

No Time Not to Try

A Community Cinema Created in Lockdown

Author: Hilary Clayton-Mitchell

Daniel Craig's swansong as James Bond was much-delayed due to the COVID pandemic, which was not an ideal time to start any new business venture let alone a community cinema; however, the same spirit that propelled Captain Tom up and down his garden and Thursday night clapping for the NHS compelled the Acton Art Project to plough on and launch their new adventure in local cinema located in the redundant Acton Library.

The library was once a key part of the civic heart of Acton. It, along with the Town Hall, municipal baths and Magistrate's Court made up the so-called Red Brick Quarter; a group of distinguished, predominately red brick, buildings dating back to the mid-19th Century through to the early 20th Century.

From the early sixties London's smaller councils, like Acton, were being amalgamated into larger borough units creating an excess of civic buildings like town halls. Ealing Council, formed in 1965, inherited three from Acton, Ealing, and Southall. By 2011 on the altar of streamlining services they started to sell off excess assets developing the old swimming baths into a new leisure centre, with leftover space diverted to new flats. The Magistrate's Court re-emerged in 2012 as quirkily-styled residential accommodation, with the Town Hall following a similar path in 2020.

Ealing Council resisted selling the final block, the Library, that had lain empty since 2014, protecting it from becoming yet more expensive housing, and insisting that a community use must form part of any re-development plan. Initially a deal with Curzon Corinthian, who proposed a small multiplex with restaurants and performance spaces, seemed to offer a solution. Despite much local anticipation Ealing Councils' development partnership with them fell through in 2014.

By now there was a backlash building against councils selling off the family silver. A 2019 Guardian article: "The Great British Sell-off; How desperate councils sold £9.1bn public assets" summed-up the mood, highlighting the disposal of numerous public buildings typically to private-sector property developers for luxury housing. Ealing's previous decision to sell the Library was reversed to renting instead: the controversial sale of Southall Town Hall, declared unlawful by the High Court in 2018, possibly influencing this change of heart.

Local opinion that the Library should be protected from unsuitable redevelopment, remain as an integral part of the community and be re-born as a cinema galvanised in the Acton Arts Project. Having begun the bidding process in 2018 the council's change of tack saw their original backer pull out, but after reforming as a Community Interest Company and working in partnership with other independent operators in 2019 they won the bid to fund and build a community cinema.

Opening-day came in Autumn 2021 with the 25th Bond-film No Time to Die: the cinema manager greeting customers suitably resplendent in a stylish tuxedo. In a nice gesture the tenant of the upper floor unit block-booked the auditorium for his staff for the first show. So, after 2 years of reimagining, rebuilding and repairing, with a budget of just £179,000 (a mere 1/1500th of its first film's cost) but buoyed-up by over 100,000 hours of local volunteer's time they opened. After 46 years Acton had its own cinema again.

To begin with there is a single 60-seat auditorium, plus a café, and an exhibition area on the ground floor: the upper floor has been sub-let to generate steady income and help with the rent. There are plans for a second screen; however, the designated space is currently used as a multi-purpose hall for events; quite successfully it seems.



Exhibitions, dance classes, and even market trading – the space has been used by Reboutique a “conscious consumption” retail pop-up selling second-hand clothes – have used it and add to the sense of community engagement. These ad-hoc flexible spaces owned by their community will challenge the formal galleries as popular destinations with interactive and locally relevant attractions.

Alas, here is a conflict for the cinema: they need the second auditorium to enhance their core offer but in losing the local interaction the exhibition space offers they will lessen their place in the community. An awkward circle for them to square.

As befits both its Grade II listing and the limited budget the architecture has been left in its original state, allowing the wear and tear of its long history to show through. A shabby-chic interior for the café uses up-cycled furniture to create a cosy environment. Admirably, local companies Bears Ice cream and wine shop Vindinista respectively run the café and supply the wine, but catering I feel is too limited and should have been expanded with varied offers reflecting the optimism that the café/wine bar would take off as a destination in its own right.

The philanthropic nature of the Library’s rejuvenation into a cinema is apt as the building was originally a gift to the people of Acton from John Passmore Edwards a noted journalist/publisher. An original feature was a reading-room to benefit the laundry-girls working in Acton’s 600-odd laundries: generating the area’s affectionate nick name of SoapSud Island.

Change is on the way and not just climate, COVID altered our perspective: working at home and taking more control over our lives; how we do things has become more fluid. We have learned to spend more time locally in the community exploring our surrounding as we were denied foreign travel. Dedicated groups as such as Locality UK assist and advise communities on how to make proposals for repurposing council owned property avoiding the sell off. “Save our Spaces” is one of their campaigns to promote the community asset transfer. Locality UK claims that 4,000 publicly owned properties are lost each year to developers for private use, showing Act One’s step in the opposite direction is a necessary one.

Greta Thunberg paved the way for the small voice to be heard. Act One captures the spirit of this period Marie Lowe and her team tackling the challenge head-on, galvanizing a group of volunteers to help give the old Library a new lease of life. Their venture was a heroic act of vision and determination and long may the building continue to inspire and encourage community spirit.