

# Clicks and Mortar

## The Tyneside Cinema

### Introduction

Digital technology is at the heart of the [Tyneside Cinema's](#) activities. The building recently reopened in 2008 following a £7million restoration and extension and with the latest digital equipment the new cinema has already met with great acclaim and success. As the oldest surviving newsreel cinema in the country and one of the UK's leading cultural film venues, the cinema is now helping to investigate how we can keep cultural spaces as relevant in the 21st century as we did in the 20th. The building is now being utilised to a degree that was unimaginable before, as it is now a cultural cinema, education and training provider, heritage attraction, archive film exhibitor, live music venue and a social hub with three cafes.

As with most cultural organisations, Tyneside Cinema is exploring what digital technology means for them and where to look for support and expertise going forward and this is not just about digital films and distribution, but the whole experience of cinema.

After the restoration, it aimed to explore the future of similar spaces in terms of digital collaboration. The result was a nine-month programme of experimentation, debate and action research about what else could be done with the building and the potential of moving forward with digital technology. In terms of statistics, targets for audience attendance at the Tyneside Cinema have been exceeded with more than a 33% increase and footfall in the building is almost 100,000 greater than expected.

### The Pixel Palace Project

The [Pixel Palace](#) was a project designed to embrace new partners from a range of artforms and creative industries, to look at the future of cinema. It began with [Northern Film and Media](#) (NFM) creating its Inspire Programme and awarding the Tyneside Cinema funds to enable its staff and trustees to travel and explore new ideas in the UK moving image sector and to bring intellectual and challenging thinkers to the North East. The Pixel Palace Programme enabled the Tyneside Cinema to bring in a series of prominent speakers and extend invitations to film exhibitors and regularly-funded organisations across the North East to meet with them. Partners in support of the project included: NFM, [forma.org.uk](http://forma.org.uk) and Arts Council England.

The name for the project comes from the notion that in the future cinemas may be transformed from 'picture palaces' into 'pixel palaces', extending their usefulness into spaces that support every sort of screen-based creative work. We know already the advent of digital technology is affecting all cultural arenas and as we have learnt the shift is away from mere presentation and exhibition towards interactivity. Therefore, cinemas are already welcoming opera and theatre fans and could soon be

incorporating games players, interactive performance artists and moving image makers, supporting new forms of film storytelling and, most significantly, engaging audiences who may well be turning from passive consumers of culture into active participants in its creation.

## Clicks or Mortar?

The culmination of the project was 'Clicks or Mortar?: Designing a future for cultural venues in the digital age' which explored the tension and issues around the digital or the online and the live i.e. the physical – hence clicks or mortar. On the 6th March 2009, Clicks or Mortar filled the Tyneside Cinema with three days of exploration, exposition, conversation and critical thinking with screenings, installations, screen-based art and performances complementing a high-level debate around the role of buildings in tomorrow's artistic practice. For the Tyneside Cinema this was an opportunity to do something unexpected and push the boundaries of their cultural programme, as well as initiate a solid debate in the cultural sector about digital technology.



Images provided by Tyneside Cinema

Clicks or Mortar? received a 90% approval rating from its audience while the entire Pixel Palace programme generated significant (15%) new audiences into the cinema. The conference had attendees online across the globe – with more people watching online in London than were present in the venue itself.

## Outcome

The first lesson learned is that an entrepreneurial spirit in cultural endeavours is not only becoming useful during this economic climate, but with the disruptions and developments caused by digital technology it is becoming absolutely essential. Both an individual as well as collective resilience is

needed by cultural organisations to not only profit from the digital age, but also survive in it. Perhaps the main point to take away from the symposium however is that this is not in fact a debate between clicks or mortar - online and offline, or between digital and architecture. For arts organisations and businesses to embrace the digital age fully, it is about exploring and exploiting the exciting opportunities created by clicks AND mortar together.

The work of the Tyneside Cinema has proven that with the increasing focus on the digital, it actually creates more demand for live events, spaces and interactions. The cinema now sees it as a priority to give audiences real ownership of the content they engage with on and offline. As we have discussed in terms of co-creation and open source projects, perhaps the future for spaces like the Tyneside Cinema actually lies in co-curating art. This is certainly a new idea in itself, as collaboration penetrates all aspects of the artistic process; from creation to presentation. As such, the benefits of collaboration between culture and business become reinforced.

Throughout these case studies we have seen an implicit debate over whether digital technology attracts new audiences or whether it merely further engages those already interested. In the spirit of the idea of 'co-curation', evidence from Clicks or Mortar? seems to be pointing towards the fact that digital technology manages both; attracting new audiences as well as further engaging existing ones.