

The London Collective

– a new approach

As a newly formed start-up we are actively looking for new members to join us on this exciting journey invites Max Farrell

It is becoming increasingly common for career paths to be 'non-linear' and mine is no exception, having previously worked in electoral services, public affairs and most recently for a firm of architects. With a degree in History, Philosophy and Communication of Science and a Masters in Urban and Regional Planning, it was perhaps inevitable that I would carve out my own career path.

Having recognised the limitations of working for a larger practice, and with the economy slowing, I felt the time was right to explore new approaches to work. I was attracted to the idea of becoming self-employed. Needing a greater degree of flexibility with a young child in nursery, partner working more than full time and no support network to speak of. Having my 45th birthday spurred me on to start a new venture, with an attitude of 'it's now or never'.



Finding a better work / life balance

Society has changed in so many ways, making it easier to set up on your own. The availability and choice of flexible workspace and the ability to connect digitally and work from home is a game changer. There's no doubt about that. However, there are inherent weaknesses for those who choose to become self-employed and the built environment is behind the curve compared to other industries.

My brother is a Creative Director who has worked on campaigns for some of the world's leading brands. When he decided to leave a global agency and become a 'solopreneur', for similar reasons to me, it was an easy choice to make and a well-trodden path. The creative industries have a number of 'collectives' with self-employed specialists morphing around clients and projects, depending on their needs. Much like the cast and crew for film, theatre and live music. It is perhaps a cultural legacy evolving from the arts and crafts collectives. However, I think it has more to do with their ability to move with the times and respond to market changes in a flexible and agile way, embracing technology and encouraging disruption. Arguably, there is greater diversity and less inequality

too, which speeds up the pace of change. Working collectively in this way gives clients what they want, which is lower costs (with lower overheads); greater flexibility (with hand-picked teams); quicker decision making (with less bureaucracy) and senior, experienced people.

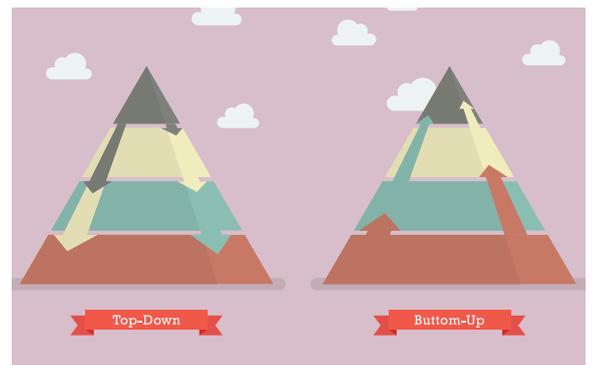
I started the London Collective because the built environment needs this type of business model more than any other



Convening and disbanding like a film's cast and crew

industry yet, as is often the case, it is slow to adapt. When I listed out the different skill sets covering politics, property and placemaking, there were more than fifty. When you add to that creatives like film makers, graphic designers and copy writers, increasingly integral to projects from concept to completion, the numbers keep increasing. It's no wonder that larger, multi-disciplinary companies have enjoyed such success. Particularly given the onerous requirements for professional indemnity insurance and previous experience of a very precise nature. But there are inherent weaknesses in that model too.

The really important thing about collectives, which is attractive to clients, is the difference in culture when you are dealing with people who are at the top of their game and their own bosses. There is freedom to give impartial advice, without corporate messaging or cross-selling. The key to



Top-down vs bottom-up



Max Farrell is
Founder & CEO of the
London Collective



making it successful is the method of organisation, which has to be bottom up and self-organising. The London Collective provides a platform for self-employed entrepreneurs to come together and work collaboratively, whilst continuing to work on their own projects. Each member has their own individual identity as well as their shared identity as a collective.

The London Collective creates the platform and links networks together. We have regular meetings which are business development or project focused, dedicated communication channels and file sharing, templates for reports and presentations and monthly gatherings to network and socialise. It reminds me of my Philosophy of Science degree, when I became fascinated by 'ontological pluralism'. I'm still not sure if I fully understand it, but the London Collective was born as a result!

One of the first questions I am asked is "sounds great, how do you monetise it"? Well, this has been an interesting journey too. We keep the membership fees as low as possible and the selection process as robust as possible. The value comes from the opportunities we explore together, as a diverse group with latent potential, and from the multiple ways of monetising it. Our members often have a mix of retainers, project fees and success fees which they would not have been able to negotiate working on the payroll, in a corporate structure or working alone. There are opportunities to take equity in new ventures too, built from intellectual property we have created together. The ability to cross-fertilise and leverage our networks is what makes it really interesting. We are determined to think 'beyond profit' too and committed to donating 1% of all profits to our charity partners.

Membership is separated into two categories – experts and creatives. Experts cover professional skill sets from planning to design as well as niche expertise. For example, the Collective has members who are 'best-in-class' when it comes to social impact, zero carbon, data mapping and behavioural change. The expert members pay more for the monthly networking events which the 'creatives' like our web designers, photographers and drone operators don't feel the need to attend.

The projects we are working can be broken down into two categories - 'site-based' and 'subject-based'. Site-based work includes feasibility studies through to planning applications,

where we bring together the best possible teams depending on the location and land use. Every place and every project is different, each with its own unique challenges from local politics to structural gymnastics. The 'one size fits all' approach never works because of this uniqueness. That's why the 'platform' approach is so compelling, calling upon a network where most people are a phone call away. I am lucky enough to have a strong network of investors and developers, from the UK and overseas, built up over many years. The combination of funding, development, placemaking and storytelling is a powerful one and the projects we are working on are exciting.

The subject-based work is best described as 'thought leadership'. Where a company wants to advance their thinking in a particular topic or subject area in order to enhance their brand and marketing potential. What we offer is different to the 'think tanks' which tend to have charitable status and do research-based public policy for the public domain. Our work is tailored to a brief, which ultimately creates intellectual capital. This is fundamental for companies looking to create financial and social capital, in a world that is increasingly competitive and specialised. Particularly when we are faced with dramatic and rapidly accelerating forces like climate change and artificial intelligence which will have a massive impact on the lives of future generations.

The London Collective is based at the Home Grown Club, a new kind of hybrid space for working and socialising. These lovingly restored Georgian townhouses provide the perfect environment for collaborative working, and the restaurant and bedrooms are handy for visiting clients. As a newly formed start-up we are actively looking for new members to join us on this exciting journey. So, if you are contemplating branching out on your own, have a particular expertise, a collaborative mindset and want to benefit from enhanced opportunities. Then get in touch, we would love to hear from you. ■

Contact the London Collective by emailing enquiries@ldn-collective.com or visit www.LDN-Collective.com

