

What is Now?

MARKET
ENTRANCE

art city

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

Artcity would like to thank the following people and organisations for their generous support in many and varied ways...

Midland Heart, Cooke Rudling, Paul Dale, Rajas Takeaway, Rory Mack Associates Ltd, Urban Spectrum Property Management Limited, Lee Challinor, Sunil Gulshan, Gulshan Property Holdings, Cllr Alan Dutton, Castle Contractors, Richard Redwin, Our Burslem, The Leopard Pub, The Duke William Pub, The Market Cafe, Barewall Art Gallery and Bread in Common

Artcity would also like to thank project participants Dan Thompson, Hilary Hughes, Anne Kinnaird and Siobhan Macaleer for delivering professional development sessions. Project artists Sonia Mirza, Sophie Molineaux, Joanna Dawidowska, Jack Stancliffe, Aimee Carter and Himarni Brownsword. Project Curators Martin Gooding, Holly Norcup, Selina Oakes, Rebecca Kremer, Leone Davis and Melodie Forrester. Site Managers Sarah Bonam, Peter Wilshaw, Annette Cartlidge and Ryan Ball. Additional Artists Chris Oldham for taking part in a workshop for Sonia and Melodie, Kidda Kinsey for artwork for the WiN map, Clinton Ball for vinyls in shop windows and Lead Curator Hilary Hughes. Finally Natalie Willatt for photographic documentation, Nicola Winstanley for project evaluation, and all of the volunteers that supported the project on workshop and event days.

Project Report by Nicola Winstanley. Photography by Natalie Willatt.
December 2018.



Supported using public funding by
**ARTS COUNCIL
ENGLAND**



WHAT IS NOW?

What Is Now? (WiN) was devised and led by arts and educational charity BArts as part of a 5 year programme of work by arts development consortium Artcity. Artcity aims to enable artistic activity in redundant spaces across the city of Stoke-on-Trent in an effort to encourage arts graduate retention and urban renewal through the arts. The Artcity Programme is about to enter its 5th year.

In early 2018, BArts were approached by Amanda Bromley, whose commercial art gallery 'Barewall' is situated in Burslem, one of the six historic towns that comprise Stoke-on-Trent. Having been a long time advocate for Burslem and the arts, Amanda asked Artcity to collaborate on a project in response to a slew of damning news reports that had emerged, naming Burslem as the town with the lowest shop occupancy in the country.¹



GHOST TOWN Britain's emptiest high street revealed where a **THIRD** of all shops lie empty – the latest victim of the relentless rise of internet shopping

Once a thriving potteries town, Burslem in Stoke-on-Trent has been decimated

To realise Artcity's twin aims of re-purposing disused spaces and encouraging graduate retention, WiN was devised as a site specific talent development project for emerging artists and curators. The project aimed to match 6 emerging artists with 6 emerging curators and facilitate residencies in 6 of Burslem's 23 empty town centre shops to 're-imagine the high street'. Over two months the pairs would be expected to attend professional development workshops and create a series of pop-up studio events, ending in an exhibition trail as part of the 'Burslem Summer of Art'.²

This short report discusses the main successes and challenges of the project for the emerging artists and curators involved, and discusses impacts on the local area and its people. The report also discusses specific problems that this project encountered that highlight some of the wider barriers to reviving disused retail and heritage properties, which are not only concerning for Burslem and Stoke-on-Trent, but for all struggling retail/historic high-streets in the UK.

¹ According to the Local Data Company, C 2016.

² The Burslem Summer of Art was designed to compliment, and capitalise on, the arrival of The Weeping Window Poppies installation in nearby Middleport, and included the Three Counties Art Exhibition, poetry trails and street festivals.

ARTISTS & CURATORS



Artist: Joanna Dawidowska
Graduated: 2012
BA Ceramics
Location: Staffs University

Curator: Leone Davis
Graduated: Ongoing
MA Art Gallery & Museum Studies
Location: University of Manchester



Artist: Jack Stancliffe
Graduated: 2017
MA Fine Art
Location: Birmingham City University

Curator: Selina Oakes
Graduated: 2012
BA Fine Art
Location: Newcastle University



Artist: Aimee Carter
Graduated: 2018
BA Film Studies
Location: Staffordshire University

Curator: Holly Norcup
Graduated: 2018
MA Social and Community Psychology
Location: Keele University



Artist: Hirmani Brownsword
Graduated: Ongoing
BA Art History
Location: The Courtauld Institute of Art

Curator: Martin Gooding
Graduated: 2010
BA Product Design
Location: Staffordshire University



Artist: Sonia Mirza
Graduated: 2016
BA Fine Art
Location: Staffordshire University

Curator: Melodie Forrester
Graduated: Ongoing
MA Music Production
Location: Staffordshire University



Artist: Sophie Molineaux
Graduated 2018
BA Fine Art
Location: Staffordshire University

Curator: Becki Kremer
Graduated: 2012
BA Music Journalism
Location: Staffordshire University

RECRUITING ARTISTS

Artcity's initial ambition was to recruit artists and curators identified at Staffordshire University's graduate shows. In reality, only 2 of the 12 people involved were reached this way, owing to lack of take up from those approached. Some of those approached failed to respond to the offer at such a busy time in their academic careers, and many more had already made plans to study elsewhere or return to their home towns following the end of their studies. In the end, 9 of the 12 participants regarded Stoke-on-Trent as their hometown, either by birth or from having lived there for a significant amount of time, and so were more able to commit to the project at this time. If the project were to be repeated with the desire to target arts students, perhaps 2nd year degree students would be in a better position to engage during their summer break than those in the 3rd year. This way, participating students who may become inspired to pursue an arts career in Stoke-on-Trent would have a further year to explore this possibility and make arrangements to follow on from their studies. This is not to say that retaining local arts graduates is not a worthy endeavour, but making sure that opportunities are accessible to students from further afield would be a good way to diversify the city's artistic pool and make the city a more attractive prospect for emerging arts practitioners from across the country.

EMERGING ARTISTS & CURATORS

The 12 people that took part in WiN come from a variety of disciplines and have a wide range of experience levels- from Artist Hirmani Brownsword who, at the time of the project, had not yet started her undergraduate degree, to her curatorial partner Martin Gooding, who graduated in 2010. Or, from Artist Joanna Dawidowska who had several years of industry experience to her curatorial partner Leone Davis, who had only graduated from her undergraduate degree 2 months previous. However, all of the participants describe themselves as being 'early career' artists, curators or producers, if not because of their very recent graduation, then because of a fairly recent shift in their creative focus. Each of the participants took part in the project to gain experience, further their professional development and take advantage of a paid opportunity to make art. Most of the artists and curators that took part in the project may not be recent graduates as expected, but it does highlight the need for continuing professional development opportunities for arts practitioners several years into their careers.

