In Perspective: **Planning for Change, Long Term – The 100 Year Plan.**

**Introduction:**

This article draws on the place-based creative practice of artist and researcher Associate Professor Anna Francis, stemming from a collapsed regeneration programme in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, providing an insight into how a social arts practitioner can facilitate public and participatory approaches to urban renewal, within this context which can lead to a range of definable impacts and outcomes.

Within the article the geographical and political background context for the research is defined, as being directly influenced by the failure of the Pathfinder Housing Renewal Scheme and the physical and social impact of that scheme on the city of Stoke-on-Trent.

Next the article takes an in depth look at types of activity and processes engaged with by Francis in the city of Stoke-on-Trent, in the context of Participatory Social Arts Practice, exploring in-depth The Portland inn Project, which grew directly from a Local Council initiative, The £1 home scheme, which sought to rectify some of the negative impacts of the failed Pathfinder scheme. Defined impacts of the Portland Inn project are explored.

The article then lays out approaches to long term planning which communities, funders and community support organisations can draw from in order to consider taking a longer-term approach to creative community development.

**Geographical and political context:**

The Pathfinder housing renewal scheme, or Housing Market Renewal Initiative (HMRI) was launched by then Deputy Prime Minister John Prescott in 2002. The scheme, which operated initially in nine areas of the north and midlands of England, before a further three areas were added to the scheme in 2005, focused on renewing often Victorian Terraced Housing, in neighbourhoods where there was said to be low demand for the housing stock available.

The aims of the scheme were said to be to ‘renew failing housing markets and reconnect them to regional markets, to improve neighbourhoods and to encourage people to live and work in these areas.’ Parliament.uk. (2013). Available at: <https://researchbriefings.files.parliament.uk/documents/SN05953/SN05953.pdf> ‌

In the city of Stoke-on-Trent, the housing renewal which focused on a number of areas around the city, saw whole streets of terraced houses compulsory purchased, and in some areas demolition began in 2006. This, alongside the major deindustrialisation process underway in the city at the time, meant that large areas of land were opening up in the city, to become urban brownfields from 2006 onwards, and in some cases those Brownfields remain today.

In its prospectus, Renew North Staffordshire, which was administered by Stoke City Council, set out an aim by 2022 ‘to clear 14,500 properties, refurbish 36,000 properties and build 12,500 new homes.’ And that this would focus on ‘Unpopular neighbourhoods: These are caused by deprivation, stigma, crime, unpopular property and design, location and poor environment.’ (Renew North Staffordshire: Stoke City Council, 2004).

For residents living in the neighbourhoods marked for demolition, the sometimes slow process of the Compulsory purchasing, left communities feeling in a state of limbo, often adding to the negative stigma already experienced by people living in and from those areas.

In 2004 The Guardian reported from one of the areas of Stoke-on-Trent on the impact of Pathfinder decision making on neighbourhoods;

‘Catherine Taylor, who lives in the Hanley area of the city, told local paper the Stoke Sentinel that earmarking homes for demolition will spark an exodus.

"Three years ago the council made this a clearance area and everybody started panicking," she said. "From that time people just got out and the community started to break up."’ (Weaver, 2004)

Even as far back as 2004, the picture of a fracturing of communities was visible, in both local and national news regarding the impact of the housing renewal on communities.

In Francis early work from 2006 onwards, which looked at Regeneration initiatives and their impact on communities, first-hand research into the regeneration sites of Stoke-on-Trent, and Liverpool, particularly looking at the designated Government Pathfinder Scheme Zoo’s (Zones of Opportunity), Francis aimed to document the physical processes of change, and to create dialogue with communities about the processes underway in neighbourhoods through activity to record the regeneration underway.

In the Portland Street area of Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent, demolition did not take place before the HMRI scheme was scrapped in 2010, leaving a fractured, partially boarded-up community, with many empty properties, high levels of crime and anti-social behaviour, and scarce to non-existent community facilities, as all facilities and infrastructure had been removed to make way for the demolition.

**The £1 home scheme:**

As part of a long-term process of social renewal and urban regeneration led by Stoke-on-Trent City Council, 33 houses were refurbished and sold for £1 each (in 2013). These properties, along with the shop building and the local pub, had all been compulsory purchased by the council, as part of the Pathfinder scheme. The project set out to help re-build the community, including strengthening connections between original residents and the new £1 homeowners. The scheme required that new residents had to commit to living in the neighbourhood for 10 years (or if selling before that, give a percentage of the profit on the house sale to the council) and to contribute to community life and community development.

As a social artist, interested in both housing renewal and the impact of regeneration on communities, Francis was interested in the scheme from a research perspective, to consider what an arts practitioner might offer to the idea of contributing to community life and community development. Francis and her family applied to the scheme and became a £1 homeowner, and moved into the neighbourhood in 2014.

