

WORKING WITH HARD TO REACH COMMUNITIES

OVERVIEW

SO, you've set up your studios and filled them with artists, developed a programme of events, exhibitions or other activities (or at least thought about doing so), but where is your audience? How can you engage new people with what you're doing and embed yourself in your community? What if that community is close-knit and suspicious of outsiders?

This case study looks at the experiences of East Street Arts as they set up a studio complex and exhibition/project space in Chapeltown, Leeds and how they attempted to engage with the very diverse communities of Chapeltown.

This is a difficult area and not one that can be addressed through any magic quick-fix solutions. For East Street Arts, who opened their Chapeltown space in 2009, it is still early days and they are still learning.

CHAPELTOWN MAPPING | LARNA CAMPBELL | 2ND JUNE 2010



TOCSIN BANG | STEPHEN FELMINGHAM | 11TH - 28TH APRIL 2011

BACKGROUND

EAST STREET ARTS was set up by artists Karen Watson and Jon Wakeman and the first studio space opened its doors in 1993. East Street Arts became a limited company in 1998 and a registered charity in 1999.

Watson and Wakeman had been studying and working elsewhere before coming to Leeds and seen lots of artist-led spaces in cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle, but couldn't find anything similar in Leeds, apart from some studios set up by students, with no links to the policy makers.

At the time there was also little in the way of connected policy and infrastructure for the visual arts in Leeds and Watson and Wakeman were an unknown quantity as no-one knew them. However they set about finding a building to rent – East Street Mills – advertised for artists in What's On Leeds and began to build relationships with Leeds City Council and the Arts Council.

Since then they have gone on to owning their own building and developing a range of workspaces for artists around Leeds and even further afield. They are now embedded within the arts infrastructure and can feed into artistic policy and decision making. At the time of writing they are also managing nearly forty temporary spaces for artists.

As the studios developed so did the professional development strands of East Street Arts' work but, as Karen Watson says, they felt that there was still something missing: "We've got somewhere to work, some support, but how do we link to our audiences?"

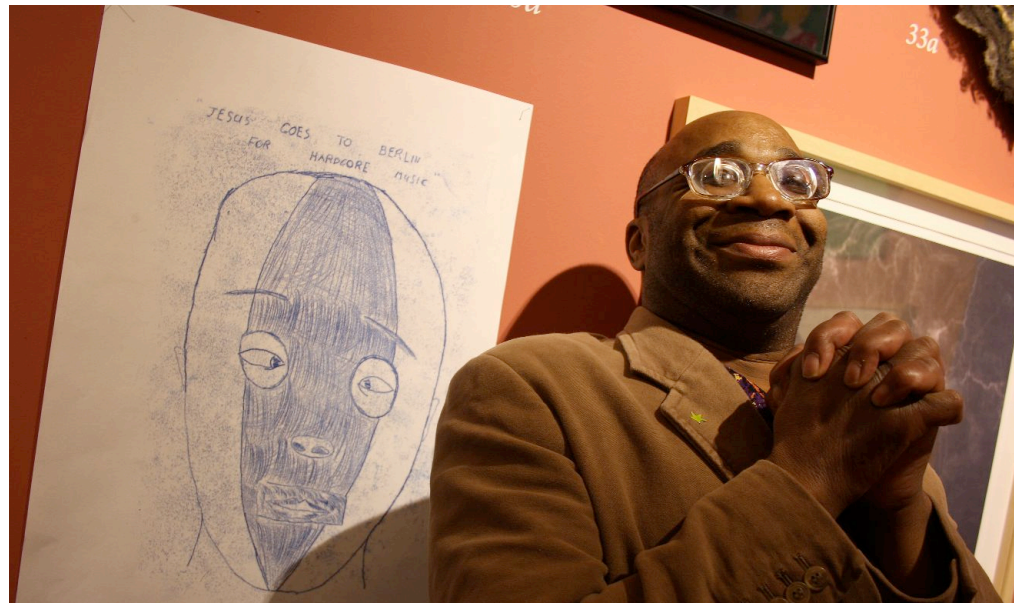
FIRST STEPS

EAST STREET ARTS' idea for studios in the Chapeltown area of Leeds grew out of many things. The population of Chapeltown is very multi-cultural with residents coming from many different backgrounds, predominantly Afro-Caribbean and Asian. Elsewhere in Leeds the visible artistic population was mostly white.

Karen and John had lived there for many years and were aware that it was the focus of a regeneration initiative. They also knew that, while there were a lot of creative people living there, artists from Chapeltown weren't joining studios in other parts of the city. From questionnaires and focus groups it became clear that these artists felt that they wanted their own studio space in Chapeltown, rather than joining existing studios. Leeds should come to them.

The idea was to create studios for Chapeltown artists and to have a gallery on the street level with programming informed by people living and working in Chapeltown. As Karen says, "Opening a space in a multi-cultural area is different." And there were always going to be issues and problems that wouldn't be easily or quickly addressed. She goes on to add that she can write race equality action plans (for funders) until they come out of her ears, but wants them to mean something.