RELATIONSHIPS WITH THE CITY

At the start of the project, many of the participants with socially engaged practices spoke about having a plural relationship with the city of Stoke-on-Trent- all at once in enamoured with, worn down by, inspired by and frustrated by it.

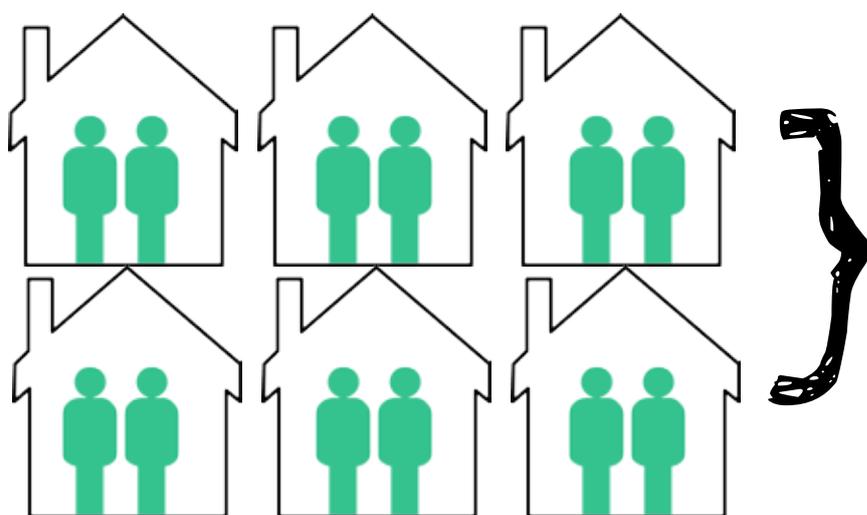
Most of the participants said that they thought a creative career in Stoke-on-Trent was a viable prospect, but with conditions- they would have to be more business-like, make community focused work and have links to bigger arts organisations to access funding. Some said that to make a creative career viable they would have to broaden their practice to suit this kind of work, which makes it particularly unattractive to specialised artists. This notion is supported the fact that the participants with more specialised practices were less convinced of the viability of a creative career in Stoke.

Some participants talked about the limitations of the city in terms of career development; That a prerequisite of being a creative practitioner in Stoke was living on a very low income, which is entirely possible to do in Stoke-on-Trent, but aspiring beyond this would render a career inviable at the moment. For more specialised practitioners like film and animation graduate Aimee, there are few existing prospects for career development because there aren't enough established creative industry employers to find work with.

Participants in the earliest stages of their career were very hopeful for the future, “seeing how rapidly things are developing now in the arts that a few years down the line there may be a career for me”- Leone. These artists, who were going on to further study recognised a “small but strong arts community platform” from which to raise the bar when they returned. - Hirmani

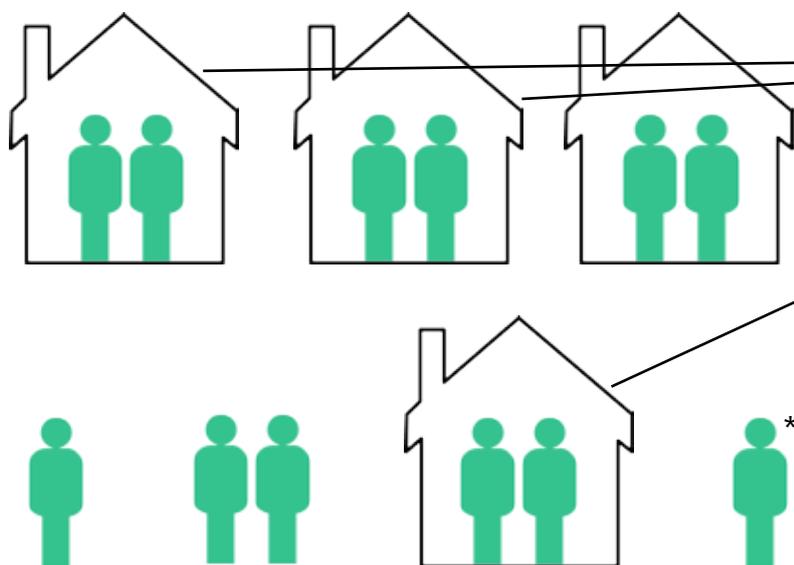
These insights tell us that there is confidence in the city as an incubator, but the cultural industries and infrastructure would need to grow and mature to support emerging practitioners into the next stage of their careers, and provide the specialised career development opportunities that are currently found in larger surrounding cities.

THE PLAN



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
JULY 2018						
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	X	X	X	X	X	X
23	X	X	X	X	X	X
24	X	X	X	X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	X	X	X	X	X	X
29	X	X	X	X	X	X
30	X	X	X	X	X	X
31	X	X	X	X	X	X
www.FESTIVALPROFESSOR.COM						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
AUGUST 2018						
			1	2	3	4
5	X	X	X	X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X	X	X
7	X	X	X	X	X	X
8	X	X	X	X	X	X
9	X	X	X	X	X	X
10	X	X	X	X	X	X
11	X	X	X	X	X	X
12	X	X	X	X	X	X
13	X	X	X	X	X	X
14	X	X	X	X	X	X
15	X	X	X	X	X	X
16	X	X	X	X	X	X
17	X	X	X	X	X	X
18	X	X	X	X	X	X
19	X	X	X	X	X	X
20	X	X	X	X	X	X
21	X	X	X	X	X	X
22	X	X	X	X	X	X
23	X	X	X	X	X	X
24	X	X	X	X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	X	X	X	X	X	X
29	X	X	X	X	X	X
30	X	X	X	X	X	X
31	X	X	X	X	X	X
www.FESTIVALPROFESSOR.COM						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
SEPTEMBER 2018						
						1
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
3	X	X	X	X	X	X
4	X	X	X	X	X	X
5	X	X	X	X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X	X	X
7	X	X	X	X	X	X
8	X	X	X	X	X	X
9	X	X	X	X	X	X
10	X	X	X	X	X	X
11	X	X	X	X	X	X
12	X	X	X	X	X	X
13	X	X	X	X	X	X
14	X	X	X	X	X	X
15	X	X	X	X	X	X
16	X	X	X	X	X	X
17	X	X	X	X	X	X
18	X	X	X	X	X	X
19	X	X	X	X	X	X
20	X	X	X	X	X	X
21	X	X	X	X	X	X
22	X	X	X	X	X	X
23	X	X	X	X	X	X
24	X	X	X	X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	X	X	X	X	X	X
29	X	X	X	X	X	X
30	X	X	X	X	X	X
31	X	X	X	X	X	X
www.FESTIVALPROFESSOR.COM						

