



“I thought, there must be a better way of building studios”

Clever thinking from Smart Studio

DAVE ROBINSON talks to an Irish firm with an innovative new method for studio construction

“There are all these little life stories that frame your thinking as you go,” says Jim Dunne, owner of Smart Studio, on the phone from Dublin. Dunne, an entrepreneur and acoustic consultant, is taking a radically different approach to studio design and installation.

“We were brought in to do the consultancy for a guy who was going to build a studio in the [Irish] Midlands,” he continues. “We went through the whole process with him – very detailed – this, that and the other, attended meetings, handed in fees, sent in invoices, da-di-da-di-da. And six months down the line, the guy realised – having spent X thousands of euros – that he couldn’t afford the studio.”

Smart Studio’s proposition to the industry is basically two-fold. One, you know what you’re getting, cost-wise, with no hidden extras and no

surprise additions to the final bill which might just stymie the whole operation. Two, you know what you’re getting, build-wise: because you’re buying pre-manufactured panels and materials that will slot snugly together in your chosen location.

Affable, easy-going Dunne was the original maintenance engineer at Windmill Lane Recording Studios in the late ’70s and early ’80s when it was “pretty much a hot bed of international acts”, prominent among them Kate Bush, The Waterboys and, of course, U2.

“I’ve worked in construction with my father, so I was used to being on building sites. I thought, there said there must be a better way of building studios...” Seven years after Dunne’s plans began to form, Smart Studio has completed its first project in Manchester and is looking to grow its innovative brand.



/ Jim Dunne: former Windmill Lane staffer and Smart Studio boss

While there are, of course, specialist studio makers and builders out there in the world, Dunne’s argument is that the construction industry in general is not geared up for building high-quality, high-end audio facilities. “Your general contractor, more than likely, they have to source a whole series of specialist people, who they hope know what they are talking about.

“All these ‘packages’, as I call them, can potentially join up into a studio. But in a lot of instances, nobody knows what they’re actually

building. They all know that they have their bit to do, but there's a lot of joining up of dots. For example, when they need people putting in the air conditioning. What they would consider to be quiet air conditioning, we would consider to be a howling gale. Then the electrical installer arrives on site, you say to the guy on site, 'Where's the cable trunking?' and he says, 'What cable trunking?'. So you need to join up all the dots. I come at it from a point of view knowing how these technical things have to work."

The SmartStudio idea can draw direct parallels with the German 'Huf Haus' model, whereby the materials to construct a house are precision engineered in a factory off-site, then delivered to the desired location and assembled on site.

"Realise your dream home, which is planned and built according to your wishes — turnkey, on time, energy-efficient and of the highest quality!" says the Huf Haus website: replace 'home' with studio, and you've kind of encapsulated Dunne's philosophy. It's the Ikea 'flatpack' strategy, but on a much larger scale. "We really want to get a repeatable system," says Dunne. Smart Studio manufactures panels of a standard size (1.2m by 2.4m) using their own CNC machines and acoustically approved materials. Everything fits together, in a modular style.

"In a conventional situation, you'd be in this position: You say, 'We want to build a studio



/ Flix Studio, a recent installation for Smart Studio

here'. What's the process? Get your architect, your acoustician, sit down and work out what needs to be done. And then you've got to come up with a spec so the contractor can price it. Before you even know it, it's gonna cost you, maybe five, seven, 10 grand, in fees and planning alone.

"Let's say somebody like ITV are looking for price for sound dubbing rooms for a new series next year because they don't have enough studio space. They'll go to someone like HHB and get a cost for the gear, probably a cost for the install too. But how much does the studio cost? That's when they come on to us...."

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Dunne notes he can currently supply a whole series of pre-priced rooms that are finished, and ready to go, from around five metres up to 53 square metres. (“If you rang me this morning and said, ‘Hey look, can you give us a studio so big?’, you could have it today!”) Smart Studio’s fees include the electrics, the air-conditioning and of course, all those modular 1.2m x 2.4m-high panels, all built into the price.

