

Clare Dowdy on co-working

The battles of Waterloo

Three Lambeth Council 'meanwhile spaces' are providing much-needed workspace for local businesses while giving the surrounding area a creative lift along the way



For Londoners in the know, Waterloo's Lower Marsh has long had retail appeal. A centrally located street with a welcome dearth of main-stream chains, it's the place to go for second-hand books, vintage clothing and independent eat-

ing options courtesy of both bricks-and-mortar cafes and street food.

In the past year, these small out-fits have been joined by a "meanwhile space" with stand-out presence. Lower Marsh Smile squats on the site of a relocated library, its smiley-mouth fascia hoping to entice Instagramming passersby. The interiors have had a light touch – no huge surprise given the tight budget and six-week turnaround. "The cheapest thing you can do is paint," says Sarah Castle of up-and-coming architect IF_DO, "so we used a graphic motif." Mercifully, shabby chic has been eschewed in favour of pared-back industrial.

Jessica Tsang is head of operations at Meanwhile Space CIC, which finds temporary uses of vacant property and sites, and was involved with Lower Marsh Smile. She believes that: "You get better quality tenants when your design has ambition."

The 360sq m prefab houses Waterloo Job Shop's office, a recycled plastics firm and a fully occupied co-working space, whose residents include a TV graphics person and app developers. "We wanted to attract creatives," Tsang explains.

Lower Marsh Smile's existence owes much to Lambeth Council. Through Lambeth Works, the council was involved in creating three affordable workspace facilities in 2016 – this one, Health Foundry (50 co-working desks for health-tech startups), and Build Studios – meaning that it's "supporting over 250 businesses".

Conceived as part of Section 106 for an AHMM-designed block, Build Studios is about the same size as Lower Marsh Smile. However, instead of a quirky, pedestrian-friendly street, newly paved in a local regeneration project, it is on a gruelling

Should more meanwhile spaces get the co-working treatment? Have your say.

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roundabout. Inside, though, is a refuge from all that.

Initially, the idea was to set up as a business incubator, explains Build Studios executive director Helen Santer. "But we felt that it needed some focus, so we thought of doing a sector-specific space." They hit on the built environment "because local architecture universities said their alumni were struggling to find space". Hence it is one of the few co-working spaces with a floorplan – by Brixton architect CarverHaggard – on its website.

These operations demonstrate co-working's perceived potential to lift a place and add value. And combined with Waterloo's other delights, they may make it a go-to neighbourhood for homeless, money-conscious creatives. 📍

↑ IF_DO's Smile graphics continue within the building