

Lunchtime University: The Portland Inn Project

7th November from 12-1 pm

Organised by: The Greater London Authority.

Anna Francis was invited to give a talk and Q and A to the Planning and Regeneration Team at The Greater London Authority. The session was part of the 'Lunchtime University' programme which informs and inspires the authorities projects, programmes and policies.

The talk particularly focused on the development of infrastructure with and for geographical communities.

Notes:

I am going to speak about how we at The Portland Inn Project have taken the lead on neighbourhood renewal and to discuss the important partnership working that enables us to do what we need to do, to make our neighbourhood in Stoke on Trent a safer, healthier and happier place for residents to live – particularly considering the role of neighbourhood decision making in relation to our approach.

We will also cover creative approaches to involving people in planning and delivery of creative interventions.

Slide 1: Planning Long Term: Participatory Governance for Community-Led Change

We are the Portland inn project (brief intro) Community based arts organization in Stoke on Trent

Since 2016, The Portland Inn Project has commissioned projects & artworks responsive to a local social & political context achieving national recognition as an exemplar of embedded community development approaches, which enable a once fragmented community to lead on the restoration of local pride and a sense of belonging and shared decision-making.

Our building and our programme are designed to meet the creative and cultural needs of the 500+ households which make up the Portland Street triangle. A traditionally working class, but increasingly culturally diverse neighbourhood within the top 10% most deprived in the UK, which creates additional barriers to work and quality of life for people who live here.

Slide 2: Now in 2024 – we're renovating an old pub building to become the first cultural centre of its kind in Stoke On Trent. Providing much needed infrastructure to our residential neighbourhood in Stoke On Trent.

Participatory Governance for Community-Led Change

What we're going to talk about are the many ways our neighbours are involved in and contribute to our organisation, and therefore, the neighbourhood – constantly shaping our programme, how we organise and the future of our building. Participatory Governance for Community-Led Change.

Slide 3: Pathfinder Housing Renewal Project:

In some areas this meant an opening up of brownfield sites across the city, some of which have only recently been developed, however in a couple of the earmarked areas, the compulsory purchase process was slow and so in one neighbourhood close to the city centre, where I now live and work,

by the time the scheme was scrapped in 2011, there were families living next door to boarded up homes and the resulting stripping of community infrastructure and the inhospitable street scene had created numerous issues. Image showing media coverage at the time the scheme was scrapped. The city council, having purchased 35 properties across 5 streets, needed to be imaginative about what to do to try to fix the residual issues, and announced the £1 home scheme. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail about that -

Slide 4: But just quickly, as an artist with a social arts practice, interested in the impact of regeneration on communities, my partner and I applied and were selected for the scheme. We would (as artists with fairly precarious incomes) have struggled to get a traditional mortgage so for personal reasons too, the scheme was appealing. Three stipulations that it is worth mentioning about the scheme: there was a cap on household income, households had to commit to live in the houses for 10 years, and had to contribute to community development. That last one, as an artist working across participatory and co-creative practices felt like something I could offer a lot to.

Slide 5: Background to the Community Maker project

Slide 6: Lack of physical community infrastructure

Slide 7: discussions with residents – treasures and challenges of the local neighbourhood – ABCD

Slide 8: Rebecca Davies brought The Oasis Social Club – a celebration of our social spaces, how we come together, and represent ourselves – working in places of development or where regeneration processes had proved problematic or challenging. Based on the governance structure of traditional working mens clubs, where we sought to adapt these traditions and develop a progressive and welcoming programme of activity.

Slide 9: This activity included a club board – which included people from the local area to shape the programme and take part in defining a manifesto of local needs and desires – here we are in portland street, where people wanted a space to come together and meet neighbours, and negotiate differences or tension that might have arisen from the pound housing scheme.

Slide 10: The neighbourhood where I live and work, the Portland Street Area of Stoke on Trent was one of the designated Pathfinder housing renewal programme areas, a collapsed regeneration scheme that ended in 2011.