THE REALITY



SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
AUGUST 2018						
			1	2	3	4
5						
6						
7						
8						
9						
10						
11						
12						
13						
14						
15						
16						
17						
18						
19	X	X	X	X	X	X
20	X	X	X	X	X	X
21	X	X	X	X	X	X
22	X	X	X	X	X	X
23	X	X	X	X	X	X
24	X	X	X	X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	X	X	X	X	X	X
29	X	X	X	X	X	X
30	X	X	X	X	X	X
31	X	X	X	X	X	X
www.FESTIVALPROFESSOR.COM						
SUNDAY	MONDAY	TUESDAY	WEDNESDAY	THURSDAY	FRIDAY	SATURDAY
SEPTEMBER 2018						
						1
2	X	X	X	X	X	X
3	X	X	X	X	X	X
4	X	X	X	X	X	X
5	X	X	X	X	X	X
6	X	X	X	X	X	X
7	X	X	X	X	X	X
8	X	X	X	X	X	X
9	X	X	X	X	X	X
10	X	X	X	X	X	X
11	X	X	X	X	X	X
12	X	X	X	X	X	X
13	X	X	X	X	X	X
14	X	X	X	X	X	X
15	X	X	X	X	X	X
16	X	X	X	X	X	X
17	X	X	X	X	X	X
18	X	X	X	X	X	X
19	X	X	X	X	X	X
20	X	X	X	X	X	X
21	X	X	X	X	X	X
22	X	X	X	X	X	X
23	X	X	X	X	X	X
24	X	X	X	X	X	X
25	X	X	X	X	X	X
26	X	X	X	X	X	X
27	X	X	X	X	X	X
28	X	X	X	X	X	X
29	X	X	X	X	X	X
30	X	X	X	X	X	X
31	X	X	X	X	X	X
www.FESTIVALPROFESSOR.COM						

* One of the artist/curator pairs who did not have a building to work in created separate projects. More on page 14.

The original plan for the project was to secure at least 6 empty shops on Burslem's high-street in which each of the pairs would undertake their residency. After surveying the town and recruiting Annette Cartilage, a connected member of the community and long term ambassador for Burslem, to lead on acquiring the properties, BArts were confident that they would be able to access at least 6 of the 23 empty shops that exist on the high-street for an 8 week period. This ambition proved to be much more difficult to achieve than anyone had anticipated. Despite Annette's reputation as a community leader and her substantial network of contacts in the town, she faced multiple barriers that meant that 2 of the 6 pairs had to complete the residency without buildings. With substantial effort, 4 shops were acquired between mid to late August, meaning participants had between 2 and 4 weeks to acquaint themselves with Burslem and transform their spaces, rather than 8 weeks as planned.

Most of artists and curators took this practical difficulty in their stride, with those without buildings creating on-street interventions and carrying out their work outdoors or in Burslem's public buildings. Both of these pairs said that they were happy to work outside, and that it had certain advantages over being confined to a building. Nevertheless, one of the aims of the project was to respond to the problem of empty shops, and it revealed some alarming facts about the difficulty of tackling this problem.

THE BUILDINGS

By far the majority of the empty buildings in Burslem's town centre are privately owned, and the two project buildings owned by local people were by far the easiest ones to secure. Although skeptical about the potential impact of the project, they had sympathy for the cause, agreeing that something needed to happen in Burslem to change its fortunes. With the project partners connected to the 'Our Burslem' community group, which is very active in implementing positive change for the town, and BArts supplying all the appropriate paperwork and site management, this was enough to instill enough confidence in these owners to allow access. Annette, who was handling this part of the project, felt that her efforts were legitimised by the Arts Council funded project, which she felt made her 'sales pitch' more weighty and convincing.

Sympathy for the cause was certainly not something that was easy to inspire in building owners with no connection to Burslem, as the case study on the following page shows, property owners can be incredibly hard to track down, owing to the chain of property and asset management companies that intercept and mediate communication between the owner and potential tenants. For Annette this was frustrating because she wasn't able to directly relay 'the bigger picture' vision to the owner, or appeal to their sense of social responsibility. However, as is the case study below demonstrates, owners are not always aware of the state of the building, the needs of the town it's in, or have any inclination to fulfill their responsibilities to maintain it.

The WiN team investigated one of the few City Council owned buildings on the high-street as a potential residency venue but again, Annette found it incredibly difficult to talk to anyone who understood the aims of the project and would take her requests seriously. After attempting to progress the request with a chain of people in several departments she found someone who was willing to act on her request. Considering ArtCity is in its 5th year and has brought in significant investment to aid cultural regeneration in a resource poor local authority area, this is a mutually beneficial relationship that should be far more developed than it is presently.

The second issue the project faced was the condition of the empty buildings. Many landlords were reluctant to allow access to spaces because of structural and water damage and lapsed gas & electricity certificates. This is a very concerning issue for Burslem, because the risk of setting up shop in a struggling town is great enough for prospective tenants without extensive remedial work to do first. The longer these empty properties sit unoccupied and neglected, the less likely it is that they will be able to be saved.



32 MARKET PLACE

A handsome three storey double fronted Georgian property in the shadow of Burslem's Historic Town Hall.

FEATURES:

- Extensive Mold
- Electricity-free
- Fire Damage
- Water-free
- Rough Sleepers
- Bountiful Detritus

TENANT REQUIREMENTS:

• Enter into a dialogue with the property's managing agent in London via a local estate agent who, acting on behalf The Owner, offers to license 1 room in the property for £600+ VAT for 4 weeks.

• Spend considerable time negotiating a reduced fee to offer "a bit of security to the client". Complete all of the paperwork required of you.

• Agree to arrange viewings and show around prospective renters on behalf of the client.

• Discover considerable property degradation, security breaches, evidence of small fires and rough sleepers squatting the building. Call the Police. Call the Estate Agent. Write to The Management Agent. Contact your Local Councilor. Ask your Local Councilor to write to The Management Agent. Barricade the door between yourself and the insecure upper floors. Become familiar with parliamentary acts regarding asset compliance. Wonder if The Owner even knows where Burslem is.



**Discounted Rate: 1 room
£100 inc VAT / 3 weeks**

If you are interested in securing this property for the future please contact:
The Estate Agent, The Management Agent, The Police, Your Local Councilor and The City
Council's Asset Compliance Officer. But please, do not contact The Owner.



