



LOCATION: SOUTHWARK VENUE TYPE: CLUB

The Arches

London underground: Light Design Group get a glowing reception at legendary gay club

Home of the massive night XXL, the success of equally massive underground venue The Arches “is linked hand in hand with the success of XXL”, insists Mark Ames, owner of the club and co founder of the burgeoning XXL brand. Now one of the most successful gay nights ever, XXL spans clothing and lifestyle lines, has two second homes in Birmingham and New York, and holds nights around Europe, especially Barcelona and Madrid.

Mark’s night was borne from a frustration with the existing gay scene in London, which he felt was too broad church. XXL was established in the hope that it would firm up the identity of an emerging strand of the scene: a strand which was initially identified by the organisers as “a mixed following of bears, cubs, chubs, muscle bears and their admirers”. Since its inception, the night has diversified and now the tag reads ‘one size fits all’ - indicating an open policy to people of all persuasions, and specifically of all ages: Ames insists his clientele is “18 to 80”.

“It was basically a case of seeing what was going

on,” says Ames. “And no one in or outside of the gay community was providing for older gay men. It was basically seeing what was available, and what was in demand. It was a bit taboo and a bit brave, but we knew we had to do the night. There was a massive gap, and after a few years we suddenly had this international brand on our hands.”

With its dirty underground dynamic forming a contrast to the glitz of Soho and the bustle of Notting Hill, Ames felt that the dim arches of the venue felt edgy enough to make the XXL ethos work - a bit of rough amongst so many diamonds. After an increasingly popular residency at the club, Ames sensed that the building’s low railway arches had become, in the minds of his customers, the natural home for XXL. And so in 2002 he made an offer to the owners and has since, with a bit of architectural lighting and a monstrous sound system, turned the place into one of the most popular gay clubs in London.

With a network of international members, club nights and the attention of big DJs from across Europe, The Arches venue is part of an

increasingly global tribe. Despite this, much of the venue is unassuming. The walls of the four arches have been left largely untouched, with a torrent of calcium deposits scaling the exposed brickwork. Oak barrels and untreated wooden surfaces line the space, while tiny connecting passages knit the arches together. Entrance to the club is from a car park on Southwark St, and the punter can choose from the jovial pub atmosphere of the first arch or the pumping atmospherics of the second arch, a stripped back warehouse with a DJ booth and Nexo sound system reaching high into the rafters. The third arch, with its harder edge and underground ethos, is mainly filled with a younger crowd, while the fourth arch features a bar and access to the garden, which is generally packed during the summer months.

“As the promoter of a night I think it was very important to have our own venue,” says Ames. “I think a lot of promoters can identify with that. Promoters will often have a higher level commitment to a single night than club operators. Operators typically want safe and easy to use, ▶