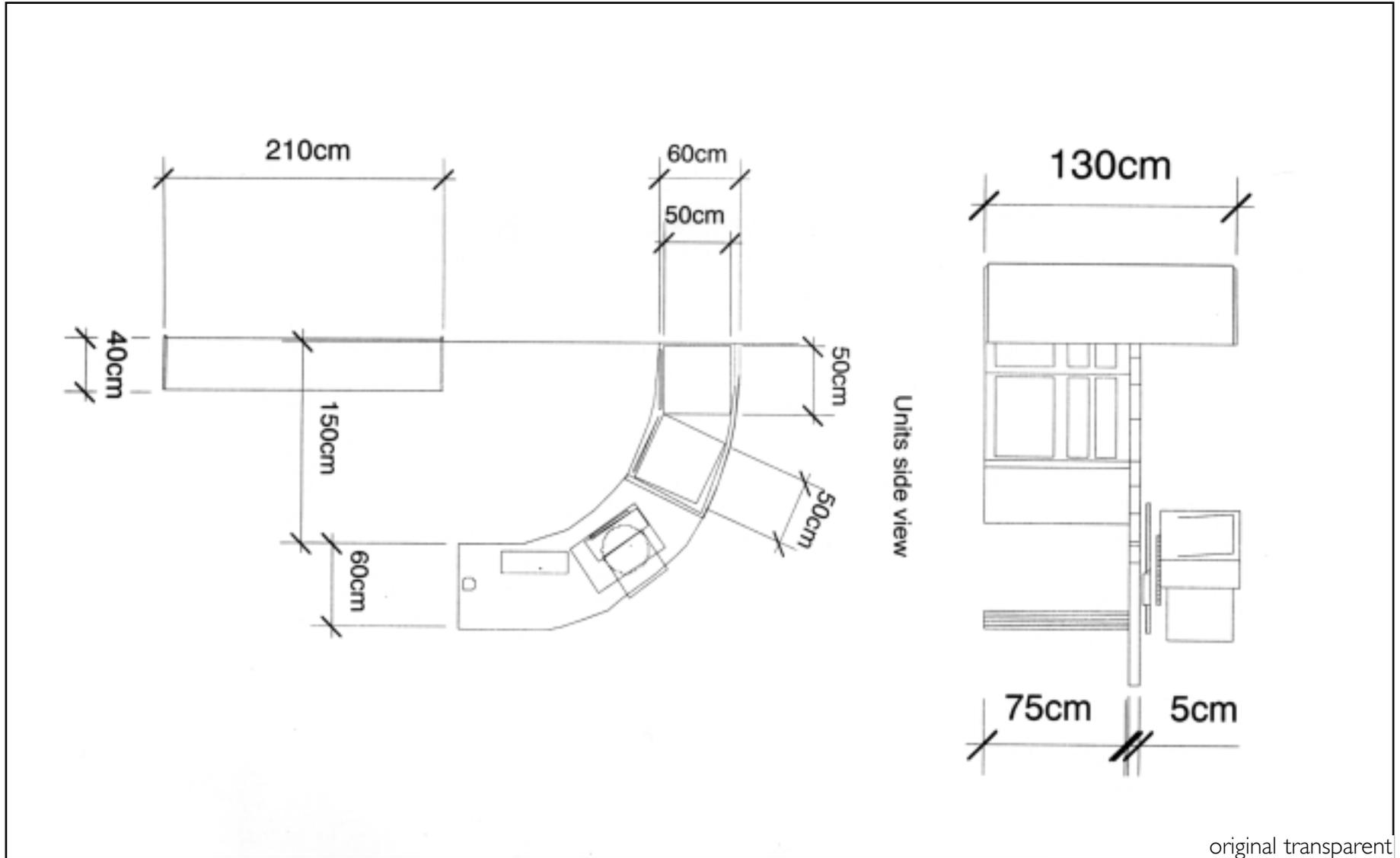


Chapter 9: Origins and Development of londonprintstudio



Chapter 9: The Origins and Development of londonprintstudio



Illustration 9.1

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londonprintstudio began, like many community-based projects, from a confluence of personal interests and local pressures. In 1972, following graduation from art school, I built some simple screenprint equipment, and from my kitchen table began to earn a freelance living. I knew little about printing and less about starting a business. But despite these negative qualifications, the orders came in. The clients were small theatres and grant-aided community organisations requiring posters. Over the next two years this nascent resource attracted an ever-increasing stream of community and political activists. During 1974 this clientele was swollen by an influx of Chilean refugees. The kitchen graduated to printing posters with Roberto Matta, and it was time to find a new home. A local community centre offered a rent-free space to house the enterprise. I constructed the furniture and equipment from the debris of the 1974 Ideal Home Exhibition after tipping £5 each to two drivers responsible for removing the sets of this annual trade fair. Large wooden screens were stripped down, their laminated surfaces transformed into workbenches and screenprint

equipment. Straight nails were recycled for their original purpose; bent ones were used to fine-tune the counterbalance weights.

