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Camden Lock and Spitalfields Market

Most London residents and visitors have heard of Camden Lock and Spitalfields Market. They are both now firmly established in the tourist guides and feature in almost every list of "London bargains" or "unusual gifts".

Few of the millions of visitors to both markets realise that they both began as supposedly temporary projects, and that these world-famous markets have been developed on a very small development and marketing budget.

Urban Space Management, the company behind both projects offers an interesting example of how an entrepreneurial approach and good marketing can regenerate a run-down area, without large-scale financial investment.

This article looks at the way in which Urban Space Management (USM) has created interesting places to visit and helped to regenerate local areas. Urban Space Management is a management organisation specialising in urban regeneration initiatives. USM describes itself as specialising "in the renewal of run-down or under utilised space for retail and community uses, in imaginative and cost-effective ways, including the interim use of land pending development".

USM works with Local and Central Government and development organisations, acting as consultant, developer, manager and investor. The company is very "hands-on" and places great

emphasis on working on a very practical and cost-conscious basis on sites that other companies might otherwise consider a problem.

Two of their best known projects focused on interim use. Camden Lock was a derelict site by Regent's Canal which was cheap because it only had a 7-year lease, pending the development of a motorway. Whereas other developers were not interested in the site, USM was ready to take the gamble of the motorway development not going ahead, and could see how they could develop short term uses for the site in the meantime.

Spitalfields Market was a similar project, developed as a joint venture with the Spitalfields Development Group with the mandate of developing and managing retail, leisure and cultural activities in the old market buildings up to and during the redevelopment of the site.

It is perhaps useful to consider some of USM's other projects, although this article focuses on Camden Lock and Spitalfields.

- **Gabriel's Wharf:** A joint venture with Coin Street Community Builders on the South Bank of the Thames. USM's brief was to take a small empty site and create a lively destination, pay rent to the landlord, and recover all construction costs in just four years, which it achieved.
- **Merton Abbey Mills:** USM refurbished this site which consisted of a historic but derelict Victorian silk printing works in South

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Wimbledon, and has revitalised it as a craft village, with markets, shops, restaurants, pub, theatre and museum.

- **Elephant and Castle:** USM took on the project of refurbishing this run-down 1960's shopping centre in 1990, with the goal of creating maximum impact with limited funds. It is now fully let for the first time since it was opened and the number of shoppers has increased by 25%.

Development of Camden Lock

When USM acquired the Camden Lock site in 1971 it was a group of disused Victorian brick stables and warehouses in a run-down, mainly residential area of London. Taking on the site was a gamble in case the planned motorway was actually developed but USM decided that if they were able to develop short term uses which at least covered costs, they would be able to gain valuable experience with the possibility of longer term gains. The low price of the property meant this was a realistic approach.

The three managers involved in the project each suggested ideas and uses which they then went on to develop. Although there was an initial plan, the emphasis was on "doing" and learning from mistakes rather than speculating on what might or might not work.

After some initial and fairly basic work to the site which mainly consisted of clearing it and painting some of the buildings, USM began to let the stable space as craft workshops. They managed

to do this by introducing a new idea - letting the spaces to craftspeople on a short stay basis. Because the workshops could be rented by the week, they filled up quickly and generated money for development of some of the larger buildings.

Some of these buildings were converted into restaurants and operators were carefully selected to give the right feeling to the place. It was felt that the restaurants would be there for longer and would be a major draw for visitors so it was important to work with restaurant operators, charging minimal rent until they became established. In some cases, USM even set up partnerships with restaurant owners to help with investment and maintain some control over their development.

The cobbled yards were used as the main site for market stalls both as an outlet for the craft workshops and other goods. This required little investment and added an extra dimension to the site.

As the buildings filled, the main objective of USM was to attract people to Camden Lock, and create a sense of excitement and interest. They were confident that they had created a good "product" and charged low rents until businesses developed. This also meant that a wider variety of items were offered for sale, perhaps more interesting than those in standard High St. shops, giving Camden Lock enhanced character.

A programme of varied weekend events was planned which included dances, concerts, special interest events, and various

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performances. These were mainly free and were well publicised on local radio and in the local press.

Over time, Camden Lock has become more and more popular. In 1976 the threat of the motorway was removed and a 125 year lease was negotiated. USM have since been able to gradually improve and develop the site. However, the original principle of practical and hands-on management has been retained.

