

# So what's an Open House then?

by Bill Black



Bill Black

Bill Black is Director of Liquid 6 Image Design Ltd, the company that created and maintains this website. He opened his own house for 5 years as part of the Beyond the Level trail exhibiting between 8 and 23 artists each year. He has also exhibited in houses in the Hanover trail and Independent venues as well as local galleries.

Over the course of the next three weeks I'll be attempting to put together a guide to Open Houses. This series of articles has come about in response to the large number of emails we've received here at Open House Online since the site launched last April.

What they made me realise was that the Open House trails have fallen into the common trap of something that evolves over a period of time, rather than something that is created from scratch - namely, that all parties involved assume that everyone outside those immediately involved in opening their homes knows what the Open Houses are and how they work.

Last year we commissioned a London-based art lover who had never visited the Brighton Festival before – known on these pages as 'the Outsider' - to write a series of articles based on his initial impressions and he made the following observations:

***'It's not as if there is, in fact, all that much publicity for your efforts. I see that there's some controversy about whether the Open House Trails are part of the Festival or not and not even [brightonfestivalfringe.org.uk](http://brightonfestivalfringe.org.uk) seems to have a simple, basic description of what Open House is all about and what treats may await a virgin visitor.'***

There is no definition available of what an Open House is, no instructions of how one sets about running one and no guidelines or helpful tips on the nuts and bolts of having artists exhibiting in your home. That's what this series of articles will attempt to clarify.

I can already hear several howls of protest from Open House owners about this. Some feel the whole process should be organic; some feel that attempting to define how it works will

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constitute a 'rulebook' leading all Open Houses to be the same. This is nonsense. The first and greatest rule about Open Houses is that, as the owner, you can set them up and run them how you like. If you want to turn your house into a Gallery, do so. Alternatively, if you want to make it feel like a Moroccan market bazaar, then go for it but remember, it will be hard work, even if everything runs smoothly. Bearing that in mind you should try your best to make it fun and make it enjoyable, both for you, any artists you invite to exhibit with you and – especially- your visitors. After all, there's not much point inviting people into your homes and not showing them a good time, is there? If you think there is then please don't invite me round for dinner and a cocktail.

So, let's go back to our original question – what's an Open House then?

First, a little history and back to our Outsider again. He visited the Fiveways trail last year and visited the very first artist in Brighton to open his home to the public, Ned Hoskins: ***'Ned first opened his house to the public in 1982, inspired by the fact that Rembrandt didn't need a gallery to sell his art: clients simply went to his house. Where Ned led, others followed...'***

So that, quite simply, is what an Open House is: a way for an artist to sell his art without going through a Gallery. There are numerous advantages to both the artist and the art buyer in this; principally, cost. The artist who shows his or her work in a gallery knows that the gallery will add upwards of a 100% plus commission onto the price the artist charges them for the work. Yes, that's right, 100% PLUS.

Now, this is not intended to suggest that galleries are ripping off potential purchasers because they are not – galleries can spend a lot of time looking for, helping and encouraging emerging talent. They promote new artists while at the same time having to pay rent, rates and all the other business bills that the giant MacDonald's or Starbucks next door will be paying - and believe me, they don't make anywhere near the profits of our Burger and Coffee producing friends.

Rather, it's to suggest to the potential visitor that if they buy a work directly through an Open House in those 4 short weekends in May, there are huge savings to be made. If you think of the Brighton Open Houses as the largest visual arts exhibition you're ever likely to see, offering professional work at excellent prices, then you will understand why they are the biggest draw in the Brighton Festival. The smart people, looking to buy quality art from established and emerging names at the very best prices, have been visiting them for years.

The Open Houses are often referred to as ‘the Art buyers’ best kept secret’ and it’s easy to see why. If you haven’t already, it’s time you joined the smart people.

So, back to Ned and his solo house. Well, obviously it didn’t stay that way for long.

Brighton has, historically speaking, always been a city that attracts artists. It’s a beautiful place, vibrant and busy with lovely – if pebbly - beaches and excellent light. A good idea doesn’t long go unnoticed with all these creative people about and so over the years more and more artists followed suit and began to open their homes, too - but this is where Brighton Open Houses become different from other Arts Festival venues and this is what makes them unique:

Ned’s house soon evolved into the Fiveways *trail*, and it was this trail concept that set the template for all of those that followed it. The sensible people at Fiveways decided that it would be best to restrict the spread of houses that joined them to a limited geographical area. That way, it would encourage visitors to ‘walk the trail’, making it a perfect way to spend a weekend - look at your map, choose your route, stay a bit longer at a house serving refreshments, pop into a nearby pub/restaurant/café and have lunch, all while attending the biggest, free art exhibition you’re ever likely to see. And the serious art buyer can purchase the work of some of Brighton’s finest artists at an excellent price while getting to talk to the work’s creator, too.

Now, that sounds like a fine way to spend a weekend to me. Little wonder that the numbers of visitors to open houses increases every year.

So, there you have it – a potted history of Open House evolution!

Over the years the number of trails has evolved from one to over a dozen but the idea remains the same: an Open House is a place where the public can view and buy work directly from the artist who created it.

Over time, the concept of walking distance ‘trails’ evolved, each of which has its own rules and ways of doing things. These trails are composed of the individual houses that fall within the geographical area.

Artists in houses, houses in trails, trails that extend beyond Brighton into Ditchling, Newhaven, Rottingdean and Saltdean, too.

[Next week I’ll write about what you should do if you decide you want to open your own home to the public, the costs involved and some of the ups and downs you can expect along the way.](#)