

ISLINGTON MILL

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BACKGROUND

Islington Mill is a cultural space in Salford with over 50 artists' studios, two art galleries, a recording studio and a club space. The space hosting all these facilities is a former cotton spinning mill, which, unlike much of Manchester's industrial heritage close by, has not been converted into loft apartments.

AREAS OF ENGAGEMENT

Letting of 50 studio spaces for artists, designers and other creatives. All the studio spaces are self-contained, lockable as well as heatable and still possessing much of the character of the original building with their whitewashed brick walls, quarry tiled floors, iron columns and vaulted ceilings. The spaces vary in size from small studios of 3x3m to big studios of 6x6m.

Besides the studios, there are numerous other spaces around the building which are used for one-off events, photo shoots, rehearsals, exhibitions and filming.

A Bed & Breakfast is located in the Engine House and can accommodate ten people in two double bedrooms and a dormitory. The B&B predominantly hosts bands and artists visiting the city, but is open to everyone. Housed in the midst of Islington Mill artists' studios, the B&B provides a lively and alternative introduction to the city and with its central dining table offers the opportunity for lively conversations between the hosts and their guests. Recent guests have included artists Billy Childish, David Medalla and Roger Cardinal and bands Earth, Salem and Group Doueh.

The Islington Mill Reference Library is an arts resource comprised of artists monographs, exhibition catalogues and survey publications as well as cultural theory ranging from philosophy to art. The library is a free and publicly available resource whose content is accumulated on a donations basis, with over 300 publications received from the initial call. One of the long-term goals of the library is to develop a specific section on publications exclusively from/on locally-based artists. Use of the library is by appointment and a comfortable and warm study area is also provided with tea-making facilities and a microwave.

The Islington Mill Arts Club is located on the ground floor of the building, hosting concerts and including a bar, a small restaurant and a gallery space.

The Islington Mill Art Academy was started by a group of Art Foundation students keen on exploring

alternatives to a university-based education for artists. On the fourth floor of the Mill, the Academy was set up to experiment with what an education in art could be, where it could take place and how it could be paid for. It is a place for people with a tremendous and unstoppable will to make art, who have chosen to direct and organise their own education. Since 2007, the Academy has worked with artists from the UK and beyond, its members have exhibited in various galleries in the UK and participated in residencies across Europe.

FUNDING

Letting of studio spaces; organisation of events; B&B

DEVELOPMENT

1994: Bill Campbell returns to Salford after studying Fashion at Central St. Martins in London

1997-2001: Bill Campbell gets interested in the abandoned Mill and tries to secure funding to buy the place

2001: Bill Campbell buys the place and organises site-specific shows

2003: The Engine House at Islington Mill is transformed into a home

2005: Islington Mill Arts Club launches, hosting concerts and events

2006: Fifty studio spaces are ready to be let

2007: Launch of Islington Mill Art Academy

2010: Further re-generation of the building, opening of a gallery space, improved bar and toilet facilities run by the Islington Mill Arts Club

2011: Opening of a B&B in The Engine House

2011: Autumn residency program starts

LOCATION

Salford, UK, 218,000 inhabitants. Salford is near to Manchester City Centre, Manchester has 464,200 inhabitants.

CONVERSATION

This conversation was held with Bill Campbell, the owner of the Mill, and Maurice Carlin, who runs the B&B, in the kitchen of The Engine House in May 2011.

Bianca Elzenbaumer: Islington Mill is celebrating its 10th anniversary this year. How did it come about that you decided to buy this massive old mill with its two adjacent buildings?

