

DRAFT IDEAS FOR THE ARTISTS' HOUSE BIRMINGHAM PREPARED BY IVAN MORISON

THE BACKGROUND

- Artists and creative practices are seen as drivers for urban regeneration.
- Art and culture is seen as a marker for the progress and success of communities and cities.
- Artists are now working in a vastly expanded field, some directly addressing major societal questions of our time, and acting in collaboration with many other areas of creativity, thought and commerce.
- Artists know that the way to solve a problem is to begin. With each action the next step will present itself.
- Artists play an important role in injecting vitality into the world we live in.
- Being an artist is a job. The work of an artist is key to a healthy society. As a key worker an artist is well placed to find solutions to creating more equitable communities.
- Artists are also citizens, have families, and very often struggle to make ends meet.
- Artists are often more nomadic – more willing and able to move around. However, they also still require security (and stability).
- Like other key workers artists are suffering from a lack of suitable and affordable houses to rent or own. Housing is key to creating security, thus enabling creativity, building better communities and transforming cities into vital and diverse places.
- The unique ways in which artists approach problems, along with their intrinsic stake in this issue, may produce innovative solutions.

WHO WE ARE

- We are an artist led research and development project looking to create tangible solutions in the area of housing.
- We believe that artists play a valuable role in communities, bringing vitality and engendering positive change.
- We are using housing for artists as our starting point, asking – what do they need and what solutions can they offer?
- We believe that by addressing the question of artists' housing we may provide a starting point for wider change.

AREAS OF ENQUIRY

We have identified two areas of investigation within the complex field of architecture, housing, city planning and regeneration:

PLACEMENT

Large new areas of housing are currently planned. These residential developments lack any strategy to encourage artists to live and work within them. We propose to develop opportunities to place artists' houses (that is houses designed by artists and for artists to live in), and therefore artists, into new large scale areas of housing development. By making use of existing conditions on developers to provide an art-content within new developments we can fund the realisation of this strategy.

REGENERATION

- Looking around the city there are many empty plots of land, the owners of which have long term plans for, but no medium term use for.
- We propose to utilise these empty urban sites, owned privately or by the city and available in the medium term (around five years), to develop a housing system (both in the physical sense as well as in an organisational sense) that can temporarily occupy these sites and house artists and creatives.
- This would offer an opportunity to the landowner to begin the regeneration of their site and surroundings, without tying up the land in the long term.
- It would also provide artists with affordable bespoke housing and studio facilities, within a new like-minded community, in the heart of the city.
- It would offer artists the security of a fixed term lease of around five years, and the possibility to move onto another site, into a new house, at the end of the term of the lease.
- It would necessitate the development of a 'light' building system. One that is light on its contact with the ground, light in use of materials and light in cost. Materials would only be required to perform in the medium term, allowing new ways of thinking to be investigated with regard to housing design and build.
- The idea of medium term housing and a more nomadic approach to living, backed up by affordable rents, long fixed term leases, security of future tenancy, and quality, 'light' and suitable accommodation, could grow into a new way of approaching how we live in the twenty-first century.

OUR APPROACH

- Artists know that the way to solve a problem is to begin.
- With each action the next step will present itself.

STAGE 1

- We propose to begin by building a house that will act as a metaphor for what we want to achieve and a gathering point around which ideas and strategies can be voiced. The house will be the first iteration of what an artists' house for Birmingham could and should be, built as a full-scale model within the gallery, and designed for an actual plot of land in the local vicinity. It will embody the notion of 'lightness' and will act as a physical and conceptual framework into which other artists and thinkers can lay their ideas.
- During its three month period in the gallery the artists' house will host a programme designed to bring different voices and ideas to the table. It will open with a special dinner, bringing the future key players in this endeavour to the table at the same time in a moment of generous hospitality.

STAGE 2

The second iteration of the house will be presented in a public arena (possibly Selfridges), offering itself up for comments from a wider constituent.

STAGE 3

The first working prototype of the artists' house will be built on the actual plot of land. An artist tenant will move in and live there for the duration of the lease on the land. Though this first artists' house will not offer a sustainable financial model, it will through the actual 'doing' of it – the mechanics of organising, funding, building and leasing this first home – take us to the point where we have the knowledge to do so next time.

STAGE 4

Stages 1–3 are designed to find answers to the questions we have set ourselves and to bring interested partners to us. Stage 4 is about putting what we have learnt and developed into practice – working with developers to place artists houses within their developments and working with landowners and financial partners to develop medium term communities of artists' housing on currently unused urban sites.