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Learning from live/work

Site profile: **Bow Arts Live/Work Units**

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Funding arts locally while providing artists with affordable living and working space can sound like a utopian vision. But in 2007, an encounter between the [Bow Arts Trust](#) and social landlord [Poplar HARCA](#), who found themselves working together on another project, made this vision a reality in East London. LSE London went in early 2015 to meet Bow Arts Executive Director and Head of Creative Workspaces Michael Cubey.

Eight years ago, the Trust—whose aim is to support community renewal in East London through arts—asked Poplar HARCA to make some of its vacant flats available for artists as live/work spaces. Redundant flats have a cost: Poplar HARCA was happy to save the yearly £5,000 to £6,000 per unit it would otherwise have spent on maintenance and protection against squatting, so they originally provided the units to Bow Arts Trust for free.

But why did the housing association have any vacant flats, given London's increasing housing shortage? These units were in buildings awaiting refurbishment or redevelopment as part of Poplar HARCA's regeneration plans, and were therefore only temporarily vacant. The initial expectation was that artists would occupy the units for only around 18 months, with contract extensions every three months. But regeneration works were delayed, and some artists who moved in at the beginning of the scheme stayed as long as 5 years. Still, the artists had to accept uncertain, insecure tenures in exchange for cheap housing.

intentionally kept the rents low (typically around £450 a month for a two-bed flat). This allowed the artists to focus on their art, and still generated a surplus for the Trust. In 2010, it allocated around £50,000 to a community arts chest, helping to fund a gallery and an arts education programme amongst other things.

Not every artist could benefit from the scheme. Bow Arts was in charge of selecting the new residents. The first criterion was that participating artists had to make a contribution to the community through art, but they also had to be economically independent (i.e. not reliant on housing benefit).



Existing Poplar HARCA residents were suspicious at first. The association's regeneration process had already resulted in the displacement of some residents, and having strangers move in was yet another disruption. But the artists took concrete steps early on to integrate and make a positive change to the community, e.g. painting walls and planting a garden. This innovative scheme accomplishes two goals: it puts vacant housing to a productive use in an alternative way, and it stimulates community regeneration by allowing artists to play an educational role (they have taught their arts in schools but also to adult residents) and to encourage community interaction. Michael Cubey observed that residents who did not know their neighbours started speaking to each other after the artists moved in.

The Trust's original financial plan set aside one-third of the rent to cover maintenance costs, and the remaining two-thirds were locally reinvested in arts. But following the 2009 recession Poplar HARCA faced financial hardship and was no longer able to provide their redundant units for free. Consequently, Bow Arts now has to charge their artists higher rents: about £650 for a two-bed flat, from which over £400 goes back to Poplar HARCA. To prevent the rents from rising too sharply, the arts chest contribution was given up and now only the maintenance costs are covered. This was a hit to the live/work scheme which has slowed down since. At its peak in 2010 the scheme involved around 100 artists in 8 buildings, while today there are 85 artists in 2 buildings (Warren House and Balfron Tower).



Ernö Goldfinger, has raised concerns among the local community and social tenants. This iconic building was originally built as social housing, but after refurbishment that flats will be exclusively private. Half of the properties currently managed by Bow Arts are located in this landmark building, which presents a huge relocation challenge for the Trust

given the lack of available units around London. Current plans are for the housing block to be empty by around June 2015, when regeneration might begin. As Bow Arts does not receive any government grants or subsidies, they are approaching other housing associations to try to negotiate access to their vacant units. This, they hope, will generate partnerships with new housing providers and allow them to relocate the current residents of their 43 flats in the Balfon Tower.



Many housing associations across London are undertaking or will undertake regeneration or refurbishment projects of their old and poorly maintained buildings, leaving a considerable number of housing units vacant. There is great potential for Bow Arts and other similar organisations to enter into ‘win-win’ relationships like those with Poplar, although the group has yet to find replacement units for the artists who must leave Poplar. When assessing the potential for this type of scheme to be scaled up, however, there are some key things to consider. First, the prototype is only for artists. While the method could also serve other types of residents, the organisers would still need to make a strong case for the mutual benefits of such into this kind of an arrangement. As Michael Cubey puts it: “There is a model that can work”.

central and inner London is pushing away members of this 'cultural' mass. Bow Arts representatives said that some former residents are now living in co-housing schemes, others moved into the Olympic Village nearby, and others are living in shared accommodation. Increasingly, artists are also looking to move out of London, looking for more affordable and spacious homes. Essentially, the supply crisis poses a risk to London's position as a cultural capital by pushing away the critical cultural mass which is so integral to it being a diverse, cosmopolitan and socially mixed community.

Innovative live/work schemes like the Bow Arts model could increase the range of housing options in London and create a more diverse supply that responds to the city's wide array of incomes and needs. This model does not just tackle the affordability dimension of the supply crisis, but through art exhibitions and community work also helps activate and preserve local communities, fostering social cohesion and participation.

Bow Arts is looking for property owners who would be ready to make their redundant units available:

<http://www.bowarts.org/studios/property-owners-work-us>

A view inside the scheme (video):

<http://www.channel4.com/programmes/home-truths/on-demand/59882-018>

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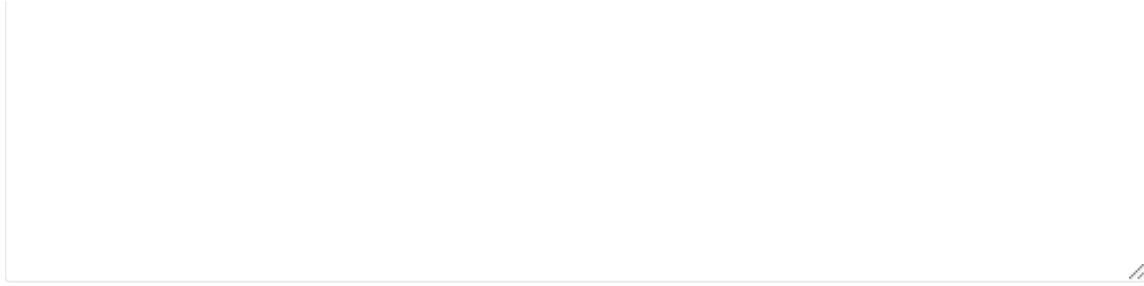
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