

# Thinking Beyond the Snowline\*

*Ideas People Places...*

...transcending the mainstream

Ruth Essex and Chris Coppock



Glenn Davidson/Artstation: 'Thresholds - an Exhibition of Front Doors', undercroft car park, St. Georges Court, Tredegar, Blaenau Gwent, 2016 and continuing.

*\*'Above the Snowline' is an in-house term used by developers in Wales to describe the physical limits of the market for private house building in the South Wales region. At the current time the snowline sits slightly above Cwmbran, firmly at the base of the South Wales Valleys, beyond which it is deemed not worthy of commercial development or speculation. In the same way that much contemporary art practice is assumed to be imbued with value (and therefore status) in exclusively metropolitan environments. Following 4 years of live research embedded in local projects delivered through IPP, we see IPP as a model of cultural democracy which celebrates the authenticity of the periphery over the centre and which ferments new sets of values invested in people and the peculiarities of place.*



Penygraig public artworks by artist Rabab Ghazoul. Photograph: Dan Green

## *To move forward, it must mean the end of the (art) world as we know it...*

The authors of this report believe the Arts Council of Wales' Ideas:People:Places (IPP) is a positive step in this journey.

*"The overall aim of Ideas: People: Places has been to embed the arts in a genuine and meaningful way into a number of imaginative, ambitious and innovative regeneration projects."*

Thus reads the short descriptor and outrider for this highly ambitious and, in relative terms, vanguard 'art in the public realm' initiative established in 2015. This game-changing but short lived programme has substantially reworked (and dismantled) the tenets of what it means to take art into regenerative community contexts; and the salient quote from Tracey Cooke below is testament to the success of IPP in embedding its values at the heart of the community regeneration process.

*"My professional learning has been that art is not just about a visual form such as a painting or a sculpture. Art, I now understand as a result of 'The Trebanog Project', has more depth, which includes various branches of creative activity. Some of the simplicity of this project is about sitting together over a cup of tea, or eating together. I learnt it's not all about formal consultation; it's an altogether softer approach. It's about listening and treating people in a different way, finding out about what they're good at. Finding out about their story and what they can contribute to their community. This new way of thinking has impacted on my team and the future vision for Trivallis. I've got a different perspective now when people talk about engagement."*

**Tracey Cooke**, Regeneration Manager, Trivallis Community Housing (part of It's Art But it's Not IPP project)

## Enter- Ideas: People:Places

### *Collectively addressing the imagination deficit...*

IPP was created by the Arts Council of Wales out of a perceived need to do things differently. At its heart was a desire to address the imagination deficit at a time when new ideas are desperately needed in the community development context and where imaginative space for experimentation and genuine enquiry is becoming a rare commodity in an increasingly sanitised arts sector that studiously avoids addressing structural long term societal problems.

ACW funded and supported new ways of working based on cross-sector collaboration with communities, statutory and third sector partners — with artists, architects and creative agents and producers at the heart of this process. In short, broadening and extending the reach and agency of art in society through 7 projects based in geographically and socially distinct community contexts across Wales. The programme attempted to shift away from the co-option and instrumentalisation of the arts destined to push through (a) already decided agendas and regeneration programmes and (b) to refrain from acting as a complicit or unknowing catalyst for gentrification.

By bringing together organisations and individuals from different sectors it created space whereby representatives could work closely on a collective mission, challenging those involved in the arts sector and those involved in regeneration and housing across the board to understand and do things differently.

### *Imagining alternative realities...*

Above all, IPP set out to make art and creativity more central to how we conceive and imagine the future, to consider broader possibilities, and to play with alternative realities, through...

...supporting and enabling communities to mobilise and have a more effective voice and sense of agency.

... creating processes and artworks whereby communities, artists and institutions could collaborate effectively and make positive change happen. It attempted to reframe and test how consultation, engagement and collaboration is conceived and made real, to develop a more shared sense of purpose and place.

...creating the space (and hearts and minds) for critical and creative thinking – to challenge the assumptions, policy and working practice of organisations involved in local development and regeneration... and at the same time challenge the beliefs, knowledge and practice of artists and arts organisations... in order to try new or different ways of doing things.

The perception of what may be possible significantly broadened as a result. To be clear, IPP was not just about engagement and empowerment. It was about changing how business is done. The resourcing of the project by ACW gave people independence and courage to act in this way.

IPP encouraged exploration of inclusive and collaborative models of working and organisation — to strengthen ideas and actions of the 'collective', challenge established hierarchies and shift power balances... while firmly upholding the principles of social justice... essentially removing the red lines and tyranny of the professionally-driven consultant's brief and replacing the tendency for top down regeneration 'master-planning' processes with a more flexible, emotionally responsive and interactive dialogue with, and for, the communities in question.



The strong emphasis on collaborative working across predominantly siloed civic sectors acknowledges the crossroads we seem to have reached, where orthodox political and institutional thinking — as manifest in the polarisation of the BREXIT impasse — has been seen for the most part to have failed community development. Within and without the Arts, we can't carry on with business as usual, we need new paradigms, new ideas and news forms of achieving mutual consensus and cultural ownership, particularly at grass roots level. Enter Ideas: People: Places.

## The Prevailing Backdrop

*"People are suffering. People are dying. Entire ecosystems are collapsing. We are at the beginning of a mass extinction and all you can talk about is money and fairytales of eternal economic growth. How dare you".*

**Greta Thunberg** at the UN Climate Action summit, New York 23/09/19

Despite decades of pursuing the economic growth model, inequality continues to widen, poverty in all its forms persists and environmental degradation is at crisis point. Finally a state of acute climate emergency is being widely acknowledged. Meanwhile we are still locked into a system based on permanent economic growth and economic values have persisted in dominating over and eclipsing other values.

Irrespective of challenges to top down and economic regeneration models since the 1960s, orthodox regeneration methodology has slavishly continued to serve the dominant model of permanent economic growth and has been predominantly driven by economic goals. This has meant continuous fine-tuning of the socio-economic system, while not dealing with social justice and the root causes of all consuming social problems. Thus, notions of regeneration have been limited to, on the one hand, maintaining the current socio-economic system while, on the other, paradoxically attempting to address the contradictions and problems inherent within, and created by, this one-dimensional fiscal model.

Those in positions of control and influence have persisted in developing strategies which maintain and protect the status quo — allowing little room for more imaginative problem-solving and effectively having the effect of eradicating the belief that other ways of working are possible.

*Troublemakers festival, Swansea High Street. Photograph: Math Roberts*



Notwithstanding decades of area-focused regeneration and investment, conventional wisdom has failed to deal adequately with geographic, social and economic inequality and disaffection. Trickle down economic theory has abjectly failed to happen in reality.

