

CASE STUDY: Green Close Studios

A grassroots approach to rural artists' studios

Green Close Studios - local studios with a global reach

SINCE ITS INCEPTION Green Close Studios has connected with its local environment, rural setting, and community and has also engaged with international artists and projects to build an outstanding, innovative arts provision.

Green Close Studios is a visual arts organisation based in the village of Melling, North Lancashire which has been delivering culturally diverse contemporary art to rural and urban communities since 1997.

Set in a stone barn in the Lune Valley, the open-plan studio provides creative workspace for artists and delivers rural and community development through the arts. It is ideally situated within the Forest of Bowland, an Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty (AONB) nestling between the Yorkshire Dales and the Lake District National Parks.

With capacity for five professional artists, the studio encompasses a wide variety of practices, including: contemporary fine art practice, printmaking, ceramics, textiles and installation work – often inspired by environmental issues.

Working with national organisations including Osun Arts, promoters of African arts and culture, and

KEY OUTCOMES

- Creative projects have been developed in response to the needs of rural communities, enabling Green Close to become a strong part of the social fabric of the Lune Valley. The studios provide project management and deliver arts development across art forms, including music, dance and theatre projects, as well as the visual arts
- Green Close has developed a specialism in working with local communities that has led to work being carried out across the North West.



Green Close Studios in winter

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international artists and organisations from Canada, India, Japan and Mexico to name but a few, Green Close has delivered a series of culturally diverse creative projects. These have helped to develop global awareness and community understanding, leading to Green Close delivering similar work throughout the North West of England.

BACKGROUND

The studios were established to provide quality affordable workspaces for artists with shared resources. The social context of creating such a space within a very isolated, under-resourced rural area meant that Sue and Pete Flowers, the studio founders and directors, could share their passion for the arts and develop meaningful engagement projects which responded to the needs of the community.

A grassroots approach to the management of the studios means that artists are supported in their practice and in developing a wider understanding of working within community and educational contexts. The studios respond to the social needs of communities, which have evolved through a lack of access to cultural services; Green Close works with local schools, village institutes, parish councils and other community groups to facilitate projects across a range of art forms.

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FIRST STEPS

Green Close Studios undertook research throughout the North West and nationally to prove that quality studio provision was highly sought after and that artists were prepared to relocate to gain access to quality, affordable studio provision.

Green Close acquired the studios at a below-market price, which gave them greater financial security to develop their provision. The nature of the architectural conversion and its isolated rural location has proved visually stimulating for artists, as well as providing a centre to develop contemporary art in a peaceful and relatively distraction-free environment.

INSPIRATION FROM THE NATURAL WORLD

A number of studio projects have drawn inspiration from the landscape and demonstrated an awareness of environmental concerns.

Taking inspiration from Common Ground's work around 'sense of place', Green Close Studios established Lune Valley Tree Dressing Day during 1997. The early stages of the project included a series of talks and creative workshops with local schools and community groups, following which a number of trees were decorated. Cross art-form work was inspired as one school created a play about the value and importance of trees, and other artists, including writers and musicians, were commissioned to create their own responses.



Green Close Studios Co-Founder Sue Flowers



The studio runs workshops with local schools

This interest in projects linked to the environment has developed into the annual Bowland Arts Festival, which is managed by studios founder Sue Flowers. The festival runs every summer between 1 May and 30 June, and aims to celebrate the importance of the environment – specifically the birds, wildlife, landscape and culture of the Forest of Bowland (AONB). In addition to profiling the vast wealth of creativity and abundance of talent in the area, the festival endeavours to develop a wider understanding of our global interdependency and the need to work collectively to address serious environmental problems such as climate change and global warming.

INTERNATIONAL PROJECTS

The studio has worked with artists from countries across the globe including Ghana, India, Japan, and Mexico, bringing culturally diverse experiences to the local community. These relationships and exchanges have been fostered and nurtured through projects funded by Arts Council England and supported by a range of partners such as the Japanese Embassy, the British Museum and a number of local authorities.