Taking 'The Wheel of Responsibility' out on the streets of Burslem revealed much about who locals think is ultimately responsible for the town's empty high-street properties. Blame was placed mainly with The City Council for enforcing high business rates, and the local community for not supporting high-street shops enough to make them viable. However, many shop keepers say that they are charged either reduced or zero rates for their buildings in Burslem and potential shoppers say that there are few remaining practical reasons to visit the town, particularly because all of the town's banks have closed and parking charges are off-putting. Not many people looked to the building owners as being part of the problem, nor the agents managing their assets.

As the case study shows, it is incredibly confusing and difficult to discover who should take responsibility for the security and usability of Burslem's privately owned high-street buildings, as well as who is expected to enforce this responsibility. Empty properties have become a blight on Burslem's high-street, with the town's potential as a thriving centre reducing incrementally by the ever-declining condition of its buildings- neglected by their owners and largely unregulated by local authorities, who themselves have limited resources and legislative powers with which to enforce standards.

If new futures are to be realised for towns like Burslem in an age of online and out-of-town retail, the process of accessing viable premises must become much easier for a wide variety of potential tenants, and a concerted effort must be made to boost and diversify the town centre offer, which incorporates "health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, as well as some shops."¹

1 Quoted from The Grimsey Report 2- Key Findings. Featured in Appendix 1 on page 32.

RESIDENCIES

JOANNA & LEONE

Of all of the artist and curator pairs, Joanna and Leone seemed best matched from the outset, and were one of only two of the pairs to choose their own partners at the first project meeting. Joanna has worked in the ceramic industry for the past 6 years, designing and supervising the making of ceramic pieces, including the Weeping Window poppies. Despite this experience, she and recent ceramics graduate Leone were coming together for the first time to make their own self initiated work.

“What is special about this project is that I can finally put my name on it.”- Joanna

“This is the first project where I've been allowed to do what I want and it's all up to me.”- Leone

Leone was about to begin an MA in Art Gallery & Museum Studies, and understood the curatorial role well.

“I've always been more interested in other ceramicists' work than my own.” - Leone

Joanna and Leone were also the first pair to have a building secured, which was in relatively good condition and in a prominent location in the town centre. The landlord of the building ran the convenience store next door, and so was much easier to contact and create a trusting relationship with than the majority of absentee landlords in the town.



Using a butterfly mold she had made previously, Joanna, who was raised in Poland, wanted to use the residency to open up conversations about immigration. Joanna used the mold as a metaphor for innate human similarities and the decoration of each piece it produced as an exploration of diversity. Leone focused on collecting research on the building and the town to support the work, and curated the individual pieces made into a sculptural piece in its own right. She and Joanna also held open workshops to allow local people to contribute to the artwork and join in the conversation.

An exciting discovery in their building, The Liberal Club on Market Place, led the pair down some unexpected avenues. In the back room of the ground floor they discovered unusual majolica and hand painted tile murals on the walls behind pile of stored items and layers of paint, and immediately called in local ceramic experts to look at them.

“[We] went into the Liberal Club and saw a wall full of beautiful tiles, we knew little about them but new they were special! In the space of a day we managed to research them and come to conclusion that the tiles made by Edge, Malkin & Co, with thanks to Mervyn Edwards and Danny Callaghan for sharing their wisdom with us!”- Leone

On further investigation, Joanna and Leone found that the unique tiled wall extended at least the length of the building on one side, and above the suspended ceiling.



Having already planned their residency themes, Joanna and Leone photographed and made relief molds from the majolica tiles to incorporate into the aesthetic of their work, and Leone undertook some desk research into the origin of the tiles, which proved too obscure to uncover in the time available. Feeling that they were becoming sidetracked by this discovery, they refocused on their initial plan, and supervised visitors to see the tiles when they came in. Ultimately, the artwork inspired by immigration became a way for people to discuss their own histories, both personal and cultural, inspired by the discovery of the tiles and the medium Joanna was working in.

**“We talked about lots of different topics but mainly I think it was about the tiles, history of Burslem and links to pottery industry.... Being in a minority shouldn't stop artists from expressing who they are. Being from a different country creates so many more reasons for great conversations between people.”
- Joanna**

The tiles' discovery highlighted the delicate relationships that the artists had with their building's owner, as drawing attention to the significance of a building's heritage credentials could be seen as a liability rather than an asset- inviting scrutiny about proper conservation measures that could prove costly and restrictive. In a financial and cultural climate where a building's basic utility is more marketable than its aesthetic or historic significance, building owners need to be incentivised to preserve and publicly display important heritage assets for posterity and to improve the image of the town. This is something that artists could help to encourage by highlighting these alternative measures of value through their work in these spaces. Joanna and Leone handled this tension well and formed a good relationship with the landlord that has led to discussions about further projects in the building, potentially based around the discovered tiles.

Joanna and Leone tidied and made improvements to the shop front and interior, which the landlord was very pleased with. This, and the landlord's location in the shop next door, was the key to developing mutual benefit in their relationship. The noticeable improvement of the shop front provoked a visit from a local window cleaner looking for clients, which led the pair to consider all of the subsidiary businesses, as well as the landlords, tenants and customers, that rely on Burslem's shops being open and occupied to create a thriving local economy.

SOPHIE & BECKI

Sophie and Becki were the last pair to get access to their building (32 Market place- as shown in the case study on page 8), which was in poor condition, but in a prominent position on the high-street. Having just over 2 weeks, rather than the 8 that were planned, made it difficult to fully engage with the local surroundings, and conflicting work and childcare schedules made it more difficult to get to know each other and make work together.

As a recent fine art graduate, Sophie had developed a passion for textiles and wanted to make quilts for the space that incorporated old and new fabrics and artifacts, referencing relationships between the old and the new, and the comfort old items can bring. Sophie and Becki purchased their items from Burslem's charity shops and held a workshop to make the quilt, but very few people attended. Becky later reflected on the lack of engagement that their project achieved...

"Next time I think I'd probably do the promotion of the event a bit differently as there wasn't much for people to see outside of the shop that made it clear what was going on. The space itself was a bit difficult to work with in terms of allowing us to promote the exhibition or workshops, so it would've been better for us to perhaps use bunting or something external to draw people in but we just ran out of time."- Becki

Sophie and Becki's experience of the project seems to have been significantly hindered by the problem of acquiring buildings in Burslem. The lack of time remaining once a building had been secured concentrated the problem that many early career artists face; Juggling subsidiary employment and childcare often means that work cannot happen at an accelerated pace and in spontaneous ways, particularly if the work involves collaboration.



