow in confidence and can add a new dimension to their practice as well as supporting their work financially
- Live/work artists can support each other, whether with a friendly cup of tea or sharing skills and experience and so a community of artists is growing

"It's really great, I can't believe I have been given this opportunity, and knowing that part of my rent goes directly to supporting local communities is incredible."

Artist living in Balfon Tower

MORE INFORMATION

Bow Arts Trust was established in 1995 as an arts educational charity and company limited by guarantee. The Trust currently runs four studio sites in East and South East London housing approximately 200 artists in spaces ranging in size from 90 to 800 square feet. In addition there are 60 Live Work flats housing over 85 artists (July 2010) The Nunnery Gallery has been running a successful international contemporary exhibition programme for the last 11 years. Generating income and opportunities for artists through education and community programmes, commissions and residencies, the Trust also works annually with up to 20,000 disadvantaged young people.

Telephone: 020 8980 7774

www.bowarts.org

www.londonsartistquarter.org

Poplar HARCA (Housing and Regeneration Community Association) is a registered social landlord managing 10,000 homes, aiming to bring about the social and urban regeneration of the Poplar area by meeting the need for good quality, affordable housing. They have already invested almost £250 million, refurbishing homes to bring them into line with the Government's 'Decent Homes' standard.

Telephone: 020 7510 0500

www.poplarharca.co.uk



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The interior of one of the Poplar HARCA live/work flats

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