Firstsite

‘Creative Together’ Our Business Plan

Photograph by Jayne Lloyd

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Raqs Media Collective, *Not Yet At Ease*, 2018
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Photograph by Douglas Atfield

Vision – First for Everyone

At Firstsite and in our satellite venues, we show a diverse mix of the very best historic, modern and contemporary art from around the world, for everyone, every day.

Vision – First for Everyone

We disrupt the way we and our visitors experience the world, we provide new creative opportunities and we promote imaginative responses to contemporary issues.

Grayson Perry and Sally Shaw, Director, Firstsite
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Mission

With our partners we are improving all residents of East Anglia's wellbeing and life-chances with innovation, ingenuity and creativity.

Gillian Wearing's statue of Millicent Fawcett was co-commissioned by Firstsite, with the Mayor of London, 14–18 NOW and Iniva to commemorate the centenary of the Representation of the People Act, 1918, through the Government's National Centenary Fund.
Photograph by John Lubbock (Cropped). Licensed by CC BY-SA 4.0

Values

Firstsite is an organisation that has its feet on the ground and its head in the stars.

Inclusion

Equality of access and opportunity combined with best practice to help engage with our audiences, artists, least involved groups, partners, suppliers and staff.

Innovation

Working collaboratively with our stakeholders, partners and funders to ensure we are continuously developing better ways of working and achieving higher returns on investment.

Quality

The use of analytics to help us continuously improve visitor experience and how we work to ensure we make valuable and measureable impacts.

Professionalism

Adopting best practice in all that we do to ensure that we are well governed, well managed and seen as an effective asset for the communities we serve.

We are inclusive, unconventional and fun.

Goals and Strategies

1. Be a Radical Contemporary Art Gallery

2. Champion the needs of children and young people

3. Bringing lots of people together to enjoy art and culture

4. Be expert in our governance and management

5. Be bold in improving equality, diversity and inclusion

6. Be financially resilient and share resources

Be a Radical Contemporary Art Gallery

Zhang Enli, *Gesture and Form*, 2017
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Supported by Hauser & Wirth
Photograph by Douglas Atfield

‘What I have I share’

Firstsite is renowned for its radical and unconventional building – Rafael Vinoly’s extraordinary curved design is inspiration to the Firstsite team and the artists and communities we collaborate with to develop artworks and curatorial methods that are equally unconventional and ground breaking.

For example, every aspect of our artistic programme is shared and co-authored. We either directly co-curate exhibitions and projects with our partners and members of the community, or we use data and intelligence gained from the region to inspire our activity. We are also committed to ensuring 50% of our programme is dedicated to work and exhibitions made by people from the protected characteristic groups.

Firstsite is one of three galleries across England partnering with the Arts Council Collection. We are collaborating with communities from across East Anglia to access the extraordinary Arts Council Collection established over 70 years of acquisitions.

Our six major projects will be co-designed with the Black History Month Society, The Radical Women of Colchester, Colchester Garrison, Refugee Action Colchester, the Young Artist Kommunity and mothers and carers connected to Firstsite through our Holiday Fun programme.

East Anglia is also home to an incredible wealth of artists past and present such as Grayson Perry, Gee Vaucher, Elsa James, Simon Carter, Freddie Robbins, Mark Wallinger, John Constable, Thomas Gainsborough, John Nash, Cedric Morris, Henry Collins, Joyce Pallot and Lucy Harwood.

Promoting East Anglia’s uniquely radical cultural heritage is a fundamental aspect of our artistic programme. We contextualise this incredible creative quality by drawing links to other artists from around the world who share our interest in radical ideas that address issues of equality, diversity and inclusion on the global stage – artists such as Bruce Maclean, Gillian Wearing, Andy Warhol, Martin Parr and Lubaina Himid.

