# Forefront initiative launches to transform vacant retail units into creative urban hubs



dRMM founder Sadie Morgan and property developer Dicle Guntas have launched a new cultural initiative, Forefront, aimed at activating underused and overlooked urban spaces, with an initial focus on vacant retail units. The programme seeks to bridge the arts and built environment sectors through creative programming and collaborative experimentation. Forefront will be headquartered on the ground floor of Milieu, a co-living and workspace office building in Old Street developed by Guntas’s HGG London and designed by Mary Duggan Architects.

HGG London, known for transforming complex urban sites into creative spaces, will fully support Forefront during its first year, funding a programme lead, rotating curators, and providing the office space itself. The inaugural programme includes a public art commission featuring a light installation by Jason Bruges Studio alongside an exhibition at the Forefront HQ. The office space will serve as a testing ground for strategies to enliven empty high street units across the UK by fostering partnerships between developers, landowners, and artists through creative programming.

The initiative also plans to commission research mapping the impact of retail vacancies and the economic and social value of culture-led regeneration. Chief Secretary to the Treasury Darren Jones has praised Forefront, describing it as a “brilliant example of how developers and architects are turning empty high street buildings into spaces for culture, creativity and community.” He emphasised the importance of revitalising high streets as a path to economic growth and community renewal.

Dicle Guntas articulated the project’s aim to encourage dialogue between industries that often operate in silos, proposing that Forefront will unlock “unexpected partnerships” and foster a “creatively reciprocal relationship” between the built environment and art sectors. Morgan highlighted the value of interdisciplinary collaboration, stating to Building Design Online that progress arises from “creative friction” when diverse disciplines unite around a shared goal. Forefront aims to create a platform for innovative and impactful formats that benefit both realms.

Early collaborators include the research and urban design practice Publica, developers Capital & Centric, and key figures from the art world such as Ella Snell, founder of Art School Plus and Henry Moore Foundation Trustee, and Jon Sharples, an art/IP lawyer and Chair of Southwark Park Galleries Trustees. This diverse group reflects the initiative’s ambition to nurture an inclusive and multifaceted dialogue around urban regeneration and cultural activation.

Retail vacancy is a pressing issue in many urban centres, with research showing that vacant storefronts can detract from community vitality and economic resilience. Studies referenced by urbanists at SafeGrowth highlight how prolonged vacancy can exacerbate negative perceptions of neighbourhoods in both Chicago and the UK, underlining the importance of initiatives like Forefront. Creative placemaking is increasingly recognised as a potent tool for promoting social equity and revitalising spaces. Projects such as ‘Liminal Space: (b)Light’, which commemorates neighbourhoods lost to urban renewal, demonstrate how art can foster community identity and healing.

Mary Duggan Architects, the firm behind Milieu, represent a design approach focused on contextual sensitivity and innovation, aligning well with Forefront’s ethos of creative urban transformation. Guntas’s portfolio with HGG London also underscores a commitment to quality, sustainability, and wellbeing in property development, favouring collaborative partnerships with architects and creatives to reimagine complex urban sites.

Forefront emerges at a time when urban design is increasingly linked to wellbeing and mental health, as exemplified by recent discussions at the Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health’s forums. These dialogues highlight the need for urban environments that foster care, inclusion, and resist economic models that marginalise vulnerable communities. By reactivating vacant spaces through culture and creativity, Forefront aligns with a broader movement to reclaim city centres as vibrant, equitable places for all.

### 📌 Reference Map:

* Paragraph 1 – [[1]](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article), [[2]](https://nla.london/news/qa-with-dicle-guntas), [[3]](https://www.marydugganarchitects.com/)
* Paragraph 2 – [[1]](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article), [[2]](https://nla.london/news/qa-with-dicle-guntas)
* Paragraph 3 – [[1]](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article)
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* Paragraph 5 – [[1]](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article), [[5]](https://www.safegrowth.org/blog/category/urbanism)
* Paragraph 6 – [[6]](https://intentionalspaces.org/building-more-equitable-communities-with-creative-placemaking/), [[7]](https://knightfoundation.org/articles/126-finalists-announced-knight-cities-challenge/)
* Paragraph 7 – [[2]](https://nla.london/news/qa-with-dicle-guntas), [[3]](https://www.marydugganarchitects.com/)
* Paragraph 8 – [[4]](https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/sanity--urbanity-forum), [[1]](https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article)

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## Bibliography

1. <https://www.bdonline.co.uk/news/sadie-morgan-and-developer-dicle-guntas-launch-initiative-to-activate-underused-spaces/5137468.article> - Please view link - unable to able to access data
2. <https://nla.london/news/qa-with-dicle-guntas> - An interview with Dicle Guntas, managing director of HGG London, discussing the company's design-driven approach to property development, focusing on quality, sustainability, and wellbeing. Guntas highlights projects like The Old Rectory, a Grade II Listed building in Monument, and a mixed-use commercial building in Old Street, emphasizing the importance of innovative design and collaboration with architects such as Mary Duggan Architects.
3. <https://www.marydugganarchitects.com/> - The official website of Mary Duggan Architects, showcasing their portfolio of projects, including residential and commercial developments. The site provides information about the firm's design philosophy, recent publications, and upcoming events, reflecting their commitment to innovative and context-sensitive architecture.
4. <https://www.urbandesignmentalhealth.com/sanity--urbanity-forum> - An article discussing the Centre for Urban Design and Mental Health's forum on 'Sanity and Urbanity,' which explores the intersection of urban design and mental health. The forum addresses topics such as the redistribution of power in decision-making, the recognition of care as foundational to urban life, and the resistance to extractive economies that devalue life and labor.
5. <https://www.safegrowth.org/blog/category/urbanism> - A blog post from SafeGrowth discussing the challenges of vacant storefronts in urban areas, citing statistics from various cities, including Chicago and the UK. The post emphasizes the negative impact of vacancies on community perception and the importance of revitalizing underused spaces to enhance urban vitality.
6. <https://intentionalspaces.org/building-more-equitable-communities-with-creative-placemaking/> - An article from the Intentional Spaces Initiative discussing the role of creative placemaking in building more equitable communities. It highlights projects like 'Liminal Space: (b)Light,' a temporary monument reflecting on a neighborhood destroyed during urban renewal, and emphasizes the importance of art and creative placemaking in honoring communities and promoting equity.
7. <https://knightfoundation.org/articles/126-finalists-announced-knight-cities-challenge/> - An announcement of the 126 finalists for the Knight Cities Challenge, including projects like 'Made in Biloxi' by Gulf Coast Community Design Studio, which aims to foster the local creative community by inviting artists and designers to experiment with a vacant lot. The article highlights various initiatives focused on revitalizing underused spaces to strengthen communities.