A chance encounter with a recently-published booklet, *Community Arts Report: Arts Council of Great Britain (1974)*, suggested a new opportunity for supporting the project through public grants. Paddington Printshop was among the first group of organisations supported by the Arts Council's new initiative. The Printshop's first funding application outlined the following aims:

"The Print Workshop has been formed on two basic principles:

That it should teach people new and useful skills.

*That it should encourage them to use those skills in the artistic or visual interpretation of their beliefs."*¹

The project was a joint enterprise with Pippa Smith, who gave up her teaching job to bring the social and educational skills that I lacked. Community presses were not uncommon at this time. The community activist movement that flourished from the late 1960s realised the importance of

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print, but showed little interest in design. Arts Council subsidy, and support from the community centre, covered the organisation's running costs and salaries. The groups who came to make posters, newsletters and leaflets contributed the cost of materials, and much of the labour. This infrastructure, coupled with the influence of Cuban graphics and pop posters encouraged a collaborative and experimental approach to design. ²

Within three years of the Arts Council's initial support for Community Arts, the sector had grown into an eclectic movement, supported at national and local level. Amid the festivals, murals and inflatable sculptures, printshops, many based on the Paddington model, were established throughout the U.K. ³ Success closer to home resulted in an agreement by the local authority to provide funds to convert the community centre, in which the workshop was housed. The Printshop opted for independence, found new premises and, to facilitate grant funding, sought an independent identity. We decided to become an educational charity; a formal structure that reflected what we perceived



Illustration 9.2

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to be the educational values of the organisation, and which, as a not-for-profit, would, we hoped, facilitate our raising funds. The material sent in support of the application for charitable status described the Printshop's activities. One example explained how a couple had used the facilities to make their own wedding invitations. The Charity Commission highlighted this passage in its rejection letter. Education, we were informed, was a learning activity disengaged from practical application. The couple's wedding invitation, the letter informed us, was made in pursuit of a practical objective, and was therefore not educational. The Printshop became a Friendly Society. Its educational models were drawn from other sources including, Freire,⁴ Illich⁵ and the counter-culture models of free schools and alternative education.

An important offshoot of the Printstudio's tendency to work collaboratively was the exponential growth of its social network. Some clients required more than posters. The Printstudio bartered the first contacts between the public funding bodies and the Notting Hill Carnivalists. It assisted a

local artist to set up an organisation to convert three-and-a-half acres of wasteland into a public park,⁶ and initiated projects such as North Paddington Community Farm, a fifty-acre property with converted dormitories enabling local people to gain access to the countryside. In its development, the Printstudio had become an important contributor to activism and regeneration within its neighbourhood. A network of community arts groups around the U.K., and regular contact with community-based printstudios across Europe complimented its local base.⁷

In 1981 a radical Labour administration gained control of the Greater London Council. The leader of this administration was the local councillor. The community-based arts agenda developed in Paddington, and other isolated pockets of London became, overnight, the main platform of a regional cultural programme. Ironically increased recognition and support did not invigorate the organisation. Developments in photocopying technology, and a climate in which community organisations no longer needed to attract so much attention left the Printstudio

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moribund. It ticked over for the next five years.

London Print Workshop, the regional graphic arts and printmaking centre, which developed from Paddington Printshop was not formed until 1990, but its origins date back to the inauguration of the Taller Artístico Experimental, René Portocarrero, in Havana in 1984, which I accidentally attended. In 1983 the Arts Council and Gulbenkein Foundation offered me scholarships to study community-based arts projects in Central America. As part of this study, I happened to arrive in Cuba on the day that the new screenprinting workshop was opening. An international group of artists had gathered to initiate the project. The building and street outside were festooned with a poster depicting Castro, which was also being pulled from the presses inside. I introduced myself, and was invited to join in and to make a print.

The Reagan administration was, at that time, linking a food aid programme to El Salvador with armaments supplies, to support the government against insurgents. As the staple crop of the region was maize, and there is a



Illustration 9.3

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physical resemblance between the corn-cob and a hand-grenade, I exploited this 'visual reference' and began to design a poster: a maize field, with grenades growing like cobs, and a legend implying that America would add iron to the Salvadorian diet. *"But what on earth are you doing?"*, asked one of the studio technicians. I explained. "Yes," he replied, *"it's obvious what you are saying, but what are you doing."* He continued, *"the government does this sort of thing all the time, it's very institutional, we're breaking with propaganda: we're here to make art!"*

The Castro image was a reprint of the first poster of the Cuban Revolution, but this time round its designer, Eladio Rivadulla, was producing a limited-edition print, for distribution to the workshop participants, diplomats, and government officials. This new studio, it was explained, would produce work by Cuban and international artists for the home and international art markets. It would contribute to the diversification of the economy and provide light relief from the production of the endless politically imploring posters. Chastened, I proceeded to make my first

limited-edition print. Two years later, I worked with the studio's director, Aldo Menéndez, to create an exhibition of Cuban printmaking in London, and used this opportunity to float the possibility of broadening Paddington Printshop's brief with its sponsors. The idea of a new type of organisation, with one foothold in community activism, and the other in the art market had been planted, but there was one more poster campaign that would occupy the Printshop while this idea germinated.

