

Tally Ho!

artsdepot at Tally Ho Corner, North Finchley in the London Borough of Barnet has just opened its doors. Roger Tomlinson explores the story behind a remarkable project.

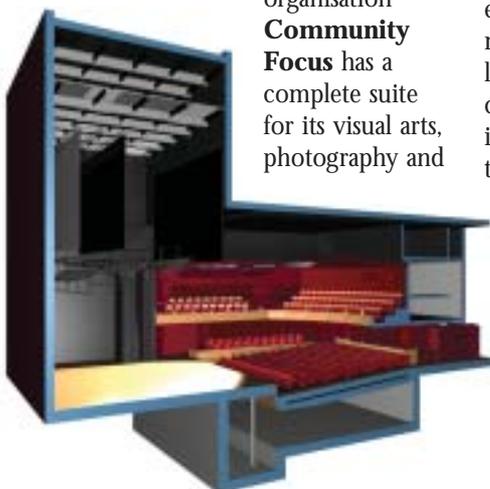
It must have seemed a simple ambition at the time. Back in July 1996, the London Borough of Barnet held a conference on Barnet 2000 and community groups had a workshop to brainstorm on future arts provision after the Millennium. Could The Bull Arts Centre be replaced with a slightly larger venue with more space? Now a £45m complex rises 18 storeys above Tally Ho Corner, with a superb new arts centre at its heart.

Fittingly, this was the site of the Gaumont Cinema which had entertained people from 1937 to 1983 but demolished in 1987. Now towering above is a complex, housing a 12-storey block of flats and penthouses, a health and fitness club with gym and swimming pool, the bus terminal, a Marks and Spencer's Food Hall, underground car parks, and the star attraction, the new **artsdepot**.

The Bull Arts Centre would probably fit into the new foyer! The Bull was a converted pub, with an extension at the back, housing a 176-seat theatre and 50-seat studio. Now the 'slightly larger' venue includes a 400-seat, adaptable format theatre with full stage, orchestra pit and fly-tower, a 150-seat thrust stage studio theatre, art gallery, dance studio, rehearsal room and drama workshop, wet and dry art studio, café and bar, all accessed from a huge central, four-storey atrium-style foyer.

It doesn't stop there. Resident

organisation **Community Focus** has a complete suite for its visual arts, photography and



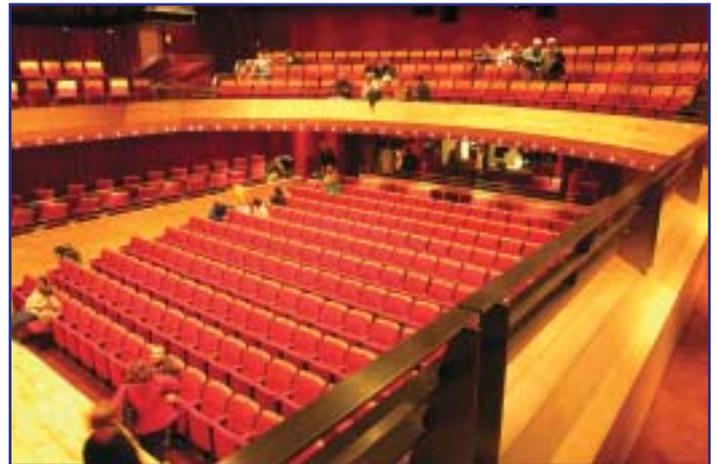
media classes for people with special needs, and **Barnet College** has two floors of accommodation including more dance and drama studios, tutorial rooms and teaching facilities.

Appropriately, but today still remarkably, **artsdepot** offers equality of access, with almost no limits to where anyone with mobility difficulties can go – including focussing lights over the auditorium. 'Show relay' incorporates vision as well as sound, so hearing impaired technicians and performers can sense what is going on.