CHAPELTOWN MAPPING | LARNA CAMPBELL | 2ND JUNE 2010



TONY TOMLIN PART OF THE ARTISAN SALON SHOW | 18TH MARCH 2010

DEVELOPING THE SPACE AND THE PROGRAMME

ARMED with the knowledge that there was a bumpy ride ahead, but also with a sense of what the local artists wanted and with a desire to work with audiences and participants, East Street Arts began conversations with a housing association. Working on the premise that Regeneration = Neighbourhood, East Street Arts wanted to put artists where people spend time.

East Street Arts knew that there'd be a period of suspicion and bedding in so, having found the space they wanted, they took on a ten year lease to show that they meant to stay. They also tailored the studios to the creative community of Chapeltown, offering spaces for a range of practices broader than fine and applied art. Union 105 opened its doors in 2009.

East Street Arts' programming philosophy applies to all of the studios that they manage across Leeds and beyond. It states:

East Street Arts' public programme is focused on the practitioner as collaborator, instigator, deviser and active link between creative exploration/production and engagement with other people. We are interested in working with practitioners based in Leeds and those from further-a-field who see collaboration and participation as intrinsic to their work.

The programme is events-based and forms the public face of the organisation aiming to develop relationships between

practitioners and participants/audience members. Events take place in appropriate spaces including Patrick Studios' Project Space.

Our curatorial approach is to question traditional formats of presentation and engagement in order to further the relationships between the producers and consumers of art.

However well-conceived on paper, programmed projects can sometimes provoke unexpected outcomes. An early Union 105 project was devised to stimulate debate around knife crime and gang culture, which were problems for the area. East Street Arts invited London-based artist, Tahera Aziz to present the work she made in response to the murder of Stephen Lawrence in a show called [re]locate. While the exhibition itself had good reviews from the wider community and the intention to provoke debate around the issues it raised was approved in Chapeltown, there was a resentment at an artist from London being brought in to spark the debate. East Street Arts also felt, in hindsight, that they had opened the space with something about the negative side of Chapeltown.

Since then the space has shown a lot of work by people from Chapeltown and the programme has developed in a responsive way, yet still seems true to the programming principles. A recent project Under The Paving Stones sought to re-imagine the 1968 student riots in Paris.

FINANCE

EAST STREET ARTS are funded by Arts Council England and Leeds City Council. In setting up the Union 105 studios and project space they had a bit of capital funding and revenue funding for a post. The funder for Union 105 capital and revenue was Local Enterprise Growth Initiative (LEGI). The studios themselves generate rent revenue.

IMPACT/BENEFITS

It is still early days for the Union 105 project. Karen says that they are learning all the time but that, while they are getting good feedback, everything still seems a bit raw.

East Street Arts had a milestone plan for the project and a target to embed Union 105 into the community so that people could see that it was a recognisable space that wouldn't disappear.

While some people in the community

now seem pleased that they are there, there are others who feel that people from Chapeltown should be doing what East Street Arts are doing.

The new space has also stretched East Street Arts' capacity at a time when they are managing one permanent owned space (Patrick Studios), in another part of the city and supporting many others either on long or short term leases.

But, from a disused and dilapidated building in a developing part of Leeds, Union 105 is beginning to carve out a niche for itself. Union 105 has its own blog site, which tells the story from the first site visits to the current programme and resident artists. East Street Arts are now working with the fledgling Chapeltown Development Trust and are negotiating with the housing association landlord to buy the building, signalling that they are there for the long haul.



UTPS | UNION 105 | 21ST JUNE 2011

USEFUL LINKS

www.esa.org.uk

<http://www.engage.org/publications/engage.aspx> (link to Engage publications, including lots of useful information about working with specific audiences)

<http://chapeltdowntd.org.uk/>
Chapeltdown Development Trust

<http://utps.org.uk/gallery/> Under the Paving Stones project photo gallery

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TOP TIPS

What follows may seem obvious in the cold light of day, but can be forgotten in the heat of project planning. So here are some questions to consider before engaging new audiences and/or your local community and some tips:

- Who do you want to reach?
- Why you want to work with/engage them?
- Is there a key figure (or figures) who can speak for the wider community group and advocate back to them on your behalf (the local council or arts development officer might be able to advise you, or just listen out for a name that comes up again and again)?
- If so, how can you contact them? (nb an enthusiastic introduction works wonders)
- What can/are you offering your target group? Eg access to workshops, events, studio tenancies, project participation.
- Why might they be interested?
- Who else wants to reach this group? Is there scope for collaboration?
- Are there special places where some, or all, of your target group meet eg: local shop, community centre, school gates, cafe, pub?
- If the target group is your local community have you read the local papers to find out what the burning issues, local sensitivities are.