Bill Campbell: When I returned from London with a

degree in Fashion Design, I knew that I did not want to take up that profession. At that time, I was living opposite this abandoned mill and felt strongly inspired by the potential for creative activity that the building already held at that time. Originally, it was not just me aiming to buy this whole thing. There were four of us, two of whom had strong visions for an artist studio, possibly following that 1980s/'90s co-operative model. The others involved in the initial plan of buying the mill had more experience of funding than I did and we spent three years trying to speak to local authorities and the Arts Council, trying to engage them in the idea of an art centre in Salford in a building like this. When it became clear that none of these stakeholders had the money for or an interest in this project, the other artists dropped out. They couldn't see how to make it what they thought it could be, whereas I was probably a little more fluid in the potential of what I imagined it could be: if it didn't become strictly a visual arts artists' studio, that was fine by me.



In order to advance the plans for the mill on my own, I needed to get residential planning permission for the building—not because of my ambition to make it into a block of flats but because of the needs of a financial safety net, i.e. to create added value. The ambition was clearly to make it everything but a block of flats. That kind of business plan had to be established

enough in order to get the planning permission and to engage the banks in the early days.

I was twenty-three when I decided to buy the building and first began renting it out when I was twenty-six. Back then it was maybe naïve to buy it.

Maurice Carlin: Definitely naivety could play a part. You wouldn't do it now when you knew what was involved.

Bill: You are right, I wouldn't do it again. But back then I suppose it was ambition that drove me.

Bianca: So when you bought the building you only had a very loose plan of what it could become, but you were very passionate about it. How do you feel now about the way the Mill has developed over the years?

Bill: I would say that Islington Mill has organically become what I imagined it had the potential to be, and it still holds more room for development. The Mill is always unfinished: when, for instance, we built this building (The Engine House), we made the decision not to paint the walls or the steel or anything. We realised that when things are in some way unfinished, they have a better sense of potential. Whereas if the development is complete and shiny as the architects specified it, then there is no prospect for it to be anything other than what it is.

Maurice: Then it is over.

Bill: It can only decay from there and look old and tired. Whereas when you never finish it in the first place, there is always space for improvement. That is my plan: never finish anything.

Bianca: As you have been running the place now for ten years, has being the owner of the Islington Mill become your creative practice?

Bill: Maybe. Some people think of it like that. I don't call it that. But I guess the decision-making process I adopt is more akin to how artists work or make decisions, rather than to how business people and property developers make decisions. The Mill is always changing. We try various ways of doing things and if ultimately we see that they are not working, we try a different approach.

Maurice: What that way of operating is acknowledging is that perhaps there is no fixed way of doing things. Different groups of people occupy the space at different times and, inevitably, changing groups of people have different ways of being in the space and different needs. It is an acknowledgement that there is no such thing as ‘the right way’.

Bill: Islington Mill is always unfinished and responsive to the people that are here. As Morry says, people bring their own ways of using the physical space and have their own approaches to how to be part of a community.

Maurice: And I think Bill is pretty laid back with the freedom he allows people.

Bill: Possibly. Painting, moving walls, bringing furniture—it is all no problem.

Maurice: One of our tenants says that what he found different here in comparison to studios run on a cooperative model is that people liked it, because you don’t have to go into the politics of who should change the light bulb or the toilet roll. He had been part of cooperative groups in the past and had presumably seen how it can go really badly wrong in terms of efficiency and organisation.

Bill: Having said that, here there isn’t anyone to change the light bulb! We don’t have a building manager or a caretaker as such that everyone relates to, so if the toilet paper runs out, whoever realises goes and finds some. I think that when it comes to things like that, the politics of a cooperative way of working are set up differently. Here, the tenants are not particularly expected or required to contribute. They are autonomous, working for themselves. They just go into the studio and get on with their work. They don’t need some sort of shared ideology or shared practice. Everyone is totally independent of each other, which, ironically, then enables them to be more of a community because they are not getting into arguments with their neighbours about the toilet roll.

Bianca: Islington Mill is a constant experiment. Could you maybe recall some of the experiments that went wrong and how you adjusted to that?

Maurice: We have tried things like opening a shop down the road in Salford. That was a bit of a disaster.

We tried to open it in a place with more passing trade than we get hidden away here.

Bill: There wasn’t much of a passing trade there either!

