

Transforming the Albany Community Design Brief



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Introduction

Introduction

The Albany is exploring a long-term transformation project to ensure it can continue serving Deptford and Lewisham for generations to come.

The Albany is **South East London's leading arts centre**, in the heart of Deptford. Originally established in the 1890s and rebuilt in 1982, the Albany has long played a central role in the cultural and civic life of Lewisham.

Today the Albany supports **hundreds of artists and community groups, thousands of young people, and tens of thousands of audiences** every year through performances, workshops, festivals, community programmes and creative development.

However, the current Albany building limits what the organisation can achieve, and without investment would leave **significant operational inefficiencies in place and limit the Albany's ability to adapt to future needs**. This is why the Albany is now exploring a long-term transformation project to sustain the Albany's current programme of events and improve accessibility and flexibility.

As the proposals for the Albany progress, we want to **work collaboratively with the community** to define what the future Albany needs to deliver.

Introduction

Transforming the Albany – Community Design Brief (Collaborative draft, September 2026)
Co-produced by community and youth co-production workshop members

This document has been developed collaboratively with community and youth co-production members as part of the ongoing engagement process for the transformation of the Albany.

The Community Design Brief summarises members' priorities, preferences and aspirations for the design of the future Albany building.

The purpose of the Community Design Brief is to ensure that:

- Community voices are embedded in the design process
- The transformed Albany building reflects the needs of the people who use and visit the building
- The transformed Albany building feels familiar and inclusive whilst retaining its role as a key cultural landmark in Deptford

This brief will help to guide the detailed design of the Albany building, ensuring that quality, comfort and community remain at the heart of the process.



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Background

Background

We have been exploring different options that can support the long-term future of the Albany – integral to this process is ensuring community voices are at the heart of it.

In June 2026, the Albany began a **dedicated programme of engagement** with the community and representatives who use the Albany regularly and live and work in the area. Working alongside our development partner, Stories, and our architect, Witherford Watson Mann, we organised a series of workshops with adult and youth community members to capture a diverse range of voices and perspectives.

The design team have worked closely with co-production members to understand:

- How people currently use the Albany
- Elements of the current building they think works well
- Challenges of the existing building