Perhaps one of the key reasons for success was that USM had a basic plan of action but was flexible enough to let it evolve as opportunities presented themselves. They were careful to develop step by step and scale the project upwards as each individual activity covered its own costs and began to make a profit. As Camden Lock has become better known, it has become possible to attract longer term tenants paying higher rents. The marketing budget has remained small, using events and word of mouth publicity to draw visitors. USM working on the principle that if the site felt lively and had a good selection of stalls, workshops, restaurants and events people would want to come and enjoy the atmosphere and tell others about it.

Impact on the local area

Today Camden Lock has a strong community of craft workers, design studios, restaurants, pub, exhibition space, offices and many market stalls. The canal is once more in use with a passenger boat service.

A survey conducted during daylight hours in the mid 1990's looked at the reasons why people came to the Camden Town area. It found that over half of the people surveyed had come to visit the market. Others said they had come to "look around", which could be attributed to the spin-off effect of the market. The roads around Camden Lock are now vibrant and fun places to visit, with many shops, bars, restaurants and clubs, all benefiting from Camden's reputation as an exciting place for young people to visit. The same survey found that a high proportion of visitors were regulars coming as often as once a week, and a large proportion of visitors are tourists from overseas.

In 1971 it would have been impossible to predict the results of the initial development of Camden Lock. The main objective was to develop the site to at least cover its costs but the actual results have been far more impressive - around 10 million people now visit the market area every year!

Re-development of Spitalfields Market

There has been a market at Spitalfields since 1683 when Charles II granted a licence for a market to sell "flesh, fowl and roots". The "flesh and fowl" were eventually moved to other markets, but when Robert Horner bought the market in 1856 it still specialised in "roots". The market buildings bear the name of Horner, a self-made man who had been a porter on the same site.

The City Corporation took over control of the market in 1920 and constructed additional market buildings, so that over 100 small

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businesses were able to sell home-grown fruit and vegetables. By 1991 the wholesale market needed to be relocated to a less congested site and a new market was developed to the East of London.

Spitalfields lies very close to London's financial centre and is only a few minutes' walk from Liverpool Street and Bishopgate. A consortium of developers (Spitalfields Development Group) bought the market, intending to construct new offices adjacent to the City of London and they obtained planning permission for the development of the whole site in 1993.

However, by then the recession had struck and speculative development was no-longer considered viable. The 4 acre site of Victorian iron-work buildings under glass was left vacant. A joint venture was formed between Urban Space Management and Spitalfields Development Group to create an interim use for the market, pending re-development.

Once again, USM decided to develop retail uses for the site, and to create a new market. However, there was some concern and resistance from other market traders in neighbouring Petticoat Lane and from the largely Bangladeshi shop-owners in nearby Brick Lane.

USM agreed to develop uses which were in keeping with the market buildings' character and which didn't compete with existing traders who were selling clothes and fancy goods. As in Camden Lock, it set out to develop multiple uses for the site, and to attract a critical mass of retail, leisure and eating areas.

Rather than change the character of the area, USM decided to try to attract local people who already knew and understood the nature of Spitalfields. Information flyers were sent to every house and commercial space within one mile of Spitalfields. Recipients were invited to attend specially organised showing days when the new uses for the market buildings were explained.

Workshop and retail spaces were gradually let around the perimeter of the market buildings. An organic food market was established, and stalls were let to sell food, crafts and other items. Over a period of time, the market buildings were once again filled, with a different character and usage in different areas of the space and on different days of the week. The aim was to ensure that there was something to attract each market segment, who would come to Spitalfields Market for one initial reason. It was hoped they would then go on to use it for other reasons at other times once they were aware of what was available.

Spitalfields is now open Monday to Friday and on Sunday, and caters for City workers, local residents and visitors to the area:

- The old wholesale fruit and vegetable units in the perimeter buildings have become small shops and workshops offering unusual and original crafts, décor, fashion and collectors' items
- There are market stalls during lunchtimes on Mondays to Fridays selling arts and crafts and fashion goods, as well as on Sundays

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- On Sundays Spitalfields is once again a "roots" market, selling one of the largest selections of organic food and drink
- In the main open part of the market there are bars, restaurants and "hawker-style" stalls selling international food, with a central seating area.
- Spitalfields attracts local people and City workers by offering sporting facilities such as football, volleyball and tennis. A temporary covered swimming pool was built in the unused basement of an abandoned development.

There are few conflicts between these different uses, and their combination appears to give extra life to the buildings.

