

Valentines Mansion: Developing Artists' Studios in a Listed Building

Redbridge Council working with ACAVA

By Amanda Astrop

VALENTINES MANSION, a disused Grade II* listed building in Ilford, Essex, has been transformed into a mixed-use cultural facility for the whole community, combining a heritage visitor attraction and artists' studio spaces.

Working closely with ACAVA (The Association for Cultural Advancement Through Visual Arts), the London Borough of Redbridge has created six studios varying in size from 277sq ft to 550 sq ft, which are available for long-term lease to local artists, along with a kitchen and communal area.

The development provides excellent marketing opportunities for the artists, with a small exhibition space, where visitors can view their work, a shop where they can sell their work and regular open studio events.

The Mansion development has been designed to provide a balance between providing income for the local authority with high quality cultural and community services – a place where local people can access cultural experiences and are encouraged to get involved.



Valentines Mansion, Ilford Essex

"Unlike other developments, there were some issues which were quite unique to creating studio spaces within a listed building. There were some real practical issues and restrictions around what the artists could and couldn't bring into the space – simple things such as not being able to drill holes into the walls because they're protected by conservation requirements. But it was incredibly useful to have ACAVA there to advise us on alternatives and how the artists would need to use and access the spaces,"

Vicky de Wit, Head of Culture, London Borough of Redbridge.

KEY OUTCOMES

- Overcoming the unique constraints of developing a listed building for artist studio use
- Creating cultural provision that previously did not exist
- Studio provider organisation able to advise on design of artists' spaces
- Studio provider organisation managing artists' spaces on behalf of local authority
- Creation of an artist in residence post

KEY OUTCOMES

Overcoming the unique constraints of developing a listed building for artist studio use:

As the building is Grade II listed, artists are required to be extra vigilant about their passage through it, particularly when moving materials in and out of the studios. Artists are not, for instance, able to fix anything directly to the walls or to do anything that may cause damage to the studio floor. Alternative solutions were found, in consultation with ACAVA, which enable the artists to make full use of their studio spaces including covering the walls with suitable materials such as plyboard or protecting the floor with plastic or hardboard.

Creating cultural provision that previously did not exist:

There were previously no visual artists' spaces or visual arts programming at all in the borough. Valentines Mansion is now actively providing opportunities for both local artists to develop their practice and for local people to be inspired by and engage with visual arts activities.

Studio provider organisation able to advise on design of artists' spaces:

As a result of ACAVA being engaged at an early stage in the planning process, it was able to advise on many practical elements of the process and some specifications were changed as a result of its recommendations. This included adding a communal area to allow artists to network with each other, as well as specific details relating to the fit-out.

Studio provider organisation managing artists' spaces on behalf of local authority:

ACAVA, as leaseholder of the artists' studios, is responsible for their management, giving the local authority the reassurance that the facilities are in expert hands. As well as recruiting artists, ensuring the studios are full and that the artists comply with the terms of their licence, ACAVA facilitate the open studio events in collaboration with Redbridge Council. ACAVA also initially advised on the rental prices of the studios – looking at what artists would realistically be able to afford and advising on their likely overheads.

Creation of an artist in residence post:

The artist in residence post is further helping to forge a link between the Mansion and the local community, as well as providing opportunities for the public to engage in new cultural experiences including creative workshops and artist talks.

BACKGROUND

The Mansion, which is owned by Redbridge Council, was completely restored between July 2007 and November 2008. The local authority was initially unsure about what to do with the Mansion but was clear it should have a community and cultural base within it.

They did not want it to be a straightforward museum in the conventional sense and carried out an extensive independent consultation process in 2004 with a range of stakeholders including established local community and arts groups.

"The idea for a balance of use came out of that consultation process - something that would include community spaces, which could be hired, educational resources, heritage experiences and creative spaces for artists," says Vicky de Wit, Head of Culture, London Borough of Redbridge.

It was decided that the top floor of the building, the old servants' quarters, would be the best location for the artists' studio spaces. Key to the political success of this change of use was that local artists would be the primary focus of the new resources and that this, in turn, would attract visitors to the building.

