

THE ARTS

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Creative generators

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I write about Art and Creativity, focusing mostly on Milton Keynes, and recently on Northamptonshire. This month I want to take a broader canvas and look at some of the creative generators across the region. This ties into a project I've mentioned a few times: the SE Midlands Creative Workspace Network. This has been exploring the potential for collaboration across a new network. At the end of last month, at a conference in Luton, the sector met for the first time and agreed some joint action.

The Creative Sector

A lot has been written over the last few years on creative and cultural industries. The Government has set up a Creative Industries Council, to look at training, skills development and apprenticeships. The creative industries – comprising everything from media, publishing and film, through arts, museums and tourism, to digital design, architecture and interior design – account for 13% of the country's jobs and £74 Bn gross value each year. This is big. The official government definition of the sector describes 'those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property'. The local strength of this sector says a lot about the maturity and clout of the areas where it does well.

The Strength of our Local Creative Sector

There have been a few studies of how well our patch does in the creative stakes. A 2015 study for SEMLEP (the South-East Midlands Local Enterprise Partnership) identified 90,000 people (11% of the total) working in 13,000 creative businesses, with food & drink, digital and sports employment leading the table. The focus of my articles, and the organisations I write about, tend to be around cultural industries, like visual arts, performance, graphic design, film and photography. Those businesses employed around 5,000 people across the south-east Midlands sub-region in 2013, and that's before you count many more involved in a part-time or hobby capacity. The creative sector locally is very substantial and adds up to a significant reason why people might move here, stay here or visit here. All those businesses have their base locally, and some, particularly the small ones, share premises, or group together for mutual support. It's at the very small end of the scale, where micro-business or arts practitioners are starting out and getting established, that the need for creative workspace

is the greatest. Our colleges and universities may do a great job developing the knowledge and skills for success, but who out there is offering support and affordable space to the new businesses they produce?

The Creative Workspace Network

Last year Arts Gateway was given a small grant by the Arts Council to explore what more might be done to build a sub-regional network of organisations who, like Arts Central, can offer creatives a nourishing place to work as part of a collective local resource. The first task was to find out who was out there, and which of them might usefully be highlighted as case studies. We knew of about a dozen across Northampton, Bedford, Luton and MK but had no idea what the true number was. To date we have identified about 40 organisations with at least a few studios available for creatives, and the list keeps growing. Many more organisations have specialist facilities to help people develop their creative practices, whether specialist printers, venues for choreography, stages for performances, studios for filming or recording. We're building up a much better picture of what's there, and plan to share this information more widely.

When we met last month in Luton, the sector agreed some projects and programmes to develop over the next six months. I want to single out half a dozen organisations who, each in their own way, are making an impressive contribution.

The Hat Factory, Luton

First on my list, and possibly the most important on the patch, is The Hat Factory. Just as Northampton was always known for its shoes and has old buildings to prove it, so Luton was known for its hats and this organisation is based in Bute Street, in one of the old buildings that owe their

existence to Luton's industrial heritage. Like several of the creative organisations on my list, this one started life in an era when local councils were able to run imaginative and ambitious cultural programmes. The Hat Factory is now part of Luton Culture, an independent charity but has inherited some of the benefits of a council partly funded by a successful international airport. As well as performance programmes in theatre, dance, music and comedy, The Hat Factory has an exemplary range of creative businesses, from software, through film, media and sound recording, to graphic design, including quickmap who provided my image. The place offers a programme of community activities and has felt busy every time I've visited. And it has a great café on the ground floor, in the heart of the town's cultural district. A great focus for a culturally ambitious town. See www.lutonculture.com/hat-factory

iCreate, Bedford

iCreate is run by what used to be Bedford Creative Arts, a contemporary arts charity with a number of strands. It was originally established in 1985 as Community Arts in Bedford, arising from work by the area's councils. Incorporated formally and independent from the Local Authority since 2004, they became an Arts Council regularly funded organisation in 2008, and have recently re-named &Co (not to be confused with a Leeds-based organisation with a similar name). Their work includes dance, drama, carnival, circus skills, textiles, community murals, and crafts – and has included a series of community plays, projects and arts festivals. At their Midland Road building in Bedford, they also provide studio space for seven artists and deliver a programme of artist support. They convene Creative Bedfordshire, a bi-monthly network across local creative industries, and they initiated the Culture Challenge web platform for linking artists and schools, being rolled out from Bedford to Milton Keynes. Like many of the





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The Hat Factory, ctsy quickmap.co.uk



Studio art installation at NN, ctsy NN



Portfolio Innovation Centre, ctsy University of Northampton



Art and exhibitions at MKAC, ctsy MKAC



The Mill at Banbury, ctsy The Mill Arts Centre

organisations I'm writing about this month, they started their life under a council umbrella and have made the successful transition to independence in the wider world, now as an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation. See www.andco.org.uk