HIRMANI & MARTIN

Hirmani and Martin were situated in a former shop at the bottom of market passage, a dead end alleyway that used to lead to the now closed indoor market in the centre of Burslem. The building was in poor condition, with no lighting, heating (or ceiling!) but Hirmani incorporated the aesthetic of the space into her installation 'Ghosts of Her Rag Sons' using raw clay, straw, chicken wire and fabric to create figures inspired by legendary Burslem characters. Hirmani had planned to research local historical and mythical Burslem figures herself, but found that members of the community who visited over the period of their residency were able to give the pair all the information they needed to inspire the work.

Martin installed battery powered lighting to enhance the installation, and composed a poem which was performed on the WiN opening night and again before the showing of Aimee and Holly's film (see pg.17). This residency installation was well received by audiences, who enjoyed the performative elements, the tangible links to Burslem's history and seeing their own input in the work.



Having only just completed her art foundation course, Hirmani had little experience of residency or installation work. She was at first worried about how the work would be received, but was pleasantly surprised by people's reactions and the immediate feedback that being on-site allowed, which has given her more confidence in her abilities as an artist.

Hirmani emphasises how important it is not to exclude young artists in conversations about the future of the arts in the city,

"The platform needs to be there for people of my age because there is a lot of conversation with older artists in Stoke but not with 18 and 19 year olds"- Hirmani.

Project curator, Martin, who has experience producing events, was able to utilise his existing skill set to support Hirmani's process and successfully enhance the work with his additions. He found he was also supporting other less experienced curators on the project, who were finding it more difficult to clarify and establish their role in their artists' projects.

This suggests that there may have been some closer support needed for the curators in this project from the core team, or from an experienced curator/producer as one of the professional development sessions.



JACK & SELINA

Jack and Selina were one of two pairs that never acquired a building from which to complete their residencies. For Jack, who likes to create embodied work in the public realm, this worked in his favour, allowing him the scope and flexibility to make public interventions that engaged passers by. For Selina, the continual uncertainty about the form their residency would take, and ultimately having no formal 'space' to curate work in, meant that she was unable to establish a working relationship with Jack that felt productive or useful. Jack's embodied practice often takes the form of temporary structures, interventions, dialogical works and performances, which also made it difficult for Selina to position herself within his project as a curator/producer given the short timescale of the project, raising the question 'how does a curator curate for an unfolding and responsive process?' For these reasons, Selina decided to create her own separate artwork for WiN to fulfill her obligation to the project.

Jack's project "Too Tough To Change?" explored the dual question of whether Burslem itself was too tough to change and if it was too tough for artists to affect change in Burslem. Jack assumed the character of 'The Burslem Bear'- inspired by a mural at the end of Market Passage- and invited passers by to either hug or hit him. Then, over the days leading up to the exhibition he built the 'Burslem Barricade' out of materials donated to him by the town's shops and businesses. He positioned it against the entrance to the Town Hall, and created 'Mother Burslem' to be used as a battering ram. On the exhibition weekend Jack invited local people to either reinforce the barricade or Mother Burslem. The outcome of the collision between the two, which was performed at the end of the exhibition weekend, would determine whether Burslem could or could not change.

Although Stoke-on-Trent is Jack's hometown, he had never formally made work in the city before. He saw WiN as an opportunity to apply his practice back home, a place that he found frustrating and confusing growing up. He also wanted to make connections with other artists in the city and would have preferred if all of the artists and curators had been situated in a single building to facilitate this better.

In terms of the projects professional development remit, Jack felt that he would have benefited from an experienced mentor specific to participatory practice rather than the general support that was available. If the project is repeated, devising a way for the participants to get more focused mentorship from similar practitioners working in the area would be a more persuasive method of encouraging retention of emerging artists in the city, as well as providing employment opportunities for more established local practitioners.

So, is Burslem too tough to change?

"I believe if we genuinely make our work dialogical and 'in conversation' with the people and multiple associations of a place, then over time there can be investment and interest on deeper levels ultimately leading to social changes." -Jack





Selina created 'KON'SERV', an alternative self-guided tour of Burslem in response to the town's most recent 'Conservation Area Appraisal' drafted by The City Council in 2011. Selina made 7 collages that re-imagined what the document classed as 'negative views' in Burslem. She displayed these artworks as digital prints during the exhibition weekend, and handed out free printed trail maps that featured each of the 7 locations. In the locations themselves, Selina installed QR Codes which linked to the corresponding artwork on a purpose built website. The piece asked audiences to contemplate the City Council's categorisation of each of the views as 'negative', and imagine how they could be reappraised.

Unlike Jack, Selina felt the lack of a building to work in was damaging to the residency. She and Jack would meet up at BARTs' building in the town of Stoke, but this stunted their ability to connect to Burslem from a collaborative standpoint.

As a producer/writer KON'SERV is the first artwork Selina had exhibited in 5 years. Though she wishes she had more time and opportunity to develop this work during the project, she plans to seek funding to continue KON'SERV and expand it into a city-wide project- producing collages of the entire city's so-called 'conservation areas'.



SONIA & MeLODIE

Sonia and Melodie completed their residency in a vacant shop unit on Queen Street, one of Burslem's most architecturally significant streets, but one that has a particularly high number of vacant properties and so garners less footfall. As a French born Muslim living in Stoke-on-Trent, Sonia wanted to explore aspects of home and belonging, drawing on her faith and spirituality to drive the aesthetic of the piece she created in collaboration with community participants. The act of creating the piece- a large mandala made from natural materials- would be a catalyst for quiet contemplation and conversation, encouraging people to sit in a circle, to face each other on equal terms and talk. The pair called their space 'Abode' to reiterate their intention to make it a familiar and welcoming space that people could retreat to and find comfort.

Project curator Melodie, who also takes a spiritual approach to life, found immediate commonalities between herself and Sonia that promised to make for a great partnership. However, with the pressure of getting to understand each others' motivations and personalities in such a short amount of time they found that they clashed over many aspects of the work's development, making their burgeoning relationship difficult at times.

"Due to the fact that we are both strong women, it was hard for us to adapt to one-another and tolerate each others' perspectives. When we did talk it through there were beautiful sparks and I think we're going to grow together." -Sonia

For Melodie, the main difficulty was to understand her role as a curator, having worked mainly in the music scene over the past 10 years.

"For me this role is very much about learning to move with Sonia but also to build my confidence to do my own thing." - Melodie

As the project progressed, Melodie found her place, playing to her strengths by creating a soundscape and making recordings of the conversations that were happening in the room.