The collapse of the scheme saw families living next door to boarded up houses. The city council, having purchased 35 properties across 5 streets, needed to be imaginative about what to do to try to fix the residual issues left in the neighbourhood, and announced the £1 home scheme. I don't have time to go into a lot of detail about that -

Slide 11: We'll come back to the importance of community decision making and self representation in a little bit. Here are some of the board delivering their manifesto – for a building - because the corner shop, church, community hall and pub were shut and ppl really wanted a space to come together. A similar conclusion to Anna's project in the neighbourhood.

Slide 12: It's so crucial to never make assumptions – and ask questions, when we started we led a 4 week programme from the pub building with questions...

Slide 13: Also – holding our hands up when we need support and to draw on the expertise of others – in order to shape what's right for us, with our neighbourhood.

Slide 14: Visibility is very important – transparency of process, but also constantly ensuring the work is seen, accessible and welcoming. And demonstrates all the ways people can be part of it, and contribute.

Slide 15: I'm skipping through years of work but In 2018 once the asset transfer of the pub building had been agreed with Stoke City Council, we tested what a community co-building process might look like. We built a temporary space to work from, and for 4 weeks we ran a programme of activity, but importantly we set up an architecture school to redesign the pub building on the street with the community.

Slide 16: 2018 – a temporary space cobuilt with Baxendale architects that received the RIBA Mcewan award – “architecture for the common good”

Slide 17: The structure we built with Baxendale architects was shortlisted for a RIBA Macewen award, which recognises architecture for the common good, and was featured on the front page of the RIBA magazine. This was just one example of our community finding positive ways to tell our story to the outside world, and to shift the negative rhetoric usually applied to our neighbourhood.

Slide 18: In 2018 we became one of 15 areas Nationwide to be a part of the Creative Civic Change programme – a programme of funding and support to enable communities to shape, lead and commission creative interventions to make positive change where they live. Importantly this programme enabled us as a community to set our own priorities (one of the things which I wanted to emphasise as being fundamental in how to support communities – is in supporting them to identify and then act on their own priorities).

The 3 year funding was a real game changer for us, enabling us to become an established organisation, and to be able to run regular creative programmes which support our community.

Slide 19: One of the things CCC enabled was a more permanent temporary space – a shipping container which we adapted in 2019 – planning permission was sought for this temporary... but slowly more permanent space, while we developed our organisation and embarked on fundraising for the future building.

Slide 20: The Pippin is a brilliant base for so much of our year round programme – weekly youth clubs, monthly womens groups, an ambitious summer programme and seasonal creative projects with artists and creative practitioners. Importantly, it is a space our community decision making panel comes together, we regularly meet with neighbours to share decision making, and we meet with services to ensure sustained, strategic action and response to the needs of our neighbourhood. Representatives from housing, environment, policing, fire, anti social behaviour and local schools meet with us to help ensure partnership working and improvement of where we live.

Slide 21: Skills development is an important part of what we do and over the years has included raku firings, djing workshops, circus performances, cooking sessions, Every session is accessible and open to all ages of people from the local neighbourhood. By developing skills, and opening up routes into training, employability and enterprise; delivering positive and holistic activities for children and young people; creating low-cost opportunity for families and the wider community to spend time together.

Slide 22: It's also a special venue for fabulous feasts and block parties – where our neighbours spill out across our small green space

Slide 23: CCC also allowed us to really look at how our community can formally contribute to decision making processes, and led to the setting up of a Community decision making panel in 2018.

Usually via a bi monthly meeting with food, we look at setting priorities, discuss urgencies and programme together – voting on anything which needs a decision. This is not like a traditional residents association – any community member can come.

Slide 24: This sits alongside the bi-monthly services meeting which has been running since 2017, which brings together services that we work with in the area, for example, the police and various departments from the council including for example: empty homes, anti-social behaviour, and environmental teams:

These meetings are always action focused, with different members of the meeting identifying actions that need to be taken as a result of issues raised by the community and then individuals owning the action, which is followed up on later. The meetings ensure that the services can do their jobs more effectively, targeting shrinking resources and allowing us to do our job in the neighbourhood too.

