

The Art House: being inclusive – purpose built studio space for all artists - with or without disabilities

Summary

The Art House is a unique national membership organisation established to create equality of opportunity for disabled and non-disabled artists and craftspeople. Set up by a group of artists in 1994, it is an inclusive organisation that believes in enabling all artists to have access to work, training and exhibition opportunities in accessible settings.

Founded in response to a profound lack of physically accessible studio space, The Art House's prime aim for the last 13 years has been to build inclusive, flexible and innovative workspace where technicians enable disabled artists and craftspeople to create new work alongside their non-disabled peers. Spring of 2008 will mark the realisation of this vision when the first workspaces open at The Art House's new, purpose-built studio complex in Wakefield, West Yorkshire.



Key issues

Access for all - The aim of The Art House has always been to build studios with the highest possible level of access for people who face a wide range of different disabilities, reflecting the core ethos of inclusion.

Finding a suitable location - To ensure access for all, the location of the studio complex was crucial. It had to be in the city centre close to public transport and accessible parking for disabled drivers. After several unsuccessful applications to secure a suitable location, Wakefield Council provided a site on Drury Lane, close to the town centre, Wakefield Westgate station and other cultural organisations.

Design - In the general design of the building, the project team, in consultation with Art House members, continually tried to think about the best provision for people with a range of disabilities:

- An initial idea for a guide rail for blind and visually impaired users as an artist's commission has grown to become 'the Helping Band' – a complete navigation system for the building
- The two-metre wide corridors will allow everyone to pass without ducking into doorways, whether they use a wheelchair, walk with a guide dog or are carrying a wide load.

Funding - The building has been funded by Arts Council England's Lottery-funded Capital Programme, with further funding from the European Regional Development Fund, Yorkshire Forward, Wakefield Council, trusts and donations. The total project cost is around £3 million. In order to secure part of the funding it was crucial that several key milestones were achieved in the timeline.

Timeline

- 1994 The Art House was founded.
- 1996 Arts Council England grant for feasibility study into artists needs.
- 2000 The Art House applied for second round of lottery funding. (18 months in timeline were lost and first round of lottery funding missed due to problems with consultants undertaking feasibility study).
- 2002 The Art House offered a building site by local council at Doncaster, but fell through due to change in local politics.
- 2004 Secured offer of site in Wakefield.
- 2007 48 week build commenced.
- 2008 First workspaces due to open in early spring.

Top tips – what did we learn?

- Undertake a feasibility study into your project and be open to the outcomes
- Always make sure your contracts with consultants and other contractors are water-tight
- Ensure you have a strong board of trustees with appropriate backgrounds and experience.

Future plans

Phase 2 - With the completion of phase one of The Art House, feasibility studies for the second phase utilising the current Drury Lane library (which will be moving to new premises in 2010) will commence, but will also be informed by the learning in phase one.

National and international residencies – In 2006 The Art House initiated a programme of international exchanges between artists in the UK and Poland/Czech Republic. With the workspace complete the residential programme can be extended.

Fact file

Website: <http://www.the-arthouse.org.uk/>

Established: 1994

Organisational structure: Company limited by guarantee and registered charity

Paid staff (days): 6 full-time, 2 part-time (project-based), 1 full-time temp.

Volunteer staff (days): None on regular basis, although ad-hoc support given

Freehold sites: 1

Studio units: 12

Studio-holders: Up to 18 artists (with a target of at least 1/3 disabled artists)

Members: 250 nationally

Equipped workshop: 1

Training/meeting rooms for hire: 3

Gallery space: 1

Short term studio: 2

Short-stay residential apartment: 3 bedroom flat (the flat can accommodate 2 artists and their personal assistants at any one time)