



Best Practice: Affordable Workspace for the Creative and Digital Sector

REPORT UPDATED: MARCH 5, 2014

CITY: MANCHESTER

POLICY AREAS: ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT; TECHNOLOGY

BEST PRACTICE

The **Sharp Project** provides affordable office and production space for companies in the Creative and Digital Sector in order to create job and career opportunities in the city of Manchester. It is a multi-functional facility that offers an opportunity for established digital businesses to flourish and for small-scale start-up companies to grow. The Project is designed to support and develop one of the city's key growth industries.

ISSUE

Manchester is the second largest digital hub in Europe after London, and strives to become a leading global digital city. Adhering closely to the City of Manchester's economic growth strategy, the Sharp Project was developed in response to the emerging needs of the City's digital production sector. The Project is part of the City's vision to drive forward the digital economy and help achieve the critical mass of companies needed to make an impact on the world stage.

GOALS AND OBJECTIVES

The Sharp Project aims to stimulate growth in the Creative and Digital Sector by providing affordable and flexible accommodations that allow companies to collaborate as well as compete with each other for business. The goals of the Sharp Project are:

- To strengthen existing industries in the Creative and Digital Sector;
- To attract a larger volume of production in the city;
- To expand the freelance talent pool in the city; and
- To develop a pipeline of young talent with the range of skills required by the sector.

In concrete terms, the Project aims to provide enough workspace and studio facilities to support over 40 businesses, create 380 jobs, and deliver £19 million of Gross Added Value.

IMPLEMENTATION

A 2008 economic impact study commissioned by Manchester City Council indicated that the conversion of a former warehouse would support and grow the digital community and local economy. The strategic development of the Sharp Project was largely guided by New East Manchester Ltd., an urban regeneration company formed by Manchester City Council in partnership with national and regional economic development agencies.

The Sharp Project features:

- A 200,000 Sq-foot building
- Converted shipping containers
- 40 rentable offices
- 4 production stages totalling 55,000 square feet
- Events space
- Campus where members can meet and network
- Music and post-production studio
- Prop store and construction space
- Affordable high bandwidth connectivity

Best Practice: Affordable Workspace for the Creative and Digital Sector

In addition to providing affordable space, the Project carefully selects tenants who are prepared to collaborate and offer complimentary services, thereby creating a balanced ecosystem and encouraging joint ventures to accelerate growth opportunities for tenant companies.

In order to locally develop the talent, skills, and capacity needed to support the growing Creative and Digital Sector, The Sharp Project's Creative Director co-founded SharpFutures, a community-interest digital creative company that supports young people in gaining employment. Through this collaboration, the Sharp Project employs young apprentices to help run the facility, giving them practical work experience in a wide range of areas across the sector. The Project has also developed links with a number of local partners, ranging from corporations to high schools and colleges, in order to raise awareness about the facility and opportunities available in the sector.

In response to the overwhelming success of the project and increased demand for workspace, the Sharp Project has sought to grow strategically. The Project has acquired and transformed additional facilities, each with a particular focus within the sector.

COST

The Sharp Project was a £16.5 million investment by Manchester City Council, with support from the European Regional Development Fund and the North West Development Agency.

RESULTS AND EVALUATION

In 2013, Manchester City Council commissioned an independent report to examine the economic impact of The Sharp Project. Ekosgen, a Manchester-based economic development and regeneration consulting firm, found that the Project had exceeded its target by creating 375 full-time equivalency jobs in its first full year of operation. The report concluded that the Project housed over 50 businesses and generated an annual GVA impact of £21.4 million.

The Sharp Project – jobs and FTEs 2012/13			
	Jobs	FTE	GVA
Tenants	184	205	£11.7m
Production	778	170	£9.7m
Total	962	375	£21.4m
<i>Source: ERDF Annual Monitoring Returns, New East Manchester 2013</i>			

Since opening, the success of and demand for The Sharp Project production space has led to the development of additional stages, thereby further expanding the Project's economic impact in the sector.

TIMELINE

2008 – Manchester City Council agreed to invest in the City's digital media production sector and commissioned an economic impact and demand study. Based on the results of this study, the Council appointed a Creative Director to transform the Sharp site into a new facility dedicated to digital and creative production.

2011 – Transformation of the Sharp building was completed and the Sharp Project began selecting tenants.

2012 – The Sharp Project commissioned SharpFutures, a community-interest social enterprise, to establish an education and training program in order to develop talent, skills and capacity for the creative and digital sectors.

2013 – The Manchester City Council commissioned an independent report on the economic impact of the Sharp Project, finding that it exceeded expectations. Following this, the Project announced plans to expand into additional facilities, including One Central Park, which focuses on the development of coding skills.

Best Practice: Affordable Workspace for the Creative and Digital Sector

2014 – The Sharp Project announced the opening of a new 360,000-square-foot hub for drama production called The Space Project. The site, which houses five large-scale drama stages and associated support space, is expected to open May 27, 2014. Once fully operational, this new facility has the potential to support 475 full-time equivalent jobs.

LESSONS LEARNED

The facility requires an on-site management team drawn from the Creative and Digital Sector as opposed to a traditional property development and facilities management company.

There is a digital skills shortage in the United Kingdom and the radical approach taken by The Sharp Project can help drive and accelerate an increase both skills and businesses.

Even though owned by Manchester City Council, The Sharp Project and the new facilities such as The Space Project (www.thespaceproject.tv) need to operate outside of any local authority management model.

TRANSFERABILITY

In a short time, the Sharp Project has attracted a critical mass of companies and succeeded in boosting the sector and the local economy. It therefore serves as a model for creating a digital community within a business environment that creates jobs and stimulates growth.

CONTACTS

Susan L. Woodward, OBE, FRSA
Creative Media Champion, Manchester
Director and Founder, The Sharp Project
Thorp Road, Manchester
M40 5BJ United Kingdom
suew@thesharpproject.co.uk
<http://www.thesharpproject.co.uk/>

Facts and figures in this report were provided by the highlighted city agency to New York City Global Partners.