NN Contemporary Arts, Northampton

In 2003 a group of artists and practitioners came together to form Northampton Arts Collective, united by the common goal to elevate contemporary art within Northamptonshire. Twelve years on NN, as they became, are thriving. I've written about them before, Northampton's leading contemporary art space located in the centre of the Cultural Quarter. Northampton has a number of creative sector workspaces, including the Portfolio Centre (see below) and, soon, the Vulcan Works. NN sits at the arts end of the creative industry sector. They present an international programme of contemporary art and multi-disciplinary events and have been in their present home at Guildhall Street since 2012. They work with schools, community groups and regional partners to produce an expanding programme of collaboration and production. They became a registered charity in 2014 and now have a close connection with the University, local councils, the Arts Council and local charities. They provide studio as well as a great exhibition space on the ground floor, with café and small performance space upstairs, all in a very good location on Guildhall Road. Find them at www.nncontemporaryart.org

The Portfolio Centre, Northampton

The Portfolio Innovation Centre, which first opened in 2006, now provides 46 studios and offices for businesses in the design, digital and creative sector. Based at The University of Northampton's Avenue Campus, it's unique among the centres covered in the article as a project funded across public and university sources and expressly set up

to nurture talent and innovation. It's a different model to the others, more directly focused on the industrial sector of the creative industries, and with less direct focus on The Arts in their various forms. Both elements are important in building creative infrastructure across the area. See www.portfoliocentre.co.uk

MK Arts Centre, Great Linford

Milton Keynes Arts Centre is a multidisciplinary arts centre set in the historic grounds of Great Linford Manor Park, Milton Keynes. The setting is idyllic and riddled with historic character. The organisation has its roots in support from the MK Development Corporation and the local council, but is now ran, as so many, by an independent charity. They have a gallery set in a 17th-century barn, reimagined by architects Manalo & White in 2013; studio spaces housed in historic almshouses, and later pavilions and school house for specialist workshop facilities including ceramics and silversmithing. As well as offering working studio space, they present a programme of exhibitions, live events and educational activities inspired by craft, design and the visual arts. Like most of the organisations in this article, they support the skills that artists and crafters need to run a business and develop their practice. They also have a second studio site at Galley Hill, housing a further 12 studios. Though their location is not central, their year-round programme attracts over 20,000 visitors a year and brings them a national reputation within the UK visual arts sector. See www.miltonkeynesartscentre.co.uk

The Mill, Banbury

The Mill, in Banbury beside the Oxford Canal, is a great example of a multi-form arts centre in a charming converted historic water mill. It has a wide range of specialist facilities including studios, meeting rooms, performance spaces and a 200-seat theatre. Although it doesn't provide

permanent workspace for creatives, it belongs on our list because of the range of opportunities it opens up and the programmes of comedy, theatre, music, variety and dance that it runs. It's also home to Anjali Dance Company, of which I've written glowingly before. Of all the organisations covered here, The Mill is the one that remains most embedded in local council support but is in the process of casting off into the independent charitable journey followed by the others. We wish it a successful journey, which will certainly be helped by the award-winning café on the ground floor. See www.themillartscentre.co.uk

Will the Creative Workspace Network make a difference?

The Creative Workspace Network has made a good start. We recognise the strength of common interests and, rather than be a talking shop, we want to have coherent and useful programmes. Here are some of the ideas we are proposing:

- Sharing models of how to provide and run creative hubs.
- Developing easy ways to use more vacant land or buildings for creative hubs.
- Promoting more widely the facilities and people we now know are out there.
- Stronger creative links with Universities and colleges, their people and their facilities.
- Training and apprenticeships for people wanting to be creative.
- Specialist masterclasses in cutting-edge activity and processes.
- Developing a sub-regional circuit for new performers to tour new programmes.
- Build new links with national and regional establishments not yet active in our area.
- Giving young, creative entrepreneurs access to angel investors.

The tenth idea: the network needs to decide how to organise itself and grow. ■

NEWS FROM ARTS CENTRAL

I didn't include Arts Central in that review of the organisations out there, but we certainly belong on the regional list. We still have our main, mixed-creative operation at Norfolk House, where we host around 40 creatives. Now at Clyde House we have completed upstairs, and the ground floor is nearing completion. Upstairs will house 12-15 mixed creatives; downstairs will be expressly configured for visual and fine artists. We're about to convert our barn to include studio space, and are now seriously looking for our next two premises. The sector needs more spaces.

Our plans for MK Arts Week in September are coming on well, with confirmed funding from MK Community Foundation. We should be piloting two innovative events during MK Festival Fringe in July, as teasers for a repeat at the main event later in the year.

And finally... for those who would like to get involved in any of those projects, either in MK or Northampton, you can sign up on our website www.artsgatewaymk.org.uk, email me john.best@artsgatewaymk.org.uk or call the office 01908 241122. We'd like to hear from you, wherever you're based.