But as we know, with that shrinking resource for those services there are significant Challenges to surmount, and I want to finish by talking through some of those:

Slide 25: One key part of our work at PIP has been to aim to move towards longer term thinking. Working with photographer Felicity Crawshaw – we delivered a community photoshoot to vision the 4 pillars of our 100 year Plan. This image won a Bronze at the Paris Photo Prize and an honourable mention at the International Photo Awards. It was a winner of the Portrait of Britain.

Slide 26: Another , VERY IMPORTANT thing is that much of the activity is responsive – perhaps to a challenge on the street, a problem that ppl want solving. Like our Portland pigeon...

Slide 27: Fern brick making on the street – connecting to the heritage of the neighbourhood where we learned there was a brick factory – we are also really interested in the biodiversity of the neighbourhood.

Slide 28: Understanding the impact of our interventions on biodiversity data

Slide 29: A visual representation of our local biodiversity, installed in the neighbourhood.

Slide 30: Most recently, we launched the Neighbourhood Workshop: A street level programme of shared learning to collaboratively build a healthier neighbourhood.

Rooted in solidarity, kinship and community, and in the knowledge that we all have something meaningful to offer, and we all have something valuable to learn, The Neighbourhood Workshop is a street level programme of shared learning to collaboratively design, develop and then create a healthier neighbourhood with a focus on healthy people, buildings and environment, delivered by The Portland Inn Project in Stoke-on-Trent.

‘You have to act as if it were possible to radically transform the world. And you have to do it all the time.’ Angela Davis

Slide 31: Just a some of our collaborators so far. One is a charity set up by one of the dads on the street – Qadir. And the other is Stewart – from our contractor team.

A hugely responsive programme, constantly being shaped by locals needs and desires and our experience and understanding that challenges like negligent and absent landlords lead to a whole host of problems for our neighbourhood.

Slide 32: Communities need to fundraise greater amounts in order to be able to work on projects like this one – as the cost of everything has risen.

Funders are more risk averse, but to share our experience: when we first met The Big Lottery in 2018 to tell them about what we hoped to do, they told us it would be a long road to get us to a point of being fundable – as we looked so risky at that point, with so much need in the neighbourhood and a true lack of community infrastructure. One of the biggest hurdles was in getting the lease agreement for the Asset transfer of the building sorted out, and for the terms of the lease to be acceptable to funders – Councils can play a greater role in smoothing the way for communities that are ready to do the work by working to unlock hold ups – but also in being a great advocate for the work – which can make such a difference to the funder – yes in 2018 we looked unfundable – but the partnership between our organisation and community, the council and the funder has been imperative in seeing this move forwards.

As budgets for councils shrink communities like ours where there are a multitude of varying challenges, can look so ‘hard to reach’ that it can be tempting to focus resource in areas where it is easy to see results. What our project demonstrates is that through partnership working, and targeting resource where communities tell you they need it – it is possible to go from a standing start (a community with no social or physical community infrastructure) to an award winning development project making demonstrable and measurable change for a really challenged neighbourhood.

Slide 33: Your funding landscape may be a patchwork of funders, which enable you to fund different things

Slide 34: Now lots of our focus is on preparing to move into our future building. Here – a scale model of the former pub building,. Every nook and cranny is a creative opportunity to collaborate with neighbours and at the moment it is exciting that the decision making processes involve considering environmentally sustainable materials for our building - we are currently seeking funding to collectively restore the heritage features of our building, including architectural ceramics, adapting them to reflect our current diverse heritage and bring into modern day use.

Slide 35: We are retrofitting the Portland Inn and ensuring it is redesigned to be a sustainable community arts building for now and for the future: making decisions about the building that will make it beautiful but also cheaper and more sustainable to run, and truly representative of our place and our people. This is what the community spoke of needing, and so we have seen amazing buy in from neighbours – if you find out what people want, and support them to do it, they will want to be involved, but what works in my neighbourhood, may not work elsewhere – the key is in supporting communities to define what they want and need.

Thank you and questions.