

The Space for Artists

Recommendations for Developing a 'Creative Thurrock'

Prepared for Thurrock Borough Council by Tom Fleming
Creative Consultancy & Brigid Howarth, 2004

*(to view the complete report please contact Tom Fleming
Creative Consultancy on 07989 950 112)*

tom fleming /**creative consultancy**/ specialist research
and support for the cultural and creative industries sector.
with / Brigid Howarth

“Evidence points to levels of continuing demand for affordable and secure workspace in every region, with the supply of artists and the scale of waiting lists indicating that there is a significant shortfall of studio space across the UK. This impacts differently in different parts of the country, but tends to be both chronic and acute in London and other urban centres where artists are competing with other commercial users for redundant buildings of scale.” (ACE 2003a)

“Thurrock will be the centre for international trade, enterprise and connections, building on a rich maritime heritage, maximising the value of the river and empowering diverse communities to provide an exciting, vibrant and sustainable place to live, work and visit.” (Thames Gateway South Essex 2003)

“(T)he conscious creation or nourishment of cultural sites, clusters or ‘milieus’, is rapidly becoming something of an archetypal cultural planning instrument in the cultural planning tool box.” (Mommaas 2004)

1. Executive Summary

This report provides an assessment of the potential to develop a sustainable approach to Creative Industries development in Thurrock, with a specific emphasis on a high quality, distinctive Creative studio/managed workspace proposition that can provide a focus for and catalyst towards establishing a more dynamic, diverse, innovative, explorative, better designed and thus ‘Creative Thurrock’.

The report proposes the development of a long-term committed intervention by an eclectic partnership that is based upon a Creative Industries programme of commissions, artist residencies, specialist business support and training, and dedicated Creative intermediary services. This will, over the next 10-15 years:

- raise the profile of Thurrock as a ‘Creative proposition’ to potential in-coming Creative businesses (and other inward-investors), so it is understood as a convincing location for Creative business development
- increase and focus the Creative aspirations and skills of local people, so they are better equipped to develop new Creative businesses or access employment in the growing Creative economy
- provide opportunities for Creative business growth and supply-chain development for non-Creative businesses, with an emphasis on the local engineering sector
- enhance the physical landscape and cultural dynamism of Thurrock, where for the first time ‘Cultural Planning’ is positioned at the forefront of large-scale infrastructural and housing development. This will lead the way for innovative development in the rest of the Thames Gateway and beyond

- provide a distinctive and unique capital development that combines large-scale sculpture workspace, outdoors sculpture workspace, engineering/fabrication workspace, Higher Education research and spin-out space, residential work/live space, plus a range of complimentary services and spaces; through the development of ‘**Sculpture Engine**’, a site for the research, development, production and consumption of public art, sculpture, design-led engineering and cultural planning that is of European significance.

Significant Challenges...

The in-depth qualitative research undertaken here acknowledges that while much has been achieved in establishing a Creative focus for Thurrock, for the Creative Industries and cultural sector to play a lead role with a convincing and sustainable structural impact, a long-term, well-resourced, partnership-based approach is required. This is because the Creative Industries sector (and all of its sub-sectors) has a very low presence in Thurrock, with supply chains and networks weak and fragmented, the skills base narrow and low, aspirations focused towards other sectors, and cultural connectivity with London and stronger Creative clusters in the East of England (such as Chelmsford and Leigh-on-Sea) underdeveloped.

Correspondingly, there is very little current ‘local demand’ for Creative studio space in Thurrock. Equally, demand for Creative studio space in Thurrock is not expressed by Creative practitioners based outside the Borough – namely in East London and other parts of Essex. This is despite high levels of demand for affordable, high quality, career-advancing studio space in these locations. There is demand for workspace, particularly workspace that offers distinctive career-advancing opportunities, but there is currently little or no demand for ‘Thurrock’ as a Creative proposition.

Thurrock is thus challenged by what might be termed the ‘Thurrock conundrum’: current activity is not at the stage or status to establish Thurrock to operate as a viable location for a sustainable Creative cluster; such clusters (and their internal and external networks) are vital drivers of change, attracting further activity; Thurrock must therefore find a way of leveraging demand for ‘Thurrock as a Creative proposition’ without being in a position in the short-medium term to offer any secure ‘supply’.

Significant Opportunities...

Currently, Thurrock is what might be termed an ‘unlikely location’ for significant and ground-breaking Creative Industries development. However, it is often such unlikely locations that have the most development potential, in which the Creative Industries sector can have the most impact, and for which there is the most support, commitment and investment potential. Indeed, it is such locations that the Creatives themselves are often keen to ‘invest in’: Creatives are often pioneers, moving to an unlikely location where opportunities exist to be part of something special, distinctive and career-advancing. That they are also relatively affordable provides an

additional reason why locations such as Thurrock can provide the conditions for a high profile, high impact and sustainable Creative Industries presence.

In addition, a range of 'locational assets' provide Thurrock with real potential for reaching a position where the Creative Industries are leading processes of change and where Sculpture Engine operates as a European centre for large-scale sculpture production and new approaches to cultural planning. These range from the distinctive industrial landscape alongside the Thames to the significant conviction and commitment of the local authority; from the resource and partnership opportunities of the Thames Gateway and Urban Development Corporation, to the role of the Thames Gateway sub-region as a significant 'laboratory' for new approaches to cultural planning in which Thurrock can lead the way; and from the strong local engineering sector to the high level of demand from artists and designers for large workspace facilities that allow them to develop work 'in the whole', supported by engineering specialists.

