

ARTIST COLLECTIVE STANDS ITS GROUND IN UP-AND-COMING VAUXHALL



Veronica Simpson is in London this month looking at Gasworks, a courageous group that has won out against rapacious developers.

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Photographs by Ioana Marinescu, Courtesy of Gasworks

There's a well-worn trope that artists are the true placemakers, the ones that move into an area that appears unloved -- even unloveable -- and, through their care and craftsmanship, make it somewhere worth living. Then the developers move in, buildings get demolished or the rents shoot sky high and the artists are forced to move on.

That narrative is being endlessly replicated right now all over London during the apparent race to maximise profits on every square inch of land owned by London's voracious developers and cash-strapped councils alike.

Nowhere is the scale and pace of change more jaw-dropping than in Vauxhall, where the new American Embassy is nearing completion among the cranes and construction hoardings, while billboards advertise Nine Elms -- this once poverty-blasted enclave of post-war housing estates and post-industrial riverfront dereliction -- as the ultimate in diplomat-friendly living, renaming it with a theatrical flourish fictional adman Don Draper would be proud of: 'Embassy Gardens'.

Set worryingly close to the Nine Elms honeypot, renowned artist collective Gasworks has just scored a major coup in preventing the usual regenerative ousting. Member artists bought the freehold of the building they have occupied for some 20 years, and commissioned architecture practice HAT Projects to refurbish the scruffy, drafty and disjointed Victorian building into a fitting home for its population of new and emerging artists, visiting international residents, and its ambitious programme of exhibitions and community outreach work. The crisp, white, £2.2m reincarnation was proudly revealed during London Design Festival.

It is fortunate, obviously, that Gasworks had a 20-plus year pedigree of collaboration and artistic endeavour to call on when it needed to raise the cash for this near-miraculous feat of bottom-up regeneration. It has always had its finger on the pulse when it comes to finding and supporting new talent. For example, at its inception in 1994 Gasworks sent recent RCA graduate Chris Ofili to participate in an artists' workshop in Zimbabwe, where he studied the cave paintings that went on to influence his style. Three years down the line, he was picked for Charles Saatchi's Sensations show, winning the Turner Prize a year later. More recently, Ibrahim Mahama was given a hosted residency in 2013. He is now showing at the Venice Biennale -- along with an astonishing 19 other Gasworks alumni.

These days Gasworks is part of an international network of artist-run spaces, stretching from Rio to Johannesburg, offering affordable studio space for recently graduated artists on terms that give them a good run at establishing themselves (currently, London-based artists rent Gasworks' studios on a five-year lease, at around £12 a square foot), while fostering strong connections -- through residencies and exhibitions -- with international artist communities.

So when the owner of the building's freehold approached them about selling up, Gasworks was able to persuade the Arts Council England (ACE) that there was a strong case to be made for keeping this artists' haven exactly where it is -- no doubt, the programmes it runs for local schoolchildren and residents helped immeasurably. ACE stumped up the necessary £1.2m to acquire the building, on the condition that the Gasworks team raised enough to cover the building's refurbishment -- a further £1m. This they did through contributions from a variety of trusts and foundations, as well as artist donations and works from past artist residents, which were then sold off at a fundraising auction at Christie's in 2013; a Kickstarter campaign at Art Basel in October 2014 raised the rest.

HAT Projects' genius has been not to tinker too much with the building but to clear out clutter, replacing ancient windows with double-glazed ones, demolishing false ceilings and flimsy partitions to make studios lighter, brighter and bigger, improving adjacencies and renewing the roof. In this way, it has made the building a calm and robust workspace.



Studios at Gasworks are now lighter, brighter and bigger than before

Workshops with the whole team early on in the process helped clarify the need for a more collegiate atmosphere; the four visiting residents' studios are now positioned next to the first-floor kitchen instead of being tucked away by the stairs, maximising opportunities for them to interact with each other and with the London-based residents. The latter now have 13 studios on the second floor (two more than before), clustered to foster that sense of local community. The ground floor is given over to a spacious new gallery for exhibitions, events and workshops.

The £1m refurb took from this February to September, with the entire roof being removed and replaced but otherwise with no major structural alterations. HAT lead architect Hana Loftus says: 'It's great that the Arts Council understood the value of this space, but the watchword with all the capital work was sustainability and resilience. The ongoing business case had to be improved. Now, with double glazing and a new roof, energy costs have been reduced by 50 per cent.'

Gasworks is now set for many decades of providing high-quality artist and community support in a building that is finally fit for purpose. Says Loftus: 'As architects who work on many studio and art gallery projects, it's lovely to have this cross-section of activity, from the making through to the showing. In all our discussions, we've been really well-aligned with what the building should be: calm, rational, well-ordered.'

Furthermore, Gasworks is, it turns out, in part of what could be a small wave of artist-led spaces in Vauxhall, including Damian Hirst's newly opened Newport Street gallery just around the corner. Now that's a satisfying twist: the artists are staking their own claim on the reinvention of these pieces of the city. Let's hope there are other creative and maker communities in pockets of rapid urban regeneration who have the nous -- and the determination -- to do the same.