

The Arts Council England National Conference – The Lowry, April 2025.

Session Title: Taking Over the Place

Breakout Session 4 - Taking Over the Place Creative radical repurposing of community spaces and venues

Time: 10.50 – 11.55 and 15.25 – 16.30

Location: Pier Eight Room 2

What does a laundrette, a canal and an abandoned pub have in common?

What happens when you empower communities to take over the place? These exciting, award nominated, original programmes, share how communities have led on the development and repurposing of local venues into unusual cultural spaces.

Anna Francis from The Portland Inn project (National Portfolio Organisation) in Stoke on Trent, will share an arts and community led retrofit of an abandoned pub as a demonstrator for wider neighbourhood renewal with a radical 100 year plan; Laura Jamieson from Left Coast Creative People and Places in Blackpool, talks about the unusual transformation of a laundrette and a public square; Laurie Peake from Super Slow Way Creative People in Places (Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn and Pendle) shares a community take-over of a canal with remarkable outcomes.

Panel Chair Jess Tickell, Arts Council England

Panel Speakers

- Anna Francis - The Portland Inn Project
- Laura Jamieson - Left Coast CPP, Blackpool
- Laurie Peake - Super Slow Way CPP, Blackburn with Darwen, Burnley, Hyndburn and Pendle

Anna Francis Speech:

In the talk today I want to emphasise how we use arts and culture in a process of Planning Long Term with our neighbourhood: using Participatory Governance for Community-Led Change through art.

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 biggest project to date has been focused on the acquisition of the derelict pub building in the neighbourhood, and through an embedded long term approach we have redesigned the building with our community and are in the process of retrofitting the building to become a creative community hub for our area.

Our building and our creative 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 there.

The neighbourhood is known externally for being one of the Pathfinder housing renewal areas where houses were compulsory purchased to be demolished, and all social infrastructure removed. When the government changed in 2010 the regeneration scheme was scrapped – and the problem of boarded up homes and loss of community were aiming to be addressed through a £1 house scheme. This is how I came to live in the neighbourhood 11 years ago.

The way we work, and have always worked is to design creative projects with our neighbours, which respond to urgencies and desires emerging in the neighbourhood. Sometimes those are as a result of the particular environment of the neighbourhood, and at other times, those urgencies are caused by external factors which can impact quickly in a neighbourhood like ours, for example the cost of living rises and covid pandemic hit hard and quickly.

Depending on what is raised we will often collaborate with neighbours and then bring in specialist practitioners to help us deliver creative projects. They can be artists, architects, designers, film makers. Back in 2018 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.

Now in 2025 – we're renovating the old pub building to become the first cultural centre of its kind in Stoke On Trent. Providing much needed cultural infrastructure.

our neighbours have been involved in and contribute to our organisation since the start, a– constantly shaping our programme, how we organise and the future of our building. We practice Participatory Governance for Community-Led Change.

Since 2018 – our CDMP has enabled us to really look at how our community can formally contribute to decision making processes locally,

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.

What started as two artists working together has now grown into an arts and community based organisation, employing 8 people currently, and in 2023 we became an arts council England national portfolio organisation, which secures the future of our organisation, at least until 2028 (and we hope for many years beyond that).

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.

For our neighbourhood the aim is to create a safer, healthier and more liveable place to call home, and art is the tool we use to imagine and then enact the future together.

We collaborate with all sorts of amazing specialist arts and craft practitioners, bringing people in to collaborate with our diverse neighbourhood.

At the moment we are focused on the materials needed for the retrofit - We have a timetable for when material decisions need to be made within our building – and we research the options together –

via fact finding visits and research into materials – last week on a site visit (right) we were looking at the wooden cladding for the outside of the building, and the image top left shows residents visiting Ketley Brick factory – who we are collaborating with on some special ridge tiles for our roof. I wish I

One of the projects we have been working on since 2020 is the writing and now delivery of our 100 year plan – which recognised that as a small community-based arts organisation, we need to build resilience into how we work – as due to the nature of our neighbourhood, the impact of external forces (as I mentioned earlier - covid, fuel poverty, the cost-of-living crisis) can be felt quickly and strongly for our community, which we, as a community based organisation can often find impacts on how we work. We realised that having a long term plan for positive change helps us to imagine the future together, but also to take a longer view even when in the short term urgencies occur.

We know that our 100 year plan is working for our neighbourhood, but we have also heard from other places how it is inspiring them...

Dudley – 100 year cultural strategy

Grimsby – East Marsh United have a plan for 100 homes for 100 years

Dartington Forest – collaborating with Natural England on a 100 year Care plan for North Woods
had more time to tell you more – but you can find out via our Instagram account and websites.

One aspect of our plan is to improve the environment where we live – one example of this is through the development of our Fern Brick – a two piece fern planter which is the dimensions of 3 ordinary bricks, and can be built into a wall. The product draws on our neighbourhoods heritage as a before the Victorian Workers houses, our area was a brick factory, which eventually would have made the bricks which built the houses. The project taught neighbours traditional brick making skills and the product is designed to encourage planting in our shadey Victorian back yards. This is part of our work to ensure environmental justice locally, through environmental interventions like the development of green infrastructure, and habitats for plants and other species.

Understanding the impact of our interventions on biodiversity data is also important, and we have developed a number of projects and creative methods which make biodiversity visible. Our Portland Palissy plaques are an eco-report method in clay, we investigate the species in a specific area, add our findings to iNaturalist and then create a plaque to make visible what we have found.

These visual representations of our local biodiversity, can then be installed in the neighbourhood, helping us to understand our nearby nature.

We have shared this work all over the place, at various scales, including working with 150 children at a reservoir fun day, and leading the session in Hiroshima last April, which was a highlight.

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.

‘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

This gives us a defined space to think about how the work we do together as a community can create positive change. 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.

It also gives us a space to physically create a better future together through our creative programme – as an example of that – we are currently working on the Tile project lead by one of our brilliant team, Ceramic artist Alice Thatcher, but bringing in expertise from the city and beyond to ensure that the tiles become a method for telling our story as a community.

Storytelling is a key aspect of what we do – and is the key to seeing the way our community is discussed nationally change. It was very exciting last April for our story to be shared on BBC2 in a one hour programme as part of Andi Oliver’s fabulous feasts.

So first we are rebuilding the pub, and making sure that every inch of it represents our community from the tiles, the roof structures and through to the doorknobs – each aspect of the building is a creative opportunity to learn new skills, and innovate together – imagining the future for our neighbourhood.

Once complete the retrofit of this Victorian Terrace will become a demonstrator for a wider neighbourhood renewal which we will work on next.