

Arts and soul

Citizens Design Bureau delivers ravishing retrofit of Jacksons Lane arts and culture hub



Citizens Design Bureau refurbishment of Jacksons Lane is housed in a Grade II-listed former church in London's Highgate. Exterior photo by Philip Vile; interior by Fred Howarth.

- Storied North London performance space in a Grade-II-listed former church has been a centre of community for 40+ years, and an arts and circus hub since the 1980s.
- Citizens Design Bureau architect Katy Marks led the £4.6million refurbishment, securing a substantial Capital Grant from the Arts Council.
- Sensitive, soulful renovation focuses on updating, rationalising and modernising the space, optimising accessibility, infusing warmth, and elevating the experience for all users: audiences, performers, and centre staff.
- Features of the Grade-II-listed former church are revealed and decluttered, to better appreciate the atmospheric historic spaces.

Housed in a Grade-II-Listed former Methodist church in the lofty heart of Highgate, Jacksons Lane has been a much-loved London performance space, a hub for the local community, and a leading centre in contemporary circus arts for decades. Now, a comprehensive refurbishment and reconfiguration by cultural space specialists Citizens Design Bureau has given it the momentum to ensure it survives and thrives for decades more.

The case for retrofit

First developed as an arts centre in the 1980s following a stint as a community sports centre, Jacksons Lane's interiors had become dated and worn, its layouts no longer suited the way the community was using the building. With more than 20 different levels in the venue, accessibility was compromised both internally and externally; studios were suboptimally shaped and offset from the historic stone structure of the nave such that key spaces were interrupted with columns. Acoustic separation was limited and some of the grandest historic spaces had become corridors and stores, while foyers were cramped.



Citizens Design Bureau's retrofit makes full use of the former church's grand, double-height spaces. L: Fred Howarth; R: Alex Brenner.

Although an important centre of the local community and nationally admired as a venue – especially in circus and dance circles – Jacksons Lane was in clear need of a thoughtful and sensitive retrofit. Award-winning architects and interior designers Citizens Design Bureau, jumped at the chance, winning the opportunity to deliver the £4.6 million project.

“We love the work that Jacksons Lane supports – and its ethos – but we also felt that there was huge potential in the building. Sometimes you find a project for which you know you can make a big difference.”

– Katy Marks, founder, Citizens Design Bureau

Now that the work is complete, the size of that difference is clear. Jacksons Lane has not only been transformed technically – improving acoustics, accessibility, energy performance, and adding new rehearsal, performance and event spaces – it has also been aesthetically reinvented. The new centre is warm, engaging, contemporary and playful; the kind of venue it is a pleasure to hang out in, whether you're attending a performance, taking part in a rehearsal, or simply popping in for coffee and cake.

Retrofit for the future

The renovation follows an extensive period of research and public consultation, in which Citizens Design Bureau assessed the functional and operational constraints of the existing layout. The pandemic coincided with the beginning of the project, creating significant obstacles to funding and timescales, but also helping shape the practice's thinking about how the building would be used in a post-Covid world, when the benefits of community togetherness, physical activity, and social connection would be more important than ever.

Having secured one of only a handful of large Capital Grants from the Arts Council in London since 2016, Citizens Design Bureau were able to deliver a comprehensive programme of renovation that not only brought the building into the modern day, it also created additional revenue opportunities for the future. These include an expanded and updated café bar and new, hireable studio spaces for circus arts, dance, children's activities, podcasting, digital content creation, and more.

Uncovering the building's history

While exterior work concentrated on essential conservation repairs, internally, the venue was extensively reconfigured, restoring many of the original church structures that had been previously obscured or confused by more recent architectural interventions. The 'old bones' of the building have been returned to prominence.

Changes to the main auditorium have increased seating volume while decluttering the space. The former church transept – a dramatic, double-height space previously used as a chair store – now houses studio spaces. The concrete floor added in the '70s to split the nave into two levels has been retained, enhanced by the addition of

expansive acoustic windows that allow the full width of the transept to be appreciated and offer views down into the double-height studios below.



For the interior spaces, Citizens Design Bureau have introduced a volcanic colour palette that complements the wood and whitewashed brick of the building. Photo by Fred Howarth.

Importantly, the main entrance to Jacksons Lane – previously tucked unassumingly around the side of the building – has been restored to the original church porch, which had been boarded up for years. This boosts street presence, strengthens the connection to the surrounding community, and restores a sense of occasion to visiting the centre – adding a form of secular resonance to the act of entering the building. Combine this with the internal contrast of warm, intimate nooks and lofty ceilings, with soaring windows flooding the venue with natural light, and it's clear that a sense of grandeur and history has returned to Jacksons Lane.