Magda Archer, *Problems with Modern Life*, 2019
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Photograph by Douglas Atfield

Bringing lots of different people together to enjoy art and culture

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Susan Pui San Lok, *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND*, 2019
Exhibition at Firstsite, opening celebration
Photo by Maddie Pierce

(Y)Essex

Firstsite is very proudly located in Colchester, Essex – serving the region of East Anglia. The county of Essex is characterised in recent times by many strong stereotypes such as the 'Essex Girl' and 'Mondeo Man', reinforced through popular culture including TV programmes such as 'The Only Way is Essex' (TOWIE). The entrepreneurial nature of TOWIE is based on selling an 'image' of Essex which, whether we like it or not, translates incredibly effectively both in the UK and internationally. Creating a strong brand for the region to connect into and export.

These recent and somewhat pervasive cultural clichés are something that we 'own' with great pride and sincerity at Firstsite. They come from the region and have been formed over many decades and centuries – they are part of our regional DNA and we explore them from a variety of contrasting viewpoints.

Historically, East Anglia has been a region that has endured and enjoyed much political unrest – Colchester in particular, as the oldest recorded town in the UK, is littered with the architectural evidence of one invasion after the next. Boudicca burned the town down in AD 60/61, John Ball who led the Peasant's Revolt in 1381 preached on the site of the gallery and more recently the town voted to remain in the European Union in amongst a sea of leave voting wards across Essex. Politics, citizenship and social responsibility are all subjects that our audiences are passionate about and that we feed through our activities.

The Essex and East Anglia landscape – physical, economic, historical and cultural – is of major significance for our audiences. Our programme is seeded with many ideas, themes and subjects that enable our audiences to further connect with their immediate environment and promote our cultural heritage past and present much further afield. For example, we know that our audiences are particularly passionate about the three 'p's' – politics, place and personality.

As a nationally significant art gallery we are working towards reflecting the national population demographics in our audiences, staff, Board and supporters and the artists we choose to support and present through our artistic and learning programmes.

There is also a vast disparity between the wealthiest members of the community and the poorest across Essex. At Firstsite we are passionate about our commitment to be 'First for everyone'. We are particularly intent on ensuring that the socio-economic gap between audiences who currently regularly attend our activities and those who are much less likely to get involved is addressed.

Tapping into these themes has borne major fruit for Firstsite, proven in our rapidly increasing audience attendance figures – In 2017/18 we achieved our highest ever footfall of 156,000 visitors since opening in 2011. Our relevance and value is also reflected in what our visitors are saying about us – 90% of our visitors say Firstsite is a welcoming place where many different cultures can come together and be explored.

Grayson Perry Gala Dinner, 2017
Firstsite
Photo by Marwen Sallouta

Champion the needs of children and young people

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Holiday Fun, 2019
Firstsite
Photo by Aura Films

25%

25% of children and young people in Colchester are perceived to be living in poverty. This equates to just under 10,000 children and young people on the doorstep of Firstsite who do not have access to the fundamental resources such as food and social interactions, that many of us take for granted, let alone access to culture and art.

Since 2017, with the support of Children in Need and the NHS, Firstsite has been delivering the Firstsite Holiday Fun programme. This has brought us into contact with over 400 families from some of the most challenged areas of Colchester. These are families who would not normally go into an art gallery because it is 'not for them' or because the demands and constraints on their daily lives mean experiencing culture is just not a priority.

The Firstsite Holiday Fun programme is designed to promote the five ways to wellbeing – helping children, young people and their families to eat, connect, be active, take notice, keep learning, give and be inspired.

The programme is entirely free to families who would normally receive free school meals during term-time and is attracting large numbers of new visitors to the gallery to see our artworks and meet the artists we are working with. As a consequence Holiday Fun is opening up conversations about the very direct and urgent issues many of the children we are meeting through the project are facing, as well as the concerns and challenges of their parents.

This insight is directly informing how we design all our activities for children and young people from ages 0–25, with special focus on children from the protected characteristic groups.

All of our activities for children and young people and also for the parents and carers who attend Firstsite with them are designed around the five critical employability skills – communication, teamwork, self-management, problem solving and resilience. This ensures that all our activities are not only great fun and totally engaging, they are also supporting the fundamental development of the next generation of citizens in a creative, welcoming and relaxed environment.

