



University of
Staffordshire

THE ARTIST AND THE CITY: REFLECTIONS ON THE ROLE OF ARTISTS IN RESHAPING OUR URBAN ENVIRONMENT

Inaugural Professorial Lecture:
Professor of Art and Society Anna Francis





In Stoke-on-Trent's Centenary year, Professor of Art and Society Anna Francis explores what it means to be an artist working in the city today. With 20 years' experience as a working artist in the city Anna's research is practice-based, with outputs including exhibitions, editorials, public and practitioner workshops, and participatory regeneration projects within Stoke-on-Trent.



Outcomes include the development of embedded co-creative approaches to collaboration leading to the transformation of an abandoned garden into a public Pocket Park and the retrofitting of a derelict pub into a creative community hub.

The research has led to specific types of impact: fostering community development, influencing Local and National government policy, and developing new initiatives in social arts organisations.



Having left the city in 2002 after graduating from my BA and then MA Fine Art at what was then Staffordshire University, I returned in 2005 to take up a position as an Associate Lecturer, then working my way up to my current position as Professor of Art and Society. On my return I was struck by the immense physical change underway across the 6 towns and began documenting the city. I was particularly drawn to the spaces opening up, as a result of both deindustrialisation and the urban renewal that can follow, and a question began to form around the role of art and artists in the city of today, given the long-standing role of creativity in the Potteries. Significantly, as I was researching towards the Indefinable City Exhibition at AirSpace Gallery (2007) I began a body of work that focused on the Pathfinder Housing Renewal Scheme, and in particular the impact that regeneration schemes have on the communities affected by them. In many ways everything that I have done since has roots in that initial investigation and can be traced back to those early explorations.

Initial research involved documentation of the change underway, as well as events and activity which sought to understand the impact of change and government decision-making on communities. This process of observation and understanding led to questions arising around alternative, artist-led models for urban renewal, which could have the potential to meaningfully engage communities from the outset. The research then took two different directions from the starting point of The Pathfinder; Rethinking the Brownfield is a series of works which moves beyond documentation and begins to consider what can be done in the disused spaces in cities, either as interim or more permanent intervention. Then from 2009 until today I have been focused on a body of work which considers housing renewal, and what is needed to create a thriving community. This has culminated in the setting up of The Portland Inn Project with collaborator artist Rebecca Davies, and the Community of The Portland Street Area of Hanley, Stoke-on-Trent.

Rethinking the Brownfield is a continuous body of work since 2012 examining how arts practice can reframe disused urban brownfield in the public consciousness. The initial research took place during a research residency in Nara, Japan, where I learned the Japanese flower arranging technique Ikebana, before returning to Stoke-on-Trent to begin an exploration of 3 city centre brownfields: the site of the greyhound track, the abattoir and the ABC Cinema. These 3 sites became the focus of activity, biodiversity monitoring and creative intervention and were visited regularly between 2012 and 2018, by which time all 3 sites had been cleared or developed. Workshops and other activity were hosted on the sites, centring around a series of responsive artworks created in the form of Brownfield Ikebana which have been exhibited in Stoke, Manchester, Birmingham and Nottingham.

I have also looked closely at developed brownfields, via a research activity looking at the former National Garden Festival of 1986 Site which resulted in the curation of series of events on the site, most notably The Lost Gardens of Stoke-on-Trent, (2016) a weekend long festival of arts and performance reactivating and repopulating the Site through commissioned interventions and activity. The Birder's Paradise project (2014) commissioned by Appetite looked at various urban nature sites in the city, including Westport Lake, Hanley Park and The Spode Factory, and was a collaboration with my partner Sculptor Andrew Branscombe, in which we transformed an old caravan into a mobile bird hide, as a space for celebrating urban nature, and planning a series of site-responsive interventions which supported and drew attention to nature on our doorsteps. This included creating a Tree Trail in Hanley Park, to raise awareness of the amazing diverse tree

collection and a bread swap at Westport Lake; where bread swapped for corn was transformed into a bread bird sculpture, to raise awareness that the feeding of bread can cause angel wing (a bone deformity in water birds) and that the bread was causing a harmful algae bloom to form in the lake.

Rethinking the Brownfield also led to the development of The Spode Rose Garden. Through a creative action research project, developed by AirSpace Gallery in collaboration with Andrew Branscombe and Glen Stoker which began in 2013, a derelict garden in the centre of Stoke Town was transformed into what is now a well-loved and well used community garden and pocket park, open every day. The Spode Rose Garden is an example of people led change. The co-created development of the space has been underway ever since, with The Friends of Spode Rose Garden volunteers, established in 2016 forming a partnership with Stoke City Council over the use of the land, working to renovate sections of the garden through creative projects. Over the years we have collaborated with artists, designers, horticulturalists and many other specialists as the garden has incrementally transformed. In many ways, so much of what I know about the setting up of a sustainable, community led project was learnt through the garden and has gone on to inform future projects. The process of proposing the change and then designing and delivering the transformation of the garden has continued to be an important metaphor for community development. The use of piloting which was evident within the garden demonstrated how starting small, in order to assemble your resources, partners and collaborators and test your methods, then scaling up as confidence grows, is a great way to build a sustainable project.

The Spode Rose Garden has consistently received national recognition. A few examples of this include the Small Worlds exhibition (2015) at The New Art Gallery Walsall, where the action research, planning and piloting process was shared. In 2017 we won a Silver Gilt medal, for our display of The Blue Italian Border at RHS Tatton, which was later installed in the Rose Garden. Plus, over the past few years the group has been pleased to achieve recognition in Britain in Bloom: It's Your Neighbourhood awards, achieving Level 5 Outstanding in 2024. The garden has also been recognised with an article in Garden News (2017) and a 4 page-spread in The Simple Things magazine (2023).

