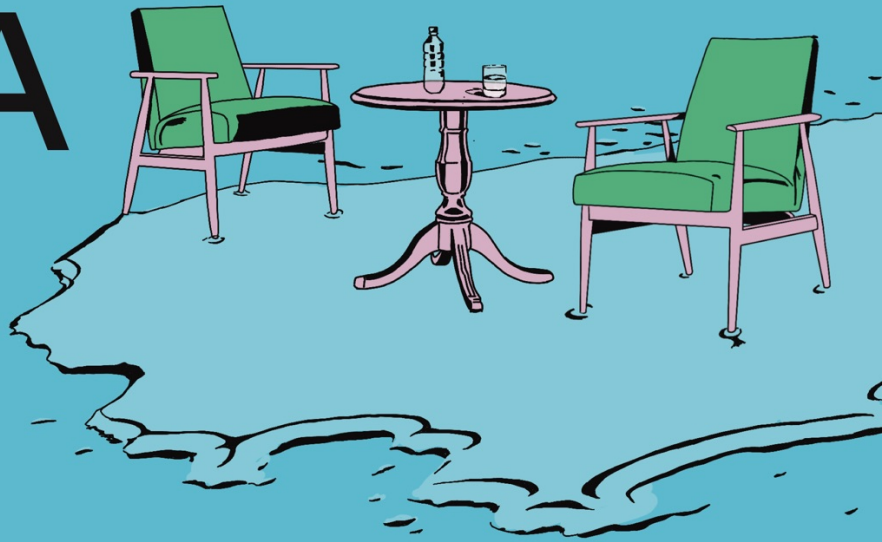


Q&A



Can you share a brief history of the Friends of the Joiners Arms (FOTJA): who are you and how was the group formed?

In late 2014, a public meeting was held in the Joiners Arms in East London, after word spread that the iconic queer bar was closing. The meeting was full of punters who were told how property developers had bought the pub for a staggering £1.5M as part of their plans to redevelop the larger site, and had terminated the landlord's lease – David Pollard had run the Joiners as a queer bar since 1997. In later meetings, hearing about how the Ivy House in South London had been saved from development to become a community-run pub inspired us to do the same. So we built a campaign to not only save the Joiners but to turn it into a community-run, not-for-profit queer bar. In January 2015 we successfully registered the Joiners as an Asset of Community Value, but this same week the Joiners closed its doors for the last time. It still remains closed to this day.

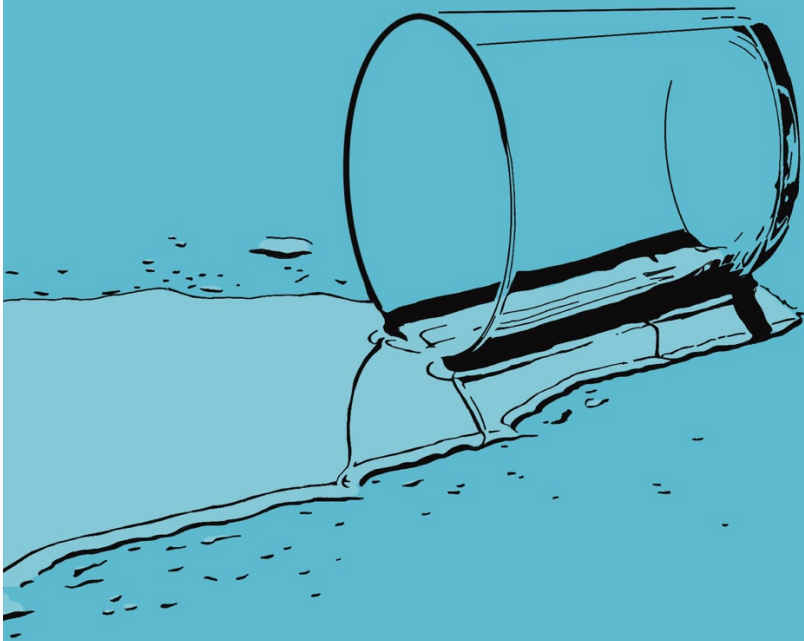
The plans for the site were finally put to the Tower Hamlets Development Committee in 2017 and again in 2021. We won historic planning protections for the Joiners in which the development of the larger site was only approved on the condition that a replacement bar be built that would have an LGBTQ+ operator for 25 years, together

with financial contributions to the bar from the developers. We also secured a financial contribution for FOTJA to run a 'meanwhile use space' to compensate the LGBTQ+ community for the years the Joiners has sat empty.

Over the years, FOTJA has evolved – many of us never went to the Joiners itself – instead we are passionate about the vision of what our community-run bar will be. We do not aim to replicate the Joiners, nor believe we could, but we aim to create a space, like the Joiners, that demands radical change.

Grassroots activism has always been at the heart of what you do. What have been some of your key campaigns?

The closure of the Joiners came in a wave of closures of LGBTQ+ spaces across London. But the closure of these spaces was not due to a reduction in need or demand – the Joiners was as popular as ever when David's lease was terminated. It was not due to the rise of dating apps or because it's "safe to be gay in any pub now" – queer spaces are not only about meeting lovers, they are spaces in which we can express and explore our identities and histories, and they empower us to fight the discrimination that lies beyond their doors. The closure of queer spaces was part of the bigger picture of changes happening



Q & A

across London: we were losing our spaces as other marginalised communities were losing theirs; pubs and live music venues were closing; people's homes were being taken away to make spaces for new developments.

From the very beginning of the campaign, we linked with other groups across London fighting against the closure of pubs, LGBTQ+ spaces, and loss of homes. We have been part of the March for Homes, protests against the Property Developers Awards, and the 'Closed House' weekend, amongst other events. In recent years we have worked with the Outside Project, a shelter for LGBTQ+ people experiencing homelessness. Pre-pandemic, we were hosting sober versions of our *Lèse Majesté* drag cabaret night at the shelter, and hope to return there when rules allow.

Seeing our campaign as part of a bigger fight-back has meant that community empowerment, grassroots organising, and fighting inequalities is a key part of who we are and the space we are trying to create.

Your community ownership model will involve a greater collaboration with the community, enable your organisation to raise 'community shares', and allow you to continue to be a cultural anchor in East London. Can you explain how it will transform your venue?

A big success of our campaign is the financial contributions we have won from the developers. This means that in order to open our 'meanwhile use space' in the coming year, and then again to open a permanent bar (hopefully) on the site of the Joiners, the capital we need to raise is relatively low. This financial burden usually falls on the community itself, and campaigns don't have the freedom to keep their share prices low.

We want to use the established community shares model, but the focus of this will be to solidify the community behind the organisation, and find ways to make sure that community contains as many people from marginalised groups as possible. We are not seeking investors with money – we are simply seeking people who want to shape a new community-centred queer venue.

Our model will centre around collective decision making, transparency, and accountability. Profits made by the bar will be reinvested to provide accessible opportunities for socialising, performance, and jobs, and funding for community services. Aneurin Bevan said "the purpose of getting power is to be able to give it away". And that is exactly what we are fighting for: we will create a space and structure that empowers the most marginalised in our communities.

Friends of the Joiners Arms is a campaign to save and evolve The Joiners Arms on Hackney Road, so it becomes London's first community-run, late-license LGBTQI+ pub.