And the cost to the London Borough of Barnet? Just £2.5m and the site for an arts facility worth £15m (more on this overleaf), said to be the largest public Planning Gain in the UK to date.

Director Alison Duthie has been there throughout, bringing her small team from The Bull into their new arts centre: "It still seems remarkable that we are here. We have the facilities we dreamed of. From those first discussions in 1996 we've had huge support from the people of the Borough. 4,000 people poured through the building on our Open Weekend. Like us, their smiles were so wide when they saw what **artsdepot** contains. Now we're working to deliver what the place promises."

The programme offers a huge range of events and activities, with dance, theatre, music, comedy, literature, art exhibitions, lots of events for children, and many courses, classes and workshops. It makes intensive use of the facilities and exploits their flexibility and rapid turn-round times. "**artsdepot** has something for you whether you are a theatre junkie or music aficionado, a dance groupie or simply want somewhere to take children on a Sunday afternoon," says Alison. The opening programme includes visits from Tamasha and Volcano, the premiere of a collaboration between Evelyn Glennie and Garage soul star and Mercury



Music Prize nominee M J Cole, a newly commissioned dance piece from Shobana Jeyasingh, and coruscating humour from Jeremy Hardy.

Tally Ho!



ACT CONSULTANT SERVICES



- Development of design options and concepts for new, renovated, extended or adapted arts buildings.
- Development of cultural strategies, economic impact analyses, business plans and audience research.
- Detailed design of auditoria and stages, with schedules of accommodation for clients and architects.
- Evaluation of layouts, seating and sightlines, technical equipment and cost options.

www.actconsultantservices.co.uk

ACT Consultant Services, The Old Wood Mill, Church Lane, Madingley, Cambridge CB3 8AF
Phone +44 (0) 1954 210766

Quality design



By keeping the design approach clean and simple, getting the detail right and using finishes of high quality, the design team has pulled off a remarkable achievement. Architects Ruddle Wilkinson were appointed from inception to the final detailed design.

Because at street level there is the bus terminus, the whole of *artsdepot* and related spaces start on the second storey, accessed by a reversible escalator. This leads into the spectacular central foyer atrium.

This is the heart of the building from which all the spaces open off and every activity is accessed. The architects have created a clean and simple four-storey high space, painted white, perfect for projections or major works of art. This is an incredibly attractive café bar space. The architects have punched out to light at every possible opportunity and created views of the interiors and glimpses of the street, the residential tower and the sky. Corridors have internal windows to overlook the dance studio, the gallery, etc. For a building with such extensive backstage areas, there is a phenomenal amount of light to make life pleasant when off stage.

Striking use of strong coloured planes enliven the drama of the atrium and the inter-connecting routes. Glass balustrades, extensive woodwork, clever stainless steel detailing, and a combination of natural slate flooring and purpose-designed striped carpeting, make for a natural and sophisticated appearance.

This is carried through into the 400-seat Pentland Theatre with its striking red colour scheme and blond wood stage and balcony fronts. The Studio is mainly dark grey but with a bright orange wall behind the audience. The dance studio and the art room on the north face enjoy the benefit of natural daylight and elevated views.

For 'design and build' this is a high quality design, fully implemented – no wonder everyone is so pleased.

Partnership works

How did Barnet pull off the coup of an astonishing Planning Gain of £15m to finance artsdepot? Roger Tomlinson investigates the path to success.

Gone are the prospects of many places achieving major schemes funded by huge Lottery capital grants, be it Millennium funds or Arts Lottery. The London Borough of Barnet quickly realised this in 1998 when it was trying to take forward the community's ambitions for a new arts centre in Finchley. Would Gordon Brown's much maligned Public Private Partnership offer a solution?

PPP

The site identified as having prospects for the arts centre was the old Gaumont at Tally Ho Corner. Since its demolition in 1987, developers had not been able to implement a viable commercial scheme for the site, and the Planning Brief had always required some reinstatement of 'Leisure/Entertainment' use. The Borough made the vital commitment early in 1997 of purchasing the whole site, so that future use could be directed towards its redevelopment to provide for the arts, helping regenerate the town centre, adding more retail and health opportunities, and a new bus terminal.