CASE STUDY: Valentines Mansion

national federation of artists' studio providers

An audience development plan was initially developed by the local authority for a prospective bid to the Heritage Lottery Fund in 2004, which was followed by a detailed bid in the summer of 2005. Having secured the funding, the local authority set about researching the process of creating the artists' studio spaces.

"It became clear at a very early stage that we would need an external agency to assist us with this as there were multiple requirements including the recruitment of the artists, managing artists and the studios and exhibition space," says Vicky.

"We were guided by the National Federation of Artists' Studio Providers and various Arts Council publications to find the right organisation and to know what to look out for. ACAVA, with their huge amount of experience, were the perfect partners for the project."

"ACAVA has over 35 years' experience of managing buildings and artists' spaces," says Duncan Smith, ACAVA's Artistic Director. "In fact our very first building project involved a relationship with a local authority. This project was a real collaboration between ourselves and Redbridge Council."

The process of advertising the studios and selecting artists was managed by ACAVA. Due to some of the practical restrictions around what artists could and couldn't do in their Grade II listed studios and that four of the studios were to be shared spaces, individual artistic practice was a key consideration in the recruitment of artists. For instance, artforms that would require the use of heavy machinery or materials such as stone carving would not have been appropriate. The range of artists now working in the studios alongside one another includes painters and ceramicists, as well as installation and video artists.

FINANCES

The Heritage Lottery Fund provided £1,956,000 towards the internal and external restoration of the building. Redbridge Council provided the additional £1.2million required to restore the Mansion to full use. Ongoing income comes predominantly from the hire of the public rooms, along with the rental of the studios.



Artists have the opportunity to exhibit their work.

BENEFITS DELIVERED

To the wider community:

"Having artists in the building has provided something which simply hasn't been there before. Museums and heritage buildings can sometimes be considered a bit old-fashioned but having artists here gives the place a whole new dimension, a real life and vibrancy.

"It is a hugely positive project, which has provided this area with cultural provision which simply didn't exist before and will support not only local artists but the wider community in its wide ranging education programmes. We would definitely do something similar again." Vicky de Wit.

To local artists:

The Mansion and grounds provide an inspiring setting and opportunity for artists to develop and display artwork that provides a fresh perspective on its architecture, history and setting.

CASE STUDY: Valentines Mansion

Queues form on the opening day

"Artists often don't get the opportunity to sell their work or have it exhibited in this very public way. These artists are being given the opportunity to make a living from their skills and develop their practice."

Duncan Smith, Artistic Director, ACAVA

"The Mansion development is helping to professionalise artists in the local area on a number of levels. Artists often have to work in isolation from one another but here there is a real mix of artists working alongside one another, from young artists just starting up to very experienced artists. Artists often don't get the opportunity to sell their work or have it exhibited in this very public way. These artists are being given the opportunity to make a living from their skills and develop their practice " Duncan Smith.

To the local authority:

There are very clear and tangible benefits in cultural and artistic terms, as well as educational and social. A successful project such as this will help Redbridge Council to gain political support for future projects and for supporting the development of further artists' spaces, as councillors are able to see the real tangible benefits of work within the community setting.

In its first quarter, Valentines Mansion attracted over 20,000 visitors. The regular open studio events have been a contributing factor in this success, with visitor feedback proving they are incredibly popular and that the local community has really engaged with the whole idea.

Contemporary artists are being commissioned to produce work that helps to engage with different audiences throughout the local community. In one commission, local filmmaker Sadia Ur Rehman worked with a group of young people from the surrounding area to create short animated films.

FUTURE PLANS

Valentines Mansion is well placed to become a cultural hub for the borough and has already secured £80,000 for a family cultural programme from the London Museums Hub.

It has been selected as one of only 16 cultural organisations in the UK to take part in the museummaker 2 programme, an Arts Council England and Museums, Libraries and Archives Council initiative that will see leading contemporary makers and designers create new installations for the building. It will be supported to commission new artwork, as well as creating audience development projects.

Funding is also being sought to secure the long-term sustainability of the artist-in-residence programme.

Redbridge Council is also planning to work with ACAVA to further develop an education and community programme in the borough.

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