‘Meet Me’ Credit: Suzi Corker

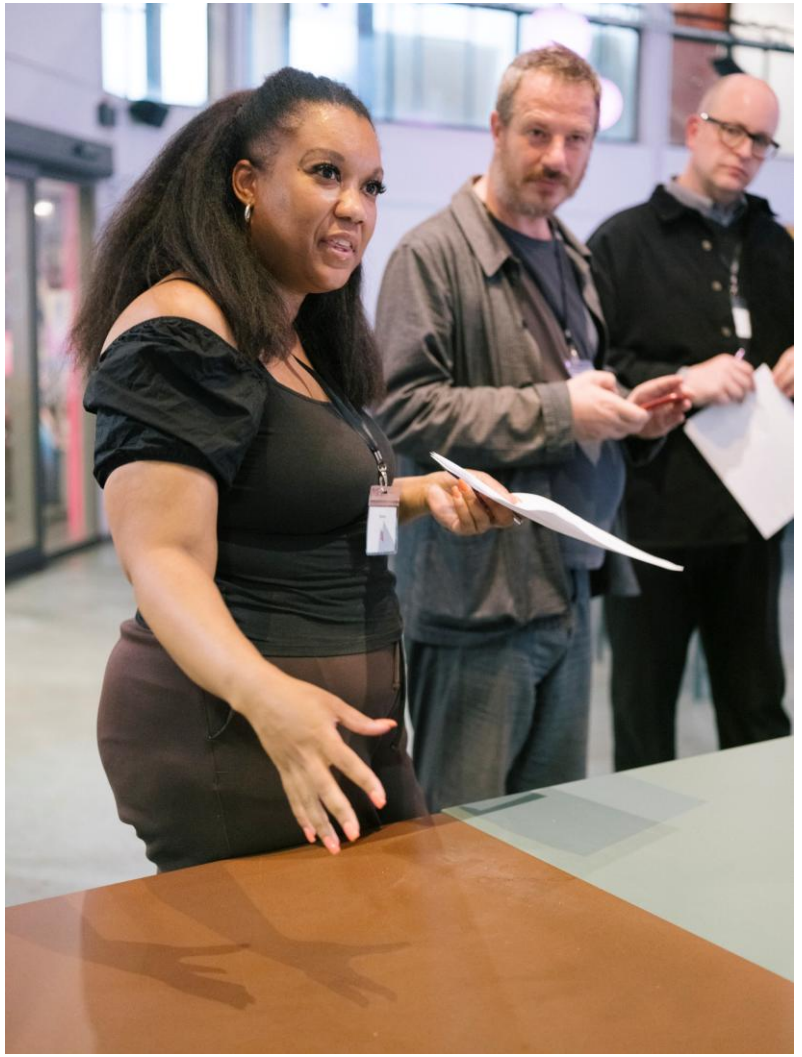
Attendees

The workshops brought together a range of people reflecting a broad mix of people who use the Albany and know Deptford well.

Members of the co-production workshops included:

- Members of the **Albany Community Council**
- Participants and volunteers from **Meet Me**
- Representatives from **Deptford Green School**
- Members of **Creative Communities** (Albany members who can use our co-working hub and can book meeting / movement space)
- Local artists and creative practitioners

This mix brought together community, educational and creative perspectives, alongside the lived experiences of regular Albany users and people working locally.



Community co-production workshop
credit: Philipp Ebeling

Engagement process

Three dedicated workshop sessions took place with the community and youth groups meeting separately for the first two sessions and as a whole group for the final session. The sessions allowed the design team to gather an audit of the Albany today.

Session	Date & Venue	Focus
Session 1: Understanding the Albany today	Wednesday 17 June, The Albany – *14 attendees*	This session was designed to understand how young people and community members experience the existing Albany building, including what works well, what creates barriers and what the future building needs to enable.
Session 2: Learning from other cultural venues	Monday 29 June, Brixton House – *12 attendees*	This session helped members reflect on what the Albany could learn from another cultural venue, exploring how arrival, movement, accessibility and flexibility could inform the future Albany, while identifying what could be adapted or avoided.
Session 3: Testing the emerging vision	Monday 20 July, The Albany – *11 attendees*	This session brought together the youth and community groups to test the findings from the first two workshops. The aim was to identify areas of agreement, difference and further discussion.

The process ensured ongoing dialogue between members and the project team, building trust, transparency and shared ownership of outcomes.



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Key themes & priorities

Key themes & priorities

The following section summarises the detailed feedback shared by co-production members during workshops 1 and 2. Areas of consensus and divergence were discussed in workshop 3. Themes and priorities are split by area of the Albany that were visited during the walkaround of workshop 1 with a summary of design considerations and wider community priorities.

Entrance

- Hard for people to know what the Albany is from the outside
- Exterior looks like an office building.
- Unwelcoming due to the shutters on the building which feel and look 'prison-like'.
- Better signposting is needed.
- Potential new entrance from Deptford Market Yard

"It always looks really dark inside...most of the time I'm coming in and I'm like 'is it open or is there something happening?"

"I realise now some of my friends have lived here on 10 years, 20 years, and they still don't know that this is a theatre"



Youth co-production workshop credit: Philipp Ebeling

Preferences

1. Desire for the Albany entrance to be better signposted
2. Support for more visible activity from Douglas Way
3. Mixed preferences for entrance location to remain in current location or be moved to market yard

Foyer



Foyer sketch from co-production workshop 3 material incorporating early feedback from members

- Foyer felt dark with low ceilings
- Need for better signage throughout the foyer so people know where to go.
- Community toilets are important but should <u>not</u> be the first thing you notice in the space.