John Ball Day, 2017
Firstsite
Photo by Firstsite

Be bold in improving equality, diversity and inclusion

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John Ball encouraging Wat Tyler's rebels of 1381
Unknown medieval artist, Froissart's Chronicles
Detail of British Library manuscript *Royal 18 E. I f.165v*

‘Everything shall be in common’

Colchester is home to many historically significant people who have radically changed life in the UK and arguably around the world – most notably John Ball who preached on the site of Firstsite and introduced the concept of equality to Western thought in the late 1300s.

John Ball’s influence permeates our thinking and programming at Firstsite. In 2017 we hosted a panel discussion chaired by David Isaac, the Chair of the Equality and Human Rights Commission. We asked the audience what is the single biggest barrier to equality in Colchester today and they told us – wealth. We also asked them, what single thing would you change to improve equality in Colchester and they answered – education.

These two dimensions – the creation of cultural and economic wealth for the region and the improvement of people’s access to and experience of education through artistic and cultural activities are what we are dedicating our entire programme to for the foreseeable future.

On our 10th anniversary in 2021 we intend to unveil a 50 year plan for Firstsite that will set us on a path to fundamentally improve these two critical factors for a generation of people growing up in East Anglia today. The current strategic plan is constructed from projects, exhibitions, ideas, experiments, research and evidence gathering which will inform and underpin this vision with the help of an exceptional alliance of partners and supporters who share our vision.

Firstsite is also making plans to embed the philosophy of John Ball into the fabric of the public realm around Firstsite as the ongoing development of Colchester’s ‘Creative Quarter’ continues. We have plans to deliver a major nation-wide competition to commission an artist to create an artwork that celebrates the legacy of John Ball and creates a major destination feature in the immediate surroundings of the building – as radical as our extraordinary building itself.

Raqs Media Collective, *Not Yet At Ease*, 2018
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Photograph by Douglas Atfield

Not Yet At Ease, co-commissioned by Firstsite and 14–18 NOW, explored the impact of conflict and the resulting ‘shell shock’, now recognised as post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), experienced by Indian soldiers during the First World War.

Be financially resilient and share resources

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Gillian Wearing, *Courage Calls to Courage Everywhere*, 2018
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Photo by Douglas Atfield

£28m

When Firstsite opened in 2011, the building was the most expensive building in the town coming in at £28m cost to the public purse. This is a brave and foresighted investment designed to trigger further investment in the region. To date, in the 9 years since the gallery opened, Firstsite has matched this with at least £17m return on investment going in large part back into the community by providing jobs, drawing in further investment and providing cultural activities that directly benefit residents of the town and region.

Firstsite is an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation. This means we are one of a chain of strategically funded organisations that serve communities across England to provide the best quality art and cultural activities for diverse audiences. Firstsite is also directly supported by Essex County Council and Colchester Borough Council.

Over the next three years we are challenging ourselves to establish significant new resources for Firstsite that will directly benefit the region by establishing a large-scale 'creative investment fund' which will enable us to have the generational impact we are seeking over the next 50 years of creative interventions. We are doing this by developing our network of individual supporters and investors as well as through our growing alliance of large-scale collaborators including the NHS, Garfield Weston Foundation and Children in Need.

We aim in the next three years to align ourselves with one further major core-funder or investor who can match the resources provided by ACE, ECC and CBC combined, in order to create a rock solid financial basis from which to advance our ambitious programme.