In 1984, before the introduction of the National Tenants Right-to-Buy Scheme, the local authority decided to sell an entire council estate to the private sector. The Printstudio happened to be located on this estate, which comprised approximately 1,000 housing units. A tenants' delegation arrived at our door. Could we make a poster suggesting that this was a bad idea? We did! During the next four years, the Printstudio produced thousands of postcards and billboard-sized posters supporting the tenants' cause. Successive development companies shied away from a scheme which was so vehemently opposed by the residents. The Council

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ceased to undertake repairs, but the campaigners persisted. When the residents finally won the right to buy and manage their own estate, it was valued at minus £17 million pounds, due to lack of maintenance. The Waltherton and Elgin Action Group became a model for resident control. Within ten years it became a capital asset worth hundreds of millions of pounds. Research now indicates that the health, job and education prospects of tenants are better than comparable occupants of social housing.⁸ But the story did not end there. The campaign went on to identify possible misuse of public funds in the pursuit of political gain. The public auditors identified this as £47 million. The leader of the council fled the country in the wake of massive scandal. A process that started from the debris of an Ideal Home exhibition had turned full circle. In the process, I had been granted an educational experience, based on the pursuit of practical objectives. The insights I gained reached beyond the realm of the fine-arts.

In 1991 Paddington Printshop was formally disbanded and a new organisation London Print Workshop took over its

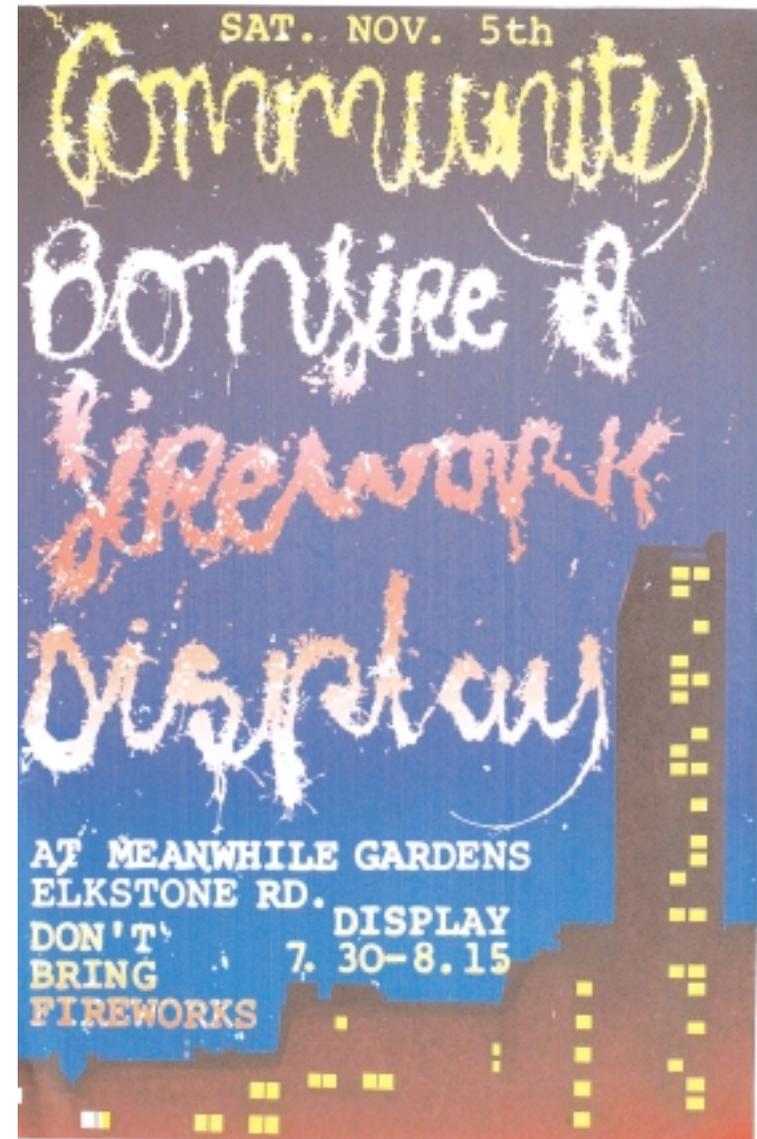


Illustration 9.4

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Illustration 9.5

original in colour

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assets with an increased funding base. Housed in a 4,500-square foot factory, the new resource offered computer facilities, screenprinting, etching and lithography to artists and community organisations. It began to publish limited-editioned prints by recognised artists such as Terry Frost and Victor Pasmore. It was registered as an educational arts charity and governed by a board of trustees who could bring specialist professional skills to the organisation. All that was required to complete this project was to find sufficient funds to convert the factory from its rather derelict condition. This opportunity arrived in 1995, with a phone call from a developer, who wished to buy, and demolish the factory complex. The London Print Workshop, as the only tenant with a long lease, would be re-housed within their scheme. There were numerous false starts before building work began. In 2000 a transformed and renamed london**print**studio opened to the public.