“Therefore, from your situation, within two or three days, you will have the cost of your studio priced. HHB or whoever quotes you for the gear, somebody will talk to you about the cost of install, and we’ll give you the cost for the studio build. All done and dusted, without having to spend any more money other than making a few phone calls and a couple of emails.”

No hidden extras: just straightforward, transparent pricing. “It’s not kind of like, ‘Oh yeah, we said 10 grand, and actually it’s 15 because we forgot the air con and the electrics and whatever. We really want to be away from all that messing and all that nonsense. People need to know where they’re going, and what the costs are as far as it goes.”

A recent win for the company has been the expansion of Manchester-based Flix Facilities into the White Tower in Media City. A requirement arose for the installation of two 5.1 Dubbing Control rooms and a VO booth. “Given the logistics of the project — limited access to a sixth floor space — the Smart Studio modular system was the obvious choice,” says Dunne. Not only did it provide the critical acoustic performance which the projected demanded, it was installed in approximately half the time taken to deliver a conventional build. Coupled with the monitor alignment — a standard part of the Smart Studio system — the rooms were handed over in a fully calibrated mode. “Since opening the rooms back the facility has developed a reputation for it comfortable and accurate working environment which is



/ CNC operator Derek Nolan preparing another panel

appreciated by clients as staff alike,” he says.

The White Tower experience underlines another valid point, notes Dunne: “The whole thing is modular: it goes in, in pieces, and it can come back out in pieces. So you don’t have this congestion of a whole load of materials having to be delivered to site and having to be craned in, and every time you want to move something, do something you’ve got to move all the gear from there over to there. It’s only as you get half way through the job that you actually get some floor space back again...!”

Smart Studio, gets a big tick in the environmental credentials box. “Because we’re made in a factory, we minimise the waste of the materials. On a typical building site, say, the builder needs a six-inch piece of timber. He finds a piece that’s around 2m long, he cuts a little bit off, and that 2m piece is now useless for the purposes that it was intended for. You could say that anything up to 20% of material that gets delivered to site, is taken away in a skip.” Smart Studio has a little machine that converts sawdust into wood pellets. Second tick!

“We want to get away from the concept of the builder, and the 17 white vans parked [outside]. The whole idea behind it, is: the components fit together into the modules, the modules stack together into the floor, walls, ceiling, and then the finishing is conventional, its

stretch fabric over acoustic panels.”

How long to build it? Four to six weeks, says Dunne.


It’s a considered investment. Building a studio facility is, ultimately, a gamble. “You’re in around Soho or you’re in London, you’ve got a five-year lease, but that doesn’t mean that you’re still going to be left in place in five years to come. But — whatever happens — you’ve bought the studio, and you can move it into the next space.

“You don’t get 100% of your expenditure back, but you’re certainly better off compared to what I’ve previously seen happen whereby, people had to return the space to its original condition, they actually had to knock the studios down!”

Last point for Mr Dunne: a designer or an acoustician might be (ahem) cynical of what is modular and clips together: how does the customer know they’re going to get the isolation they’d expect from a traditional studio? “Everything is isolated — the build replicates a traditional acoustic design strategy. There is no hint of a resonance in any of our rooms as such. They have a very neutral sound to them.

“You need a facility whereby you started in Dub Studio #1, and now you’re going to move into Dub #3 to do X, Y and Z and you’re returning to Dub #2 to finish it. So many studios, and you know it’s a fact of life, you walk from one control room into the next, and the sound feeling has completely shifted from one to the next.

But — “I was over in Manchester last week with some people from London, and we could walk from three rooms, and the sound only marginally changed room to room. How do you put it? We are ‘well-matched’, you know, room to room. At the end of the day, you’re hearing the speakers, not the room talking to you...”

Maybe Smart Studio, and Jim Dunne, should be talking to you. 

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