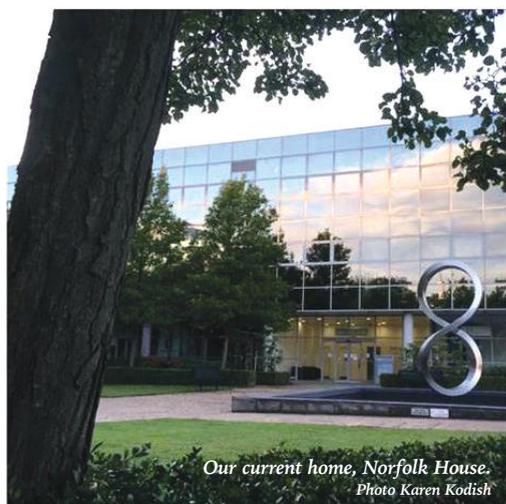




THE ARTS



*Our current home, Norfolk House.
Photo Karen Kodish*

Arts Gateway MK

.....● JOHN BEST

With the new year upon us, this is the month I look forward to most – when I'm allowed to write just about Arts Gateway and how it felt through 2015. This is the heroic tale of a small and imperfectly formed charity, cut loose in the world with no visible means of support, and finding, one year on, that actually we've done OK. Better than OK. And we're going to do better still in 2016. This is what it feels like at the heart of a nimble, creative organisation, blessed with an extraordinary diversity of team members.

For those who don't know us – and I suspect many in MK and most in NN will not – we've been around, formerly known as *MK Arts*

Association, helping artists for 30 years. Our main activity was splitting a big grant given to us, into many hundreds of small grants given out to all sorts of artists or arts groups needing help and support. And to help us do that we had a small Council grant for our overhead costs. Inevitably both those sources of money dried up around three years ago and we faced oblivion, or...

Pretty much by accident we found an office landlord who wanted a house-warmer, and one autumn day in 2013 we moved overnight from sharing a hot-desk in one building, to being master of 16,000 sq ft of prime office space just down the road. That's the size of around seven tennis courts. Our object was to design a creative hub where the unexpected might happen: designers would design, artists would art, musicians would make music, actors and singers would act and sing, crafters would craft and film-makers would film-make. Moreover they'd do stuff together, make new friends, tweet and social mediate about us. In short, that's pretty much what happened, and we called it *Arts Central*. Only there's a catch. We don't pay rent and when the landlord finds someone who will, we're out on the street.

So quite a bit of this account is about the grunt-work that lies behind the artsy surface. What goes on behind the scenes? And we think it could be as interesting to people in Northampton, Bedford, Aylesbury and Luton as

it is to the people of Milton Keynes. Every town should have one – could have one.

Our busiest year yet

We've had the most eventful year, starting out with a week when we had three premises in parallel, in a total of 56,000 sq ft. Just before Christmas 2014 we got notice to move out of our first space, at Station House above CMK railway station, right after we had signed leases on two more spaces. We moved directly into 30,000 sq ft at Station House, where we transferred our 60 or so creatives in studios or at desks, and laid out a central café, a large exhibition area, performance area and meeting rooms (they at least were already there!). We also took a second lease – a lifeboat for later – on 10,000 sq ft not far away at Norfolk House. For most of 2015 we were in the huge Station House space (14 tennis courts) building up to around 85 people working. Then, having lost our Christmas and New Year holiday for a move, the landlord chose August to give us notice again, and we lost our summer holiday too.

Moving 30,000 sq ft into 10,000 sq ft is no mean feat, considering we'd built up a stock of hundreds of desks, tables, chairs, lights, cupboards, sofas, pedestals and three very heavy (and empty) safes – everything donated by supporters. We also had a mass of construction we had to dismantle and move. See photos below of how it looked at the end.

So in September 2015 we finally said goodbye to Station House, after over two years, put most of our stuff in storage in a converted barn near Chicheley, and set about making Norfolk House

comfortable – for as long as we're privileged to be there. We now have around 50 creatives and artists there.

The year in view

Despite the two substantial removals, our programme of activities has kept going and we've had a busy year. We or others have organised over 300 events in our two spaces, more than half of them posted on www.meetup.com/artscentral. We've had about a dozen decent-sized events, with over 100 people attending. We've had training sessions – for writers, Salsa dancers, film-makers, photographers, artists, actors and theatre directors, and many more... We've had a score of local organisations use us for their own creative activities, and community groups use our spaces for celebrations. We've celebrated with the Chinese community, Friends of the Caribbean, Latvian film-lovers... and at our headline Festival of Nations in July we involved over 20 widely diverse communities in saluting their music, their art, their costume and their cooking. We see ourselves as a community resource.

Exhibition space

One well-tryed way to support artists is by mounting exhibitions, which we have done in all our spaces. In 2015 we have had four curated and themed exhibitions which among other things are a great excuse for a party. Exhibition Previews and our own quarterly networking 'Mingles' are popular events, with a mixed programme of performances and often a craft fair to boot. This year we have also agreed with the Cornerstone Church in CMK to run a two



From left... to centre... to right... in a fortnight, leaving Station House cleaner than we found it.



