

Event Title: Start up spaces – Unlocking the potential of underused sites



Event Date: 28th November 2019

Location: Peckhamplex Cinema

Regeneration of urban centres and tired old buildings

On a damp autumn day on 28th November 2019, HEDQF members explored two projects in the centre of Peckham in SE London raising many issues for Higher Education Institutions to consider in their future projects in an uncertain and cash-constrained world. Do they over-specify? How can they achieve more with less money? How can they support and connect with their communities and contribute to regeneration at a time when many high streets are full of ‘Closing Down’ signs?

It has to be said that perhaps this story started two decades ago when Southwark Council made the bold decision to invest in its innovative new library in the heart of Peckham, designed by Alsop and Störmer and winner of the Stirling Prize. At the end of the afternoon, Andy MacFee who was the project architect at the time, shared his experiences while we saw how well the library is being used today, 20 years later. In its first year it had half a million visitors and it is still a popular and well-loved community asset.

The Library was planned a part of an ambitious masterplan to create a civic and cultural area for Peckham, which, twenty years later, has yet to be completed but a recent key addition has been the Mountview Academy opened in September 2018. For the architects Turner Works, this was a progression in a journey



Mountview Building - Image credits: Andy MacFee

which had started with the Peckham Levels, their first project in Peckham and one which showed what a forward-thinking council Southwark is in terms of their future economy and communities.

What are the Peckham Levels? An unusual project – the repurposing of an old unused and unloved Brutalist multi-storey car park in the heart of Peckham owned by Southwark Council and leased to operator Make Shift. Turner Works’ design has converted the car park into start-up spaces for enterprise, artists and designers. With the unusual constraint of retaining vehicle access up the car park ramps to the top floor art and entertainment spaces, it was a unique architectural challenge. The £3.5 million project at £350 per m² was great value for money and the philosophy of what has been achieved here for very little cost is being used as a model to elsewhere such as in the regeneration of Newhaven town centre.

A key challenge linked to the budget was the entrepreneurial atmosphere to be created. Neither supported a standard and bland corporate answer. This had to be an ‘east end’ warehouse environment brought to Peckham, linked into the structure and layout of the existing building which enabled large central communal spaces. The lower levels of start-up spaces link up into the communal



Peckham Levels - Image credit: Ian Caldwell

and public spaces at the topmost levels. The architectural challenge was to integrate new robust insertions into the original concrete structure and leave as much exposed as possible.

From there Turner Works were given a new challenge, the new Mountview Academy which, with political and planning support and financial investment from Southwark Council, moved from North London to a new site adjacent to the Library as part of the new civic and cultural centre.

Taking the precedent of the Peckham Levels, the architects developed the architectural philosophy for the new building as a 'warehouse for the performing arts', not just an aesthetic philosophy but also indicative of the position of the 400-student Academy in the community, not just as an academic institution, but also one which brings in commercial partners for academic and economic benefits and supports community groups with, for example, drama training every Saturday and Monday evening.. The aim is to support performing arts in Southwark and a new generation of performers and producers, including two performance venues which run events that provide both an academic function but also bring in the public, albeit within a challenging business model.

The 11,000 m² building with a core cost of £22 million, constructed in an astonishingly period of 17 months, has a restrained aesthetic with a limited pallet of materials, creating quality spaces with some quirkiness in the furnishings and art which the Academy brought from its old home, but that is part of its DNA.

What are lessons for others thinking of similar projects?

In terms of strategy:

- Bringing together the different stakeholders, designing for their varied requirements, and balance with available funding;
- Planning circulation and spaces that support different audiences – academic, commercial and community lettings and activities;
- Supporting and benefitting from economic regeneration, planning strategy and investment in public spaces;
- Determining key success factors.

In terms of design:

- What is the best aesthetic to match the project and budget? (talk to potential students – they are often full of ideas)
- How can you achieve the best value for money? Are you over-designing to a standard corporate identity which adds cost?
- How can you balance architectural rigour/control with client informality/identity?

Many thanks to Suzi Winstanley and Carl Turner for organising and leading the event and to the venues for hosting it.

HEDQF would like to thank Turner Works - our sponsors for this event:

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