

## **Encouraging Cultural Entrepreneurship**

By Dany Louise

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The current ubiquity of new creative industries programmes represents a shift in thinking at the highest levels. There is an underlying trend to wean artists and creative practitioners off the grant subsidy culture and towards financial independence through entrepreneurial self-reliance. Considerable resources being invested in a variety of initiatives by local authorities, the Regional Development Agencies, European sources and the Arts Council of England. For anyone believing they can earn a living through their creative skills, now is a good time to take the plunge - there is more real support available than ever before.

This support varies between regions and localities but generally comprises a mixture of generic business management training, coupled with sector-specific and personalised business advice. The aim is to equip creatives with the knowledge and skills necessary to access start-up finance and successfully run and sustain their creative businesses. This thinking has evolved into "creative clustering", a recognition that creative businesses work best in an environment with other like-minded concerns. Other benefits include mutual support, ease of networking and shared information; and in specific localities it can strengthen the infrastructure, provide a focus for the tourists and shoppers, and contribute to the local economy.

Successful early examples of creative clustering include the Custard Factory in Birmingham (factory conversions seem to be de rigueur) and Dean Clough in Halifax although there are many other initiatives of varying ambition. One such in development is in Knowsley, one of the more distressed boroughs of Merseyside. It has a particularly low rate of new business start-ups, although there is a fair amount of creative talent in the area; the task is to nurture that talent and create an infrastructure strong enough to make staying in Knowsley a viable economic proposition.

I am leading on a two-year pilot scheme will combine creative workspace with sector-specific business support and add-on programmes. A suitable building and finance has been identified, and the guiding principles laid down: it will be cheap, cheerful and practitioner friendly. This means easy-in, easy-out terms and a sliding scale of rents, starting from a low enough point that no-one will be turned away because they cannot afford the smallest space. We have decided against free rental, since we think it important in terms of ownership and commitment that practitioners make at least a small investment in themselves and the programme. It is experimental in that the mix of

tenants is likely to be much wider than the traditional studio space, leading, we hope, to a beneficial 'internal ecology'.

From the local authority point of view this is fairly innovative. More used to providing "sheds" for well established businesses, this will be the first time Knowsley MBC has led on this type of , initiative. To succeed, it requires a genuine commitment to meeting the needs of this particular sector, something that local authorities generally struggle with. It has needed quite some persuasion to shift thinking in the economic development department, who are more used to dealing with space for which they can charge £8.50 /sq. ft on a minimum five year lease. However, with a new creative industries strategy being adopted by the Cabinet, of which this project is a part, the will is there and the commitment, I hope, will follow closely behind!

*Dany Louise is Creative Industries Officer for KMBC*