'Mingles' networking. Photo Karen Kodish





Exhibition space.



Dance – Three commissioned pieces from Motus 2015. Photos George Bell



year programme of (secular) exhibitions in their Gallery space. We have named it, with great originality, AC at the Cornerstone. In September we had a successful dry-run in the space to test support for a Milton Keynes Arts Week every September from 2016. The first full display was in December on the theme of 'Darkness into Light'. In December we also commissioned our own internal display and exhibition area in Norfolk House.

Dance

Last year, 2015, was a great year for our dance team led by Helen Parlor and her colleagues. Originally intended to deliver a dance festival every other year, Mótus has blossomed into a successful programme of events through the year. At the end of May Mótus held its very successful festival for 2015, a promenade programme incorporating MK Gallery, Margaret Powell Square and locations in Campbell Park including MK Rose. Over 1200 people experienced ten newly commissioned dance pieces from over 50 professional and community dancers, funded by the Arts Council, MK Community Foundation and MK Council. Later in the year the same team did some great work around commemorating WW1, including another memorable piece at MK Rose.

How to make a cinema

When we first moved into Station House we made a small Film-makers Cinema, with capacity for around 80. We used it also for small theatre productions but it wasn't ideal. When we moved to Norfolk House we decided to recreate it, but design it also for theatre with backstage, changing rooms more seats and more space. The result is shown below: first the office space, then fittings, then the people. Easy. We held our first full-blown screening in our 120-seat cinema in December, with a world premiere of Fractured

Minds. This film, produced by one of our creatives Alan Mallyon, was embedded in our lives for eight months as every part of the process, from conception, treatment, screenplay, development, cast auditions crew recruitment, costume, lighting, and production team were based in our Station House hub. Much of it was even filmed in the space, and many residents had roles. As a demonstration of hybrid creativity and making the unexpected happen, this was the highlight of 2015.

Plans for the future

We have big ambitions for the future. In May we made a proposal to use the former Waitrose supermarket, vacant for over a year, as a centre for dance, film-making, music and visual arts as The Store.

We proposed this as a first step to regenerate the Food Centre as a Bohemian Quarter for the city. We think it's a shame that the building remains empty six months on, with no apparent plans to use it. The Store would add greatly to the area's cultural infrastructure.

Undeterred, last month we submitted a proposal to convert a former gym in the Theatre District to a centre for youth music, and a centre for youth dance, under the working title AC at the Savoy to reflect the adjoining street name. The project will centre on a bohemian café that would spill out into the surrounding Theatre District and would offer a performance space with seating capacity of 150-200. It would significantly improve the commercial prospects for nearby premises, as well as add to the vibrancy of the centre. Another opportunity to be grasped.

Our growing family

We may be precarious in our space, but the model works and we have just enough money in

the bank to cope with our next move whenever it comes. This existence is certainly exhausting but it helps to dispel the doom and gloom around budget cuts and project closures. We're very lucky to have brought together a great team of volunteers, a few of whom are paid minimum wage for some of their hours, and who together keep our amazing project going. Every bit helps when you're trying to build a creative practice. We see our future within a more secure space, which we're doing everything we can to get. We also see the future as lying across a wide range of creative practice including design, digital, fashion and film, not just the traditional Arts genres, important though they are. The way forward is through collaboration – across genres and across boundaries. In 2016 we will continue to develop an annual MK Arts Week in September that reaches across the boundaries towards artists in Northampton, in Bedford and in Aylesbury. We are working with Bedford Creative Arts to roll out their Culture Challenge database for artists working with young people. And we have a small grant from the Arts Council to establish a sub-regional network of the creative hubs similar to us, to share experience and capacity, to promote performance circuits for artists and to give a louder voice to our sector. Few people succeed in isolation and the Creative Workplace Network will help us all.

And finally...

For those who want to know where we are, we have our very own Arts Central Cute Map, thanks to Norfolk House creative, Sheree Willis. Everyone should have one. And for those who really want to know where we are, you can sign up on www.meetup.com/artscentral, email me at john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office on 01908 241122. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based. ■



Before and after in Norfolk House: first the space and then the fittings.



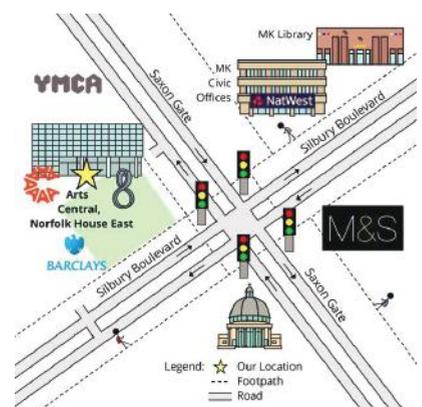
Image for The Store commissioned by Andrew Armes.



Here's what 120 people look like. Photos Karen Kodish



Image for AC at the Savoy by Matt Waruszynski.



www.cutemaps.co.uk