Rents and occupation costs are kept as low as possible to maintain an interesting balance of traders. In the first year, rents were only £4.50 sq. ft when the "going rate " was £7 or £8 sq. ft. Rents are now nearer £16 sq. ft as more visitors come to Spitalfields, increasing trading opportunities. One of the stalls in the Sunday market is now taken by a Women's Enterprise Network which gives women considering starting a small business the opportunity to sell their goods for just two weeks rent-free on a communal stall to gauge interest before they venture out on their own.

Impact on the local area

Independent research was conducted in 1998 in order to quantify the economic impact of the re-development of Spitalfields

Market. Within just four years and with an initial investment of £300,000 the following has been achieved:

- 249,000 sq. ft. of empty space has been brought back into use
- launched a major organic food market
- 6 restaurants
- 16 cafes with a food court eating area
- 6 workshops
- 8 studio office units
- 25 shops
- 2 galleries
- 80 fine art studios
- Grade II listed building restored to English Heritage standards

The project has created the environment to house:

- 531 on site new jobs
- 95 new businesses
- the turnover of the on-site businesses is estimated at over £39 million
- purchases from immediately adjacent but off-site businesses is over £2.5 million
- gross (including displacement) jobs 929, projected to increase to 1066 by the end of 1998.

This shows a start up cost of only £300 per job created. In the first three years of the project external funding totalling five times the original set-up cost was levered in. Perhaps more importantly, the

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project appears to have had a positive effect on the neighbouring area and new residential development has started again.

In 1997 the Spitalfields Market project was given a British Urban Regeneration Association Best Practice Award and stated,

"The project demonstrates what is possible in terms of finding a commercially viable interim use for certain inner city sites which in turn can influence for the better the long term development by bringing back confidence to the surrounding area, creating employment opportunities, fostering community involvement and providing a bridge into a better future"

The area around Spitalfields is gradually becoming more vibrant. Spitalfields now has a Town Centre Manager who is also helping to develop and promote the neighbouring markets of Brick Lane, Petticoat Lane and Whitechapel, as well as the restaurants in Brick Lane. Many of the Georgian buildings in the area are being renovated. A local agency, Cityside Regeneration has commissioned a PR consultant to raise the profile of the area and to develop marketing activities to draw in more visitors. Whereas Spitalfields Market was originally re-developed to attract locals and City workers, word of mouth publicity and mentions in many guide-books means it is now known in several overseas markets including France, Germany, the Netherlands and the USA.

Marketing activity

Marketing has played an important role in all of USMs projects, although budgets have been kept small. The initial launch budget for Spitalfields in 1992 was £10,000 which included publicity material, photography and a press launch to generate interest in local papers in areas such as North and East London, Hertfordshire and Kent.

USM recognises that it is easier to encourage repeat visits to a site than to develop new markets. For this reason, strong emphasis is placed on events which are designed to attract attention, interest and participants as well as steadily raising the profile of a site within the local community.

Event marketing takes a great deal of energy in terms of developing new ideas and generating publicity for them but it can be very cost-effective.

Events range from exhibitions, draft demonstrations, fashion shows, open air cinema shows, arts events and promotions with relevance to the neighbouring community. In Spitalfields the variety of events is particularly broad, spanning seasonal events such as a pancake race, to the London Festival of Bangladesh and corporate events such as the 21st birthday celebrations of Batchelors Mushy Peas, which included women bathing in mushy peas!

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Where-ever possible USM mounts events in tandem with other organisations such as local authority arts and leisure officers and arts associations, and has so far attracted sufficient sponsorship to organise a full programme of events at minimum cost. Another advantage of event marketing is that if the events are original or exciting enough they will stimulate extensive press coverage, removing the need for expensive advertising.

One such event is the Alternative Fashion Week which is a free annual event presented by Alternative Arts and which takes place within Spitalfields Market. As London Fashion Week became more and more popular and mainstream, Alternative Fashion Week was initiated to give young designers an opportunity to show their work. Young musicians were encouraged to play live music for the event and the Alternative Fashion Week provided a platform for designers who would not be able to avoid to show at London Fashion Week. There are daily fashion shows and a fashion market from 12 noon to 3pm each day. Admission is free, with collections for London Lighthouse.

Many of the designers produce "wacky" and colourful designs which photograph well and regularly appear in mainstream press. The Alternative Fashion Week is now enjoying a higher profile and increased numbers of people attend the event which has become established in its own right as well as making more people aware of the attractive setting of Spitalfields Market.

