

Saturday 21st February 2015
2.0 pm - 9.0 pm

A Taste Of Rooms Of Our Own

Harmony Hall
E17 7BY

roomso4own@gmail.com

Report on the Day

On Saturday 21st February 2015 we held “A Taste of Rooms of our Own” at Harmony Hall, Truro Road, E17 7BY. Our idea was to give councillors and communities a Taste of the kinds of events and activities that would be encouraged and supported by having a Women’s Centre in the borough.

Rooms of our Own is keen to support feminist artists, musicians and performers when we open our building. We plan to have gallery space as an important part of the centre. So as a “taste” of that we invited local artists to contribute a piece to hang in the foyer at Harmony Hall. This exhibition will remain in place until International Women’s Day on March 8th and possibly longer. Our thanks to contributing artists Angela Gbemisola, Alison Brown, Della Rees, Marion Hack, Mo Morris, Sba Shaikh and Shirley Cook, and we are very grateful also to Neesha Badhan who curated the exhibition for us. For further information contact neesha.badhan@crestwf.org.uk



Louise and Lauren on Reception



Part of the Feminist Art Exhibition

Rooms of our Own Directors Wendy Davis, Nabila Pathan and Karen Flint were delighted to welcome Jennette Arnold AM to open the day. Jennette has an excellent track record of supporting women's groups and organisations, and gave us a very powerful account of how her childhood had laid the foundations of her politics. Jennette is a member of Rooms of our Own's Advisory Group and has been very helpful in assisting us to move the project forward. You can read Jennette's blog here <http://jennettearnold.com>



Jennette Arnold AM opens the day for us



Jennette making some powerful points about women's roles

Recently we engaged Liz Mackie from Shared Enterprise <http://www.gpartnership.co.uk/CGP/sharedenterprise/liz-mackie.html> to carry out some research into the need for a Women's Centre in Waltham Forest. You can download the report here <https://roomso4own.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/the-case-for-a-womens-centre-in-waltham-forest.pdf>. Liz explained her methodology and the key findings, the main one being 90% support amongst those surveyed for the idea of a Women's Centre.



Liz Mackie from Shared Enterprise

In order to encourage a good response, we offered a prize to one voluntary organisation and one individual woman. Jean Lambert MEP kindly picked the winning tickets. <http://www.jeanlambertmep.org.uk> Fiona Heath won the individual women survey, and Sanctuality <http://www.sanctuality.com> won the voluntary organisation.



Jean Lambert MEP picks the winners



Dr Mel Morris from Sanctuality receiving her “cheque”

Yael Gordon from Anne Thorne Architects <http://annethornearchitects.co.uk> then gave us a presentation of the possibilities for an actual building on the St James St site, based on wide-ranging discussion with local women, community groups, councillors, officers and women’s organisations across London and the UK.

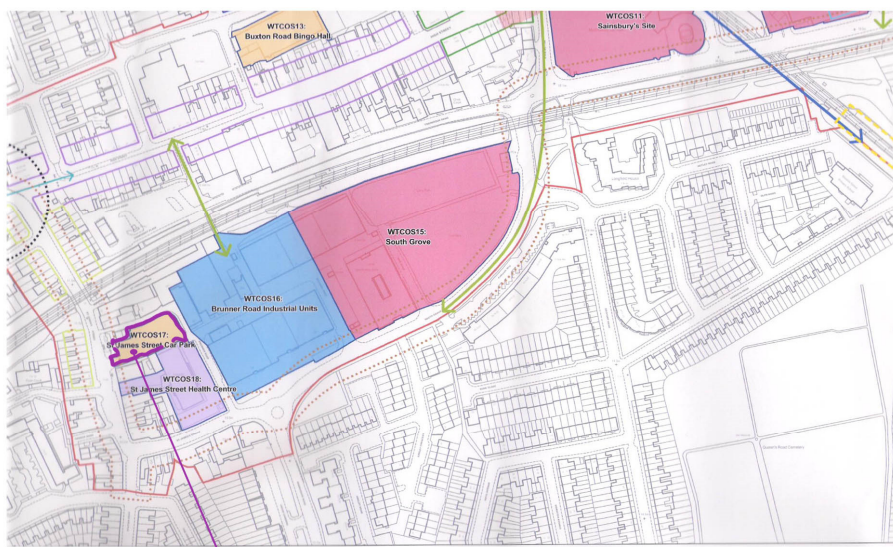


Presentation from Anne Thorne Architects Partnership

Some aspects of the brief were derived from the very successful conference organised by Rooms of our Own, Queen Mary University of London and Women’s Studies without Walls in May 2014. You can download that report here <https://roomso4own.wordpress.com/about/conference-on-womens-spaces-may-2014> The plans are based on the St James St carpark site, which was originally offered to Rooms of our Own under the terms of the Localism Act by LBWF in October 2013. At that point RooO engaged architects who started to work up a feasibility. Sadly last summer LBWF changed their minds and said they were going to put the site on the market. We are still waiting to see what will happen but meanwhile we hope that we will be able to acquire this site which is perfect for the project.