*“Wales is a classic example of how trickle down from hard infrastructure investment is minimal; we have seen massive investment which has had very little effect in changing people’s lives, building resilience.”*

**Barbara Castle**, Community Regeneration Activist

As such, the IPP model concluded that economic growth couldn’t usefully be considered as a key driver in ‘future-focused’ regeneration. Not least because, by its nature, it has to operate a ‘top down’ and not ‘bottom up’ dynamic, where community engagement becomes perfunctory and dressed up in the rhetoric of ‘consultation’.

### *Participation without civic agency is self-defeating...*

And while the roll out of IPP understood that the lack of community participation is deeply corrosive and counter-productive when absent from the ‘regeneration’ process, it also concluded that participation without significant civic agency and action can become self defeating and diversionary for those taking part. As such IPP was based on the principle that active participation — coupled with the enabling of community transformation in terms of aspiration, building confidence, self-development, and creative ownership — should be obligatory and form an integral part of the IPP (social) contract.



*Pocket park on Swansea High Street created during the Station to Sea project*

IPP was, from the outset, determined to eschew the physical regeneration model for one driven by social regeneration, where the largely intangible and less quantifiable human assets — such as the wealth embodied in people, from individual skills to community trust — were considered to have a much greater degree of value and purpose; and where evidence of ‘progress’ was not defined by the metrics of physical transformation, whether in terms of public artworks or environmental features in the urban landscape. In this way, each of the IPP projects across Wales were encouraged to place great emphasis on the symbiotic relationship between the social, natural and built environment and the quality of life, and to take account of the conditions that might compromise this connectivity.

There is a huge body of evidence that human-centred design nourishes and underpins human well-being, a mutually beneficial state so clearly articulated since the 1960s by great thinkers and designers such as Jane Jacobs and Jan Gehl (see, for instance *The Death and Life of Great American Cities & Cities for People*), but whose prophetic lessons have largely gone unnoticed in much contemporary regeneration, not least in Wales. IPP attempted in its various creative guises to redress this deficit.

### *Parachuting and pidgeonholing...*

As a result, community, vision and imagination have been stripped out of the mainstream regeneration process... further destroyed by complicated bureaucracies, contractual procedures and labyrinthine procurement exercises which do little to support local economies or expertise. In fact it is so often the case that professional consultants are parachuted into places that they know and care little about — nor feel any moral or ethical responsibility towards — before disappearing with the spoils of the contract. As a result, many well-meaning projects, with significant investment, have been implemented bluntly and generically, with little regard for the specifics of people and place. IPP chose to work to a different set of rhythms and values.

Mainstream regeneration has tended to confuse and mask root causes of inequality and misinterpreted the issues using terminology such as “places in deficit”, “left behind towns”, “the disengaged”, “hard to reach” and “culturally deprived”, as if targeted communities are devoid of life and hope. This terminology has permeated the arts sector too. Such language exposes how the privileged confirm their own prejudice and how this prejudice becomes normalised, and is pervasive in policy and practice.

Art propagated in this context, without questioning the pejorative way in which certain communities are characterised and pigeonholed, can often function as a superficial and tokenistic intervention, which only pays lip service to the fundamental issues which blight community empowerment. IPP sought to turn this language and its negative connotations upside down.

### *The terrain is politically charged...*

The Participatory Arts have become an established component (or ‘tool’) of regeneration for several decades in the UK and owe much of its impetus to the vestiges of the, hitherto politicised, Community Art movement that placed fundamental emphasis on process — and engagement with people — rather than the production of art and its inherent qualities.

As such, Participatory Art sees little benefit in mainstream art models and sees the principal role of the artist as passive interlocutor adding a degree of creative depth, connectivity and benign enjoyment to community consultation and the neighbourhood regeneration process.

All well and good. But it is important to understand that, laudable though this sentiment is, the terrain is — without question — politically charged and contested. In his essay, ‘Rethinking the role of artists in urban regeneration contexts’, **Stephen Prichard** speculates that...

*“The interrelated roles art plays within an increasingly uneven, transnational and globalised world, (is compacted by) the complex roles art plays in regeneration, gentrification and (what he describes as) ‘art-washing’. Those complexities are often both hidden behind simple narrative devices ... and used as a way of masking the layers of vested interests that coalesce around art projects involved in ‘urban renewal’.”*

Inevitably this emphasis on urban renewal has led to a fixation with measuring art and creativity in purely functional and economic terms; with art becoming a hapless vehicle in the clamour to measure and rank places against each other — and feeding the obsession with competitive ‘Placemaking’, so-called brand awareness and marketing.

### *Future Well-being — realising the principles on the ground...*

IPP draws from and sits alongside a wide range of initiatives, existing and emerging policy and practice, trying to shift thinking, re-vision and build new models for future practice. Wales is slowly moving away from measurements of GDP and GVA towards the primary value being that of ‘well-being’. In this respect IPP plays seamlessly into the values and ethos of the seminal Well-being of Future Generations (Wales) Act 2015, the Welsh Government’s flagship policy which puts a legal responsibility on the Welsh public sector, including government, to consider sustainability in all of its actions. This has fundamentally refocused political thinking around the principles of healthy and prosperous citizenship.



In many ways, IPP emulates its goal to “make the public bodies listed in the Act think more about the long-term, work better with people and communities and each other, look to prevent problems and take a more joined-up approach” by trying to make these strategic goals a reality in practice on the ground.

*“The IPP initiative is an innovative example of public institutions and communities working together as collaborators to put into practice the concepts and ambition of Well-being of Future Generations policy. Encouraging open and creative dialogue within and between public institutions and communities is critical to building a collaborative culture in which we can seriously shift away from a growth based system to one based on sustainability and well-being. Artists can be effective facilitators of this process and most importantly help us think imaginatively about our future. We need projects such as this to make the Act a reality on the ground”.*

**Jane Davidson**, Former Environment Minister, Welsh Assembly and original architect of the Act.

So what are some of the key themes that IPP has unearthed in its short history which harness the spirit of the Act and which provide critical reference to assist the learning and legacy process?