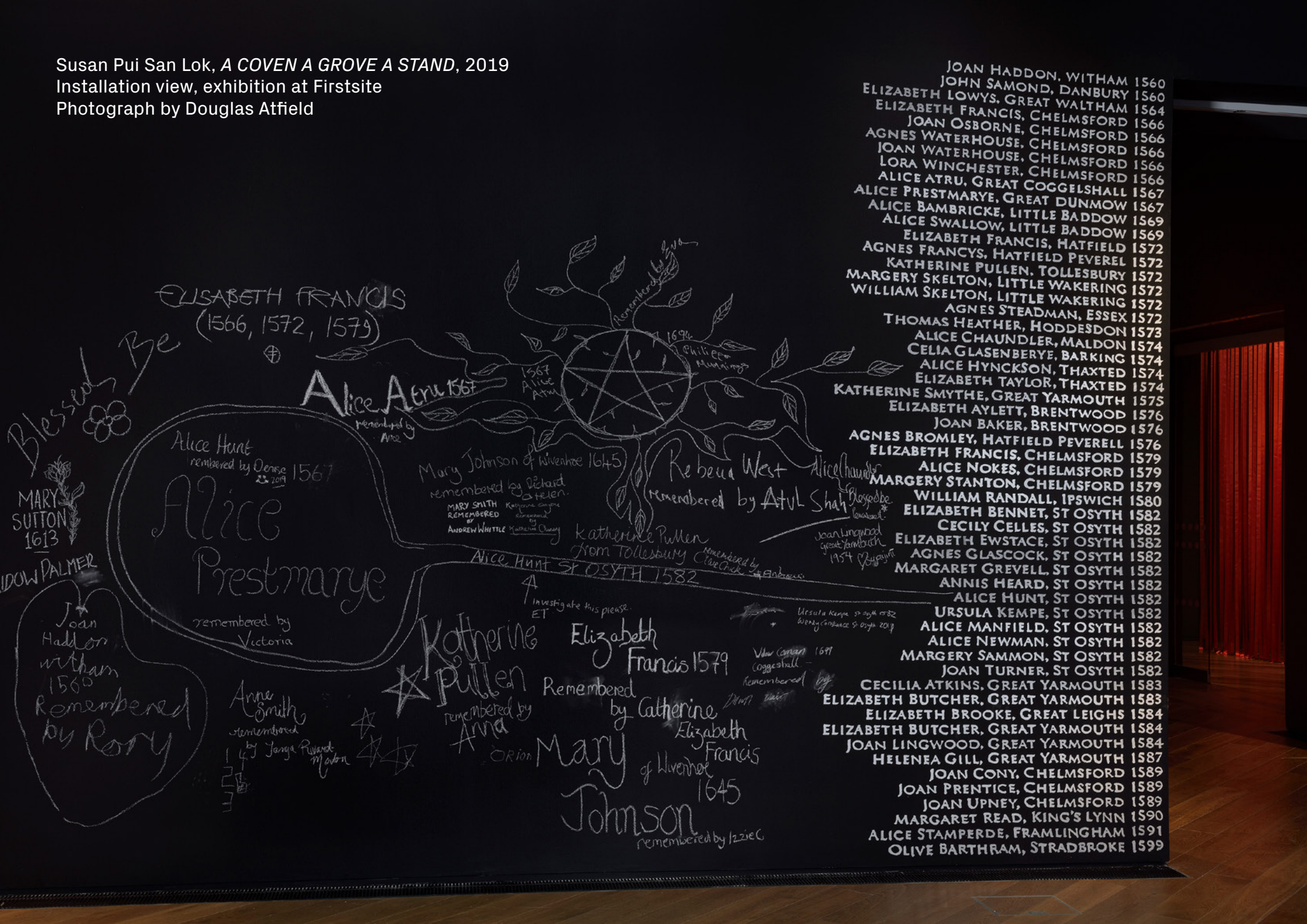
Alongside our ambitious development activity, Firstsite's incredible building houses many high quality commercial assets such as our shop, selling exclusive artist designed merchandise, our cinema curated by Curzon Cinemas and our commercial hires programme which enables a wide variety of businesses to host their corporate events against a backdrop of world class artworks and exhibitions.

To further boost our capacity to invest in innovative projects over the next three years, we aim to increase the profit generated from these assets by 10% collectively. We will achieve this by applying an equally creative and entrepreneurial logic as our artistic programmes to how we develop the commercial aspects of our activities.

For example, we are currently incubating ideas to create a low-cost, high volume 'canteen' programme for our restaurant that can serve the rapidly growing student population as well as the working population on the doorstep in Colchester. There are very few venues in Colchester offering a bustling, highly affordable, culturally relevant food offer that would appeal to large numbers and would draw further traffic to the gallery.

