

Making space for community in Stamford Hill

Artefact designs the Common Rooms to bring people together



- Architecture studio Artefact worked with community charity Clapton Commons to transform undercroft of St Thomas' Church
- The Common Rooms is a suite of flexible spaces to serve anyone and everyone in the surrounding community
- Interiors are bold, beautiful and uplifting, creating an inspiring and joyful backdrop to the shared activities taking place within

Access to public and social spaces is vital to community cohesion and our individual and collective wellbeing, yet in London such spaces are in short supply. To address this, the result of years of underinvestment in our communities' social infrastructure, the charitable organisation Clapton Commons was formed to bring the diverse

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community of Stamford Hill together, founded on the principle that what unites us is greater than what divides us.

The charity is rooted in the ancient tradition of the common land and the concept of the common good. To be 'common' is to be able to engage with others, and the 'commons' is traditionally a place where people from all faiths and none can come together, where many voices can be heard and hope shared.

Born out of these principles, the Common Rooms is a new home for the community to grow together, designed by local architecture studio Artefact. It comprises a series of rooms beneath St Thomas' Church, a beautiful modernist listed building in the geographic heart of Stamford Hill.



Noted for its atmospheric nave designed in the late 1950s by the revolutionary church architect Nugent Cachemaille-Day, St Thomas' was blessed with an extensive but underused undercroft. To revive this large empty space and catalyse the renewal and rebirth of the church as a building rooted in the community, St Thomas' came together with Clapton Commons and Artefact founders Benedetta Rogers and Daniel Marmot. Together, they aimed to transform the overlooked undercroft into a valuable and versatile community resource: the Common Rooms.

The key design ambition of the project was to create an uplifting sequence of carefully designed, high-quality spaces that could form a joyful backdrop to the social life unfolding within. Financing for the Common Rooms was secured through a combination of support from the GLA, Hackney Community Fund and The Clothworkers' Foundation, and a £55,000 crowd-funding drive led by Clapton Commons.

Now complete, the Common Rooms offers a compelling case study on how to create beautiful and practical spaces for social connection with a limited budget – as well as a demonstration of Artefact's expanding interest and expertise in community-enriching architectural projects.

"As architects, we really believe in the importance of community-led spaces – spaces where all sorts of activities can take place, where rituals are performed and new possibilities and connections are created, strengthening a sense of community and belonging.

Clapton Commons is a fantastic grassroots organisation and it has been wonderful to support them in creating a much-needed place for the community to come together. With shared values around enacting positive social change, we have relished the opportunity to put our design skills to good use in the service of this community."

– Benedetta Rogers, Director, Artefact

Elevating everyday materials and uplifting space

The principal design ambition was to create an uplifting place that reflects the needs of its diverse users, and has a quality that belies its constrained budget. Through carefully considered, bespoke detailing, Artefact elevated cost-effective materials to create a place that feels unique and helps to define a new identity for Clapton Commons.

The partitions were constructed from off-the-shelf timber sections, with polycarbonate clerestory windows whose details and rhythm echo the design of the garden room in the church above. Wood wool panels help to absorb sound across the large spaces, and a joyful colour palette helps to enliven the undercroft and compensate for its limited daylight.

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A bold blue column with expressed copper piping in the centre of the space creates a moment of curiosity, as it supports the baptism font of the church above, while the servery projects from the kitchen into the canteen, celebrating the moment food is served.



“Our main aim with the design was to encourage unexpected encounters through the spatial planning, and to forge a new identity for Clapton Commons through the character of the architecture.

We located the dining room at the heart of the scheme, where the community comes together to cook and break bread. It is the nucleus around which the other spaces revolve, ensuring different users rub shoulders and make connections when circulating through the building.

We developed a vibrant, varied colour palette to reflect the optimistic outlook of the client and community, and to uplift what was previously a gloomy undercroft. The rhythmic partitions are a technicolor reinterpretation of a detail in the church, and the continuous clerestory ensures light permeates between rooms, as activity spills from one space to another.”