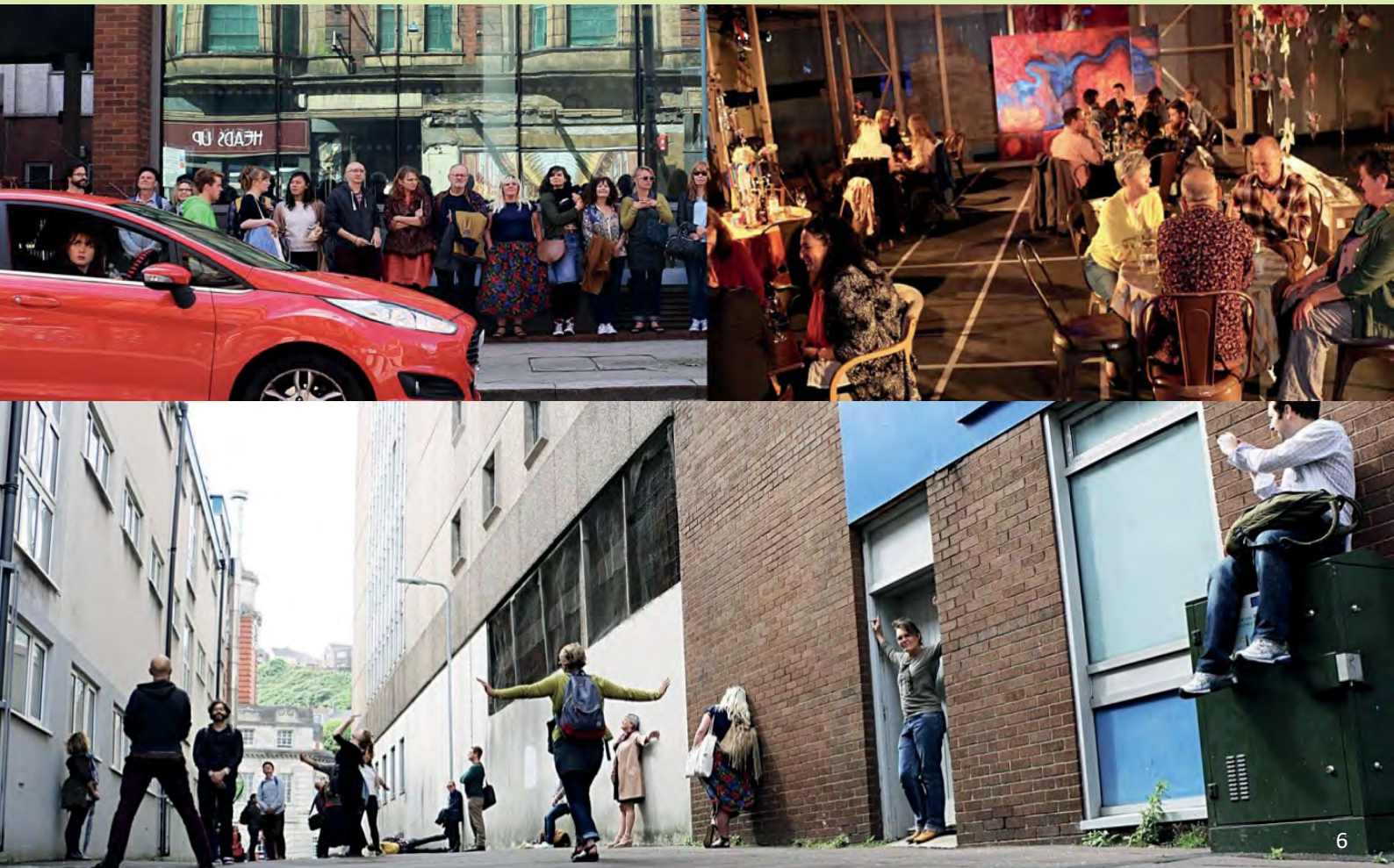
## Some Key Themes

### 1. The Funding Process and role of funder — priorities and practice

#### *Investment in the quality and durability of collaboration...*

From the outset, ACW understood that the nature of the collaborative framework for each creative IPP project was of critical importance. The projects selected were ones that breathed life into previously uncharted partnerships or consortia between very different and distinct organisations to those that they might have been accustomed to working with. So, for instance, a housing association could be partnered with a local authority leisure trust and a local arts group; similarly a commercial developer could be partnered with a social landlord and a group of artists; or a local authority regeneration department (as opposed to conventional arts development teams within the local authority) could be brought together with a theatre company.

*Photos below of one of the periodic cross-programme learning and development workshops, this one hosted by Station to Sea on Swansea High Street. A typical blend of formal and informal activities. Photographs: Claudine Conway*





In this way, new and untravelled connections could be made and mutual learning developed; all the while recognising that the cultural dissonance between very different partners — with their own distinct organisational and strategic needs and culture — would presage inevitable levels of frustration and conflict.

Recognising that the quality and durability of the relationships between partners would be key to the sustainability of the projects, ACW invested heavily in facilitating, and on many occasions patiently brokering, partnership meetings. So the overarching ethos from the funder's perspective was predominantly process-focused and incremental, with an acknowledgement that the financial and time investment needed to build confidence between parties — who had hitherto passed like ships in the night — would prohibit grand gestures and landmark moments in the project roll out.

ACW was also clear that the gestation period for project/consortia evolution was sacrosanct. And it was against this backdrop that projects were always envisaged to be supported by funding for 3-4 years, which within an arts context can be considered relatively longer term. The temporal certainty and security that this provided allowed people the critical distance to get to know each other and to evolve projects that embraced local context with an understanding of the knowledge and perspectives of all involved; and above all, provided a dialogic space to confront and address sometimes conflicting values and *modus operandi*.

While some consortia struggled more than others, there is no doubt that nurturing and prioritising relationship-building became a cathartic springboard to shift towards a more collaborative culture and level playing field.



*Finding Maindee open workshop event- The role of arts in place recognition*

### ***Resisting outputs and a problem-solving logic...***

The courage on behalf of the funders to forego 'output' fever and problem-solving logic and prioritise 'outcomes', particularly with naysayers and critics baying for tangible and conventional results, was a defining feature and resilience of IPP and, we believe, one of its enduring legacies. We need more funding agencies to be less fearful of the clamour for physical things, particularly if we are serious about addressing social environments where economic deprivation is all-pervasive and the foundations of social cohesion are tenuous with communities fighting a negative version of themselves.



*“There have been very few or no procedures to determine a problem and then fix it. Neither to answer a social need from prescriptive diagnosis. Neither to ‘regenerate’ culture on behalf of those that, in supposition, require re-cultivation. Instead, the IPP projects have generated value and values from self-effectuation and from inclusive dialogue and co-operative culture. To be clear, the IPP initiative is the invention of a policy of enablement; from the point of view of Arts Council Wales, it has been an institutional initiative designed to ‘allow’ unpredictable outcomes and defer any judgement of relative success, meaning that there is greater scope for genuine shared ownership.”*

**Paul Haywood**, Dean of Academic Programmes at University of the Arts: Central Saint Martins & Visiting Professor of Creative Community Engagement at University of Salford. External advisor to IPP

Consequently, engagement and collaboration had more meaning and real purpose beyond the constraints of traditional funding metrics. In this way, IPP became an emergent process, with the programme developing organically and responding to real changes — and challenges — on the ground. Projects were negotiated continually at the local level, between partner organisations and between project team and funder; a revelatory way of working that incorporated ‘failure’ into the learning process.