We intend for the 'canteen' to incubate creative talent in the same way our artistic programmes cultivate and develop the careers of artists, shaping the future careers of young chefs and food entrepreneurs interested in developing locally sourced and geographically unique menus.

Susan Pui San Lok, *A COVEN A GROVE A STAND*, 2019
Installation view, exhibition at Firstsite
Photograph by Douglas Atfield



Be expert in our Governance and Management

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Pride, 2018
Firstsite
Photograph by Tanya Rees

Transparent

Firstsite is rapidly becoming a highly agile organisation, able to respond to changes in the cultural and creative industries sector quickly and with creativity. This is powered by an influential Board led by Rosie Millard OBE and staff driven by the leadership of Sally Shaw.

Firstsite is comprised of trustees, staff and volunteers with both detailed local knowledge as well as those who also bring professional expertise from further afield and across a broad range of relevant professional contexts.

As such Firstsite is an incredibly positive and confident organisation that is expert at identifying opportunities in a challenging landscape dominated by extraordinary contemporary politics and the economic uncertainty that these inevitably generate.

Firstsite aims to be a transparent and horizontal organisation that finds success as a result of being open and thorough in its processes and decision making and through its willingness to collaborate with a broad range of partners and supporters that are all invested in the regeneration of East Anglia, its residents, businesses and cultural heritage.

Rosie Millard, Firstsite Chair of Trustees
Photograph by Jayne Lloyd

The Firstsite team

From our dedicated team and Board of Trustees, to our pool of fifty fantastic volunteers, everyone at Firstsite works passionately to fulfil our vision and mission and ensure everyone can access and benefit from this creative community space.

3 Year Action Plan

In 2019/20 we will be:

- Delivering our first year of activities as an Arts Council Collection National Partner Organisation with The Black History Month Society and the 'Radical Women of Colchester'
- Launching a brand new and highly interactive website and digital engagement programme to achieve steady traffic of 150,000 visitors per year
- Expanding our Firstsite Holiday Fun programme to Harwich, Clacton and Walton on the Naze
- Establishing the Creative Investment Fund with a major contribution from a donor/investor
- Embedding our new Chair of Trustees Rosie Millard OBE and expanding the membership of the board of trustees

Arts Council Collection stores
Photograph by Sally Shaw

3 Year Action Plan

In 2020/21 we will be:

- Delivering our year of ‘Landscape and Wellbeing’ in which we will celebrate cultural icons such as Grayson Perry and John Constable alongside delivering a major collaborative exhibition with Newlyn Art Gallery and Sunderland Culture as part of the Arts Council Collection National Partnership Programme.

- Unveiling our new Membership programme that encourages contributions that directly support Firstsite to continue to contribute to the wellbeing and cultural health of the region.

- Opening a major exhibition of submissions to the competition to design an artwork celebrating the legacy of John Ball for the public realm around Firstsite for the public to engage in a ‘voting’ process.

- Announcing our Schools Partnership Programme to work with 3 schools in Colchester on a large scale cultural investment programme to re-boot the creative curriculum.

- Opening our fully re-formatted ‘cultural canteen’ serving the communities of Colchester, Essex and East Anglia as a destination restaurant with civic purpose.