Buying the site was the easy step. How could a major development be afforded?

In-house

The Borough's in-house architects had undertaken studies exploring the feasibility of a mixed use development, and during 1997 and 1998 key consultants, led by Ruddle Wilkinson, were selected and engaged to join the team developing a full Project Brief, including ACT Consultant Services to design the theatres and develop the specification for *artsdepot* spaces. This meant that the parameters of what Barnet wanted were fully specified, including detailed design drawings and technical specifications for the spaces.

The community had been kept in a consultation loop throughout this process,

culminating in the outline brief for the key components of the Tally Ho Corner redevelopment being presented to a public meeting in December 1998 at The Bull, together with a road map of the route to selecting a developer.

Design and Build

'Design and build' is not favoured for procuring quality arts buildings funded by the Lottery, but it remains a financially

attractive route for local authorities with limited resources. The most common complaint is that the developer provides the minimum quality solution possible, and the design may not deliver adequately what was required. The London Borough of Barnet specified fully what it wanted, and in sufficient detail, so that the developers and designers knew exactly what they had to deliver and at what standard.

Some of the previous planning applications to develop the Gaumont site had established the possibility of a high density of use, so the developers would have the opportunity to incorporate any cost-effective commercial elements they could fit in to determine the viability of the project. The Borough wanted the new Bus Terminal, *artsdepot* and

related Community Focus and Barnet College spaces in return for the development.

It is certainly my experience that some local authorities get cold feet at this time. Perhaps it is unrealistic for members and officers to be expected to have a vision of what is possible. Certainly it seems that some don't necessarily share the perception of the value that developers and others might see in arts provision. I always recommend taking the risk of finding out what might be possible.

Cultural soul

Architect Eric R. Kuhne, designer of





Flexibility in minutes

Chris Baldwin explains how the 400-seat theatre in artsdepot manages to provide a variety of forms with no compromises and still achieve rapid change-overs.

Bluewater, has of course argued strongly for putting the arts back into civic developments, to create living towns and cities with a cultural reason for being there and being used by the people. He wants to put a cultural soul into shopping centres, and he doesn't mean Showcase Cinemas. And more and more developers across Europe, such as the Heron Corporation, are looking to arts and cultural facilities to bring all day life and quality footfall alongside the shops and offices. In Chelmsford, for example, developers Countryside are working with architect Lord Rogers on re-developing the former Anglia Polytechnic site next to the railway station, based on creating a cultural quarter with the Planning Gain of substantial arts facilities.

In Barnet, the Borough held initial interviews with potential developers to explore the possibilities of the scheme and identify their interest. Three came back with schemes and the price tag. In June 1999, the Chiltern Partnership, together with Architects Ruddle Wilkinson, were selected to design and implement their proposed scheme, including the health and fitness space (with a swimming pool and gymnasium) and retail units topped by a residential tower with 142 flats, crowned with two storeys of 16 duplex penthouses with spectacular views over North London.

Footfall

At Tally Ho Corner *artsdepot* and related elements are expected to deliver that crucial footfall which brings people to the development. And these are people who will visit at all times of the day and into the evening. This will bring a healthily up-market socio-economic profile of visitor. For anchor tenants Marks & Spencer and Canon's Leisure, this is fundamental to making the development attractive.

And the end result? Barnet were asked to contribute just £2.5m in addition to providing the site.

For many years we have been striving to get the most out of the technology available. When we can only afford to build one auditorium, we are often asked to make it possible to offer a variety of forms, so that it can meet more needs, and help the users maximise the opportunities.

But we've all seen those buildings where either bleacher seats constitute flexibility or a team of people heave rostra around to change the layout. Often it takes a day, sometimes overnight, rarely less than a few hours, so the venue cannot change over to another form for another event on the same day, and certainly not between afternoon and evening.