Without stating the obvious, the lack of predetermined programme and outcomes presented people on the ground with a blank canvas — and the freedom and agency to have an impact that was not contingent on any extraneous process. This left space for iterative working and for unintended ideas to take shape... thus respecting and following the concept that “Culture makes us as we make it”. Or to put it another way:

*“You can plan events, but if they go according to plan they are not events”*

**John Berger**

With the application process not focused on setting out and assessing outputs and anticipated activities, applications were assessed substantively on factors such as...

...the quality and potential of the consortia of organisations committed to the project.

...the level of openness shown by partners to adapt, learn and change through the experience to best exploit the uniqueness of the partnerships and what might be possible.

...the underpinning values, aims, purposes and approaches outlined.

It must be acknowledged that it is trickier to assess factors such as ‘commitment’, ‘quality of relationships’, ‘openness’ etc., rather than a preconceived plan of action and detailed budgets, and this bold approach by a funder is a leap of faith in itself.

## *Funding non-arts based organisations...*

Another key aspect of the funding requirement was that grant aid was destined to sit within the coffers of a non-arts based organisation and, in one case, it was awarded to a community group with representation from a wide network of organisations (Maindee Unlimited) rather than a consortium of institutions and organisations.

This was both symbolic (i.e. finances focusing minds and bringing a non-arts organisation centrally to the table, so to speak) and in some cases practical locally — whereby larger organisations with the capacity to manage the level of funding granted could carry out this task on behalf of smaller organisations. While this did allow for funds to be held and distributed locally according to each projects specific needs, this approach wasn’t without issues for some projects. The centralisation of funds created power imbalances between fundholder and other consortium members giving the grant holder perhaps too many levers of control through selective allocation of funds. With hindsight, according to **Steve Phillips**, social housing and regeneration professional (who was centrally involved in 2 of the IPP projects) *“...funding should be allocated to encourage independence and allow the sort of fierce challenge that needs to take place if there is going to be genuine, deep rooted systemic improvements.”* Additionally, project and payment delays due to large non-arts organisations’ procurement rules did not support a responsive, flexible and often opportunistic way of working encouraged through IPP.



cc-by-sa/2.0 - Salt marsh in the former... by Simon Mortimer - geograph.org.uk/p...

### *Creating more 'edge'....*

To use an ecological metaphor, drawing from the biodiversity arising at habitat boundaries, IPP aimed to exploit and expand the 'edge effect' — where different sectors, disciplines, cultures, etc., meet and coalesce. The more edge you create, the more biodiversity you get. These ecological ideas around the richness of the periphery area were explored by artists such as Nils Norman, one of the group of external 'experts' invited to share his ideas and practice with projects to generate discussion at the beginning of the IPP process.

Similarly, throughout the IPP journey, a series of cross-programme learning and development workshops were hosted by the different projects — each co-organised by ACW and the respective host project. These placed the emphasis on peer learning and relationship-building across the projects to build connections and a loose IPP 'community' a potential national 'movement'. Reflecting the multi-sector nature of local projects, these events brought together a very diverse range of practitioners, artists and community activists.

One aim of these events was to build a national network of mutual support and to create a national forum for discussion and training through formal and informal activities. The value and legacy of this face-to-face durational peer learning programme cannot be underestimated. It enabled relationships and debates to develop over time. It is these connections that support people to develop, innovate and drive forward ideas during and beyond the programme timeframe. Regrettably these forums have largely dissipated following the withdrawal of the IPP programme.

### *Promoting honest conversation...*

A level of trust and culture of honest conversation was achieved throughout the programme between funder and projects and within the wider network. This meant that productive and critical, often difficult, dialogue could take place (on the whole) in good faith. The degree of openness between the strategic and operational partners was fundamental to the success of the programme in general. It was also key to mitigating fear of risk and failure and promoting learning at each stage of the way. In many cases it also led to more effective, nuanced and better quality activity.

In this respect, the decision by the Arts Council to actively engage an external 'critical friend' and interlocutor in the guise of an independent programme manager was prescient. This person became a key conduit to the process and provided an objective sounding board — without fear or favour — both for the funders and the projects.



## 2. Regeneration beyond Placemaking: re-visioning the future and notions of change

### *Building a regenerative culture...*

Mainstream 'regeneration' models have traditionally operated to the mantra of 'quick wins' and 'turn key' solutions, particularly in relation to economically disadvantaged community contexts. From the outset, IPP considered the notion of regeneration in very different terms. For a start, it embraced the principle that the structural problems that beset many of our communities cannot be solved by incidental art programmes, and that to pretend that they can is counterproductive and futile. As such, IPP was wedded to a 'slow' regeneration ethic and one predicated on building a regenerative culture that placed communities and relationships (between all stakeholders, residents, institutions, funders etc.) at the centre of the creative exchange. However the stark truths of climate crisis and biodiversity loss raise an urgent question of how we marry slow regeneration with the rapid and far reaching changes we need to happen in the next 5-10 years.

*"In a powerful way, IPP has enabled artistic practice to challenge a conventional sense of regeneration, architecture and design culture to influence the way that community space and local development is planned and managed. Social regeneration, i.e. the investment in social capital, was the bedrock on which IPP proceeded and provided the basis on which citizen-led, place-based change could be identified and built, creating fresh communities of purpose"*

**Paul Haywood**



IPP also saw community regeneration beyond the conventional participatory model — working together, and with, and not prescribing the nature of any participation, as so often happens within current Community Arts practice, which can be largely passive and paternalistic. Emphatically, it was also not predicated on a numbers game and the numerical extent of community participation was not an end goal or evaluation metric. Rather, the concept of participation became more synonymous with the process of enabling transformation: there was an emphasis on quality of involvement and experience; focusing on depth not the number of people taking part.



*The Trebanog Project. Community bread making. Lead artist and photos: Owen Griffiths*

## *Investing in the real community leaders and movements...*

Investing in people and organisations that remain in the communities, long after a transient artistic initiative has ceased is vital to continued legacy and helping to make any meaningful change sustainable. The experience of IPP reinforces the fact that enduring and sustainable grassroots movements typically rely on a relatively small number of community activists or leaders, which makes them inherently vulnerable. It must be recognised that so many good things in reality come down to the commitment and unique leadership skills of very few people — community leaders/activists' — operating outside of a professional role. The importance of this simple reality cannot be underestimated (but is often under-recognised).

