



A NEW HOME FOR CLAY STUDIO

South Kensington site set to open this fall

The Clay Studio's new 34,000-square-foot home at 1425 North American St., in the heart of Philadelphia's South Kensington neighborhood, will open its doors this fall. Designed by DIGSAU, it will be the first-of-its-kind ceramic arts facility built from the ground up in the U.S.

The inaugural exhibition at the new building, Making Place Matter, will feature works by South Kensington-based artist Kukuli Velarde and artists Ibrahim Said and Molly Hatch. The show encourages visitors to explore the meaning of place.

The new facility will continue to deepen relationships between The Clay Studio and the South Kensington community. Over the last 25 years, The Clay Studio has engaged and formed long-lasting relationships within South Kensington through its children-focused Claymobile program. In recent years, educational programming has expanded in the neighborhood to include artist-led workshops, classes, and discussions to better understand culture and place.

The Clay Studio will expand its services and spaces by 67 percent in the new facility, paving the way for unlimited new possibilities for studio art, arts education, and community engagement. Larger classrooms, state-of-the-art studios, an outdoor sculpture garden, a rooftop garden, and luminous new gallery spaces will meet the increased demand by students, artists, and visitors.

For Velarde, Said and Hatch, this new space will offer the chance to connect with visitors on a personal level. Each Making Place Matter artist – Velarde, Said, and Hatch – will hold two-week residencies at The Clay Studio, offering audiences direct access to the artists in relation to their work.

"Making Place Matter launches a new era for The Clay Studio," Executive Director Jennifer Martin said.

"By linking these powerful works that weave together personal history, cultural legacy, and social justice with hands-on experiences with clay, we can inspire transformative experiences in our new space."

PW recently caught up with Martin to talk about The Clay Studio and the move to the new home.

PW: Let's start with the big news: The opening this fall of The Clay Studio's new home. Talk a little about why you're opening a new place and the relationship the studio has with the South Kensington community.

JM: After scouring the city for the right location, we determined that the American Street corridor in South Kensington would be a great home neighborhood. South

Kensington is a multi-ethnic community with a vibrant, longstanding cultural landscape. Many artists and other arts organizations have already found a friendly, creative, and communal environment in which to live and work. The Clay Studio will be a new anchor for the American Street corridor, a culture and arts destination for Philadelphia.

As soon as the location was chosen, we began a serious effort to engage deeply with the long-term neighbors and cultural organizations in the area. In 2018 our Clay & Conversations project invited 50 neighbors to connect, make art, and talk with us about their view of the neighborhood over a series of four events. That same year, Maker Days projects offered free programming that reached over 500 residents through local summer festivals and culminated with a shared community dinner. When we open the building this fall, the inaugural exhibition will be Making Place Matter, which we have been planning for over a year with a council of local residents. We are dedicated to making sure every person who walks in the door feels welcomed and inspired.

PW: How will the new space differ from your current location on

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The inaugural exhibition at The Clay Studio's new building, Making Place Matter, will feature works by a number of artists, including South Kensington-based Kukuli Velarde. Image | John Carlano for En Route

The Clay Studio's new home in South Kensington is scheduled to open this fall. Image | Courtesy of The Clay Studio



North Second Street? What are some of the features in the new building you're most excited about?

JM: I'm excited about it all. We love our current building, but it was not designed as an art space. Going through the process with our architects, DIGSAU, to thoughtfully design each new space for its particular use will allow us to serve even more people on a higher level. There will be designated classrooms for children and youth, to allow our already great children's programming to continue to grow. This is especially important since we will be in a more residential neighborhood that will allow a robust participation in our new after-school programming. Our nationally recognized Claymobile, that serves close to 4,000 school children around the city each year, will get an expanded space and move back into our main building. Our current building was too busy to accommodate the kilns and program needs for processing all the kids' clay projects.

Dedicated indoor and outdoor space for gatherings, like free lectures and community meetings, will also cultivate strong relationships with our neighbors. A communal kitchen will allow staff, artists, students, and neighbors to get together and build connections. Well designed artist studios and galleries will allow the highly regarded, professional artists with studios at The Clay Studio all the resources they need.

PW: The Clay Studio began in 1974 in Old City as a collective of five artists. It's now a thriving, and diverse fellowship of artists, teachers and professional staff serving 35,000 people a year. Why has it been so successful?

JM: That's easy – because of the people! The Clay Studio has grown exponentially and with a continued focus on our mission, because of the thousands of people over the last 47 years who have poured their passion for the ceramic art into the organization, and kept evolving

it to serve greater numbers. From a group of friends sharing resources, we have become an organization with many interconnected programs. We started as an internally focused organization and quickly became one dedicated to being a place that welcomes people and offers an outlet for creativity to the community. We strive to serve a wide swath of the local Philadelphia community, while also serving as an internationally recognized center for making and exhibiting the highest quality ceramic art.

PW: How did the pandemic and all of its closures affect The Clay Studio? How was it able to not only get through the hard times, but also position itself to expand this fall?

JM: Our expansion has been in the works for years. We are lucky that our funding for the capital project was in place before the pandemic. After the initial shutdown, we have been able to operate at 50 percent capacity in the building and we added virtual programming to continue to cultivate our sense of community for those who could not come in person. Our Lunch & Learn series has had over 3,000 attendees over the last 10 months, and our Clay at Home series is available anytime for people who want to work with clay in their own space. The class capacity we are safely allowed to offer in person sells out each term. We are proud to be a place where people can come and express themselves during this difficult year. We look forward to applying the lessons of the last year to make The Clay Studio's new home even better than we anticipated.

PW: What are the best ways for people to stay current with events and activities and even get involved with The Clay Studio?

JM: Sign up for our weekly e-blasts and follow us on Instagram. We have virtual programming, workshops, and free lectures online now, as well as limited in-person classes. Visit theclaystudio.org for more info!



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