Projects have included a Japanese performance artist in a local village hall, tea ceremonies in the studios, exhibitions and schools workshops. Two ceramic artists from Mexico were hosted by the studios and their work formed a part of an exhibition of Mexican art and craft which toured to museums throughout Lancashire on the Viva Mexico! project. The following year, artists from Green Close travelled to Mexico; further residencies and exchanges are planned for the future.

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DEVELOPMENT

The organisation has grown and developed in response to the needs of artists and communities. Although demand for studio space within a rural setting often fluctuates, Green Close has had 90% occupancy since day one. This success is due to the scale of the studios, which provide only five spaces along with a range of projects and employment opportunities.

Green Close Studios actively recognises the importance of new technology within creative practice and has recently developed a new media studio, providing the opportunity to train artists in using digital imaging and film-making resources.

Green Close works with over 60 creative arts professionals, and has established an associate membership scheme to further develop the reach of the studios. The scheme has increased opportunities for collaboration with a wider number of artists across the North West who do not require studio space, but who seek meaningful professional development opportunities, training and employment. Twenty artists are currently involved.

The studios have harnessed a joined-up marketing approach through integrating their work into differing sectors of the community. Working in schools, utilising the publicity tools of parish newsletters and post office notice boards, concerts in village halls, developing strong links with local community leaders, taking part in a range of events and word of mouth have all helped to improve the visibility and profile of the studios, as well as develop the work and ongoing programme of events the studios deliver.

FINANCE

Green Close Studios was developed with financial support from the European Union Objective 5b programme (economic development and diversification in rural areas), the Rural Development Commission and with private investment from the studio directors.

The organisation has covered its overheads for the last 13 years through the rental of creative workspace, whilst securing project funding from Arts Council



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Mexican ceramics workshop

England, Lancashire County Council and Lancaster District Council for its arts and advocacy work engaging rural audiences with contemporary visual arts

FUTURE

Green Close Studios has been developing a new programme of work, which consolidates its previous experience. This includes a new programme of professional development for artists, further work with schools, a wider programme of culturally diverse work and a new programme of commissions.

The studios are keen to strengthen their links with Mexico, Latin America and other parts of the world, building accommodation for visiting artists and enabling them to connect and communicate with each other and isolated communities in order to make the world a better place to live.

CASE STUDY: Green Close Studios**BENEFITS FOR ARTISTS**

Through outreach work and projects in the community, artists have access to opportunities to develop their understanding of creative engagement work and develop new audiences who would not necessarily visit exhibitions, giving a fresh perspective on their work.

Many practising visual artists feel isolated; Green Close Studios has provided a hub of professional activity in an idyllic rural location, which provides opportunities for artists to take inspiration from the natural environment.

An element of mentoring, mutual support and development takes place naturally, due to the size of the studios and numbers of artists coming together within this context.

"Green Close Studios provides an inspiring space where I can work in decent light with all the practical facilities a professional artist requires, knowing that there is a reliable infrastructure in place to take care of insurance, fire safety issues and maintenance for example, it means that I can concentrate on painting."

Hugh Miller, artist.



Green Close artists professional development event

APRIL 2010

BENEFITS FOR THE COMMUNITY

The studios provide the opportunity for the local community to see and experience high quality work by professional UK and international artists outside urban centres.

Schools and other community groups have access to innovative cross art form workshops, enriching their understanding and experience of art and the role artists play within society.

Through developing high quality events, partnerships and festivals, for the local community, Green Close informs a sense of rural community cohesion, empowerment and social development.

"The space demonstrates the tenacity and commitment of its founders, the perhaps surprising potential of a rurally based initiative to be aspirational, pioneering, and innovative and an equal commitment to a high quality transformative art and to social context including regeneration."

*David Bell, former Arts Development Officer,
Lancaster City Council*

MORE INFORMATION

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