The IPP experience has highlighted that rather than fund big institutions maybe it is more effective to back community movements with committed leaders who are supported by expertise/cultural developers, as and when needed and requested.

## *Artists as facilitators of place recognition...*

Against this backdrop, there is an obligation for artists and others wishing to take part in 'socially engaged practice' to immerse themselves in, for example, local activist culture, the workings and imperatives of housing practice and the drivers that inform the regeneration sector. So that any interventions that are proposed are informed by the context and institutional frameworks that characterise, define, constrain and inform the operating environment. With this more nuanced and immersive knowledge the ability for creative intervention to help facilitate 'place recognition' and realisation rather than the concept of 'placemaking' — which often has more to do with place branding than social inclusion — will be enhanced. Or as **Wendell Berry** in *"The Art of the Commonplace"* muses: *"Until we understand what the land is, we are at odds with everything we touch"*.

Echoing this sentiment, IPP privileges the journey... before formulas get articulated — to counter the trend of places becoming less like themselves and more generic — and to grow places which are an expression of the people who live and work in them. Not imposing an aesthetic, but to discover and share what is authentic and what resonates with people; what is valued, and what should be valued.



*'Searching for the Centre' by artist Janetka Platun saw four women dressed as traditional Llangwm fisherwomen enter Haverfordwest at different points and through asking the public for guidance hunt for the centre of the town*



## CASE STUDY I : New paths, Mass Observation and the Nonsense

An important strand of the 'Finding Maindee' project was New Paths. New Paths was both a regular open forum or 'ideas lab' for artists and community members to help seed and evolve ideas and a small grants fund to support the development and realisation of those ideas selected by a local panel. It led to a mobilisation of local community members and artists, giving strength to a growing local network of creative community activists.

Reminiscent of the paid investigators of the Mass Observation project (1937-1950s) to record everyday life in the UK, through New Paths Maindee developed its own local artist-driven research project led by its own local artist-investigators — digging deep into the identities, values, diversities, emotions, experiences, beliefs, feelings and psyche of the place. This experiment with "art as research", creatively engaged with the people who live in the neighbourhood. One of the most salient of these experiments went the extra mile, delivering art to the doorstep.



'Stuart Farnsworth-data collector', the alter ego of artist and local resident Steve Jones, embarked on the project 'Nonsense' and carried out an extensive door-to-door survey over the summer and autumn of 2017, canvassing over 700 houses. He turned data collected into a book meticulously documenting, word for word, the hopes, fears and dreams of the community which was then developed into a performance and opera. This innovation develops into a novel "verbatim art", which is unfiltered and unedited.

A cacophony of voices from the community are not only embedded in this process, but these voices are also fundamental to the art. This was a new, vivid and idiosyncratic representation of the hopes and fears of so many of Maindee's residents, which completely transcended the tired models of civic community consultation. Local residents working with artists went on to develop a community event to consider the findings of this work, which raised so many questions about a range of current affairs and concerns.

Fun, friendly and informal approaches to engagement such as this illustrate the added benefit of art, to innovate novel ways that are responsive to place and value what people have to say. The simple act of listening can be empowering, and 'Nonsense' embraces face-to-face dialogue in a manner that was both humorous and illuminating. The bridging and bonding of social capital that has resulted from these various works, has helped to create new identities as well as representations of the place that are produced by those who live there, rather than outsiders.

### *Placemaking as social inclusion...*

In this respect, IPP was always about supporting a place to be the "best version of itself" and avoiding the tool-kit, quick fix thinking and approach prevalent in the roll out of professional Placemaking — often based on fleeting observation and lacking any real authenticity, control and involvement of communities.

*“A lesson learnt from regeneration projects is that the funder can seem to be generous in their offer of money, but all to often they want to do such things as: push places upmarket; make them use a certain set of urban designers or find something unique - the latter seemingly an oxymoron.... Space is important and whole of the Finding Maindee project was about facilitating wider conversation and views [practising acceptance and an ability to trust] which ended up in the production of many materials [photos, the Nonsense interviews, a tapestry and more] and only one physical change [to Maindee Library] which would suit the normal sense of regeneration. That latter physical change was a process which was negotiated through an understanding of what was already valuable to people [the pull] and what they were prepared to explore for the future [the push].”*

**Aled Singleton**, ex-Project Manager Finding Maindee- in his blog article Push and Pull of Place <https://www-maindee.org/blog/the-push-and-pull-of-place>