If supported by a committed partnership, appropriately resourced as investment rather than 'revenue spending', and based upon a coherent and widely supported long-term Creative Thurrock strategy, Thurrock is in a position to develop a truly unique facility for the Creative Industries sector. However, this is a long-term and highly challenging process. The report sets out this challenge, providing an outline for Thurrock to move from a position where:

- a) There is very little current demand for Creative Industries workspace of any kind in Thurrock, which in part is due to the lack of supply against which demand can be tested, but mainly linked to the weak presence of the sector and negative/ambivalent responses to Thurrock as a 'proposition'

TO

- b) Activities, initiatives, advocacy, brokerage and support services work to raise the profile of Thurrock as a place with 'Creative potential', with an ongoing focus of these processes the aspiration to have a particular model of Creative workspace: the Sculpture Engine (working title)

TO

- c) The Sculpture Engine has sufficient credibility and dedication from the range of necessary partners, and demand/commitment from the required 'market' to develop initial core features/functions, while allowing for a fine grain approach to further development

TO

- d) The Sculpture Engine is the leading centre for sculpture, public art, cultural planning and Creative-led engineering in the UK, if not Europe, operating as a centre of design, experimentation, production, research, major project development and – possibly - as a visitor attraction. It will be the think tank and Creative factory for the Thames Gateway, Europe's largest regeneration initiative

TO

- e) Thurrock is recognised as a ‘Creative place’, a place with an increasingly mixed economy that is high skilled; aspirational; diverse in ethnicity, class, occupation and taste; and able to explore different cultural and intellectual opportunities within as well as outside the Borough. Thurrock is valued as a pioneering ‘model of good practice’ for Creative-led regeneration.

Key short to long-term interventions are highlighted (with detail diminishing into the longer-term), explained and placed within a time-frame. Activities and interventions for Year 1 are costed.

Sculpture Engine: Leading Creative Thurrock

This report outlines how Creative Industries activities and interventions over the next 10-15 years should be targeted towards establishing a capital development offering a unique and ambitious opportunity for Thurrock and the Thames Gateway. Sculpture Engine will be:

- The centre for large-scale sculpture practitioners in the UK, with large-scale, low cost, flexible space. Sculptors are able to cluster and are connected directly to markets and supply chains: The Thames Gateway, London, architects and engineering companies. Specialist services are also offered, such as business support, bespoke training, and the provision of ‘agency services’ - working on behalf of the artist to raise his or her profile while establishing the Centre itself as a provider of significant ‘cultural currency’
- The centre for large and small(er) scale sculpture and public art research, innovation and development, with the ‘space to Create’, ready-made support services, intellectual prestige and a global audience. This is a ‘live’ engagement with a huge regeneration process: the Thames Gateway (and beyond) is the testing ground for what is developed in the ‘laboratory’ – Sculpture Engine. Dedicated staff will broker these relationships and explore opportunities
- The centre for architectural development in sculpture and high quality urban design, and the prestige location for companies seeking work in the Thames Gateway
- The centre for engineering in sculpture and urban design, where local and incoming engineering companies can work alongside and with architectural, product design and sculpture practices, develop a direct trading relationship, and develop best practice models through research and partnership
- A leading centre for research into sculpture, public art and broader approaches to cultural planning – focusing on economic and social impact, civic boosterism, Creative Industries employment etc.
- A strikingly distinctive and locally convincing model that plays a lead role in transforming the image of Thurrock (with the positive economic and demographic outcomes), as well as providing employment and introducing new trading patterns to the Borough

The report outlines key interventions necessary to successfully launch Sculpture Engine. These include:

- A long-term, diverse and challenging Creative Programme of high profile, opinion-leading sculptors, architects and urban planners – establishing Thurrock as a ‘Creative project and laboratory’
- The identification of development site for Sculpture Engine and feasibility/costings for long-term, phased development
- Targeted training and supply chain support – connecting local engineering companies to opportunities in sculptural development and Creative architecture practices
- The development of a Higher Education Partnership for Thurrock – necessary for credibility and sustainability
- The establishment of specialist Creative Thurrock Steering Group, to include Thurrock Borough Council, UDC, Essex County Council, EEDA, ACE, Living East, Thames Gateway South Essex, RIBA, CABE, CEME, LSC, Commissions East, Creative Partnerships, Thurrock Arts Generate, Business Link Essex, a London studio provider company, a major HE institution, a major Creative/artist champion, possible private developer interest
- The development of Creative Thurrock Strategy – to underpin the process
- The recruiting of a team of Creative Intermediaries, to drive, manage, broker and champion the process.

It is clear that for the Creative Industries in Thurrock to play a lead role in future processes of development and change, then a brave and dedicated approach is required. This report shows that much is possible. It is also clear that much must be done to make it possible. It seems that Thurrock (and partners working for Thurrock) is faced with a choice: to initiate regeneration, economic and residential development intervention to fulfil contracted outputs and minimum social/cultural commitments; or to undertake an innovative and visionary approach to culture-led regeneration that offers Thurrock a convincing opportunity to build progressive and sustainable communities and economies that have the resonance and impact to position Thurrock as an innovative, visionary and Creative place. This report sets out a series of challenges and engages with a series of critical issues to assist key decision-makers to make that choice.

(to view the complete report please contact Tom Fleming Creative Consultancy on 07989 950 112)

tom fleming /creative consultancy/ specialist research and support for the cultural and creative industries sector.