

Placemaking with Purpose Developer x Arts Centres Roundtable Insights Report

The Albany, Deptford - 24 November 2025



Overview

Future Arts Centres (FAC) convened a small, invitation-only roundtable at The Albany, Deptford, bringing together leaders from arts centres, the development sector, social value specialists and advisers working between culture and real estate. The aim was to explore how developers and arts centres can build deeper, smarter partnerships that deliver lasting value for places, people and projects.

The discussion forms part of a wider strand of work to:

- Understand how arts centres can act as anchor institutions and civic “living rooms” in changing town and city centres.
- Test how the property sector currently engages with arts and culture – and what gets in the way.
- Shape a potential platform at UKREiiF 2026 and a longer-term collaboration programme between FAC and property partners.

This report summarises what we heard, highlights key tensions and opportunities, and sketches possible next steps – including the idea of “arts centre champions” within the development and local authority community.



5 Key Messages

1. **Arts centres are under-used placemaking infrastructure.** As trusted civic spaces with deep local networks, they can de-risk engagement, strengthen social value and bring “living room of the city” energy to new and existing developments.
2. **The relationship between culture and development is structurally hard right now.** The traditional “third/third/third” funding model for culture is weakening just as development viability is under intense pressure, especially outside the strongest markets.
3. **There is a visibility and translation gap.** Developers struggle to find robust, investable arts partners beyond a familiar set of “shiny” institutions; many arts centres struggle to frame their offer in language that speaks to risk, return and long-term operations.
4. **There are promising models – but they need to be made legible and repeatable.** Examples discussed ranged from revenue-sharing mixed-use schemes, to “living room” cultural hubs, to arts centres doubling as engagement infrastructure and social value delivery partners.
5. **A practical next step could be a small cohort of ‘arts centre champions’.** These would be developers and local authority officers willing to work closely with FAC and a sample of arts centres to shape pilots, refine the partnership offer and help design a UKREiiF 2026 showcase.

Who was in the room?

Participants included:

- Senior leaders from **Future Arts Centres** and individual arts centres.
- **Developers:**
 - A family-owned national developer focused on hotels and student housing.
 - A regionally based regeneration specialist working closely with local authorities in secondary cities and towns.
 - A listed commercial property company with a UK-wide portfolio of offices, retail destinations and large-scale urban regeneration projects.
 - A mixed-use urban developer with major London schemes.
 - A purpose-led, socially responsible developer delivering mixed-use projects with institutional partners to create long-term social and environmental value in local communities.
- A **social value and wellbeing specialist** working across real estate.
- An advisor operating at the interface of **culture, property and planning**.



Why this conversation, and why now?

Participants described a context in which:

- **Arts centres face the toughest operating environment in a generation.** Traditional public funding is shrinking; capital is harder to secure; and long-standing business models are seen as increasingly untenable.
- **Developers face a viability crunch.** Rising build costs, higher interest rates and flat values make it harder to justify additional non-core uses, however attractive they may be socially. One participant described it as “the most difficult time for development in 55 years”.
- **Local authorities are squeezed at both ends.** They are simultaneously under pressure to cut revenue funding for culture and to fix hollowed-out high streets and town centres.

At the same time, there is growing recognition that **culture and community infrastructure differentiate places**, support wellbeing and can underpin both social value and long-term commercial performance.

This mix of pressure and opportunity led FAC to ask: **how can we make arts centres more visible and investable partners for development – and what would it take for developers to actively seek them out?**

Themes and Frictions from the Conversation



Arts centres as engines of local social value – but hard to see

Participants agreed that arts centres are often **engines of local placemaking and social value** with a level of local knowledge and trust that few other organisations can match.

Their strengths include:

- Deep relationships with diverse local communities and audiences.
- Neutrality and trust compared with local authorities or single-issue groups.
- The ability to host and convene multiple artforms and activities under one roof – operating as civic third spaces.

However, this value is not always visible to development teams. Developers rarely have a simple way to scan a place and identify credible arts partners; when cultural partners are sought, there is a tendency to default to large, well-branded institutions with perceived financial resilience, even if they lack local roots.

On the arts side, many centres lack time, headspace or expertise to translate what they do into clear, investable propositions aligned to development timescales and risk frameworks.

A tough double-squeeze on money and time

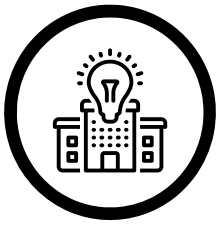
Both sectors described a double-squeeze:

- For arts centres, the erosion of core subsidy, rising costs, ageing buildings and stretched leadership capacity limit the bandwidth to explore new commercial models or strategic partnerships.
- For developers, viability is fragile; there is limited room for additional obligations beyond planning requirements, especially in towns and cities where land values are lower and schemes already struggle to stack up.



This can make cultural partnership feel like a “nice to have” unless it is clearly tied to:

- Winning or accelerating planning consent.
- Enhancing long-term asset performance (footfall, dwell time, rental tone).
- Helping political and community stakeholders support a scheme.