From 2015 Francis began a project in partnership with the British Ceramics Biennial, which aimed to work with other community members to understand what worked in the area, and what needed work. This approach involved taking an Asset Based Community Development model (ABCD) set out by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann (1993) and considering it within the context of participatory art. ABCD empowers communities to ‘assemble their strengths into new combinations, new structures of opportunity, new sources of income and control, and new possibilities for production.’ (Kretzmann and McKnight, 1993)

Initially the project took place within a tent on the green space, because though the regeneration scheme had seen 33 homes renovated the pub, the shop and the community centre were all still closed. Through this engagement it was found that what residents said they needed, more than anything was a permanent space for community activity to take place in. Francis joined forces with another artist Rebecca Davies, whose touring project: a pop up social space – The Oasis Social Club (Davies, 2015), based on her Grandad’s working men’s club, had visited the neighbourhood, and had also heard from the community how much they wanted a space.

**Evidence of cohesion, and contribution to wellbeing**:

Since 2016, Francis and Davies have been working with the community of the Portland Street Area to first persuade the city council to hand over the disused pub building via a community asset transfer, and then to set up an architecture school in 2018 to redesign the building with the community, to be a creative community space. A community interest company was set up in 2018, to provide a legal entity to enable the community to access resources and funding. Planning permission for the co-created architectural development was granted at the end of 2020, and Francis and Davies are now working together with the community to fund raise to renovate the building, aiming to begin the renovation project in Summer 2023.

In the meantime, weekly activity in the neighbourhood, takes place from a temporary space, an adapted shipping container. This includes a weekly youth club plus sports sessions for children, a pigeon club for adults and other creative projects and activities across the year. Often, the community works together to find creative solutions to problems identified locally, as an example: the Portland Inn Pub had a big hole in the roof letting water and pigeons into the building, so via the creative programme the community worked together with artists and artisans to design a Ridge Tile, which would fix the hole but also, be an opportunity to learn new skills, and develop a product which would contribute to sustainability.

The BBC documentary We Are Stoke-on-Trent (2019) demonstrated the project’s contribution to wellbeing, with one regular participant commented: ‘I come down here in a foul mood, I’d work with clay, and then I’d feel a lot better’ and another community member commenting on the opportunity to share their cooking skills via the project ‘I cook for the community. I think it’s a bit therapeutic’ (Mackie, 2019).

**Evidence of influencing local policy:**

A new approach to local government outreach: The Local Government Association (LGA) highlighted findings from Community Maker and Portland Inn for the design of future urban regeneration projects nationwide. The LGA study People, culture, place – The role of culture in placemaking (2017) emphasized the research’s capacity to foster community cohesion by bringing residents into planning the use and development of community assets.

The Portland Inn Project continues to influence Stoke-on-Trent City Council’s design and implementation of housing policy. The City Council’s Empty Homes Manager confirmed that involvement with the project helped the Council to ‘understand what is necessary to revive a community, with the artist being a significant factor,’ and that Portland was a ‘major driver’ encouraging the Council to commission a second, ‘more proactive and inclusive’ phase of the original £1 home scheme; through the ‘Reviving Communities Scheme’ to improve the wellbeing and quality of life of Hanley residents. (Watson, 2019)

Participation in democracy: The research’s collaborative ethos has resulted in The Portland Inn Project partnering with city council to host a bi-monthly Community and Services meeting bringing together community members and multi-agency representatives since 2017. This targeted approach, enables better communication between residents and local services, and unlike a traditional residents association meeting, instead of minutes being taken, an action plan is produced via the meetings, with different representatives ‘owning’ actions and feeding back on their progress at the next meeting.

The project also hosts a bimonthly Community Decision Making Panel, established March 2019, which focuses more on the Community Programme and Building development. The panel includes volunteer community members (in majority, to ensure any votes can be swayed towards community) alongside government agency representatives, who help to steer and decide on actions for The Portland Inn Project. The panel has given local government a way to involve the community in planning and decision making and given the community agency over decisions affecting the area. In 2020, the panel enabled the community to object to a local factory’s plan to increase onsite flammable materials storage. As a result of this objection to the potential risk, the factory’s planning permission was only awarded with a reduced flammables storage capacity. Therefore providing concrete opportunities for community members to have a voice in decision making processes which affect them locally.

In 2022-3 Francis and Davies aimed to consider what greater influence the community might be able to have over policy and decision making at a local and national level, which impacts on the lives of residents. Initially this was in response to a perceived gap in understanding from communities around what policy makers do and indeed, who they are. This also grew from an identified need to do some work to understand more about the following three key questions for the project but potentially other communities nationwide:

- What are the decision making processes and protocols of policy makers at various levels?

- Where are the points of access for communities to inform policy makers and their processes and outcomes?

- In what ways do policy makers want to hear from communities (are we speaking and sharing in the best way?)

