



Fazeley Studio the Eastside & Digbeth Strategic Investment Plan

location: Birmingham

Fazeley Studios, an assortment of restored heritage buildings including factory premises and a former Unitarian chapel, now forms a focal point for the creative industries in Digbeth and gives substance to the Eastside & Digbeth Strategic Plan.

Introduction

Fazeley Studios is a complex of 44 studio offices set around a courtyard and, in total covers 1.25 acres. It stands on land bordered by River Street, Floodgate Street and Fazeley Street. Fazeley Studios is designed, developed and run by Lucan Gray, son of Custard Factory owner Bennie Gray. While the two developments are managed by different companies, they work closely together to promote the wider Digbeth area.

Fazeley Studios follows the Custard Factory's mantra of creating nurturing space for creatives to share ideas and contacts, feed each other work and grow their business. However, it is positioned at a slightly different audience: larger, established creative companies whose work centres on digital and new media.

The studio offices at Fazeley Studio range from 200 sq ft to 10,000 sq ft in size with two main characters of space, top lit open plan offices with excellent natural day lighting ranging from 700 sq ft to 10,000 sq ft and character spaces fronting Fazeley Street ranging from 200 sq ft to 1,500 sq ft.

In order to understand the context, it is important to explain the development of the Custard Factory and how this fits in with the wider Digbeth investment plan. The Custard Factory has grown dramatically since the early 1990s, and has become, along with the Jewellery Quarter, Birmingham's creative capital and is home to hundreds of companies in the artistic and media sectors. Set in five acres at the heart of Digbeth, the Custard Factory has utilised a series of factory and semi-industrial buildings originally constructed by Sir Alfred Bird which at one time employed more than 1,000 people. After the closure of the company in Digbeth in 1964, the buildings, like much of Digbeth, went into decline. This decline ended in 1992 when Bennie Gray purchased the Scott House building and, with support from a City Grant Award of £800,000, was able to lever in £1.6 million of private sector investment and provide architect Glenn Howells with an opportunity to work on an exciting Birmingham project.

Fazeley Studios is a sister project to the Custard Factory's suite of buildings which include:

- Scott House – this was the first building in the Custard Factory to be

restored in 1992. Originally a dingy factory, it has been transformed into studios and offices with the ground floor now home to shops, dance studios and bar. There are 80 studios from 300 sq ft up to 2,000 sq ft

- The Green House – the second phase of restoration completed in 2002. Green House focuses on new media and media businesses and currently has 100 studios ranging from 170 sq ft to 600 sq ft
- Gibb Terrace – a previously semi-derelict Victorian workshop building that was reconstructed as five small shops
- Zellig (Devonshire House) – one of the finest Victorian terracotta-fronted buildings in England, work is currently underway on the transformation into new workshops, offices and studios based around three courtyards. This project, also involving EBNS, has secured further funding from Advantage West Midlands

Design process

The very highest principals have been applied, taking the existing set of buildings and linking them together by creating a new open-air courtyard and retaining the most stunning section, the 1890s chapel, as a gallery reception.

Although a leading-edge 21st century facility, the building is architecturally historic, dating back nearly 150 years and embracing much of Digbeth's religious and industrial legacy. The developers of the project have meticulously worked to preserve this heritage, maintaining a strong continuity with the past. This painstaking restoration has helped to provide a strong link to the past.

The oldest part of the building was originally a Unitarian Sunday School built in 1865 which is now home to a spacious conference room. The grand reception area, now the gateway to the building was formerly a Unitarian Chapel designed by George Ingall and opened in 1876. Meanwhile, the north light studios occupy a series of factory buildings which date back to the 1920s.

Fazeley Studios has been designed as an inward facing project, a tranquil inner city sanctuary. While on the outside it blends with its gritty urban surroundings, the heavy doors lead into another world which forms its own creative eco system. It has been described by visitors and bloggers as a 'cathedral of creativity', 'an oasis in the desert' and 'a kind of The Lion the Witch and the Wardrobe experience'.

By utilising the existing buildings, using natural light through north facing windows and avoiding new constructs, Lucan Gray has kept the build process as green and sustainable as possible, avoiding the huge amount of energy consumption that is involved in demolitions and rebuilds. The top-spec, rain-sensored windows that are fitted throughout the rear studios provide optimum natural light and ventilation, reducing the need for energy consumption by occupants.

Furthermore, a cycle park is included for those who chose to cycle to work and the Studios are within walking distance of both the main bus routes into town and Moor Street and New Street train stations.

The gallery reception is a beautiful common area, where tenants can greet and impress clients and their staff or make use of the free WiFi to work in a fresh environment.

The gallery and adjoining conference room have also hosted a number of prominent events from regional and national networking events to a reception for British Embassy workers and an address by Lord Carter the day after the publication of the Digital Britain report. This draws new audiences into the Digbeth area and creates opportunities for businesses in the Studios to expand their industry networks.

Adjacent to the Courtyard are the Winter Garden and the soon to be launched Brasserie and games room, which are also fully WiFi enabled. Again these are common areas where tenants and their visitors from national creative industries are encouraged to meet or relax. It is a space which promotes interaction between companies operating in similar but complementary industries.

There are also free weekly yoga sessions and afternoon tea laid on for tenants and contacts every Thursday. Altogether the collegiate atmosphere encourages meeting, relaxing, eating and drinking and collaborating between occupants and, unlike conventional office developments, it allows them to share space and time together.

Evaluation

Within three months of the launch of Fazeley Studios, the facility was 60 per cent full with businesses working across art, film, design, PR, advertising, podcasting and marketing. At the time of submission the occupancy levels were at 80 per cent, with two deals pending that will make Fazeley Studios 95 per cent full when they have been legally completed.

Among the companies who have moved into Fazeley Studios are well-known Birmingham media organisations such as Podnosh, First Light Moves, Pete Ashton, Substakt, Meshed Media, Big Button, Furore PR, Adage Models, Rice Media, Adhere Creative, Media Dog, Unsuitable and One Black Bear. It has attracted companies from Warwickshire such as film company Fullrange, while digital marketing agency Stickee has relocated from High Wycombe and London.

This performance has been achieved against the backdrop of economic recession and has been coupled with significant activity, with Fazeley Studios at the focus, which has helped to position Birmingham and Digbeth at the forefront of the UK digital sector.

Ultimately, Fazeley Studios and the prestige that it brings have helped to provide a powerful focus point and impetus for the wider Digbeth creative

industries which, until this time, the creative community had lacked. In many ways, the lack of a focal point for the creative industries that was identified in the Digbeth Strategic Investment Plan has been tackled as a result of this development.

Despite there still being challenges to investing in Digbeth – including the constraints of the Conservation Area requirements – and the lack of investment in commercial property generally due to the recession, there are still significant signs of confidence which are strengthened by what has happened at Fazeley. Not only has the building been sympathetically brought back into productive use, but the way the creative community has been orchestrated is evidence that the demand within this market exists.

Key design features to look out for

- The grand reception area, formerly a Unitarian Chapel designed by George Ingall and opened in 1876
- The new open-air courtyard linking the existing set of buildings
- The Unitarian Sunday School built in 1865 which is now home to a spacious conference room
- The top-spec, rain-sensored windows fitted throughout the rear studios providing optimum natural light and ventilation, reducing the need for energy consumption by occupants

Link and downloads

Fazeley studios website
www.fazeleystudios.com

Contact for further information

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