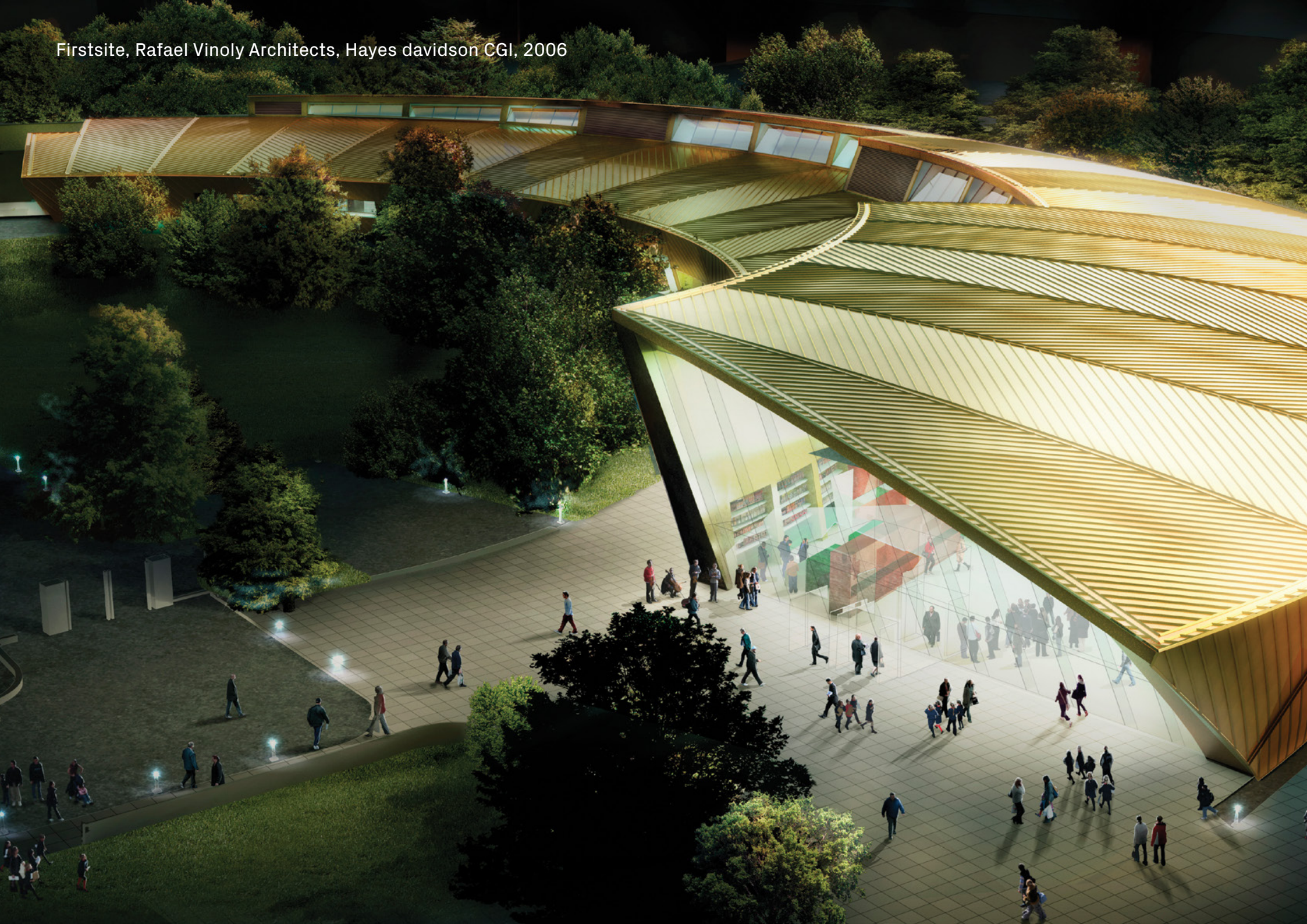
- Establishing the Creative Community Forum that enables Firstsite to formally tap into the civic life and development of the region by listening to the needs and challenges faced by communities across East Anglia.

Simon Carter, *Light on the Sea*, 2018
Acrylic on canvas
Image courtesy of the Artist

3 Year Action Plan

In 2021/22 we will be:

- Delivering our 10th anniversary programme to include artists of major international significance and headline exhibitions with major partner organisations.
- Achieving record sustainable visitor numbers of 170,000 visitors per year.
- Unveiling a major public realm commission celebrating the legacy of John Ball and his fight to achieve equality.
- Expanding Firstsite's Holiday Fun programme to be delivered through a daisy chain of venues across ten districts in Essex.
- Announcing major long-term partner investment to match our Arts Council NPO for the next four years of delivery.
- Rolling out our new 50-year plan to transform East Anglia through radical, cultural investment and intervention.



Firstsite, Rafael Vinoly Architects, Hayes davidson CGI, 2006