*The currently empty car park at St James St
“We can make it happen” by graphic designer Michelle Isme*



PROPOSED SITE FOR ROOMS OF OUR OWN St James St Car Park London E17 7PJ

Should this site not become available, a lot of the work would be transferrable to a different location. Yael explained the concept of the building. The Centre on the ground floor will be divided into 3 Zones; a public area, an area focused on women and a women only area. The public area will have reception, a café and a shared resource space. The central part of the building will host hot-desking, a creche, meeting rooms and spaces for women owned businesses. The women-only area will host charities and groups working on issues such as violence against women and girls.



Yael from ATAP explains the zoning of the building

On the upper floors there will be housing which will provide the funding to construct the Community centre. Our development partner, Thornsett Group, <http://www.thornsett.co.uk> may also be able to give the centre ongoing revenues from housing rental on one or two of the properties as they have used this model with other charities in the past.

Yael explained that this will be a very green building, built to passivhaus standards so running costs for energy will be extremely low. As many rooms and flats as possible will have access to outside space, including balconies and a roof garden. You can download our architects' report here:-

<https://roomsofour.files.wordpress.com/2014/10/proposal-for-st-james-st-by-anne-thorne-architects-partnership-for-rooms-of-our-own.pdf>

Rooms of our Own are very fond of the architect Hundertwasser <http://www.hundertwasser.com> and would love to see something amazing and colourful like this in St James St.



Councillor Karen Bellamy, LBWF's lead on Domestic Violence then spoke to us very powerfully about the issues still affecting women and girls in the UK. Like Jennette, Karen also treated us to a very personal and moving story giving renewed cogency to the old feminist mantra, "The Personal is the Political". Karen explained her long history of work around Violence against Women and Girls, and said she liked to think of herself as a community activist rather than a councillor. Karen explained what the Council is doing and planning on these issues, and promised that she would continue to fight any cuts to these life-saving services.



Cllr Karen Bellamy speaking out against Violence against Women and Girls



Rooms of our Own wanted to offer a showcase to all and any organisations working on women's issues in the borough and across London and indeed the UK. We only had room for a few stalls, but we did have two large tables and pinboards for organisations to promote their work and campaigns. Once the Centre is built, we hope that some of these organisations will be based at Rooms of our Own, either with a permanent or shared office, or for their regular meetings and events.



Stallholders including Ahead, Link4Growth, The Haven, Waltham Forest Women's Network, Newham Books, Feminist Library plus peripatetic stall, 50:50 Parliament



Cllr Tim Bennett-Goodman and Alison Griffin from The Mill enjoying a chat with Jennette Arnold AM



Leaflets about a whole variety of women's organisations on display





Newham Bookshop Stall
<http://www.newhambooks.co.uk>



Feminist Library Stall
<http://feministlibrary.co.uk>

One of the many aspects that Rooms of our Own wants to promote when we have our Centre is women in business. Statistics demonstrate that despite the Equal Pay Act of 1970 women's pay and status in the employment market has not progressed nearly as much as was then anticipated. Fawcett have more information here

<http://www.fawcettsociety.org.uk/2013/11/equal-pay>

An increasing number of women are finding that starting their own businesses is a good way to make progress towards financial independence without having to conform with the practices of discriminatory or non family-friendly companies. Rooms of our Own plans to have spaces for women's businesses with shared reception and resource area together with hot-desking and business support activities.

Karen Flint from New Direction Partnership www.newdirectionpartnership.com and Debra Oakaby from Coach Me Smart <http://www.coachmesmart.co.uk> talked to us about the difficulties and rewards for women of working for themselves and gave us some good advice about networking.



Karen Flint from New Direction Partnership



Debra demonstrates the "power pose"

During the Second Wave of Feminism it was obligatory for every event hoping to attract women to provide a creche. Most young children were quite familiar with being left in a creche while their mothers attended a talk or workshop. We asked Grace Chambers of Loriamahgrace Childcare Agency to provide a creche for us for Taste of Rooms of our Own.



Having a creche in our building is a key part of the brief and we hope that it will be a significant element in allowing women a few priceless hours to focus on their business, studies and/or leisure pursuits without interruption. We hope that our younger citizens will gradually get used to the idea.

We were therefore delighted to welcome Ann Nkune to tell us all about Bloomsbury Babies <http://www.bloomsburybabies.co.uk> and explain their hot-desking and creche arrangements. Ann also talked about their very successful Parent-Cubator scheme which provides business sessions for parents while their children are being looked after.



Ann Nkune from Bloomsbury Babies

Our last speakers of the day were Angela Ratcliffe and Deirdre Flanagan from the Older Women's Co-Housing group, <http://www.owch.org.uk>. OWCH is a group of women aged 50-80+ who have been meeting for many years to talk about their dream of setting up the first co-housing community of older people in the UK. Finally their dream is becoming a reality; this exciting project is being built in Barnet. Hanover Housing Group is OWCH's developer and has purchased a site for the group in High Barnet, ideally placed near local shops, amenities and transport routes. A building of 25 three, two and one-bedroom flats with common space and a garden has been designed by the architects Pollard, Thomas, Edwards, with input from OWCH members.