### *Moving beyond a competitive culture of place ranking...*

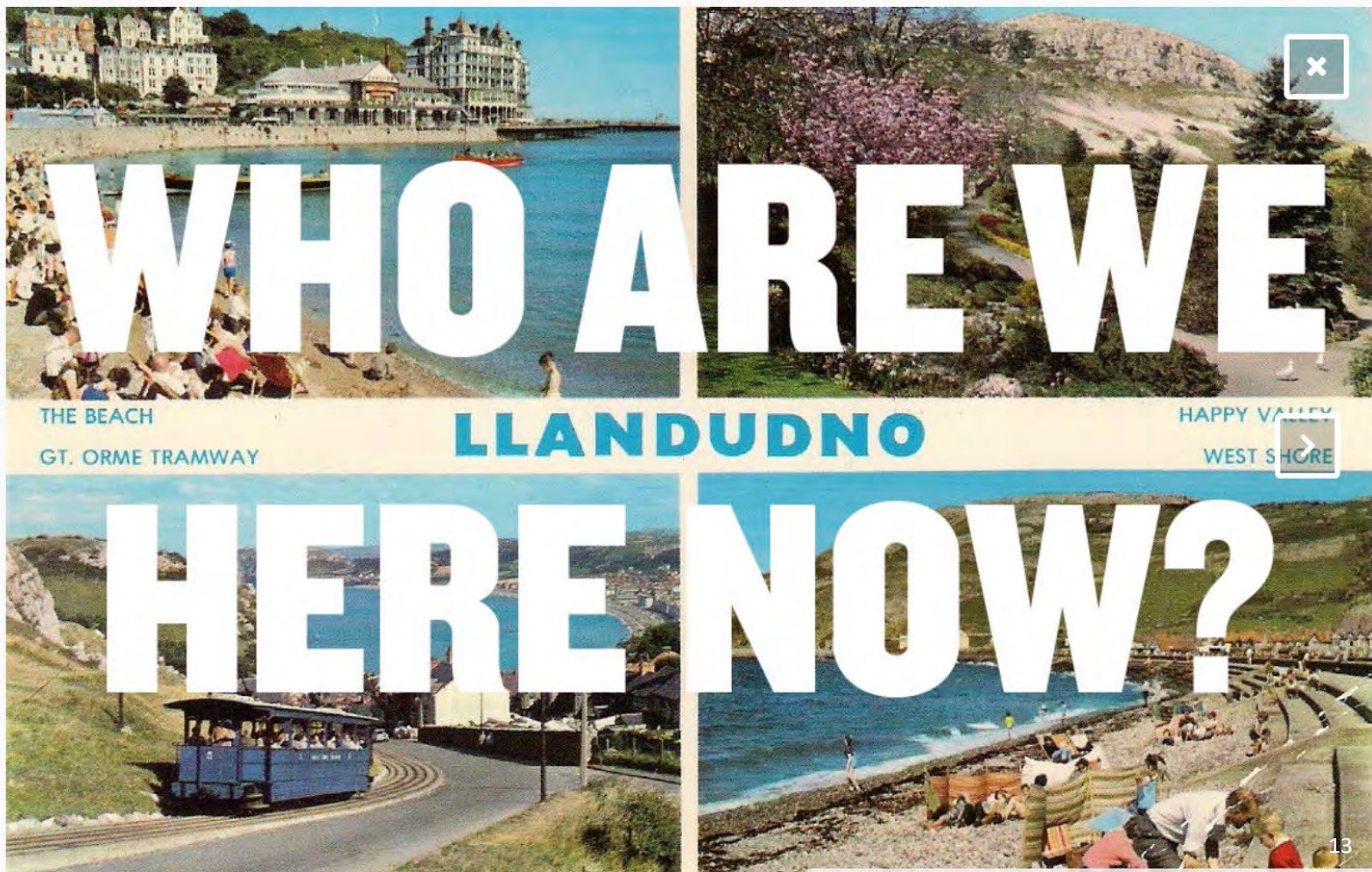
In this regard, the work of the Foundational Economy Collective on foundational liveability <https://foundational-economy.com/> is pertinent particularly in terms of putting an end to place ranking: in the words of **Prof. Karel Williams**, *“We have to put behind us the binary distinction of successful and unsuccessful places — materialized as left-behind places”* (Talk ‘Foundational Liveability: A new approach to making places work better’ given at Regeneration Practitioners Network Wales, Cardiff 27 August 2019).

This has fuelled an obsession with finding the local USP, finding superficial markers of difference and use of value-laden (often elitist) measurements... which begs to question, what’s wrong with ‘ordinary’ places or ‘unexceptional’ places? When thinking about how to make places work better, **the Foundational Economy Collective** call for *“The end of place ranking and the beginning of place specific intervention in ordinary places... (because)... places are like Tolstoy’s unhappy families, unhappy in their own way and can’t be ranked from 1-60 as by Demos PWC”*.

### *All places are extraordinary if you look deeply enough...*

Many artists commissioned within IPP were highly skilled in revealing and uncovering the vernacular and quotidian; often things considered prosaic or which have gone largely unnoticed became seedbeds for exploration and discovery. Conversely, those things in the urban and social landscape which appeared incongruous and discordant, but which may have become normalised through familiarity and matter-of-factness could be identified and highlighted through the creative process.

*As part of the Shape My Town project by Culture Action Llandudno, artists Becca Thomas and Clare Charles explored the towns identity with various community groups*





## Revealing hidden barriers...

Programmes like IPP have the power to cultivate safe space for open constructive discussions and explorations of identity without the normal constraints of mainstream regeneration agendas. This in turn can help reveal and challenge the often hidden institutional, policy and procedural barriers which (consciously or unconsciously) impede creative thinking and action and frustrate those on the ground from making good stuff happen. While this can be linked more generally with a crisis of democracy and some of these barriers are relatively generic, the barriers on a more local level vary from place to place. IPP tried to drill down into the peculiarities that affected each individual place.

Making these barriers visible is a key part of making our institutions fit for purpose in fulfilling their role as servants of citizens. It also reinforces a recognition of citizens as actors not just passive recipients. Institutions need programmes like IPP to help them improve what they are doing.



Courtesy Glenn Davidson/Artststion

## 3. Contemporary Arts verses Community Arts as Levers of Regeneration

Whether by design or accident, contemporary art and community art activity have been largely considered as two distinct forms of mutually exclusive practice, with contemporary art being seen as an elitist preoccupation for artists who work primarily for and by themselves, and who exhibit their wares in the rarefied and contemplative space of the white-walled gallery; by contrast, community artists have been characterised as creative agents of the community, with their artistic authorship shared collectively with the participating community, and the process of engagement taking precedence over the production of art. Generally speaking, this distinction — dichotomy even — has prevailed within arts funding culture and patronage for many decades. Although, with the era of 'socially engaged practice' becoming increasingly prominent in arts development work the hard boundaries between these two apparently polar genres have begun to blur.

### Agents of Change...

The experimental and unconventional nature of IPP, and the inalienable belief in the role of the individual artist as agent of change, has further eroded these boundaries and started to create a level of intelligent and nuanced debate which has foregrounded a more vital, creatively adventurous and meaningful connectivity between Art and Community. One that invests heavily in the quality of ideas and the individual aspirations of the artist while at the same time introducing community partners to creative strategies which challenge conventional wisdom rather than confirm common narratives and offer easy answers to difficult social questions. In this process, ambition has been lifted and imaginative frameworks built which go beyond the simple tropes of much community art, which have largely dominated the artistic influence and input into the fields of regeneration, local development and, so-called, Placemaking

### Socially Engaged Practice — just a new genre?

Rather than becoming a compliant part of mainstream regeneration culture, IPP has sited its commissioned artists as hard agents of change not soft servants of gentrification; to avoid, as Stephen Prichard puts it, Art becoming "... our nation's soft powered weapon of choice". It is not about distracting from reality or making people feel better about their bad lot. Artists can be useful catalysts of change because they are not part of the conventional order of things. Within this context it is important that the motivations of commissioned artists are questioned and rigorously understood. The move towards 'socially engaged' arts practice isn't always working in the interests of social regeneration or local communities - and can be self serving like anything else..

## CASE STUDY II: A tortuous but enlightened journey on the Yellow Brick Road

<https://arts-and-minds.squarespace.com/yellow-brick-road>

Following a call to artists "who understand the constraints of working in the public realm – but who relish the 'democratic' exposure that this challenging context delivers – and who can offer imaginative solutions to help transform the built environment in ways that transcend many of the tired models of conventional public art and engagement that we see around us in many of our urban spaces today", Glenn Davidson of Artstation was appointed as artist-in-residence on behalf of the Arts+Minds IPP project in St. Georges Court, Tredegar: a brutalist flats complex on the edge of the town with a majority share of rental accommodation, administered by social landlord, Tai Calon Community Housing.