In a location with little footfall, the pair found that participants came from the flats above and businesses on the same row. This made for deeper engagements, with people coming back multiple times to continue conversations- about perceptions of Burslem and the need for alternative spaces in the town.

"People always say nothing happens in Burslem, but this is proof that it does. It's really not such a bad place." -Participant

"Look at my boys! I've honestly never seen them so calm and concentrating for so long. It would be great if there were calm spaces like this in the town permanently to take them to."- Adjacent business owner.



AIMEE & HOLLY

Aimee and Holly were one of the two pairs not to get a building for their residency, but as a film and media graduate who had specialised in stop-frame animation, Aimee was keen to make her first live action film. Curator Holly was excited to explore the potential of creating a 'pop-up cinema' in Burslem to host the film, but at first struggled to define her role as a curator.

"I don't know what a curator is. I googled it and thought 'I do this anyway, this is fine', but the language around it was alienating." - Holly

Once she recognised her role as a producer, she understood better what she could bring to the project. Because Aimee's creative process was clearly defined by the making and editing of the film, Holly's role became instrumental its public presentation, and the participatory elements that went into it's making.

Following the project Aimee and Holly reflected on the timing of the roles. Having the artist and curator starting the project at the same time had made it difficult to define the curatorial role early on, when the artist was still developing their ideas. This issue in echoed in the experience of some of the other pairs, and may need some further honing or role definition if the project is repeated.

The pair collaborated with local performance poet Jason Smith to make the film, which was inspired by stories collected in 'memory boxes' they installed in local shops and businesses. The film was shown in 1940's inspired pop-up cinema 'Beneath The Bear' at the bottom of Market Passage (an alleyway just

off the main high-street). Holly and Aimee dressed the space with artwork and photographs gathered during the project, offered popcorn and fruit to the audience and showed a number of Burslem related shorts and trailers as a prelude to the film, one of which advertised another film that was being show that weekend in another Burslem venue. The cinema's 'big screen' was a blocked up former entrance to the long closed indoor market, beneath the town's iconic bear mural.



For Aimee, it was exciting to get this real world experience so soon after she had graduated (two months previous) but since she had been using university stock for the duration of her degree, she had to quickly acquire the equipment and software necessary to make the film, which took time and resources. Then there was the time it took to edit and render the film itself, which- considering the timescale of the project- left little room for error.



Happily, the editing process went to plan and Aimee found this pressure a positive force in the project, but her experience does raise an important point when

considering retaining arts graduates with process heavy and equipment reliant specialisms. Access to equipment in the primary years after graduating could be considered a major benefit to remaining in the city following a degree. It would allow these graduates to continue development, apply for work and in the long term, encourage the growth of cutting edge creative technologies, design and manufacture in the city.

SITE MANAGEMENT

To support the artists and curators' residencies and ensure they had safe access to buildings, three site managers were recruited to the project. This role involved liaising with building owners, providing paperwork such as risk assessments and inventories, and making sure that the buildings were clear and safe for the participants to work in. For the site managers, the unavailability and condition of the buildings, and the resulting time restrictions, proved particularly challenging, since responsibility to get the artists settled in their spaces and to get the project to run smoothly ultimately fell to them. For site manager Ryan Ball, the biggest challenge he faced was due to weather conditions during the set up of Aimee and Holly's pop-up cinema on the first night. Ryan found overcoming this and other practical challenges of the project very rewarding.

"I gained further experience in the management aspects of a project and on-the-spot problem-solving."
- Ryan Ball

While Ryan found support from the core team adequate and forthcoming, site manager Sarah Bonam felt she would have benefited from a little more focused time with the core team early on and during the project.

"Two weeks before the final events we still didn't have enough empty spaces and, for me, we didn't reach a final decision about what to do about that soon enough. It was all very last minute due to the time issues" - Sarah Bonam

This suggests that, because it was assumed that accessing at least 6 of the 23 empty shops would be an attainable goal, the project lacked a strong contingency plan.

Since it proved difficult to get willing building owners to commit to the project in advance (or indeed honour their commitments as the project dates approached) it is difficult to recommend longer lead times and forward planning alone as a solution to the problems encountered by this project. However, devising a clear contingency plan would be essential if the project is repeated. Having a contingency plan in place would enable site managers to execute their role better in adverse circumstances, which would facilitate artists and curators to begin their projects in a timely manner.



PROFESSIONAL dEVELOPMENT

Alongside the residency, artists and curators were offered a number of professional development sessions, which aimed to prepare them for developing a creative practice in the city. These included a session by 'pop up shop for dummies' author and socially engaged artist Dan Thompson, a session on community participation with local participatory artist Anne Kinnaird, as well as a number of practical sessions on writing funding bids, risk assessments and method statements.



“I’m essentially clueless when attempting to navigate the world as an artist and the help I was given has made me a bit less so”- Hirmani

Several participants found the session on Arts Council funding applications very interesting, but each said that they wouldn’t feel confident to apply for funding this way themselves at this stage in their career.

Some of the artists and curators found the session on legal requirements- i.e. risk assessments etc. very helpful, and most were very inspired by the session on pop-up shops with Dan Thompson. For others, the chance to get together with the other artists and curators on the project was just as important as the sessions themselves.

**“It was good to be with the other stakeholders of the project to be connected and share experiences and ideas etc was very valuable”
- Melodie**

Since most of the curators on the project had not specifically studied curation, if the project is repeated with similar participant pool, a professional development session on the curatorial role might benefit them in the early stages of the project; to explain the scope of the role and guide them on best practice to support and enhance their artist’s residency work. This could take the form of a talk or one-to-one surgeries with an established curator. This might reduce instances of conflict and confusion and enhance project outcomes. As a starting point, the WiN project curators have contributed to a list of tips for novice curators coming into the project, based on their own experiences and learning. (Appendix 2).

AUDIENCES

The artists and curators were in Burslem for between 2-4 weeks, with those with buildings opening to the public when they were able to be on site. Most of the artists ran workshops/open studios during Burslem Unites Festival that took place in the town on 27th August and officially opened their exhibitions on the evening of 14th September which ran into an arts trail over the weekend 15th-16th September.

Many of the works created evoked Burslem's industrial and cultural heritage, which is still very much a part of its contemporary identity. For this reason, local audiences found these works appealing, and were able to confidently interpret and discuss the work in the context of their own experiences and reflections. Many people who took part in workshops or contributed to the exhibitions were grateful for having been allowed to express themselves creatively. Particularly in The Liberal Club, people were grateful to have been allowed access to the building to look at the newly discovered tiles.

"Thanks for letting us express our creativity with hand carved butterflies we really enjoyed the experience and I'm looking forward to seeing them in the exhibition."

