

Studios offer homes to arts and media firms

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The largest arts and media cluster to come to Birmingham since the Custard Factory is set to offer a home to growing companies from the city's burgeoning creative and digital sector.

Developed by Lucan Gray, son of Custard Factory owner Bennie Gray, Fazeley Studios, in Digbeth, is a 1.25 acre collection of magnificent but previously derelict listed buildings fronting Fazeley Street which have been restored to form 44 studio offices for creative and digital businesses.

Almost 3,000 designers from across the UK were given a preview of Fazeley Studios last week when it played host to PLUS International Design Festival.

Although the doors do not open officially until December, it is already the new permanent home to Ikon Eastside gallery and is rapidly filling with creative and digital businesses, including Big Button, Rice Media, Capricorn Studios and Substrakt. It provides workspace for 500 people.

At 200 to 20,000 sq ft, Fazeley Studios includes the largest workspaces available to date in the creative quarter and it aims to serve the "new generation" creative sectors such as digital media, web design and TV production, along with fashion and software houses.

Lucan Gray said the studios were the first in a rolling programme of developments that will increase the number of creative and digital businesses in Digbeth by tenfold within ten years.

He said: "It has been a painstaking two-year, £7 million development process, but now we've achieved a completely new style of workplace.

"It starts with an exceptional reception space, set in a converted 1870s Victorian Gothic chapel, and continues with a range of WiFi covered public spaces and relaxation rooms including a brasserie, landscaped courtyard and winter garden, yoga studio, games room, Xbox arena and multi-gym.

"It is about working and networking in the new age, for industries that feed creativity.

"It might seem like a strange time to launch a project of this scale, but actually Fazeley Studios has come at the right time for many people because it is so competitive on price.



Lucan Gray outside Fazeley Studios in Digbeth and, below, the Fazeley Studios Winter garden



"It provides a great option for companies having to make difficult financial decisions to cut their running costs, as they can have the same amount of space for less money and take a step up in the quality of their working environment.

"However, the majority of our current tenants are actually expanding, perhaps because digital media and web are cost effective, targeted and at the cutting edge of their sectors.

"They are great success stories for the

city at an extremely challenging time, so it is important that we can provide them with the kind of space and support that they need in order to grow."

Lucan Gray has worked in Birmingham for over ten years redeveloping buildings for the creative industries.

After managing the construction of the Custard Factory, he went on to create bespoke workspaces for companies such as Maverick Television, North One Television, the Audio Suite, Eastside Projects

and WBP. Fazeley Studios is his largest development to date and was made possible by gap funding from Advantage West Midlands, through the East Birmingham and North Solihull Regeneration Zone (ebns).

Along with the Victorian Gothic Unitarian chapel, the building's architectural gems include an 1860s Unitarian Sunday School and a series of 1950s factories converted to provide studio spaces.

Advantage West Midlands chief executive Mick Laverty said: "Digbeth is the Creative Quarter of the region.

"The Custard Factory has been a great success story for creative freelancers and entrepreneurs, but Fazeley Studios will address the gap in the market for established creative companies who need high impact offices with large floor plates and quality finishes. It will help to ensure that we retain the city's most successful creative businesses."

Ebns chief executive Graham Edwards said: "We are pleased to have been involved in the birth of this project. Fazeley Studios will make a massive contribution to establishing Digbeth as the location for creative and media business."

Branding guru Michael helps shout about Birmingham

Design and branding supremo Michael Wolff returns to Birmingham's Eastside for a debate on creative leadership and direction in the city this month.

The event, organised by regional representative group Creative Republic, will explore the concept of a "creative director" role for the city – a high-profile position with responsibility for championing arts, culture and design.

A Creative Masterclass with Michael Wolff will take place on 27th November at 5.30pm at Fazeley Studios, the city's creative and digital cluster, and offers an opportunity to engage with one of the UK's most respected branding experts on issues close to the city's heart.

Looking ahead, Michael said: "It is currently a very tough time with much pessimism – certainly a great time for a city to generate self-confidence and optimism. Encouraging and supporting Birmingham's creativity is the most effective way. It's a privilege for me to do what I can to enable this to happen."

As co-founder of the Wolff Olins brand agency, Michael Wolff created identities for Audi, VW, BP, Citigroup, P&O and the rebranding of the Labour Party.

Entering design in the mid-fifties, he worked across the industry from architecture to graphics and is a world-renowned voice on innovation and identity.

Birmingham is often accused of poor promotion and under-representing individuals and organisations working in creative and cultural industries in comparison with Liverpool and Manchester.

Yet the West Midlands is home to hundreds of thousands of professionals working in the creative and cultural industries, contributing around £6.6 billion annually to the regional economy.

Creative Republic chair Helga Henry said: "We were delighted to welcome Michael to Birmingham earlier in the year for a research trip in the city, when he experienced many of our truly great cultural and creative assets.

"We hope the masterclass will help us champion our many strengths as well as offering a platform for engagement between creative professionals and Creative Republic." The organisation develops and coordinates events for people with a passion for the region to encourage the sharing of proactive ideas and aspirations for the creative future of the West Midlands. Projects include working with Birmingham City Council to shape the Big City Plan, the Regional Economic Strategy and supporting the Created in Birmingham blog.

New-look website aims to unite media and marketing professionals

The Publicity Association of Central England (PACE) has unveiled its new-look website with more content, improved layout and navigation.

Designed and built by Birmingham-based digital agency One Black Bear, www.pace-uk.co.uk has lots of new features including a feedback section where users can submit their views on site content, blogs from council members

and a new image gallery powered by flickr.

PACE chairman Terri Smart said: "The growing importance of e-communications means that it is essential for us to have a cutting-edge website.

"The clear and dynamic image presented by the site supports and demonstrates the way we want to engage with all our members in the future. We hope

it will create a new platform for feedback from members and non-members alike."

PACE is a forum which provides informal contact between professionals working in the media and marketing and communications industries in the Midlands.

Steve Price has been leading the redevelopment project over the past six months.

He said: "As well as giving the website a cleaner and more modern design, we wanted to make it more user-friendly – which meant completely overhauling the structure".

This is the first phase of an ongoing digital development plan. The second phase of the website development will be launched in 2009 and will feature a new purchasing system where tickets for

events can be bought online.

A social networking feature will be launched next year to increase professional and social interaction between PACE members.

In a bid to drive new membership, some areas of the site will only be fully accessible to PACE members and a series of new PACE membership offers will be available through the site.