

Patricia Sutcliffe: The Founder of The Art House

Patricia Sutcliffe was an artist and the founder of The Art House, which was established in 1994, and originally based at Dean Clough in Halifax. It was not until 2005 that The Art House moved to Wakefield and became the award-winning charitable organisation it is today.

In the beginning, The Art House was just an idea and an initiative driven by a group of individuals, led by Patricia, who saw a better future for arts inclusively. Patricia had the determination and vision to create studio spaces that were physically accessible and adaptable for as many artists as possible. With the Disability Discrimination Act not coming to fruition until the following year in 1995, this way of thinking marked an incredibly important time to instigate a shift in the arts.

Patricia was a sculptor who completed a Fine Art degree in 1993 at Bradford College as a wheelchair user and sufferer of severe arthritis. During her studies, she had to work from a loading bay – leaving the space during deliveries – and had to travel to the local library to use the bathroom facilities.

After graduating, her friends and fellow creatives moved into local artists' studios, many of which were in old mills or former industrial buildings, and were not accessible to her. Patricia had lost vital access to technician support and discovered that the type of facilities she needed to continue her practice did not exist. She quickly became frustrated by the lack of support and wheelchair-friendly studio spaces that were available for disabled artists. An article in the Halifax Courier voicing her frustrations resulted in a small group of artists gathering together. At their first meeting, The Art House was officially formed, with its core aim to provide a platform for disabled and non-disabled artists to work alongside one another. Building a space becomes the original aim underlying the formation of the organisation.

The Art House began its journey in Halifax after Patricia acquired office space in Dean Clough galleries to begin running creative workshops. What started as a group of artists looking for a space, became a national membership organisation dedicated to enabling all artists to have access to work, and opportunities. At its peak, it had a membership of 250 disabled and non-disabled artists working collaboratively.

In the period 1994–2004, Patricia and a small group of artists and arts professionals worked hard to secure funding for art projects, training events and artists' residencies across Yorkshire and the Midlands. All in all, The Art House existed then similar to how it does today, but without a roof to house all of the creativity. In 1997 The Art House became a registered charity, and funding was received to begin a building feasibility study. Potential locations were discussed, but because connectivity with the rest of the art world was extremely important, Wakefield became an important decision due to the 'critical mass' of important visual arts organisations such as Yorkshire Sculpture Park.

By November 2004, an agreement had been reached with Wakefield Council to build on the location it is now, and by February 2007, construction work had begun. A new milestone was achieved on 4 June 2008 when The Art House took possession of the building. After almost 15 years, that July, The Art House opened its brand-new, centrally located building, exemplary in terms of physical accessibility, offering artists' studios, accommodation, meeting rooms and community spaces, and positioned by the rail station. Patricia's original ambition and vision were finally a reality.

As an artist, Patricia predominantly worked with stoneware ceramics and mixed media. Based on the figure and landscape, her clay sculptures have little surface colour but offer an array of textural and surface contrasts that emphasise the sensual qualities of larger and more abundant feminine forms. Patricia Sutcliffe sadly passed away in 2016. Her strong belief that art should be accessible and enjoyable for all remains at the forefront of The Art House's values. We will forever be indebted to her for the passion and commitment she showed to supporting the development of artists.

