

THE SPACES

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London's Old Manor Park Library to become a collaborative arts space

Where artists and residents will join forces



The Grade II-listed Old Manor Park Library on Romford Road, east London. Photography: Emli Bendixen

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What can artists bring to a neighbourhood? That was the question arts organisations Create and Bow Arts asked themselves when they took charge of the empty Old Manor Park Library in east London.

Standing proud on Romford Road, the 1904 building - one of a slew of libraries across the world built by philanthropist Andrew Carnegie - has been lying vacant for three years. Now Create and Bow Arts are bringing it back into public life as a workshop space for artists, creative businesses and local residents.

'Artists are finding it harder and harder to find studio space in London,' says Create's Hadrian Garrard. 'We want to fill this gap, while exploring what it means to have artists in a community.'

Create and Bow Arts have secured a seven-year lease on the building from Newham Council for their new breed of collaborative co-working space, which is backed by £177,500 from the Mayor of London's High Street Fund.

All of the artists working at Old Manor Park Library - including established and emerging names - will engage with the community on workshops and projects that will be free of charge and open to all.

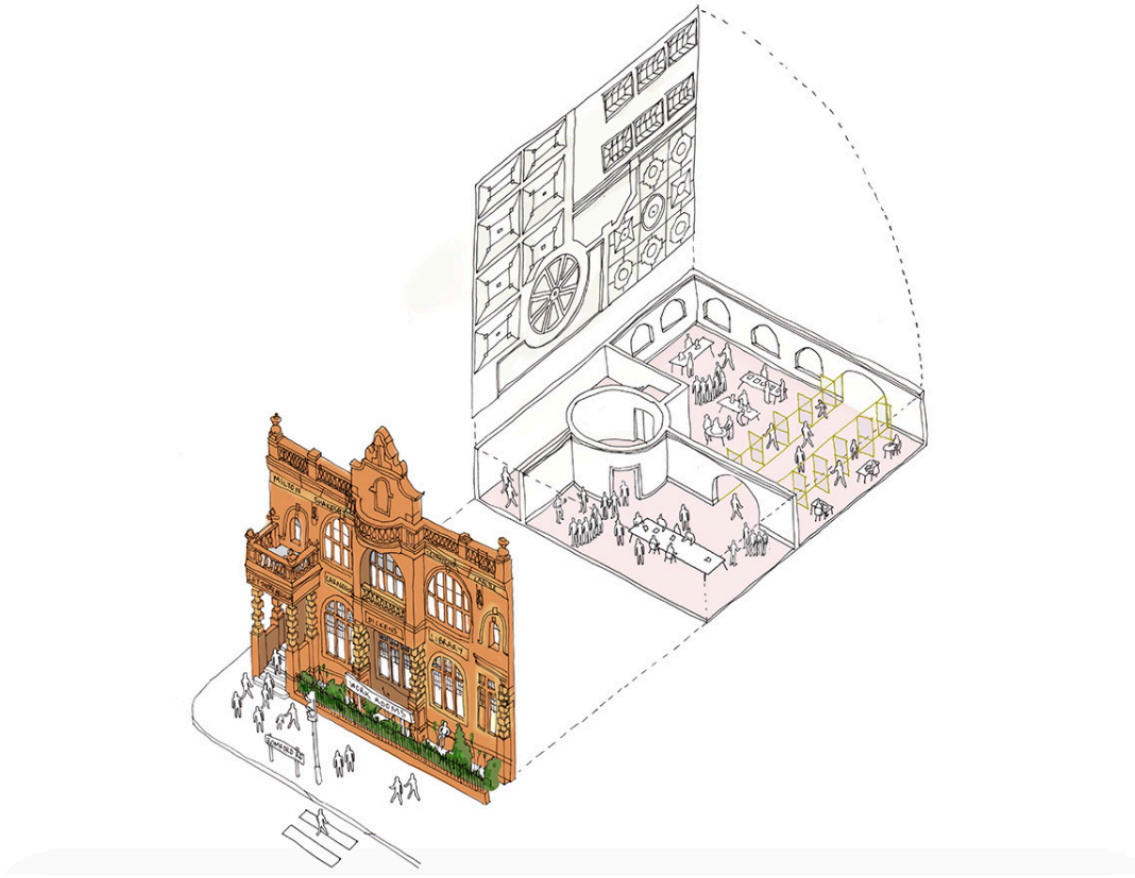


'Artists can have a negative impact, because they can trigger property price rises and gentrification but we want to tease out the good things,' says Garrard. 'We will create a space that everyone can use - a resource for the community. Some areas of Newham have a particularly low level of cultural engagement so we want to see if we can have a positive effect on this in Manor Park.'

Old Manor Park Library's front room will be home to the Rabbits Road Institute, a new art space led by artists Ruth Beale and Amy Feneck, whose on-going collaborative project 'The Alternative School of Economics' explores practices of self-education. They will provide support for different art forms, while conducting research and anthropological studies.

The space will also act as a living room for the neighbourhood - a place for artists and residents to meet, swap ideas and exchange skills.

Architects Nicholas Lobo Brennan and Astrid Smitham are charged with transforming the building. The duo have designed a series of transparent features for the interior of the restored Grade II-listed library that can be moved according to people's changing needs. These subdivides carve out an arcade-style walkway that dissects each floor, resembling a streetscape.



Create, which describes its work as 'social practice', has a history of working with creatives to turn empty London buildings and plots into community hubs.

In 2011 it teamed up with Turner Prize-nominated architecture collective Assemble to create Folly for a Flyover, a performance and screening pavilion in a disused Stratford motorway undercroft. Now it is working with Assemble again on Chicken Town - a healthy chicken shop in Tottenham former fire station.

'The library project is the first time we've worked on such an obviously public, municipal space,' Garrard explains. 'It's an extravagant building; an iconic landmark on the high street.'

Bow Arts, meanwhile, has been providing affordable creative workspaces for emerging artists for two decades and educational programmes are a core part of its remit.

The Romford Road project could mark a new chapter for libraries across the world that are struggling to reinvent themselves in the digital age.