Referencing the elevated 60's walkways that link the estate, the artist evoked the symbolism of the Yellow Brick Road from 'The Wizard of Oz' as a moniker for his immersive residency with residents; a creative journey addressing difficult social realities, illusions and the omnipresence of statutory and non-statutory agencies who effectively sit in judgement in relation to the health and well-being of residents' lives.

Following negotiation, the project co-ordinator convinced Tai Calon — the largest social landlord in Blaenau Gwent to provide a vacant flat on the estate. This flat became an essential dialogic and immersive space for the artist and his array of creative associates to facilitate creative community conversation, environmental design team meetings (with the residents central to this process), meetings with third sector agencies, councillors and Welsh Government civil servants and, most importantly, a surgery on site for residents to express their concerns and aspirations for their homes and spaces around them.

In short, Davidson's 'Art', became a creative negotiation around the values of the 'social contract', with the artist deploying creative interventions that addressed fundamental issues of disaffection and the lack of agency experienced by the residents. This artistic strategy was an attempt to redirect mainstream environmental improvement programmes towards the values of the social, rather than, physical regeneration model. Not surprisingly this holistic, and community-centred approach, led to significant resistance from conventional design team professionals who, it appears, are largely unaccustomed to reflexive ways of working. But it did very successfully galvanise members of the community.



As a direct result of the artist's work, a new residents association was formed which now meets regularly in the church hall; a venue at the heart of the estate, but which had been largely ignored by the residents as a community space until the artist developed a series of creative means to rebuild relations with the local vicar and his support staff. The residents association remains a fledgling organisation but it now engages regularly with the police, local councillors, the social landlord and other support agencies. And while the project co-ordinator continues to attend meetings on a pro-bono basis to contribute expertise and chart the legacy of the arts programme, the short term nature of the IPP programme means that opportunities for the artist, and other like-minded artists, to provide creative agency to the community development process has been lost, squandered even.



## Art — always at the margins?

Notwithstanding this, the role of the artist and the artistic commission continues to be misconstrued or narrowly understood in planning and regeneration circles; it is often considered an afterthought — the icing on the cake — the activity or object that is commissioned (with Section 106 money) which causes least disruption to the procurement process and which asks nothing of the other design team professionals who have already cast the conceptual die and imposed their regenerative red lines. For the most part this marginalisation and disregard for the agency of the socially engaged artist has led to predictable, safe, mediocre and compliant art; an art that merely oils the wheels of civic and municipal nicety and provides a chimera and gloss, which conveniently obscures any deeper conflicts or societal contradictions. In this reductive process, the potential and value of the arts to affect and support change becomes fundamentally undermined.

IPP aimed to and — we believe — succeeded in creating the conditions whereby the intervention of the individual artist/artists in partnership with community activists and residents could gain significantly more traction. IPP wanted to explore and fashion situations where the artist in collaboration with communities and organisational partners was centrally involved in all stages of the regeneration and community development process — most importantly from the beginning of the procurement process; finding opportunities at every stage for people, and not just the regeneration professionals, to be part of a process of change never mind, theory. As a result, it is fair to say that across all 7 projects perceptions about the nature of art and the intrinsic role that the artist can play in redefining and articulating the principles of regenerative development have significantly evolved and matured.



As part of the STAMP project, at the historic and derelict site Cei Llechi (Slate Quay) in Caernarfon, the old forge was reinstated to create a temporary community forge and focal point for testing and discussing future uses of the site.

## 4. Shifting What We Value and How We Measure Value

*“There are no objective views of culture, we cannot escape its clutches”*

**Raymond Williams**, ‘Keywords: A Vocabulary of Culture and Society’, 1976

### *Developing a new language to measure value and lasting change...*

With its commitment to grass roots development and cultural democracy IPP has sought to actively promote the overlapping principles of creativity, quality, justice and inclusion. In seeking to offer a new paradigm of creative engagement IPP effectively responds to....

*“... the need to create a new language for the value of community-focused regeneration that is not solely dependent on the lexicon of economic values – in line, in fact with the values of the Future Generations legislation, and with the well-being and sustainability agendas. We need to find a language that enables us to really measure truer, more lasting change — Self-fulfilment? A sense of belonging? A sense of being able to explore and debate how places and communities might change and develop? The feeling of a sense of power?”*

**Barbara Castle**, Community Regeneration Activist

At the same time there needs to be much stronger empowerment locally — policy needs to be informed by the experience of delivery at the community level and this should be fed back to influence and change the policy agendas at the local authority & government levels.

While ACW, like many public organisations, opted to frame the official IPP programme evaluation in a ‘theory of change’ methodology, the team behind IPP also wanted to use the process to better understand the difficulties of measuring emergent programmes such as IPP and how to best capture value.





The beauty of the IPP programme was that it was not afraid to address this philosophical question and, in doing so, both enriched the quality of the discourse and confounded the theory of ‘quick wins’ and ‘turn key’ solutions, which have done little to assuage disaffection and bolster community agency in the longer term.

### *Beyond economic values and metaphors — understanding the lived experience..*

In this context, IPP has substantiated the view that there must be better ways of understanding the value of culture, and indeed also the value of regeneration initiatives, beyond the economic imperative. We urgently need to reinvigorate our understanding of cultural value, beyond the limits of numbers and economic measures to better understand where value exists. It is these extra-economic values, that describe the relations generated on the ground by innovative and experimental artworks.

The PhD study has concluded that these first-order representations are often more useful, reliable and valid than any other source of data when it comes to assessing specific cases of the efficacy of arts practice. This approach has a focus on lived-experience and direct experience — more in line with anthropological study. It values emotional and affective associations so vital to understanding the impact on people’s lives, effectively operating as an emotional antifreeze. We have to ask ourselves... what does success feel like ? If one thing has shone through profoundly during the extraordinary IPP journey, it is that cultural happenings or events cannot be readily predicted or predefined. Rather, what ‘happens’ often surprises and goes beyond what was originally planned. And in the absence of a clearly defined ‘road map’ — which was always a counterintuitive pre-requisite of IPP — if we don’t trace the journey that emerges then we rather miss the point.



*Photo by Clemetine Schneidermann as part of her photography-in-residence at the Arts and Minds project in Blaenau Gwent. Part of her residency involved working with a group of local girls and local stylist, Charlotte James to do improvised fashion shoots.*

## Some key observations and recommendations to aid the process

Since 2015 when IPP began, already the world is a very different place. However the key themes identified above only highlight that initiatives such as IPP are more important and needed than ever. With the traditional drivers of society being lost and so much uncertainty on the horizon, we urgently need to reinvent the drivers and cohesion of civil society...create 'fresh communities of purpose'.

