

Studios the answer to new firms' prayers



Fazeley studios is a converted church in the heart of Digbeth's warehouse district which has spawned a digital renaissance

Anna Blackaby looks at the Fazeley phenomenon

Nestling among the remaining metal-bashers and greasy spoons of Digbeth's back streets lies a powerful symbol of Birmingham's digital renaissance.

Fazeley Studios occupies a converted 150-year-old church building right in the centre of the former industrial heart of Birmingham, yet the antique furniture and Pre-Raphaelite reproductions adorning the arches of its reception area couldn't provide a sharper contrast with the gritty, grey streets outside.

Without Fazeley Studios, it seems unlikely that Microsoft subsidiary Rare Games would be seriously looking at taking space in Digbeth.

Together with The Custard Factory and The Big Peg, Fazeley Studios forms a key part of the "Gray empire" run by antiques market proprietor and property developer Bennie Gray and his son Lucan.

It was Mr Gray Junior who steered the £7 million Fazeley Studios redevelopment project, which benefited from gap funding of £2.2 million from regional development agency Advantage West Midlands in partnership with East Birmingham North Solihull Regeneration Zone.

When the studios opened, they were

billed as an upmarket version of the grimier Custard Factory which was pioneered by Bennie Gray in the 1990s.

When it was launched last year, Lucan Gray said the studios, which provide working space for 500 people, were the first in a rolling programme of developments that will increase the space for creative and digital businesses in Digbeth by tenfold within ten years.

Although Fazeley Studios first opened its doors last midwinter in the darkest days of the city's commercial property market, it has since defied the gloom to fill up with digital and creative industries, a sector which seems to be booming despite the downturn.

Many of its tenants are going from strength to strength – web design firm Substrakt for example recently launched a new sister company Subcom, acquired a Bristol-based digital media company and took on a new office in London.

The Grays have widely been credited with kickstarting Digbeth's renaissance as a centre for the creative industries.

Dr Austin Barber, a lecturer in urban planning at the University of Birmingham, said the Digbeth area was a "tremendous success story for the city".

"I take students from our planning programmes around Digbeth and it's the one area that really catches their interest because they can see this energetic new economy emerging and they

are really fascinated by it. "In terms of the Custard Factory, the new Fazeley Studios and also The Bond, the main thing they have contributed is good-quality, attractive and affordable workspace for small business providing the kind of incubation space that small start-ups need.

"When you go inside Fazeley Studios, it is stunning and it creates something that's different and distinctive and that again is what firms in this kind of sector really like."

Dr Barber pointed to the "clustering" effect which allowed digital firms to collaborate more easily and contribute to building the profile of Digbeth.

"Because of the way they work, it allows a natural clustering to happen. Because small firms work very closely together and individual projects often involve short-term working, networks between firms develop that are crucial to the economy.

"Again the Custard Factory has created that kind of ambience that firms like that want to be around.

"With buildings like Fazeley Studios, The Custard Factory, The Bond, Vivid and Ikon, by forming a cluster, they start to create a profile for these kinds of sectors and add up to more than the sum of their parts.

"They create a kind of visibility for the digital and new media sectors and that

starts to benefit the city as a whole."

The next steps for Digbeth include the opening of Devonshire House, the imposing Victorian building facing onto Digbeth High Street, a £10 million 100,000 sq ft project that has also been gap funded by Advantage West Midlands.

It's not just Advantage West Midlands – Birmingham City Council has also recognised Digbeth as a key zone in the city's digital and creative economy.

Earlier this year it announced plans for the area spanning Digbeth, Aston Science Park and Eastside to become Birmingham's new "digital district," benefiting from next-generation high speed broadband.

The initiative revolves around a project to install fibre-optic technology which would enable internet speeds of over 100 megabits per second.

But many of the companies resident in the area have raised concerns that Digbeth's infrastructure still needs to be improved, pointing to the need for better lighting and signage.

Dr Barber said the area had succeeded "in spite of council planning rather than because of it".

He pointed to Digbeth High Street and the connection between the Bullring and the Custard Factory as a case where further investment was needed to better integrate the two areas.

BIG PLAYERS IN MIDLANDS

■ Serious Games Institute

Thanks to the Serious Games Institute based in Coventry University's Science Park, the West Midlands has become one of the world centres for "serious games" – games used for non-entertainment purposes such as education, culture and business.

The institute provides a meeting point for high-level applied academic research and leading-edge technology companies who are pioneering the commercial use of serious games.

Tenants include a firm called Digital 2.0 which is developing a game to help young people who are at risk of offending to understand the realities of life in prison, the Virtual Experience Company, a company which can take users on an exquisitely-detailed tour of historic buildings like Anne Hathaway's cottage, and Ambient Performance, which helps companies customise and build their own online spaces for use in things like online conferences or training programmes.

■ Codemasters

One of the original names in computer gaming, Southam-based games developer and publisher Codemasters was founded by teenagers Richard and David Darling in 1986. The brothers were honoured in last year's Queen's Birthday Honours.

Today Codemasters sells all over the world, boasting Operation Flashpoint: Dragon Rising and online games such as The Lord of the Rings Online.

Last November Codemasters took over Birmingham developers Swordfish Studios, buying the firm out from American games giant Activision Vivendi. Swordfish and Codemasters had worked on projects such as the acclaimed Brian Lara-endorsed cricket game.

Today Codemasters employs nearly 500 people in the UK.

■ Blitz Games Studio

The firm has a similar history to Codemasters – emerging from the bedrooms of schoolboy coders Philip and Andrew Oliver in 1990 to become one of the largest independent video game developers in the world.

Blitz has carved out a name for himself in "family games," but the studios are also working other areas such as serious games.

■ Freestyle Games

The Leamington Spa-based firm, which employs about 100, is a specialist in mass-market music-based gaming and has worked on games titles like the Guitar Hero franchise. It was founded in 2002 but was taken over in September last year by US giant Activision Blizzard.