Angela and Deirdre explain the OWCH project

Rooms of our Own plans to have one floor of housing in our project reserved for older women. Women tend to live longer than men, and there are many women living on their own in family houses in Waltham Forest. Whilst this may suit those who have grandchildren and others coming to stay, some find it increasingly difficult to cope in a large house, experiencing loneliness and anxiety as well as being unable to maintain their home in a good condition.

We had three workshops running during our event.

Nadia Baksh, chair of Waltham Forest Women's Network

<https://www.facebook.com/WF.WomensNetwork> ran a workshop on Feminist Activism



Workshop on Feminist Activism

Beti Baraki from OBJECT <http://www.object.org.uk> ran a workshop on Objectification of Women in the Media



Workshop on Objectification of Women in the Media

Catherine West from Significant Seams <http://www.significantseams.org.uk> brought materials for workshop participants to contribute to this year's community quilt on The Changing Roles of Women.



Community Quilt Workshop by Significant Seams

We then had a break before the evening entertainment. During the afternoon participants had enjoyed cakes from Crumbs and gluten free cake from Tudor Cakes as well as tea and coffee supplied by Dawn Gaillard.



Impossible to have a women's event without lovely cakes

Now it was time for Feminist Cocktails, devised by Rooms of our Own and supplied by Livio Italiani <https://www.linkedin.com/profile/view?id=199502225>

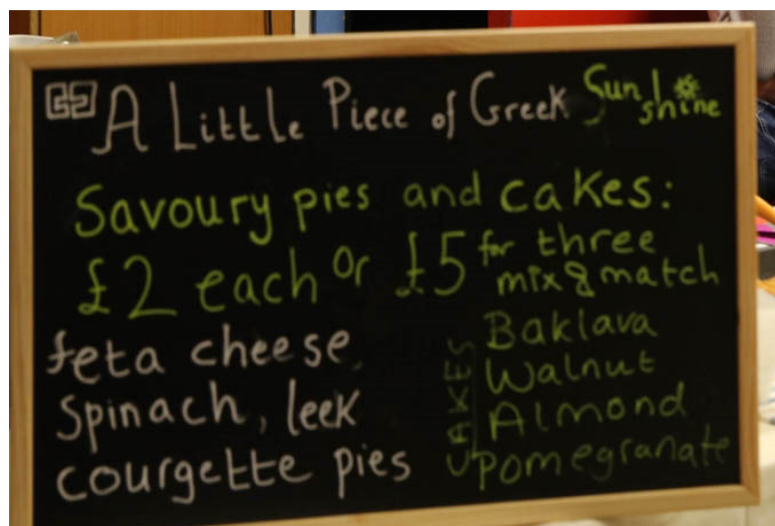


Livio Italiani ...sommelier and mixologist

and of course for wonderful Greek Food supplied by A Little Taste of Greek Sunshine.
You can follow them on twitter [@GreekTreats](https://twitter.com/GreekTreats)



A Little Piece of Greek Sunshine



The day was rounded off by some wonderful female musicians and performers. Rooms of our Own plans to have performance space in our Centre so thanks to all those who gave us a “taste” of what might be to come.

First on were the wonderful Natural Voices Choir <http://www.naturalvoices.co.uk> led by the inspirational Lizzie Renihan. Lizzie had kindly agreed to our special request for Holly Near’s “Mountain Song” and sang it beautifully with Alison Jones for our event. The choir sang “March of the Women” and then showed the very poignant video they had made with their youth choir about how sexism affects young people, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=klYFBzkPkLs>.



“..... you can’t just take my dreams away”.



Natural Voices fabulous Youth Choir

Next up were amazing and innovative Boireaneach <http://boireannach.com> fresh from their success at the VAULT Festival 2015. We were treated to a variety of songs and poems. Boireannach is Scots Gaelic for “strong woman”.



Boireannach

We then heard from Ros Kane, long term community activist in Waltham Forest, who performed a mixture of poetry and songs, including some classic numbers written by Leon Rosselson.



Ros Kane

Finally Kim Watson gave us a wonderful end to the day with 3 acts from She17:- talented singer /songwriter Sam Kurt; a powerful and imaginative performance from Lady President and a very impressive finale from Sam, Dee & Alice. Special thanks also go to Kim and Angie for helping out on the technical side.



Sam Kurt



Lady President



*Sam, Dee and Alice
(Alice is the guitar....)*

Rooms of our Own would like to thank everyone who contributed to make “A Taste of Rooms of our Own” such a successful day; the speakers, the workshop organisers, all our volunteers, the stall-holders, the refreshment providers, the creche organiser, the musicians and performers, the attendees, and of course Harmony Hall.

Please email roomso4own@gmail.com if you want to be involved in helping to take this project forward and make it a reality.

Photographs of the Event used in this report were taken by Stephanie Waterman
<http://wdps.org/member-galleries/stephanie-waterman>