– Daniel Marmot, Director, Artefact

A space to strengthen connections



Artefact's bold new signage draws visitors from the street into a mature courtyard garden, where a new entrance door with a distinctive colour palette of earthy reds and pinks leads into the Common Rooms.

In the diverse and disparate community of Stamford Hill, the Common Rooms aims to strengthen the web of social connections in the neighbourhood by fulfilling multiple uses and serving multiple sections of the community.

The architecture of the space encourages unexpected encounters and new social connections to form. A constellation of smaller rooms encircles and opens into the central canteen at the heart of the space, reflecting the importance of a community dining together. There is space for people to cook together in a new kitchen, hold both intimate and large-scale public meetings, for tenant clubs from neighbouring estates to meet, for care in the community, to exercise in the studio, to dance, make music, learn new skills and share hope in each other.

"The Common Rooms has always been about more than just bricks and mortar and making an underused space look architecturally beautiful. That of course is important, but working with Artefact, we were able to develop a vision for a community hub as a space where people could come together, action could be witnessed, and hope could be shared in transforming the neighbourhood"

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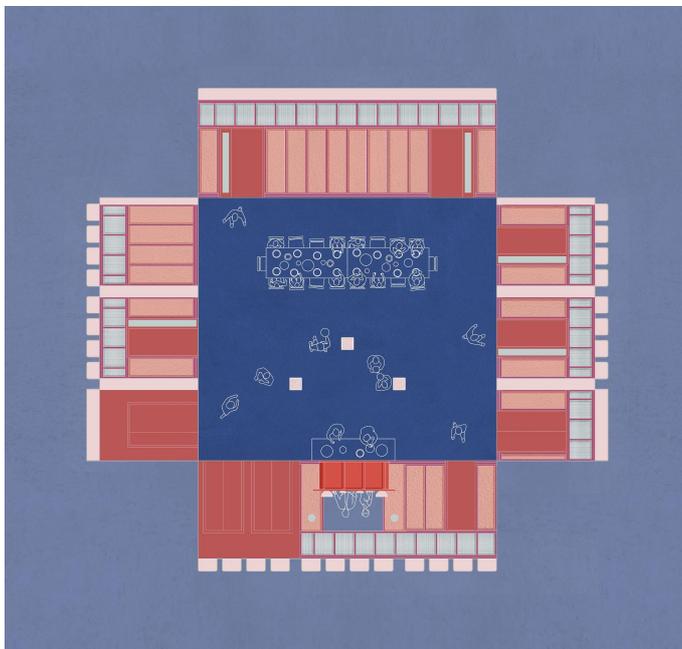
and the lives of people we work with. This is our common purpose - to give people more control over their lives and to foster a sense of shared ownership of civic and community space."

– Joe Walker, Director, Clapton Commons

The programming and management of the Common Rooms are now being handled in collaboration with the local community. By incorporating a variety of spaces at different scales, the Common Rooms is inherently flexible, able to evolve over time with the changing needs of the community.

The Common Rooms is the first phase of a wider transformation of St Thomas' Church and parish hall, all the works to the undercroft are designed to be easily demountable should the requirements of users change as further improvements are delivered.

Notes for editors



The Common Rooms are now open at St Thomas' Church, 1 Clapton Terrace, London E5 9BW.

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Project data

Client Clapton Commons

Architect Artefact

Contractor PBL Group

Photography Jim Stephenson and Diogo Real

Film footages Jim Stephenson

For images (both still and moving), further details and interviews with the Artefact team, contact artefact@zetteler.co.uk

Artefact

Artefact is a London-based architecture studio, founded by Benedetta Rogers and Daniel Marmot. The practice is interested in buildings as cultural objects that reflect the culture of their users, and works on a range of projects, ranging from private homes to public spaces and community venues. It is known for its ingenuity in using everyday materials in unexpected ways and for exploring new materials that reduce the environmental impact of architecture.

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Clapton Commons

Clapton Commons was set up in 2013 by a small group of neighbours with the shared aim of improving their local neighbourhood in Stamford Hill, East London for the common good of all residents. It became a registered charity in 2020.

claptoncommons.org

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