

WOR CULTURE: RE-THINKING THE HIGH STREET - WHAT ROLE FOR ARTS AND CULTURE?

Welcome to this reflection of our seventh *Wor Culture* event which focused on **Re-thinking the High Street - What Role for Arts and Culture?**. Here, we'll give the key points from our presentations, reflect some of the discussions, provide some (hopefully) useful links and resources, and let you know what's happening next.

For those of you who couldn't be with us for our zoom gathering, further information on what *Wor Culture* is about can be found at the end of this document. Please get in touch if you'd like to contribute, have any suggestions, or would like to share any links or resources.

We look forward to welcoming you to one of our events.

The #WorCulture team,

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Presentations

Our event included presentations from **Dr Emma Coffield, Newcastle University** and **Katharine Wheeler, Partnerships and Development at the Stove Network**

<https://youtu.be/iwUr49Twzxk>

[If you click on the Presentation menu there is an option to view with subtitles]

Q&A

We had plenty of questions in the chat and as we couldn't get through all of them our speakers have responded below

Who is paying for all the staff, materials etc

We have a portfolio of core and project funding with about a third coming from "arts" funders and two thirds coming from partnership work. There's a useful link on our website for some information on this: <https://thestove.org/key-facts/>

What we aim for is to core fund an engine that can then support the growth of independent and collaborative work and projects that are project funded.

How instrumental have the local authority / town council been in supporting The Stove and Mid Steeple Quarter projects and initiatives?

Absolutely instrumental in terms of support, a project like this would not be possible without LA on board as partners and collaborators. However it has also been important to have the independent and responsive, agile structure of The Stove to get this work started and ensure it comes from (and is not done to) our community. As I mentioned there has been a lot of learning together in terms of Scottish Planning legislation but also in how to devolve power and decision-making usefully to local people through the development of this work. This is where The Stove plays an instrumental part, in first building and growing the conversation as part of the community, then testing and piloting ideas, co-shaping the vision and showing how it could work, and then in working side by side with MSQ towards this shared vision for the town. I should say that the MSQ team have had to operate very differently from The Stove since they set up as a Community Benefit Society in 2018 and have put a huge amount of work into pulling the funding in and growing the business plan for the project, what is interesting now is what our relationship will be as we go forward as very different but equally vital projects.

Katharine, Is there anything significant about the scale of Dumfries that has helped The Stove's success? i.e. is there a 'right' size of a community for this kind of model to take hold?

I'm really not sure - but I do know that often what we talk about in terms of engagement with our community is a need to work in a multi-dimensional way because we do not have the critical mass of "people who engage with creative work" as an audience to draw on, that is why one of our main aims is to say that we believe art should be for everyone and not just an "arts" audience. This has made collaboration, partnership and embodied community work vital to growing participation in projects and activity.

I think in any projects journey you can look back and point at a certain set of circumstances that both bolstered and hindered work. In our story - <https://thestove.org/key-facts/> - Dumfries was part of Scotland's Place Partnership Programme - <https://www.creativescotland.com/funding/funding-programmes/targeted-funding/place-programme> (this is actually one of our projects in the photograph ;D). Dumfries and Galloway Arts had recently liquidated leaving a gaping hole in creative "arts" provision and no form of support, delivery within the local authority. There was also, separately the story of the building - see also key facts. The Stove started as a collective of artists coming together to try to be part of the solution by doing work in their place, from a building that was central. A key recommendation out of a consultation as part of the Place Partnership work recommended supporting The Stove to an amount of £20 00 this, small but regular, investment was a foundation that we grew from.

In terms of size of place, the Embers report was interesting in this as we talked to very small places but also about the common factors of success if you like - See Key Findings and In Conversation sections: https://thestove.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EMBERS_Spread.pdf

To what extent can individual locality distinctiveness, sense of identity & belonging etc be a driver in this, and who is best placed to cultivate imaginative ways of developing that?

Vital in our eyes - again see - Embers report Key Findings and In Conversation sections: https://thestove.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/EMBERS_Spread.pdf

How do we have a positive impact upon our high streets when many empty shops are owned by landlords who live outside of the area and are sometimes unwilling to engage with arts

organisations who would like to access these spaces to create work and engage with the local community?

Off the back of Stove and MSQ work our local authority conducted a survey of ownership of our High Street, that was really helpful, MSQ also got the local press involved when a sale fell through because of a Pension Fund deciding to do a last minute property dump (decision came above the contact the one they had been negotiating with) and a buyer who had never even visited the properties tried to make some money through re-sale - some press here - <https://www.midsteepquarter.org/news/fundraising-campaign-media-coverage>

A lot needs to be done both in public conversation and at policy level - we see our work as advocating and pushing for what needs done, making it visible until local, regional and national policy reflects what is needed. Scotland I think has an easier policy landscape within which to do this than England but having said that the story in say Edinburgh is incredibly different in terms of leverage. What is important I'd say using public space as much as possible and finds ways to wedge in even small parts of community ownership and try to amplify it.