Over the past two years I have used the learning from these various projects in a perfect commission for Appetite and The Canal and River Trust, considering the development of the Local Nature Recovery Strategy (LNRS) for Staffordshire. A series of public walks along the Canals across the city have aimed to discuss the urgent need to address biodiversity loss. The RSPB State of Nature reports tells us that 'Since 1970 more than half of our flowering plants, mosses and their relatives have been lost from areas where they used to thrive. 54% of flowering plants and 59% of bryophytes (mosses and their relatives: liverworts and hornworts) across Great Britain have decreased in where they are found.' (RSPB, 2023.) These walks have invited the public to explore and celebrate our urban nature spaces along the canals and is leading to the delivery of a public art trail for the Caldon Canal, launching May 2025, with a series of ceramic plaques and a set of cards which celebrate plants growing along the canal, and share folklore, medicinal properties and meanings of the plants. The work is also informing the development of the LNRS, as I am able to feed the findings in via my role on the Community Advisory Board for Staffordshire LNRS.

My early research into housing renewal; investigating the impacts of regeneration schemes in Stoke-on-Trent, Liverpool and Birmingham, alongside a growing frustration with short-term projects meant that when Stoke City Council announced the £1 home scheme in 2013 I was very interested to apply. On a personal level, home ownership had become important as my partner and I were pleased to be expecting our first child, Rowan, who was born at the end of 2013 (with our second child Vita arriving in 2020). To become a £1 homeowner, the conditions included living in the house for 10 years and contributing to community life and community development. It was the second condition that interested the researcher in me, as I pondered what skills and attributes an artist might usefully contribute to community life. Soon after moving in, the Community Maker project launched in 2015, initially a 3-year project commissioned by British Ceramics Biennial, aimed to consider what else, beyond houses, a community needs to thrive.

Through a series of hands-on workshops on the street, which took the model of asset-based community development as a starting point, the project asked 'What works in the neighbourhood, and what needs work?' Through this project I aimed to understand what greater impact we can have, as artists, if we work where we live. In addition, I hoped that it may be more possible to map and track longer term impacts than is generally possible with shorter term projects. Community Maker was shared as one of 10 national case studies in the Local Government Association publication *People, culture, place - The role of culture in placemaking* (2017). It was used to set out best practice approaches for how councils can work with culture to make positive change:

'They show how the arts and culture can be used to improve a wide range of measurable outcomes, from education and wellbeing to economic growth and community cohesion.'

Local Government Association (2017) <https://www.local.gov.uk/people-culture-place-role-culture-placemaking>

Around the same time as Community Maker began, artist Rebecca Davies came to the area with her pop-up social space The Oasis Social Club. The Club was a touring project, where in different cities a group of local people would come together to programme the club's activity and discuss 'how communities come together and why that's not always easy,' (R. Davies, 2015).

Our two projects came to similar conclusions - the community expressed needing a permanent space. In 2016 Rebecca and I joined forces to initially apply for an Arts Council England Grant to be able to consider if the derelict pub 'The Portland Inn' could become the community space that residents in the area spoke of needing. A decade after first starting our work in the area, this enduring collaboration with Rebecca and residents of the Portland Street Area, alongside hundreds of artists, designers, architects, builders, craftspeople, and other specialists has proven to be the most challenging and rewarding of my career. This year we complete the retrofit of the pub building, in a true artist and community-led development; we have created a beautiful and

sustainable building for the future, in what will be an important step in delivering on our co-created One Hundred Year Plan for the Neighbourhood. Our next steps are to explore the viability of setting up a Community Land Trust for the area, ensuring that the building provides a beacon of hope and a useful template for how to retrofit the Victorian Housing locally. In this way The Portland Inn Building Project can become a demonstrator for a wider Neighbourhood Renewal.

The project is recognised as a national case study in culture-led regeneration. We have demonstrated how artist-led interventions generate tangible social and economic benefits for neighbourhoods, involving communities in establishing long-term development projects which are community-led and sustainable. In his book *A Restless Art*, (2018) François Matarasso talked about The Spode Rose Garden and The Portland Inn Project, reflecting on "the intricate balance artists must maintain between our own creative vision and the desires of the community: It is the artists who understand that such negotiations are not a zero-sum game who co-create the most valuable work. They see that ceding part of their artistic autonomy can be a route to the emergence of new, richer work than anyone could have imagined, still less achieved, on their own. This insight underscores the collaborative nature of socially engaged art and the potential for artists to foster deeper, more meaningful community relationships through shared creative processes."

Matarasso, F. (2018) <https://arestlessart.com/2018/07/03/the-complexities-of-socially-engaged-art-practice/>

Rebecca and I regularly share our work in creative contexts all over the UK and further afield, including recently in Brussels and Hiroshima, in addition increasingly we are invited to contribute to community and policy development contexts, ensuring that our work demonstrates a wider impact. The work has been shared in national press and was featured in Andi Oliver's *Fabulous Feasts* on BBC2. A recent article by The Guardian's Culture Editor Charlotte Higgins about The Portland Inn Project perfectly captures what artists can do in cities and other place:

"What artists do is dream up narratives, stories - they imagine different futures. That is the power of what is happening here. Plus, the project is a small, exquisite exercise in engaged, radical democracy."

Higgins, C. (2024) <https://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/article/2024/jun/19/stoke-on-trent-optimism-arts-levelling-up>

My practice as an artist has always informed my teaching, and I have been privileged to support hundreds of students over the years to consider their role in society through my role as a lecturer on the Fine Art course at the University of Staffordshire. My embedded place-based approach and well networked practice has been an invaluable resource in creating opportunities and experiences for students and graduates to take their own steps in exploring the role of the artist in the city.