

a sense of community

Florence Derrick

Less than a 20-minute walk from Canary Wharf lies Pepper Street. It is lined with empty, brick shop fronts. All is quiet on an average weekday morning, except for the buzz of what's to come over the next few weeks and months.

A social initiative called ILove Community has set up here until at least 2020, with the aim of transforming the disused street into a strip of shops, events spaces and organisations – all with the aim of enriching the local community, boosting opportunities and creating links between the Canary Wharf estate and the surrounding area.

Founder Jay Mtonga launched the initiative in 2012 with a Brick Lane-based project called Nomadic Community Gardens, which regenerated an abandoned piece of land, delivering a communal garden for local people to grow food, create art and make connections in.

"He was actually homeless at the time," said ILove Community project manager Natalie Dinsmore. "But prior to that he'd worked for Bank of America in Canary Wharf."

"He had gone through some things in his personal life and ended up living in a hostel."

"He came across the derelict piece of land and decided he would speak to the developer about creating an outdoor space that could be utilised by the local community."

Having grown up in south London and worked in corporate environments, old friends Jay and Natalie were perfectly placed to run a project on the Isle of Dogs – an area marked equally by fast, corporate development and a long history of community.

But it wasn't until Jay had found the Pepper Street site that Natalie got involved.

"I've lived in Spain for the last 10 years, working in recruitment and real estate, and was on a break from work, which you can do easily there," she said. "When there was a whiff of getting a space here, he called me and said: 'Can you help me set up this project?'"

It was thanks to the reputation established by Jay's Brick Lane project that the pair managed to secure the buildings.

"Nomadic Community Gardens was the kickstarter for the concept of meanwhile spaces," Natalie said. "That is, taking them on and utilising them in the gestation period where the property developers are just waiting for planning permission."

Currently, ILove Community runs an upcycled and secondhand furniture shop on Pepper Street, which helps to fund community-minded start-ups and organisations, including a vegan pop-up shop and children's workshops, either free or at a far cheaper cost than standard market rates.

"We're very proud to say that we've

been self-funded up until this point," said Natalie. "While we get funding to run specific programmes, the furniture business has allowed us to sustain ourselves and we receive a donation from the property developers each month."

"We work completely differently to most other organisations. We believe that if there's something you want to do, then you need to find the resources to do that."

"Jay and I have worked since we were 15 and when I was told at 17, 'You can't have a car because you haven't got the money, I did what I had to do to get it."

"It's been a similar scenario getting to here. It's been to our detriment at times – without a big injection of funding, it makes it more difficult to affect a wider range of people."

"But we haven't wanted to have a handout mentality. A lot of organisations we've encountered rely on funding and when that gets taken away, the whole project falls apart. And the irony is, we're now housing those same organisations that's happened to. But with everybody putting a bit into the pot, more organisations can do their work here."

What kinds of projects are due to roll out in Pepper Street?

"Our remit is very much that they have to benefit the community," Natalie said. "We've already got three or four start-ups occupying the space for free, to allow them to expand without the pressure of rent, in a good location that is accessible for getting new clients."

"There's an organisation called Martial Finesse, a mixed martial arts gym for kids, that's here for free for six months. ILove Community is giving them £9,000 to add to their online crowdfunder."

"Another one I'm really excited about is the bike workshop. We engage with a lot of young people and there are really high rates of bike theft in this area, and we're in an interesting position – meeting the people having their bikes stolen but also meeting the young people who are stealing them. A lot of them are being tarnished with these horrible labels but they really are not bad kids. We've found they are actually stealing bikes because they are taking the parts for their own bikes, or to fix a friend's or a cousin's bike."

"So we said, if we give you a space and the means to be able to fix those bikes and get those parts legitimately, then would you be up for doing it here?"

"And of course they were."

"Then, in February 2019 we're hosting a programme from a brilliant organisation called the University of Hard Knocks that puts together accredited courses in the media world – digital marketing, social media, music, graphic design."

"They target people who are out of work. It is aimed at over-25s, getting them back into employment in the media world because there's a real lack of creative training

for people who are outside of college or mainstream university. It's a lot easier to get freelance work if you have this kind of qualification, so you don't have to rely on the job centre to get you an interview."

Another part of the ILove Community ethos is addressing the disconnect between the Isle of Dogs' residents and the commercial and financial centre on its doorstep.

"Between Canary Wharf and the more residential area of the Isle of Dogs, there's this huge disconnect between the islanders – the original community that's been here since before the DLR came in – and Canary Wharf, which has been stuck in the middle of it without a huge amount of consideration for the community that lived there prior to its existence," said Natalie.