"The tile discovery is remarkable and should be followed up from the V&A downwards. The Butterflies are a metaphor for the fragile potential of bringing the colourful tiles back to life again, and Burslem's renewal."



Jack's more agonistic approach provoked much consternation among some passing locals, who were unfamiliar with the visual language of dialogical, critical practice. People outside the pub opposite Jack's installation didn't recognise it as 'art', but after a conversation about its themes and purpose, they made some interesting observations themselves about the town which were both agonistic and imaginative.

"Well you can see what happens here by what's left- pubs to get pissed in, take-aways for after the pub and solicitors for when you've had the punch-up."

"Just look at the buildings, I think the whole town could be an open-air museum, like Blist Hill."

Jack's Burslem Barricade later inspired a meme on social media, which reiterated the confusion local people felt about the meaning of the work. Jack sees this as one of the greatest achievements of his project, proving the dialogical power of the piece- i.e. to stimulate discussion around what is and isn't

art, and what value it has.

Aimee and Holly were also able to capture passing audiences with their pop-up cinema. Though Burslem generally suffers with low levels of footfall during the day, at night there is far more activity due to its relatively high number of pubs and restaurants and its proximity to the Port Vale football ground. On the evening of the 15th, several post-match (mid pub-crawl) football fans stumbled upon the cinema and sat down to watch the films, for which they tipped the pair £7.



Hirmani and Martin were also able to open up their adjacent space to new audiences before the cinema opened, and Joanna and Leone said that having Jack's project happening in the street outside their building made it more visible and encouraged people to come in. For this reason, a repeat of WiN may be more successful in attracting local audiences if on-street and building based activities were programmed and clustered together, which would also require fewer buildings to make a greater impact.

For the opening and the Art Trail weekend, many of the audience members had traveled into Burslem specifically to see the exhibitions.



“There’s not really any reason to go to Burslem usually, so it’s nice to have an excuse to come and visit it again.”

“We check what’s on in the city at the start of the week and spend the weekend going round them. We don’t get to Burslem often, so we’re doing this trail, then we’re going to that little cafe then we’re going to look at the Three Counties¹ in the School of Art.”

These comments highlight how staging exhibitions and events in Burslem's empty shops can help the remaining businesses to stay open, countering the spiral downwards that was triggered by the town's loss of utility² and compounded by empty and neglected shops. By accommodating multiple and various attractions that people are willing to travel to Burslem for, that aren't available in their own locality, in out of town retail parks or on the internet, Burslem's high-street retailers, cafes, pubs and restaurants could evidently benefit.

1 The Three Counties Open Art Exhibition at The Burslem School of Art, 28th Jul-30th Aug 2018.

2 The closure of Burslem's historic Royal Doulton factory in 2004, decimated footfall in the town. At this time 500 people worked at the factory and many used the town daily. Many other local pottery factories had already closed by this time, leaving what is known as 'The Mother Town' of the Potteries unable to sustain the same functions that grew to provide.

CASE STUDY

THE BRICKLEY FAMILY @ ABODE

The mainly local audiences that attended Sonia and Melodie's space 'Abode' enjoyed its atmosphere and emphasised the need for quiet, contemplative spaces for adults and children. A function that was formerly provided by the library in Burslem's most architecturally significant building, The Wedgwood Institute, situated across the road.

"We absolutely loved this event today with Melodie and Sonia it was so relaxing and so chilled yet so amazing my three little boys are normally so crazy yet they went here and behaved so well and really really enjoyed it and has made us as a family realise we need to do more stuff like this at home so thanks to both of you for making us realise more family time is needed at home doing stuff you were showing us today."- Sophie Brickley

Following the workshop, Sophie and her family put what they had learned into action and produced homemade products together to sell at the up-coming Christmas light switch on, and made some money for the family's Christmas fund. This demonstrates that stimulating Burslem's local economy is not limited to opening new shops, but can be supported by providing opportunities for experimentation, inspiration, innovation and learning.



In this way, artists re-imagining redundant spaces in Burslem could act as temporary testbeds for the townspeople to utilise, or not, to establish functions that grow organically based on it's inhabitants' identified needs, skills and desires. Viable projects that show the potential to develop long term functionality could be considered for further exploration and support by the project partners, in order to avoid tokenism and to extend the legacy of the project.



“We have just got back from an event in Burslem for the light switch on and we as a family have made £60 in stuff we have made since we came to that class and learned we could do stuff as a family. So that will go towards boys Xmas and it's thanks to you guys that you made us realise we can try anything regarding art and there no set thing to do.”

- Sophie Brickley, Audience/participant at 'Abode'.



OUTCOMES

LEGACY OF THE WORK

Some of the artists and curators have gone on to continue their projects, or use what they have learned to begin new ones.

'Beneath the Bear'- the pop-up cinema by Aimee and Holly, continued as a project in its own right after WiN ended. To help, support and raise the profile of local organisations, the pair launched a poetry competition in conjunction with Burslem Book Room and Burslem based 6 Towns Radio, which was sponsored by local musician Danny Shaw. The winner of the competition had their poem recorded and broadcast on 6 Towns Radio. Holly, Aimee and the people they worked with have also been invited to Sheffield to appear a pod-cast with 'Cinema For All' to talk about WiN. With help from the project partners, Holly has since been awarded funding to create a three day city wide film festival.

"This led to going to Poland to judge a film festival, and drawing from the WiN project experience creating a pop up cinema in an alleyway was helpful in capturing a few directors attention who may let me screen their films in stoke. Equally, an artist from that film festival with a good portfolio in Vienna and London, has approached me too ask me to curate her large scale exhibition in a disused building in Stoke-On-Trent."- Holly



Burslem Butterflies Curator Leone has kept contact with the owner of The Liberal Club, where she and Joanna's residency took place, and where the Edge, Malkin & Co tiles were discovered. She has been awarded funding by The University of Manchester (where she is now studying for an MA in Museum & Gallery Studies) to explore what she learned about community perceptions of art.

"I learned a lot about community engagement, more than what I would on my course and decided this is what I am going to focus on for my dissertation. I have been awarded £500 to curate an exhibition in a 'non-place'. I am planning to do it in Burslem, possibly The Liberal Club, or the Market Place Cafe. It will be a very visual exhibition with workshops. From this I am going to explore how people engage and learn from something which would normally be classed as a 'Museum' exhibition but not in a museum- in an every day place."- Leone

She and Joanna also plan to work together again this coming Easter, to hopefully uncover and exhibit the rest of the tiles in The Liberal Club in partnership with the building's owner and other cultural partners in the city. Similarly, Melodie is using what she learned during the project in her own postgraduate study-creating mandala-based visual projections and soundscapes which will form part of a performance piece she is working on. She has also been inspired by the project to do more art based community work and develop her own professional practice as part of the process.