In aiming to answer these questions, Francis and Davies set out to undertake creative residencies in policy makers work contexts, with a view to explore what greater influence the projects local work might have, through conversation and collaboration with decision makers.

The idea of undertaking Creative Residency activity drew on the learning and evidence of Artist Placements which emerged in the 1960s, proposed by the Artist Placement Group The ‘organisation actively sought to reposition the role of the artist within a wider social context, including government and commerce.’ (Tate, 2004)

3 different contexts were explored through the Creative Residencies.

1.       Undertaking activity in partnership with Stoke Creates and Stoke City Council to rewrite Stoke’s Cultural Strategy. The role became to advocate for an open community consultation (rather than the proposed invite only approach to consultation first mooted,) and then to plan and deliver a consultation event in partnership with Stoke City Council and Stoke Creates. **(local policy and decision making.)** This ensured that the community voice was included within the process.

2.       Partnering with Local Trust on creative residency within their context, particularly in relation to the Community Wealth Fund activity they were working on in 2022, advocating that the Government consider funds raised from Dormant Assets be used to set up the fund. This involved a series of emails and meetings to discuss what role we might be able to undertake, attendance at the launch of the Community Wealth Fund at Parliament. This has led to The Portland Inn project being consulted within The Dormant Assets Consultation. **(national policy and decision making).**

3.      In 2023 Francis and Davies are developing a partnership with Staffordshire Police, to develop creative residency within the policing team, in relation to the new Community Policing policy, moving towards ‘neighbourhood policing.’ The aim is to support the policing team in ensuring the community experience is considered in new policy decisions. **(local policy and decision making.)**

**Local Decision Making and Long Term Planning**

The neighbourhood where The Portland Inn Project is based, is an estate of around 500 terraced houses. A muti-cultural neighbourhood, scoring poorly across the indices of deprivation in terms of low educational attainment, high unemployment, high crime and low incomes. (Ministry of Housing, Communities & Local Government, 2019)

The Community Decision Making Panel (CDMP) offered a formal way for community members to get involved in deciding on the direction of the project, and to feel agency over local decisions and this was working well, until 2020. Like most communities, the pandemic made it difficult for people locally to think to the future. The pandemic impacted quickly and significantly in an area already experiencing multiple hardships. As an example, the pandemic made digital poverty in the neighbourhood more visible, as community members communicated the issues of home schooling or looking for work, when digital poverty is a significant barrier for residents in the area – with households reporting a paucity of access to the internet and a lack of devices. In 2020 as a result of lockdown restrictions the CDMP meetings moved online, making it difficult for some community members to take part. The Portland Inn Project set up a digital library, enabling some households to borrow a paid for wifi dongle and devices, but demand quickly outstripped supply. Further partnerships were sought to bring initiatives to the neighbourhood to support households to apply for support with digital devices and internet access.

The way a lot of community and creative activity is funded is via short term projects, which makes it harder for community based organisation to think and plan long term. Since 2021 to try to counter this short termism and the difficulties in thinking of the future that emerged with the pandemic, The Portland Inn Project and the community began work together to write a 100 year plan. This has meant that the community has begun to think of the neighbourhood, and its future in landscape design terms, approaching the community landscape in the same way that a gardener develops a garden.

When starting to develop a new garden, the gardener does not try to develop the whole garden at once, but instead works on sections of the garden at a time. For example; one area may be focused on and something new planted which may do very well, looking after itself for years to come. This section then does not have to be attended to for some time, but other things you might try in the garden, might not work first time around, so will have to be rethought next year. The beauty of the community garden landscape is, that there is space for all ideas within the garden. In addition, it means that smaller pots of time limited funding can be understood within the wider plan, ensuring a legacy and greater impact for accessed resources.

Some community members want to know the entire plan – and can formally impact on decision making and actions taken via the CDMP, whereas others, might just want to know about one aspect, activity or development.

In writing a 100 year plan, The Portland Inn Project are working with the community to lay the foundations for a better place for everyone in the community, learning new skills and planting seeds for future development. Importantly also, the plan is about making the power of individual and collective action visible through creative outputs, which can be shared across the country and beyond, in the form of artworks, films, articles and exhibitions. This fosters a sense of pride in the community and helps to change the rhetoric associated with the neighbourhood.

Learning which can be drawn from this case study, for use in other neighbourhoods includes:

* Make connections locally, to people living and working in the area, and find the shared concerns, which can be a bridge to differences.
* Make time to understand who in the community and beyond wants to be involved in development for a neighbourhood, work together to define possible resources and assets, and then make a plan to intervene.
* Have a clear communication plan, how are you going to communicate, and when?
* Make an action plan together and ensure it is clear who owns the actions.
* Piloting can be useful in building confidence in working together, start small and then scale up as energy and resources grow.
* Share the work regularly locally, but also make space for conversation with external decision makers – make them aware of the processes which govern decision making with the community – and push for local voices to be heard in National contexts.

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