Maurice: It was a little bit better, but only a little bit. That was a joint initiative with the makers hosted in the Mill who wanted to sell their work. It was a real disaster.

Bill: It wasn’t that bad, but it is difficult to call it a success.

Maurice: It would be dishonest to call it a success!

Bill: It lasted for about two months. Now one of the tenants has taken on the same space and makes it work as a studio and exhibition space.

Maurice: In that sense, the original initiative in the space didn’t come to a full stop. Again, it became what it was more suited to: not a shop but a studio. A way of making it work was found, it changed and it is now more successful.

Bill: We did another experiment with artist-directed dinners. We tried to make something of a good quality social experience.

Maurice: Everyone paid something like £10 for a three-course meal with a glass of wine. We, and maybe five other people, would do the cooking. It was so much work to cook for 30 to 40 people that we realised that, in order to make it financially viable, we would have to charge people at least £25 and of course then, nobody would pay that. Trying these things out gives you an appreciation of why things are as they are; how difficult it is to set up a restaurant and to make a successful business out of it. It also gives you a concept of value, because in a place like the Mill, people expect things to be really cheap, whereas if you go to some fancy restaurant, paying £25 is acceptable. Here, that would be outrageous, so it is all a bit fucked-up (big laughter).

Bianca: Running Islington Mill sounds like a trial-and-error endeavour but also like a job for life. Are the two of you able to make a living from this?

Maurice: I guess we don’t really spend much money, because we never leave here. (big laughter) I always notice that whenever I do leave, how expensive every-

thing is. You go for a night out and the prices hit you. In the bar here, we don't pay for the concerts and the drinks.

Bill: We don't get on the bus. We go to the supermarket maybe once a week. That is the only time I get out. (big laughter)

Maurice: There is a café here on Thursdays and Fridays. If it was open everyday, we would never go to the supermarket—we would never leave! That's not good either though, because you start to have no understanding of what the real world is like. (big laughter)

Bill: The Mill and the work here are also our social life. Everyone comes here, which is again great, but it makes you do too much socialising and the combination of work and social life makes it difficult to spend quality time with people.

Recently, I needed to get away to think because there were a number of problems to do with the energy levels of people driving the activities on the ground floor. We set up the ground floor as Islington Mill Arts Club to specifically run the venue and the gallery. The Arts Club is a company limited by guarantee, whereas a private company like the one with which I own and run the studio spaces is not fundable.

I lease the ground floor independently as the Islington Mill Arts Club, which is run by three directors—me, Morry and Mark. We then employ two people on a freelance basis. We also had a Bar Manager, and then there is Kim who does the food, but in itself it is an independent project, almost like any tenant. This group of people making things happen in that space was getting worn out. I got away to consider practical solutions to that, but ultimately came back with the feeling that none of the practical solutions would be enough, as the negativity had, at times, turned into confrontation and even almost animosity. A general bad feeling existed, not from the fact that the crisps were stored in the wrong place, but from a fundamental difference in vision as to where we as individuals wanted the place to go. We would have these two-hour long meetings—myself, Morry and Mark—and by the end of it, Morry would always say 'but I don't want to run a café and not make any art. I'm not getting in the studio as much as I want to to make my art.'

Maurice: In 2010, we hoped that by also creating a gallery and by making visual things, we could draw in more people, but then it becomes about making the

most successful bar and café because that's the only way that you fund the whole thing. You do that up to the point that you realise you don't actually have the skills to do it. I had never even worked in a café and I had no idea of how to make it a successful café. And then you think that perhaps you are not even all that interested in running a café.

Bill: We had this calendar on the wall, showing all the months ahead and, before I went away, there was this sense of desperation in trying to give people reasons for coming here, in order to generate funds.

Maurice: We had a target of money, a turnover that we had to reach every month in order to make it work. Since autumn, we had all this pressure piling up to get people here to participate in activities.