<u>Brixton House:</u>

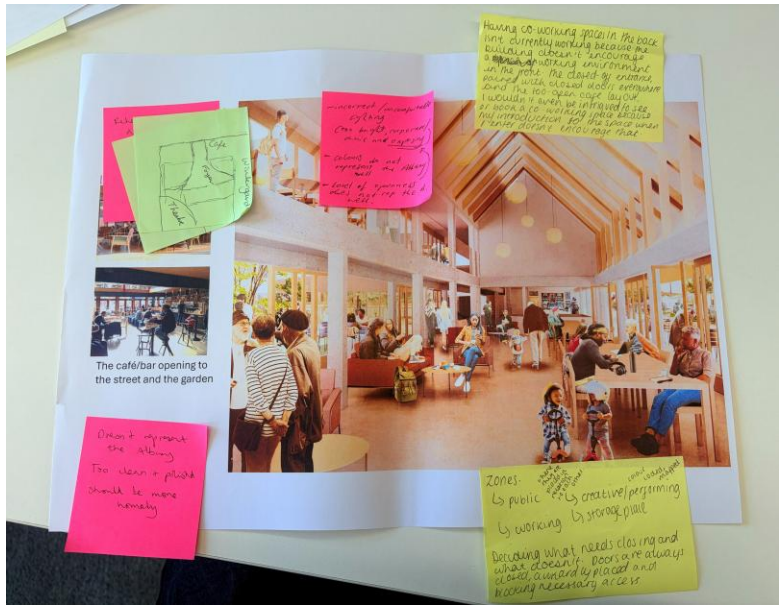
- Liked how the foyer space celebrated and acknowledged the history of the Windrush Generation
- Furniture and décor felt too 'clinical' and not appropriate for Deptford.

Preferences

1. Desire for the foyer space to better celebrate the Albany's history and current programmes / events
2. Support for the foyer being a more welcoming space where people can stop to sit rather than pass through
3. Avoid use of modern materials which make the foyer space feel 'clinical' and 'uninviting'

Key themes & priorities

Café



"Poor lighting...when I went out in the garden, it was actually so nice to see the white light. It's quite depressing in here in the summer"

"I feel like the space feels really open and welcoming but...because you can see the balcony area, I think sometimes it can feel there's a lot going on"

"I think it is important to keep the café a big open space...rather than close it. It's important for us to have a big space that is quite open where we can easily move chairs around"

"When I come in, I wouldn't really know where to sit because I feel like I'm just on show everywhere...it would be nice to have a mixture of nooks and crannies...little spaces where you can be on your own"

- Café is hidden from the street meaning many people don't use the space or know it is there
- Lighting makes the café feel dark and uninviting
- Confusion around the opening hours of the café
- Overstimulating space for some, with too much information and decorations on walls
- Used by lots of groups and users at the same time
- Feels unconnected to the garden outside
- Important community space through initiatives like 'pay it forward'

<u>Brixton House</u>

- The 'nook', an exhibition space by the cafe was a good way to showcase art
- Good visibility of the café from the street
- To some, the café felt 'artificial' and 'no lived in' due to manmade artificial materials

Preferences

1. Desire for the café to remain a flexible space that better supports the range of activities that take place at the Albany at the same time
2. Support for the café to be better connected with the garden space outside and with the entrance outside
3. Support for natural materials to be included over modern materials to ensure the space remains welcoming
4. Balance the commercial operation of the café with the Albany's role as an important third space

Key themes & priorities

Garden



MMA in Albany Garden credit: Elena Ledgister

- The garden is a well-loved part of the Albany and is perceived as a 'safe haven' for all that should be a protected and managed space for everyone
- Uncertainty if the garden is open and accessible to all.
- Furniture and seating should be adaptable so the garden can be used all-year round
- Garden feels disconnected from the rest of the Albany
- Sound from café and rehearsal spaces often bleeds into the garden
- Labelling plants would help educate and showcase to people what is being grown at the Albany

"I love how the public can take part in what happens in the garden as well and make use of it"

"I think most people don't know that there's a garden here...it is a green space that people have no idea about.