Transformation with soul

Where the internal reconfiguration of Jacksons Lane has enhanced the functionality, accessibility and revenue potential of the venue, it is the aesthetic reinvention that has had the biggest impact on its atmosphere. Taking the building's long-standing association with circus arts as a starting point, Citizens Design Bureau have infused the interiors with colour, playful energy and clear personality.



New interior layouts ensure that all experiences available in the multi-level building are fully accessible. Drawing by Citizens Design Bureau.

Complementing the existing structure's exposed material palette of brick, stone, whitewashed walls and dark wood panelling, Katy Marks and her team have introduced volcanic colours such as deep reds and oranges, juxtaposed with rich teal and pop accents in lighting details.

In some cases, functional interventions such as acoustic isolation required already-low ceilings to be lowered further – a potentially oppressive change which Citizens Design Bureau tempered by introducing a concertina profile, allowing for the introduction of bright orange lighting conduits and colourful self-assembly lampshades.

"We wanted the lighting to express the playfulness of Jacksons Lane's ethos: low-cost, standard elements, assembled in quirky ways – hanging and projecting at unusual angles, adding dynamism to the spaces."

– Katy Marks, founder, Citizens Design Bureau

Making an impact at every level

Now complete, the new Jacksons Lane showcases a transformation that elevates its operational functionality. Improvements to natural lighting, ventilation and energy monitoring ensure the building is now more energy-efficient – and future-proofed to cope with climate change.

Rehearsal rooms are now technically advanced, acoustically isolated studio spaces that befit the venue's role as a film set and rehearsal venue for theatres and TV shows. A range of styles and sizes of space make it flexible enough to support varied creative and performance arts – from circus in light-flooded double-height studios to future-focused practices such as podcasting, digital arts and experimental projects in smaller spaces.

Where the multiplicity of levels previously made the building mostly inaccessible, Citizens Design Bureau's internal reconfiguration, and the addition of carefully positioned gentle ramps and a lift, has ensured that every experience the building offers – hanging out in the café, watching a performance, practising circus skills, or simply working in the office – is now accessible to anyone, no matter their mobility needs.



Jacksons Lane has been an important centre for circus arts in the UK for decades. Image courtesy of Jacksons Lane.

Perhaps most importantly, the centre is more open and full of life, warmth and energy than at any time in its history. Jacksons Lane has its soul back – and a whole new lease on life.

“Since the re-opening of Jacksons Lane we have seen increased footfall, hire of space and a return of theatre and circus audiences, and the public, artists and users of our building are loving the new design, facilities and accessibility. For example, companies such as Extraordinary Bodies are utilising the newly accessible Studio 1 and our café/bar offer has seen more daytime use of the building by local residents.”

– Adrian Berry, artistic director, Jacksons Lane

Notes for editors

For more information about the retrofit of Jacksons Lane and Citizens Design Bureau’s work, contact cdb@zetteler.co.uk.

Project credits

- Skelly and Couch M&E engineers
- Momentum structural engineers
- Gillieron Scott Acoustics
- Francesca Weal Conservation
- Bristow cost consultants
- Jayne Earnscliffe Access
- Cragg Management
- GPF Lewis main contractors

Photography

Fred Howarth, Alex Brenner and Philip Vile

Jacksons Lane

The flagship arts and cultural venue in Haringey, Jacksons Lane maintains a year-round programme of contemporary performance, arts participation and cultural education, aiming to empower, and ignite creativity within diverse communities and overcome traditional barriers to performance art. The arts centre is committed to leading the way in the creation, production, presentation and artist/audience

development of contemporary circus theatre. It is also a key part of the social fabric of its local community, with imaginative initiatives that combat isolation for all ages and backgrounds, a buzzing programme of after school clubs, parent-and-child sessions, third-age dining and social activities, and more.

jacksonslane.org.uk

Citizens Design Bureau

Citizens Design Bureau are an award-winning team of architects, interior designers and new-enterprise strategists, founded by Katy Marks in 2013. They collaborate with inspired, forward-thinking organisations and individuals, distilling complex briefs to create spaces with functional clarity, woven with ingenuity and joy.

The practice was named Public Building Architect of the Year at the 2022 Building Design Awards.

“The ability to create buildings with a really distinctive personality is at the heart of the work we do. We often manage to do this with constrained budgets, while distilling complex briefs into spaces that have functional and aesthetic clarity. Crucially, we work with many organisations that have rich, experimental and hugely varied histories. We love finding ways to create architecture that is resolutely new, while somehow still retaining the ethos, character and quiriness of the communities that use our buildings every day.”

– Katy Marks, founder, Citizens Design Bureau

citizensdesignbureau.net