Bill: Which is potentially an OK business model, but only if that is what you want to do. In our case, it wasn't working because we weren't able to commit to it passionately as individuals and find the 150% of energy you need because that is the energy you want to put into your artwork. Our hearts weren't in it and we were not all pulling in the same direction.

Maurice: There would be some months that our income would be under the amount we needed and some months where it was over, but over six months, on average we would still be a little bit under. We had this idea that the more popular things we put on would pay for the less popular things. That was good in theory, but didn't work in practice as even the popular things weren't popular enough, and the things that were unpopular, were really fucking unpopular.

Bill: Since making the decision to cut the activities back to the level they were at before starting this, we all feel so much better. We have drawn a line to end an era. Now, we are carving out some space for ourselves as individuals, to spend time thinking about what we actually want to do. We are giving ourselves the choice not to do this if we don't want to and to see what can grow out of that.

I'm quite excited about removing ourselves and allowing other people to come in with new ideas. While we are there, people assume that we have made decisions when in actual fact, we probably haven't. By removing ourselves, there is more chance for other people to get active and passionate.

Maurice: Because you can be an obstacle for other people stepping in and taking ownership over something and making it what they want it to be.

Bill: You are definitely an obstacle if you are in a bad mood, if you are tired, overworked. Terrible! We realised that and made a change.

Bianca: Keeping the Mill running means juggling all sorts of different tasks and necessities. Does there remain some time for a private life and time away from the structure or is there almost an analogy to a farm where you can never really leave?

Maurice: I grew up on a farm and know what you mean: when we grew up on the farm, in order to go away for a holiday for a week, we had to spend two weeks preparing, and it is the same here. We've got an old campervan, but it takes at least three or four days for us to get ready to leave in it. Also, the way the Mill has previously been structured, going for artist residencies has been difficult, but it might be possible now. Until now, I've only been able to get away for about two weeks, so it is never very long. It is tricky to find the right balance. Hopefully, we can make it work better.

Bianca: Going back to the financial side of Islington Mill, how do you deal with the financial and psychological pressure of paying off the debt?

Bill: Psychologically, you just don't think about it, you just ignore it. Financially, the rates that I'm paying at the moment are all interest only, so the debt isn't really been paid yet. However, I'm in negotiation with my bank to start making capital repayments as well, which will increase the monthly fee but will enable us to pay back the debt and not just the interest. You need to demonstrate that you cover the mortgage payment with an income of 130%. Reasonably, the income is about double the outgoings as half of that money is what helps us survive. Now, I can afford to consider a fifteen-year plan to pay off the debt. Fifteen years... Luckily we don't have many outgoings since the Mill is also our lives, in that everything is in here. Everything we need is almost covered within the business. Even the B&B is a way of getting what we want: living where we want and meeting people in order to have a nice experience with them, while at the same time it pays the bills a little bit. In the end, I guess it has always been about planning things so that you get what you need in your life before money. If you get all those things

through other means, then you don't need money.

Bianca: Given the current situation at the Mill and your own plans for life, what would your hopes for the future be?

Bill: A hope would be to be able to carve out a bit of space for ourselves; spending some time really thinking about what we want, or maybe not thinking but being open to a wider sense of what the future might hold for us as individuals. I own it, I'm here and I'm not going—the decision to sell the building is not on the table at all. It wouldn't make financial sense; it wouldn't make any sense. But from there, to decide to disband the Arts Club and to lease the venue to someone else is an option, if it helps remove our requirement to be here. In some form or another, I will continue with the overall vision to complete the building, which means looking at the fifth floor at some point and continuing with the ground floor to get as full a program as resources allow. This might mean going back to that idea of a six or seven days-a-week open building with a regular program, but only once the resources are in place to enable that to happen. Morry and Mark might not be involved in that—or at least not in the same ways—because they have more option to just go. It is important that, as individuals, we get our freedom and we might then come back and find that, this time next year, we are doing all of the things we just stopped doing—but if we are, I hope it is in a much better way.

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