Preferences

1. Desire for the garden to function more as an extension of the Albany
2. Balance the want for the garden to be opened up more with the need for the garden to be a safe space for children and young people.
3. Support for the garden to be adaptable to the seasons

Rehearsal space

- Existing windows in the rehearsal space brought lots of natural light
- Low-hanging light fixtures can be an obstacle during rehearsals
- Rehearsal spaces are currently too hot in summer and too cold in winter
- Sound bleed means you can hear other rehearsals at the same time

<u>Brixton House feedback</u>

- Spaces were designed to allow users to convert rehearsal rooms into a black box theatre
- Multiple doors in and out of rehearsal spaces felt confusing

Preferences

1. Desire for rehearsal spaces to be light, bright spaces that incorporates natural light where possible
2. Support for rehearsal spaces to include temperature control
3. Support for good soundproofing to enable multiple users to use the space at once



Community co-production workshop credit: Philipp Ebeling

"...it's really not versatile as a space...like there's height, but you can't use it. There's width, but like not enough"

"There was always [an issue] to do with sound...especially if we've got a very loud group...it clashes, the sound"

Key themes & priorities

We also heard the communities' priorities around the operation of the future Albany building which will inform the Albany's future operating model and building design.

The Albany as a third space

"I think it should have a set time for every day of the week... you can use the space during these hours, freely, openly, as a member of the public "

"I think the most important thing will be the third space for younger people...there needs to be a place where people can trust each other and find people they can trust"



Material from co-production workshop 3 exploring how different uses can operate at the Albany at the same time



Opening hours and access

"There's this kind of sense that the space is only available if you are invited into it. You need a connection to be able to come here"

"I think [more could be] done to make sure the space is busy all the time...do dynamic pricing...just keep it busy and vibrant"



Community co-production workshop credit: Philipp Ebeling

Affordability of spaces

"...with music, you have to, it can be, like £60 for one hour in a room. And as a 16-year-old, sometimes you just don't have that"

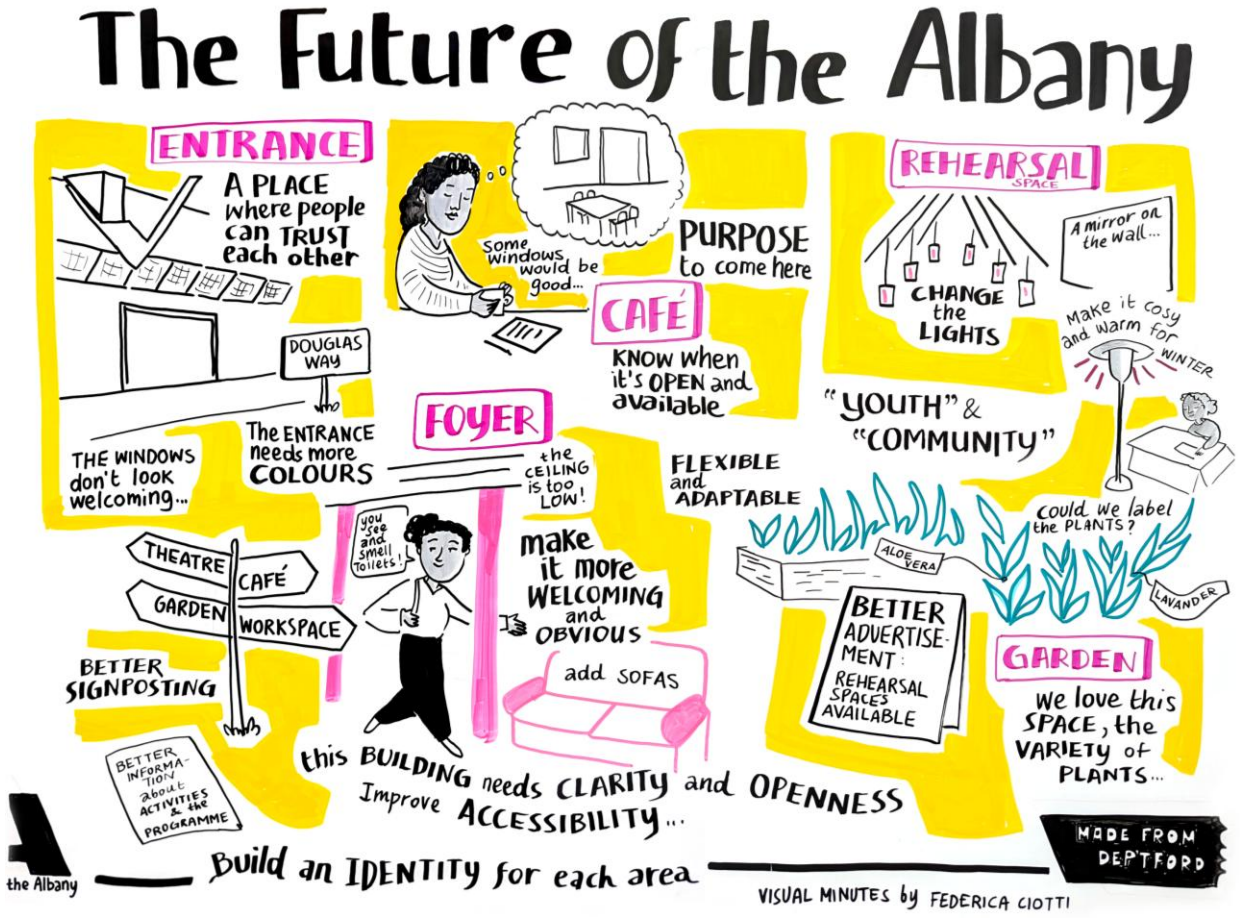
"Back in the day people would meet here...new groups would form, new partnerships, the accessibility and the opportunity for art to grow"