"There's a sense Canary Wharf isn't for them. They're very much isolated despite it being a stone's throw away. We want to incorporate companies and organisations to help address that gap."

"Our furniture upcycling workshops do that a treat, because it doesn't matter what demographic you're from, if you're into upcycling furniture you can all get together. That furniture is either then re-donated to people in very difficult situations or we sell it at low cost to the local community."

"A couple of times a month, corporate organisations come down to the space, we give them old furniture and we teach them how to fix it up. There's the potential for a huge amount of crossover between those demographics – it's just about finding things that are non-demographically specific."

"And I've seen with my own eyes what happens when people you never thought would get on are put in a situation together. It's like Big Brother. Energy meets energy and if you're a nice person, you connect, regardless."

The upcycling project has not only forged unlikely connections, but also helped those living on the breadline. "There's a lot of social housing around here. Tower Hamlets has got one of the highest poverty rates in London," said Natalie. "There's one case that sticks in my head. We got a call about this young girl, 18 or 19, who had just had a baby. She'd just been put into a baby-mother hostel."

"Social services had come over and said, the property's not furnished so we're going to take the baby from you. Now."

"We heard that and straight away got her a bed, crib, sofa, kitchenware. It was that real slap in the face that there are people who genuinely do not have what they need to be able to set up a home."

While the local residents are, by default, the main benefactors of ILove Community's work, by no means is its work closed off to the wider London community.

"Yes, if you live in E14 you get free delivery, and it's funding and facilitating jobs for local people and allowing us to run workshops

and let organisations use spaces for free," said Natalie. "But people come from different areas to purchase furniture. We want people to visit our project and see what we do."

It's that kind of interaction that Natalie feels could also help repair relations between the surrounding area's long-standing community and its newer developments.

"I think there is a resentment here, but not one that can't be dealt with," she said. "Private developers buy previously council-owned buildings and people are moved out of the area while those buildings are made into much nicer properties, and they can't afford to move back."

"That breeds resentment. "Then there's the complete disconnect between the potential workforce from here that could be in Canary Wharf, but isn't. If you walk from Canary Wharf to here, there's a sense of complete divide."

"Don't get me wrong, we're not against development or change. But there needs to be more of a consideration for the process and how much you include local people. If you did that, you'd end up with a lot less aggravation and you would get the workforce you needed."

Armed with the dual insight gleaned from their personal and professional backgrounds, Jay and Natalie aim to expand their work to Newham and internationally after 2020.

"At the end of the day, the western world is not set up to listen to a small grassroots organisation, and that's absolutely fine," she said. "But if Jay and I are able to bridge the gap, because we're comfortable in those corporate environments and within these communities, then great. We've got local people jobs in Canary Wharf, because they trust us."

"We didn't want to have this traditional community centre feel, which hosts the odd knitting club and people with a higher income bracket don't go near it."

"We want it to be something that absolutely everyone can enjoy. On a given day we might have a baby bank where people who need baby items can pick them up for free."

"You won't get someone paying £3,000 a month for their property in Canary Wharf coming to that, but they may donate. And they might get something from the furniture shop, or go to a yoga class."

"It's just about being smart with what you put out there to bring people together from all walks of life."

"We all need help to connect with ourselves a bit more, to be human and relate to other people, particularly now London is being constructed to separate people rather than bring them together."

"We're trying to hold onto that last little bit of community connection and make people understand that if they're not active in keeping it going, then it will disappear." *Go to Ilovecommunity.org.uk*

ISLE OF DOGS, POPLAR & BLACKWALL



MATT GRAYSON

Project manager
Natalie Dinsmore is
working with old
friend Jay Mtonga
on the 1Love
Community initiative

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Natalie Dinsmore explains how
1Love Community is filling a
vacant row of shops on the Isle
of Dogs with projects to benefit
residents and Wharfers
.....

Coming up

What to do in your area



STAGE | Graveyard Gang

Poplar Union, Poplar

Purple Moon Drama bring their
new play set over 24 hours on New
Year's Eve and New Year's Day.

Dec 7, 7.30pm, £8



GIG | Christmas Concert

The Space, Isle Of Dogs

The London Docklands Singers
perform the usual favourites. Mulled
wine, mince pies, profits to Crisis

Dec 10, 8pm, £6



STAGE | Little Women

The Space, Isle Of Dogs

A new adaptation of Louisa May
Alcott's classic, this is a celebration
of sisterhood. Expect love and loss.

Until Dec 15, 7.30pm, £9.50



SOON | 3D Pens Workshop

Trinity Buoy Wharf, Leamouth

Join Grace Du Prez for a family
exploration of 3D printing pens.
Suitable for age six and up.

Dec 15, 11am, £24