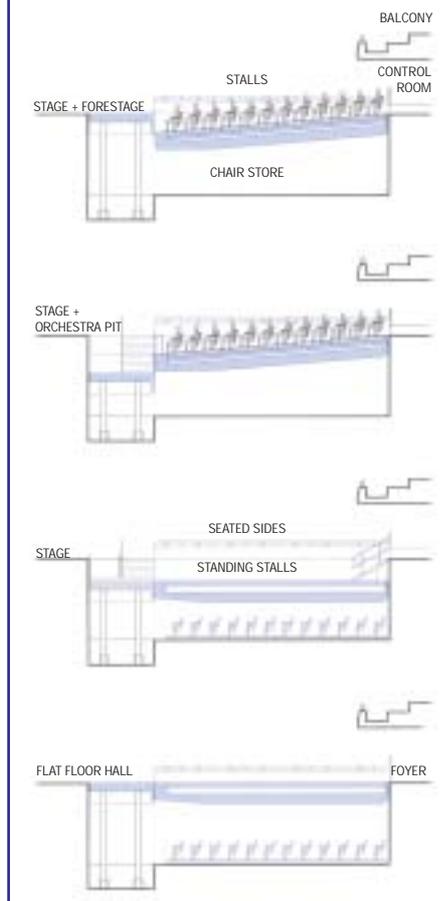
In Wellingborough, when we were developing the design for the auditorium in The Castle, we identified developments in lifting technology which allowed us to move the whole floor of the theatre, raking it up or down. And the use of air bearings meant we could lift and move large areas of seating around on wagons.

artsdepot allowed us to build on that experience and meet a variety of needs:

- theatre with raked auditorium, with or without orchestra pit, with proscenium arch stage for drama, dance or opera
- theatre with raked auditorium and concert platform (no proscenium) for orchestral concerts
- theatre with raked auditorium and thrust stage with or without proscenium
- flat-floored auditorium (no seats) and stage at the same level for exhibitions and trade fairs or promenade productions
- flat floored auditorium (no seats) below stage level (for standing concerts)
- flat floored auditorium with whatever combinations you wish.

Essentially, the theatre auditorium floor is a single huge lift platform, supported on pillars near each corner so that it can be raised or lowered or raked. There is an independent mechanism to raise the seating units out of the floor. The seats are

Adaptable Auditorium Layouts



on four auditorium-wide wagons, with three rows of seats on each. Each wagon comes with a self-contained lifting system to speed operation of movement.

There are various combinations of step units to accommodate the variations. The forestage of the theatre is a conventional stage elevator which lowers from stage level, to seating level, to standing concert level, and then to under stage level. Each seating wagon fits on the forestage and can be taken down and stored underneath.

On stage the two-storey proscenium towers at each side again use air bearings technology and can either form a stage with generous wing space or be removed for concerts.

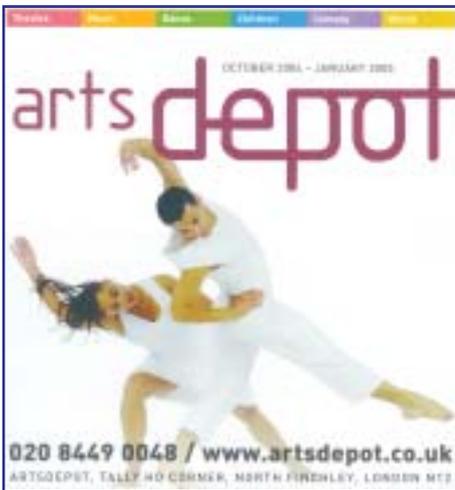
And finally there are acoustic reflectors which come down from the fly-tower and enable an excellent acoustic for live unamplified music. Turn-around time was designed to be under an hour from any one form to any other.