Internal wayfinding

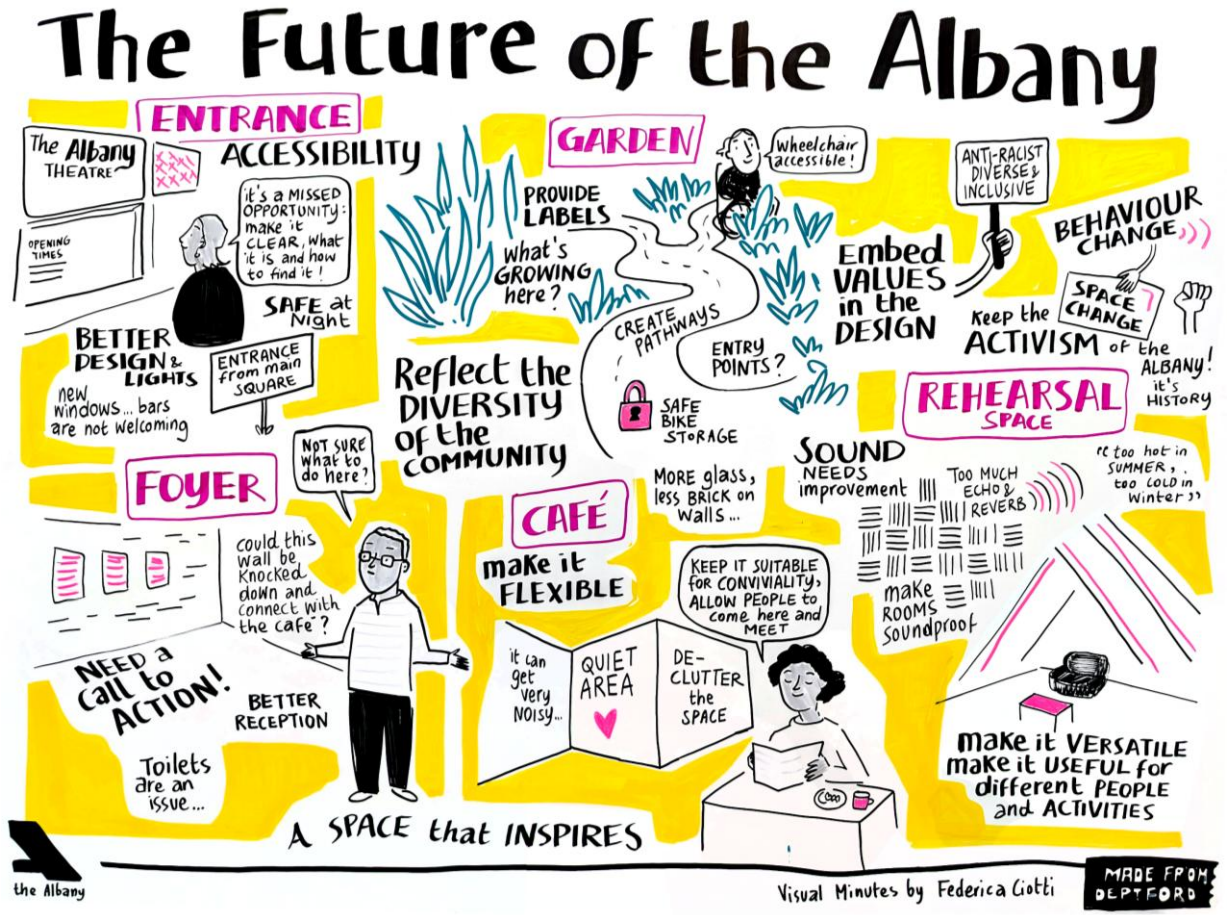
"...there's so many things you just wouldn't know. I think there's almost [an expectation] because its very community everyone knows what is going on"