Any successful organisation is conscious of its target markets and their needs, and recognises that different segments have different needs. Despite being developed in quite similar ways, each of

USMs projects attracts a different market and they rarely compete with each other.

Camden Lock attracts a high proportion of young tourists, many of whom come from overseas, whereas Spitalfields attracts local people, Londoners and city workers, with some thirty-something tourists at weekends. Merton Abbey Mills attracts a high proportion of families from the surrounding area.

By offering shopping, leisure and eating facilities, USM is generally able to encourage the public to make multiple visits to sites for different reasons. For example, City workers use Spitalfields Market at lunchtime to eat and may visit at other times to buy gifts or organic vegetables.

Over time, the market for each of these sites has evolved and as the sites have become better known visitors have started to come from further afield. However the initial underlying objective for any marketing activity has remained very simple - to create and publicise the sites as being places of "surprise and excitement" that still manage to blend with the local community.

Initial marketing targeted people living and working in the neighbouring area and developed over time to cover a broader geographic area. This is an important lesson for many new attractions to learn - it is far easier and more cost-effective to promote to local residents and workers, and perhaps to their friends and relatives, than to undertake ambitious marketing campaigns in wider geographic area, particularly when the product is in its infancy.

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Why has Urban Space Management been so successful?

USM are more likely to describe themselves as a management company or developers than a company that creates visitor attractions and yet they have developed some of the most successful sites in London. At a time when many organisations are facing increased competition and others are planning large, expensive new attractions, it may be interesting to look at some of the factors which have contributed to USMs success.

USMs approach is particularly interesting because:

- They set out to work on relatively small scale projects with a limited time span, which have evolved to become famous "visitor attractions" attracting millions of people every year - even large scale developments need a heart and soul from which they can grow. USMs projects have all been developed step-by-step, building on small initial successes. A phased approach is less risky and easier to control and manage. It also allows developers the opportunity to test what works and doesn't, before committing large-scale investment.
- They have contributed to the regeneration of under-used and unloved areas on a community-sensitive basis, enhancing the sense of place and creating real job opportunities. This may not have been the original intention and yet some of USMs projects have created more employment opportunities than far higher profile job creation schemes.

- USM has replicated its success in several areas, but unlike many modern heavily branded shopping malls or visitor attractions, each project has a different character, atmosphere and target market. None of the sites bear any prominent USM branding. Strong branding can reassure consumers and visitors but without perhaps recognising it we all look for local distinctiveness. Tourists and visitors travel in search of new experiences and "something different" so when they come across one of the markets they believe they have found something which has developed out of the local community and is particular to that area.
- The success of these projects has meant that several clusters of old buildings have been given a new lease of life. These buildings have not been "preserved" in a museum sense, but retained because they are considered appropriate settings for new uses. Some conservationists may feel that more care should be taken in the restoration of such old sites. However, Britain is littered with many old buildings which may have limited historical significance and are unlikely to be preserved in their own right. This is not to say that the individual buildings are not locally important, interesting or perhaps of architectural significance but in today's commercial world, it is unlikely that they can all be saved without adopting new uses.
- One of the greatest differences between these projects and many other tourism projects is that there is strong emphasis on learning by doing, reacting to opportunities as soon as they occur, and proving that USM's ideas could work without over-

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reliance on an army of professional consultants and large-scale financial investment.

The author wishes to thank Eric Reynolds for his help in compiling this case study.

- USM often works with sites on an initial short term basis so it has to accept what is already there because it cannot afford to knock down buildings and start again. This focuses the mind on accepting buildings and areas and distracts it from trying to make too many changes to the character of what is there.
- USM tries to develop a "sense of place" at each site and to fit in with the local area and its character. This isn't entirely altruism. Maintaining a sense of place and local distinctiveness means that in the early stages of development local residents are less likely to object and more likely to accept the small changes that take place. In all its projects, USM recognises that it is very dependent upon the local community as one of its main target markets.
- Critics of USM projects comment that most of the sites are "tatty", with a slightly unfinished look. This is true, and happens partly because USM works on interim projects which perhaps don't *initially* seem to warrant heavy investment in restoration. It is also partly because USM has recognised that visitors and users of their sites feel comfortable with places that feel "lived in" and which don't resemble any other place. As cities become more homogenous there may even be a frisson of excitement to be gained from visiting a place which is somewhat "gritty" and outside our normal lives.