

Setting the stage for studio success

By ...Ann Gray | 24 Oct 2024

There are a lot of misconceptions about film studios that come to the fore when new tax incentives are announced, someone's grandfather bequeaths them a storage shed in Brixton or residents hear about plans for a new one in their neighbourhood.

There is roughly 7m sq ft of stage space in the UK, mostly spread around London but much of it in London itself. While convenient, this makes very little sense. Studios need to be built on less expensive land to make any economic sense – except in cases where demand exceeds supply, which brings us back to the inherited shed.



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Unless it is being used for still photography, converting odd spaces with low ceilings does not create respectable stages.

Conveniently, a good stage looks a lot like a barn. Put several of them together with some outbuildings and lorry parking, and it looks a lot like a farm. In fact, the first stage was actually a horse barn. According to historian Etan Rosenbloom, in 1912, a young filmmaker named Harry Revier leased a horse barn, added some interior walls and converted it into a film studio – and that was the beginning of Hollywood as we know it. The following year, director Cecil B DeMille and producers Jesse L Lasky and Samuel Goldwyn rented the barn to shoot a silent film called *The Squaw Man* – the first feature-length film shot in Hollywood.

Another misconception is that only films are made in studios. Yes, feature-length movies are made on studio lots in large stages, but stages are also used for live action gaming, music rehearsals, television chat shows, sitcoms and advertising, which will make up a larger percentage as streamers look to enhance that source of revenue. When the government favours studio development, it supports a whole range of sectors that one might not think of.

Los Angeles architect Bob Hale, whose firm RIOS designs new studios, says very little has changed in terms of what makes a good stage. In recent plans for studio developer Bardas Investment Group, RIOS has figured out how to accommodate, with a modern flair, bungalow-style office space and large stages in the classic style that filmmakers say makes them optimally creative. “I can do 18,000 sq ft by 35 ft high all day long for a new stage,” he explains, “what’s changed is who is using the space.”

Tax incentives

Streaming platforms know what makes a good studio lot and they are buying, building and leasing them all over the world. This is why the tax incentives offered by the UK government are important. Nick Davis, head of visual effects at Netflix, says the UK’s deep pool of skilled crew makes it the only place in the world outside of Hollywood where several major motion pictures can be made simultaneously. Other countries are building stage space in the hope they can build that workforce, too.

Let's go back to the shed in Brixton. A recent report from ALM reveals that in Q3, industrial space returned to its low pre-pandemic vacancy rate. Competition for sheds, aircraft hangars and warehouse bays will be fierce, particularly for last-mile urban locations. More money can be made renting the shed to Amazon than to a local documentarian.

As an industrial use, when compared with, say, the automotive industry – which the government also favours – studio lots are clean and quiet, they support well-paying creative jobs and they maintain a low profile on the suburban landscape.

Developing these studios will protect the UK's success story as a major global player in the film industry. Now is the time for new purpose-built studios to gain approvals.

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