

The London craft hub providing ‘therapy’ for jewellers

Social enterprise Cockpit, which offers studio space and coaching, claims to offer a unique way of nurturing artisans



Ute Decker benefits from the ‘cultural infrastructure’ of Cockpit © Alun Callender

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“If I have any question, whether it’s about shipping to China, working with a gallery in India [or] how does that metal react with this, I just need to walk down the hall and I have [many] experts,” says artist jeweller Ute Decker. “And I can solve my problems in five minutes.”

She is speaking about how she benefits from the “cultural infrastructure” of Cockpit, a social enterprise that supports London-based jewellers. The charity is marking its 40th anniversary this year with a fundraising auction, including a pair of earrings by Decker, next month. It is one of several activities Jonathan Burton, Cockpit chief executive, hopes will raise awareness of, and engagement with, the organisation that he claims is “unique” internationally in being a business incubator dedicated to craft. Its aim, he says, is to support makers to have “sustainable, professional” practice.

Cockpit provides studio space in two London locations (Bloomsbury, near the Hatton Garden jewellery district, and Deptford), professional development programmes and one-on-one business coaching to 173 craftspeople, who have combined annual sales of £7.5mn. Jewellers account for more than a quarter (26 per cent) of these makers, the largest proportion of the 25 disciplines represented.



Cockpit’s Deptford studios © Peter Landers



Cockpit’s Open Studios are held every summer and winter © Jamie Trounce

Its main public-facing activity is Cockpit Open Studios, held every summer and winter. It is at this selling event from June 4 that the organisation will run a silent auction of 40 pieces donated by makers. The winter Open Studios will feature a display of pieces featured in an upcoming book telling Cockpit’s history through 40 objects by current makers and alumni.

Ben Massey, chief executive of the National Association of Jewellers, says Cockpit plays a “distinctive but an important role” in the sector. “What it does do is bridge this gap between education, professional practice and marketplaces,” he says. He adds that Cockpit celebrates craftspeople “in a way that there’s a lot for the rest of the country to learn from” in terms of having a “unique community that allows businesses to start and develop”, keeping skills in the UK.

“When makers are together that’s when they can often feel the most creative and the most reassured and most empowered, the most confident,” says Massey. He adds that it is essential in less certain times that small businesses can “share challenges”, describing the community at Cockpit as “a real superpower”.

Alongside peer support, Decker benefits from the business advice, calling the business coaches her “therapist”. “They’re really good at asking questions,” she says. “They don’t tell you, ‘Oh you should be doing this, or you should be doing that.’ They ask, ‘How does that fit with this? What are the priorities?’ . . . It’s invaluable.”



Huimin Zhang joined Cockpit Bloomsbury last year



Cockpit’s Bloomsbury studios © Harry Plowden

Goldsmith Huimin Zhang, who joined Cockpit Bloomsbury last year, says Cockpit Open Studios enables her to share a “more detailed” look at her work by showing tests that came before a final piece, and the equipment and gold wire she uses. “Most of the people see my work just when I do a fair outside [Cockpit] or when I put something on my Instagram, but they don’t know about how I make it,” says Zhang, who has a filigree brooch inspired by a friend’s journey through breast cancer in the collection of London’s V&A Museum.

One in seven applicants for a Cockpit studio is successful. Burton says the organisation seeks makers who not only have the skills and quality, but a “singular voice”. Other resident jewellers include the award-winning hand engraver Castro Smith and Jacqueline Cullen, who specialises in Whitby jet.

Cockpit, which had an income of £1.31mn in the year ending March 31 2025, supports 40 makers each year who receive an award or bursary entitling them to subsidised studio space and business support. This support tapers over the course of the award. Its annual impact report, launched this week alongside a short film and exhibition staged as part of London Craft Week, said £1 invested in Cockpit generated £3.90 in gross value added.



Yen Duong © Sophie Mutevelian

“Lord knows, it’s tough enough to make a living in craft, and being an independent jeweller is no different,” says Burton. “So, for us, a measure of our success is being able to see how our makers’ practice evolves, that their businesses are successful, that they achieve recognition in their field . . . whether that’s being able to identify those that are collecting their work, where it’s being retained, institutions that are purchasing work for permanent collections and indeed press [coverage].”

Looking ahead, he says the organisation, which partners with other charities on education and community workshops, will continue to develop its services for makers in response to market shifts. Given the “gloomy” economic atmosphere over the past 12 months, he says Cockpit is exploring new opportunities for makers to sell work or raise their profile. He says there are “plans to take work out of the building” to retail in a gallery context.

There will also be a new mentorship scheme. After nearly 30 years at Cockpit, jewellery designer Yen Duong is giving back by supporting two younger makers who would not currently be accepted by Cockpit in their own right. She will pay them to work for her and will offer them expertise; they can use a shared studio and equipment for their own designs. “It’s a two-way system where they can have work [to] support themselves, but it also enables them to develop their business,” says Duong. This approach, she adds, is “almost creating a microsystem” of Cockpit.