IPP is a relatively short-lived pilot project, and cultural change of the magnitude needed to reconfigure the tenets of regeneration culture — which are so deeply embedded — is a mammoth task. In this respect the IPP 'experiment' must be viewed as the first staging post of a long and arduous journey; and without capacity building and a financial commitment to drive this radical programme forward its influence and ability to build on its successes will, we believe, be seen retrospectively as a well-meaning but largely impotent exercise in peripheral community development. In this respect, the learning from IPP needs to be embedded within the philosophical framework of ACW's 'Arts For All' strategy and become central to the ethos of Lottery funding principles.

Some key observations and recommendations include:

### *Stakeholder Culture*

A profound part of IPP was based on the complexion of the partnerships that were brought together, either as flags of convenience (to draw down funding) or because of a genuine desire for disparate organisations to work together. It is the mixing of very different organisational cultures that created opportunities for different kinds of working and where the creative impulse could start to influence mainstream orthodox thinking. Clearly this worked to greater or lesser degrees, depending on how 'embedded' the respective IPP project was within the host (non-arts)organisation.

In this respect it is counterproductive for the project to be realised within an organisation, 'under the radar'. In other words, the CEO/senior management must have ownership of the project from the outset — and throughout the project — otherwise operatives further down the chain of command could become disaffected, disparage or ignore the process in the absence of directorial lead, commitment and motivation. Without this support the organisation may be merely going through the motions — and not actually embedding real learning or embracing the spirit of the arts-led culture change that the public funding was predicated on in the first place.

### *Failure as part of the Learning Process*

We need to get better at learning from difficulties and failures and move beyond a culture of good practice 'good news stories'. The real learning often lies within the struggle. This connects to creating a working culture of trust and honesty and also the way in which we chose to measure and evaluate. It also relies on leadership and commitment from the funder to embrace this culture.

Clearly this is where IPP functioned so successfully in contrast to many other superficially similar programmes. Because there was moral support from the organisers to allow projects to evolve and not be subject to the tyranny of the overarching blueprint, activity could respond more authentically to the rhythms and empirical realities of the community environments where the 'immersion' took place. At its best, this created a much more synergistic relationship between the 'outsider' artists and the resident communities.

### *Time to Breathe and Acclimatise*

Once again, IPP demonstrated that long gestation periods, particularly in relation to building meaningful relationships from the outset with unfamiliar partners was essential if the partnership was to have robustness, trust and sustainability. In this respect, 'front-loading' the project and investing considerable resource and time before attempting to produce any tangible (or intangible) outcomes/outputs is paramount. And so the art of conversation rather than the art of production plays an invaluable and fundamental role in winning hearts and minds.

### *The importance of Continuity*

Many consortium organisations were undergoing substantial restructure and change during the time span of the project and consequently this had a detrimental effect on the projects — either through staff changes or changing organisational priorities. For example, one housing association had three changes in CEO. In a programme so focused on relationship-building, consciousness-raising and learning, this personnel churn is a huge set back to project evolution, stability and purpose. Mechanisms need to be put in place to ensure that information/experience is transferred seamlessly from one regime to the next, so to speak, so that the wheel does not have to be reinvented perpetually, and valuable learning lost. Additionally we need to get better at sharing and absorbing the learning (of success, failures, difficulties, solutions) within organisations.



## *The Agency and Importance of real community leaders and community lead organisations such as Local Residents Associations/Forums*

In reality, projects like IPP can never address the structural issues that impact on the daily lives of members of the community. However if arts programme are to have any long term impact within specific communities then it is imperative that they work through (and potentially help to develop if they don't exist) local forums, as they represent potent forums that allow residents to engage with their councillors, service providers, the police and other third sector organisations on a regular basis. If ACW wants communities to believe their organisation has a genuine desire to affect change then they need to shore up the immersive programme with a longer term funding commitment that builds on any good work achieved. So much arts activity is seen (for good reason) as a worthy helping hand, and without a fundamental commitment on the part of the funders to address the long term structural deficits, that surely is at the heart of the regeneration paradox.

### *A need for new skills, roles and understanding within the arts sector*

The level of professional learning and upskilling involved in IPP has been exceptional and in many ways it revealed some of the current weaknesses and gaps within the arts sector in Wales. In particular, it highlighted the need for new hybrid roles which span the arts and multiple sectors — a more sophisticated type of curator/creative producer who can work effectively and strategically in different environments. Counter-intuitively community arts organisations are not necessarily natural partners for this kind of community-immersed programme and may not bring the required understanding and curatorial expertise. It appears that many are driven by more therapeutic participatory models rather than a desire to develop the agency of communities to effect social and political change. There is also a tendency towards a 'bums on seats' mentality: or in other words, evaluation and accountability by numbers. In this respect, the emphasis on 'process' can downgrade aesthetic considerations or notions of quality. ACW plays an influential role here in that its current set of metrics, we would argue, allows — encourages even — bad practice to perpetuate.

### *Expanding the 'edge effect'*

There is huge potential to share the learning and key methodologies developed more broadly throughout Wales through continuing to expand the 'edge effect' — bringing the arts sector together with a whole host of other sectors and interests. This could be through targeted training, for example, for community teams in Housing Associations or for planning/regeneration teams in Local Authorities and through collaborative events/workshops such as between Arts Council Wales and Community Housing Cymru. As observed by Steve Phillips from his experience of working in two housing associations, involved in two IPP projects, there is the need for more training and development of staff in engagement techniques and understanding iterative processes. He identifies a fundamental ignorance amongst social landlords in relation to expanded service development and delivery, based on cooperative practices and the challenges of working with — and critically engaging — a properly informed community partner.

### *Reciprocal & Regular Exchanges*

The importance of sharing common interests, successes and failures amongst collective projects was both affirmative and challenging; and also the fact that these were organised with a degree of informality and spontaneity meant that they were not prescriptive but were able to respond more directly with the specifics of each project's rhythms and nuances. However, it is imperative that these forums do not become comfort zones and talking shops amongst like-minded artists and curators but actively include key people from the non-art stakeholder class. Without that interaction — and insistence that the non-art stakeholders become embedded within the process — the role of Art in civic space will continue to be perceived as largely decorative, incidental and expendable and, by extension, not something that will have any real value in the increasingly corporate world of mainstream community regeneration.

*The Trebanog Project. Lead artist: Owen Griffiths*



This paper is an independent review and reflection by Ruth Essex and Chris Coppock commissioned by the Arts Council of Wales.

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For more information on Ideas People Places go to:

<https://arts.wales/our-impact/how-we-reach-wider-audiences/ideas-people-places>

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