Business model innovation: towards sustainable cultural assets

Several parts of the conversation focused on business models where cultural and commercial uses reinforce each other:

- Mixed-use buildings where restaurants, retail or events businesses cross-subsidise cultural uses, sometimes on land valued at a notional £1, or with ring-fenced revenues supporting an arts operator.
- Arts centres using commercial activities – from weddings to conferencing – to underpin their core cultural work.
- New funding tools, such as repayable finance schemes, emerging from national funders keen to support innovation and income generation.

The group noted that many arts organisations are already earning a higher proportion of income than in the past – but this may be happening within the context of a wider governance & operating model that is challenged, making it harder for developers and funders to see the long-term value.

Arts centres as engagement and insight infrastructure

A social value specialist highlighted the potential of arts centres to act as early-stage engagement hubs for developers:

- Hosting consultation events, focus groups and co-design workshops.
- Reaching a wider range of ages, demographics and community groups than typical statutory consultation.

From a developer perspective, this can be a “quick win”: it improves the quality and legitimacy of engagement while strengthening relationships with local authorities and planning officers.

Examples such as the Stockport “Stockroom” were cited – spaces that respond directly to articulated community needs (for instance, safe places for young people simply to “hang out”) and in turn become magnets for activity and local pride.



The missing “watering hole” and the role of intermediaries

Participants noted the lack of a “natural watering hole” where developers and cultural organisations meet routinely.

Potential intermediary roles included:

- FAC as a translator and connector, helping arts centres become “partnership-ready” and curating a visible national map of potential partners.
- Social value specialists providing evidence and metrics – for example, research on willingness to pay for features such as flexible space, affordable local business units and public art.
- Sector platforms such as UKREiIF or built-environment networks, which could host case-study-rich sessions that go beyond generic “culture and place” panels.

Emerging Opportunities and Partnership Patterns

Across the conversation, several actionable opportunity areas surfaced.

Early-stage partnerships: using arts centres to open the door

- Position arts centres as **standard partners** for pre-application engagement – not optional extras.
- Use their spaces to host **multi-stakeholder conversations** early in the development lifecycle, before designs are fixed and only small changes are possible.
- Recognise arts centres as **trusted convenors** for difficult local discussions, especially in places where trust in public bodies is low.

Mixed-use, revenue-sharing and £1 land models

- Explore schemes where **commercial ground-floor uses** (hospitality, workspace, retail) are intentionally designed to generate revenue that supports an arts centre tenant and reduces pressure on local authority subsidies.
- Where public land is available, consider **peppercorn or residual-value land deals** that make a cultural anchor viable in the long term, with clear governance and performance expectations.

Living rooms of the city and consolidation

- In towns with multiple small, under-resourced cultural organisations, test **consolidation into stronger civic hubs** – places that combine performance, libraries, learning, youth space and everyday social uses.
- Use these hubs as **platforms for local cultural ecosystems**, not replacements – giving smaller organisations a shared “home” and reducing duplicated overheads.

Data-led social value and willingness to pay

- Build on existing research into **wellbeing and willingness-to-pay** for features such as public art, cultural spaces and affordable local business units, to create **business-case tools** that can sit in investment committee papers as well as cultural strategies.
- Combine quantitative evidence with **qualitative case studies**, showing how cultural uses support occupancy, reduce anti-social behaviour and build long-term reputational value for developments.



Implications for Stakeholders

For developers

- Treat arts centres as strategic infrastructure, not only as potential tenants. Early involvement can de-risk engagement, strengthen planning narratives and support long-term place resilience.
- When scanning a new location, ask explicitly: “Which arts centre or cultural hub here already acts as the civic living room?”
- Be clear with cultural partners about viability constraints and risk appetite, so that partnerships are grounded in realistic expectations and shared targets.

For arts centres

- Continue to build commercial and development literacy within the FAC network: business planning, capital structuring, operational risk.
- Develop a partnership-readiness offer – a way for centres to present concise, investor-grade summaries of their audience reach, building condition, revenue mix and social value.
- Work with intermediaries to strengthen storytelling and evidence around arts centres as anchor institutions and engagement hubs.

For local authorities and funders

- Recognise arts centres as neutral civic infrastructure that can mediate between communities and development.
- Bake cultural requirements and strategies into planning policy and guidance, reducing the perception that culture is optional.
- Consider how repayable finance, capital grants and revenue support can be aligned with development opportunities to create sustainable cultural assets, not one-off flagships.

Possible Next Steps

The group did not aim to reach formal decisions, but several concrete ideas emerged:

1. A small cohort of arts centre champions.

- Identify a handful of developers and local authority leads willing to act as **critical friends and advocates**.
- Champions would work with FAC and a sample of arts centres to test partnership-readiness tools, co-design pilot projects and help shape messaging to the wider development industry.

2. A pilot transformation group of arts centres.

- Select 6–7 arts centres that are “ripe for transformation” to go through a structured process focused on business model innovation, asset optimisation and partnership-readiness.

3. A UKREiiF 2026 platform.

- Use UKREiiF as a public milestone to:
 - Present early findings and case studies.
 - Showcase arts-led development partnerships already delivering value.
 - Invite additional developers and authorities to join the champions cohort.

4. Exploring a longer-term watering hole.

- Work with existing networks to explore a recurring **forum between developers and cultural organisations** – possibly rotating between arts centres to ground discussions in real places.

This report shared initially with invited round-table participants and invitees. Chatham House anonymity applied at the event, with all comments are attributed by role only.

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