See also MSQ story here: <https://www.midsteepquarter.org/our-story>

BREAKOUT ROOMS

After the presentations we split into Breakout Rooms (smaller discussion groups) themed on:

- Community involvement and partnership working
- More than more meanwhile spaces - how do we think (and encourage others to think) long-term?
- Resisting instrumentalism - what role for the arts on the high street?
- The city centre of the future - what do we want to see, and how do we get there?

Here's a summary of the key points from those groups

Community involvement and partnership working

- Community engagement is an “evolving experiment” – constantly informed by reflection on what is working in this context.
- A values-based approach to community engagement requires establishing the process: the ‘how’ will inform the ‘what’. Create spaces for conversation to exploring the role of creativity in grassroots action and decision-making, embedding grassroots action in the definition of place-making.
- We are all ‘early career’ if we are committed to keep on learning and remaining interested.
- Think of culture in the broadest sense. What about pubs and cafes? What role to chefs and bar workers have alongside artists?
- Pooling resources.
- A regular programme enables getting to know – a two-way thing. Building relationships over time allows the ideas and vision to come out of the engagement work, which then informs future engagement. It is not community consultation; it's about coming together to talk about needs. It's about building knowledge and learning together. The conversations must continue and be opened out in many ways.

- Building relationships takes time, belief, trust, and care – who is doing the pastoral work?
- Community Benefit Society model – must be about what the members want.
- Taking a multifaceted approach to addressing equality and diversity across arts workers. Not relying on a volunteer model to widen diversity but based on need and what is appropriate. Support a healthy freelance model, alongside good internships.
- How do you make sure that you're just not preaching to the choir or just talking to the choir, we need other voices to be heard
- We need to take a multi faceted approach - we're all quite excited about digital but we're also very mindful of the digital disenfranchisement of parts of the population - idea of posting packets through doors encouraging creative engagement from communities to overcome this and gather insights from a wider group of voices.

More than more meanwhile spaces - how do we think (and encourage others to think) long-term?

- Importance of dialogue with local authorities
- A lot of organisation has to happen behind the scenes to make the most of funding schemes
- Community ownership of places is a great model
- From a local government there has been experience of ownership being thrust upon community groups who then have to deal with the organisation and maintenance of a space which can sometimes detract from the kind of creative purpose they had in the first place

Resisting instrumentalism - what role for the arts on the high street?

- How do we move away from 'off the peg' solutions, where every high street looks the same?
- Similarly, pre-designed 'opportunities' often don't work, and feel more like an exercise in ticking boxes or trying (sometimes unrealistically) to increase footfall.
- Can we look more carefully at the role of the artist/freelancer/cultural organisation, and the kinds of (potentially uncomfortable or distressing) situation they might find themselves in? How do we resist these kinds of 'opportunities'? How do we set different parameters / requirements? How can we do this differently? How can we better prepare artists/freelancers/cultural organisations to resist or renegotiate?
- It can feel like artists are always the ones learning new languages and being asked to re-think - how do we engage with the discussion, and even change it, while retaining a sense of the value of the work that we do? What evidence might we call upon? How to bring this together, if we all have a small piece?
- How do we better articulate what we do (or could do)? How do we make clear that artists on the high street aren't there to decorate empty spaces?

The city centre of the future - what do we want to see, and how do we get there?

- Do we still see the high street itself as a singular entity that people walk along, or is it more of a disparate weird phenomenon
- Local production, consumption as a way of refocusing attention within urban spaces.
- The agency of different people and the importance local authority actors in brokering relationships
- Move away from 'off the peg' solutions and path dependency
- Multifaceted nature of land ownership and property ownership in the high street means the need for a multi sector partnership working and thinking about the future of the high streets
- Consider the potential scale of the gaps that are emerging in the city centres following the demise of Debenhams etc, and the size of the buildings and spaces,
- How do we see ownership and how do we communicate it so we can know what kind of scale organizations are working? It's not necessarily as monolithic as we might think within city and there's a gradation of ownership in different parts of particularly Newcastle
- Consider the ethics of regeneration and gentrification, be aware that practices can drive different forms of change in city centres and town. How might you do this in a way that doesn't displace communities and affect them negatively.

LINKS

- More Than Meanwhile <https://morethanmeanwhile.wordpress.com>
- Open Doors Reports <https://www.meanwhilespace.com/single-post/open-doors-reports>
- Culture on the High Street <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/cultural-places-and-creative-spaces/culture-high-street>
- COVID-19: Impacts on the cultural industries and the implications for policy <https://pec.ac.uk/news/covid-19-impacts-on-the-cultural-industries-and-the-implications-for-policy>
- The Projected Economic Impact of Covid-19 on the UK Creative Industries report <https://www.creativeindustriesfederation.com/news/press-release-cultural-catastrophe-over-400000-creative-jobs-could-be-lost-projected-economic>
- The Stove <http://www.thestove.or>
- MidSteeple Quarter (MSQ) - www.midsteeplequarter.org
- MSQ Crowdfunder - <https://www.crowdfunder.co.uk/reclaim-the-high-street>
- Embers – <https://thestove.org/projects/ongoing-projects/embers/>
- TurnAround Towns - CarnegieUK Trust - <https://www.carnegieuktrust.org.uk/project/turnaround-towns/>

For information on future sessions you can sign up [here](#) and view our blog at <https://blogs.ncl.ac.uk/culturencl/>