Seating is wrapped round the auditorium on three sides with a balcony accommodating 131 people and side stalls seating 48 people, and there is a fully seated capacity of 400, or with some seated and some standing in the stalls for a concert, a maximum of 500 people.

Community Focus

For artsdepot, Community Focus is both an intent and the name of an organisation. Roger Tomlinson met the people behind the vision.

Maria Bartha is looking forward to moving her classes and workshops into **artsdepot** in January 2005. Lots of her users visited the building during the Open Day on October 23, enjoyed the disabled access and were really pleased with twin dark rooms, digital art room, and large studio for classes and workshops. Maria is the driving force behind **Community Focus**, an organisation she has been running for 25 years and memorably describes as “an art centre for people of all abilities”.



This is part of the ‘community focus’ of **artsdepot**, bringing together opportunities for arts participation and learning as well as spectating. Director Alison Duthie’s philosophy is “there are no boundaries here between artists and education”. **Barnet College** has two floors of the building with additional dance and drama studios, and student tutorial and teaching rooms. “There are huge new opportunities when we start using the building in January 2005. There are opportunities for collaboration, for joint projects, for a real interface between everything we do. And we have put

equality of access as central to the ethos.” says Alison.

Barnet College is expected to bring hundreds of students through on courses delivered in the building, with a core of about 120 based there, linking professional practice and higher education. Of course their space can also be used for community courses and adult education so that **artsdepot** has a focus on lifelong learning.

But it is the equality of access which makes a special difference to the collaborations. Community Focus already has an all-day programme which includes dance and drama workshops for people with special needs, and there is now a 40-strong dance group and a large amateur theatre group. Mini-buses collect participants from all over the Borough, and at Tally Ho Corner, they all arrive at the same front door as everyone else, sharing use of the all day café and front of house facilities, just as the Barnet College students do. The access does not stop at front of house. It actually includes all the technical and performance areas and studios.

Maria sees the project as “giving visibility to the arts activities and the creativity of disabled people, raising their profile while achieving equality with the rest of the population”. Not least, it is hoped that more volunteers and helpers will be attracted to work with them since there is constantly



rising demand from adults with learning and physical disabilities. Students from Barnet College already work with Community Focus and some have completed their courses and come back as tutors.

The partners have all collaborated together in Barnet in the past, but now Maria is planning with Alison to be more ambitious, including thematic classes and workshops related to the **artsdepot** programme of visiting companies and artists. Alison foresees a quadrupling of activity levels: “The staff has increased to 23 just to run **artsdepot**, and all around us are new opportunities to develop exciting projects. We are already carefully balancing the access of all our local groups from the community to make sure they get their place in the programme”.

Photo: Fanni Omole



Alison Duthie



Maria Bartha

The London Borough of Barnet is right behind this creation of a crossroads between arts and education, with equality of access. Tri-partite revenue funding from the Borough, Arts Council England and the Association of London

Government will finance **artsdepot's** expanding programme. The Borough supports Community Focus with an annual grant of £100,000 for education and outreach. Maria and Alison are clear that they will find out much more about the potential by doing it.

Delivering the difference

ACT Consultant Services is a multi-disciplinary practice, from arts strategies and market analysis, to detailed design development of arts and entertainment buildings:

- preparing cultural strategies;
- developing master plans;
- completing feasibility studies;
- conducting marketplace and catchment area analyses;

- carrying out economic appraisals and compiling business plans
- detailed design development.

ACT works closely with clients to gain cost-effective solutions to design development and to procurement seeking to address all operational issues to ensure venues are easy to run, accessible and friendly. ACT can draw up the

ACT CONSULTANT SERVICES

constitution, recruit and induct the Board, and prepare the staff for opening night.

ACT takes a 360 degree view of an organisation, its needs, its operation and circumstances. ACT specialises in key strategic interventions to tackle operational, management or marketing issues.

See the animation of the artsdepot on the website: www.actconsultantservices.co.uk