"Clarity, I think is one of the most important things of this whole building"

Key themes & priorities



Visual minutes from youth co-production workshop, 17 June 2026
credit: Federica Ciotti



Visual minutes from community co-production workshop, 17 June 2026
credit: Federica Ciotti



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Design Principles

Design principles

Based on feedback, the following Design Principles will guide the detailed design of the Albany:

Open, visible and easy to understand

- Make the Albany's purpose, entrance and activity immediately visible from the surrounding streets.
- Create clear, intuitive routes and signage so everyone knows where to go and feels confident entering.
- Use lighting, transparent materials and active frontages to communicate that the Albany is open and welcoming.

A welcoming community living room

- Design the foyer and café as warm, comfortable places where people can meet, sit and spend time without needing to buy something or attend an event.
- Balance the café's commercial needs with the Albany's role as an affordable and trusted third space.
- Use natural, robust materials and avoid finishes that feel clinical, artificial or out of character with Deptford.

Flexible spaces for creativity and community life

- Create adaptable spaces that can support performance, rehearsal, learning, social activity and informal use, sometimes simultaneously.
- Make furniture, layouts, lighting and technical infrastructure easy to reconfigure for different users and activities.
- Provide rehearsal spaces with usable dimensions, clear circulation, natural light, effective temperature control and strong acoustic separation.

A garden at the heart of the Albany

- Connect the garden more clearly to the café, foyer and wider building so it feels like an integral part of the Albany.
- Make the garden welcoming and usable throughout the year, with adaptable seating, shelter and opportunities for growing and learning.
- Balance greater visibility and public access with the need to maintain a safe, secure space for all.

Inclusive, comfortable and accessible to all

- Design for people of different ages, cultures, abilities and sensory needs from the outset.
- Provide step-free, dignified and easily understood access throughout, supported by clear signage and straightforward routes.
- Balance lively communal activity with quieter, calmer spaces, managing noise, visual clutter, lighting and overstimulation.

Rooted in the Albany, Deptford and its communities

- Celebrate the Albany's history, activism, programmes and people throughout the building.
- Give different areas a clear identity while creating a coherent sense of place across the whole venue.
- Use local character, art and community knowledge to create spaces that feel distinctive, lived-in and unmistakably "Albany"—not generic



05

Our commitment

Our commitment

The Albany remains committed to being an independent, community led arts organisation. As proposals for the transformation of the Albany progress, we reaffirm our commitment to:

Clarity and Transparency: Providing clear, honest updates about the design process, key decisions, responsibilities, timescales and any changes that may affect the community

Early and Ongoing Engagement: Involving the community throughout the design process, sharing proposals early enough for their views to make a meaningful difference.

Accessible Communication: Share information in clear, inclusive and accessible formats, using a range of channels so that all of the local community can participate and consider opportunities for additional meetings where helpful and appropriate.

Listening and Responsiveness: Explain how community feedback has been considered, what changes have been made as a result, and why some suggestions may not be possible.

Community-Centred Design: Keep the community's needs, lived experience and long-term wellbeing at the heart of decisions about the building's design, construction and future use.

This brief is more than a design guide - it is a shared statement of what matters most to the community. We look forward to continuing to work with the community as proposals to safeguard the Albany's future develop.