Hirmani, who also began studies directly after the project, has found that local people have been conducting their own research into the history of the characters she made, which she was not expecting to happen. Some of the figures have since gone on to be exhibited at an event by local record label 'Burslem Crypt', and there has been further interest in exhibiting the sculptures from others.

Several of the artists and curators have met up since the end of the project to discuss collaborating on future projects, and Selina continues to develop her first artwork in 5 years, KON'SERV, into a citywide project. Some of the Burslem Butterflies are currently (Dec 2018) on display in the Ceramic City Stories Secret Museum where they continue to promote the work of the project and the tiles found in The Liberal Club.

IMPACT ON THE ARTISTS & CURATORS

Many of the artists and curators have identified increased confidence as a major outcome of the project, particularly in terms of their self esteem and understanding of their practice, and a renewed sense of clarity about where their practice is headed.

“Being paid for a purely creative project has given me the confidence to identify as a creative person, and look for work within the industry which I had never before considered as accessible to me...I feel like I'm more likely to achieve it in what I now recognise to be “my practice”. In essence, I've come to learn to value creative projects for themselves, and less apologetically”- Holly

This confidence arose from the practical and creative experience the project afforded, and being able to compare this with their preconceptions about what a creative practice should be, the ways in which publics engage with art, and how equipped they are to do it.



“I feel I have always had this high brow gallery outlook and my contacts were mainly curators and owners of art galleries but there is this fantastic network of creatives that I didn't know about all doing amazing things, and all creating these amazing ideas and projects themselves. It really inspires me to do the same”- Leone

“I leaned on some existing skills and networks to work with [Aimee] to create a film. This led me to realise that I do have some transferable skills and important access to some of the film making equipment”- Holly

Making connections was another major outcome for the participants. Many of the artists and curators found that the project opened up new networks of cultural practice, which inspired them to want to further explore the local art scene. In the project itself, learning about networking and interpersonal skills were significant lessons that many of the artists and curators learned from each other. Whether

this was through resolving conflicts, learning to communicate ideas and needs or how to conduct workshops and liaise with stakeholders.

“This project gave me the confidence boost that I needed. I have come away with so much knowledge, more than I would get from reading a book, amazing job experience for the future, great contacts and connection as I have met many people within the a similar creative pool working within the city” -Leone

“I think I've personally felt a lot more welcome within the city, and certainly felt there's many people in wider networks that I can have conversations about it through” -Jack



“From working with Leone I learned a lot about curating, what is important to write in the artist statement and how to approach people when we need something for free. She is a wonderful person with a big heart and I was very impressed with how she talked with all different people, treating everyone with kindness and care”- Joanna

“I think that's one thing I've learned from working with [Martin], that in order for a project to be successful, you must be able to communicate well with the people you're working with” -Hirmani

PERCEPTIONS OF THE CITY- POST PROJECT

Since the end of the project, the participants have reflected on the viability of Stoke-on-Trent, and Burslem itself, as a place to develop a creative practice. Many of them are more optimistic as a consequence, but are more aware of the complexities involved in making it happen.

**“WiN has given me a lot of hope and pride in Stoke-on-Trent's art scene... I have a lot of faith in Stoke and one major thing I've taken with me from working on the project is that I see working in Stoke as a viable option and it's made me want to help participate in furthering its cultural growth”
- Hirmani**

“I'd suggest it's slightly more optimistic, but also revealed if possible, then this demands energy and consistency” -Jack

When talking about Burslem specifically, many of the participants could see huge potential to develop and grow in the physical spaces available, including the empty shops and public spaces. They also thought that the supportive community in Burslem was a major asset which could enable further creative development, and that its deep cultural heritage sets it apart from the other towns of the city as a place to make work.

“It seems there is enough people/places already on board and open to that idea to further develop [Burslem’s] potential and the opportunities and experiences that could be possible”- Melodie

“Having access to cheap buildings, and small tight knit communities which lends itself to participatory arts and “give it a go” creative ventures. I’m grateful for the opportunity to learn through this industry, before I thought the focus of structured development, learning, and expression could only be found in education.. and this project exposed me to a creative industry with lots of similar opportunities- Holly



Some artists talked about the audience demographic in Burslem and how artists should be prepared to encounter people who are not used to engaging with contemporary art. For some, this was a liberating and radical prospect- bringing museum quality experiences to places they wouldn’t ordinarily go. However for others criticism or lack of engagement could be a chastening experience, and one to be prepared for.

“A project like this really opens up the museum world to a wider audience and to people who we would class as non museum visitors. By being in a non-space, creates a more relaxed environment for people to engage with arts and culture”- Leone

“It’s more difficult to be creative in working class spaces so, don’t compare yourself by the standards of an exhibition or middle-class workshop/website. If we get six willing poets that’s a win for example. Responding to the place usually involves responding to the people”- Holly

Some of the participants also questioned where their practice would fit in the cultural scene, in terms of being part of a competing network of creative practitioners and within the wider social culture of the city. These questions, and other critical reflections, indicate genuine engagement with the prospect of setting up practice in Stoke-on-Trent on the part of the participants.

“I think the complexities of working in Stoke have been made apparent, and for any practitioner this obviously begins to ask how your practice fits within and between these” - Jack



OUTCOMES FOR BURSLEM AND ITS PEOPLE

Project instigator and partner Amanda Bromley has since reflected on the impact WIN had on her gallery, herself personally and the town of Burslem.

In her role as Cultural Ambassador for Burslem, WIN enabled Amanda to strengthen relationships with cultural partners and expand her awareness of the wider artist network in the city (and vice versa). Amanda's commercial gallery 'Barewall Gallery' enjoyed additional cultural visitors during the project, and she has recently started to integrate performance into the gallery itinerary- including spoken word poetry evenings- as a direct consequence of WIN. In her capacity as an advocate for Burslem, Amanda was able to include WIN as a tourist attraction, broadening the tourist offer in conjunction with The Weeping Window at Middleport and The Three Counties Open Exhibition at The School of Art.

"Burslem has gained a new audience, artist fans, desire to setup studio space, confidence to speak to landlords about using space for cultural activity, landlords have said YES you can, a number of spaces are now potentially open doors for artists to use them or setup studios in them. Burslem's creative identity in the current day has been strengthened and is a thing now, one which we can continue to build on."



Amanda also believes that the project has helped people to imagine using Burslem's street spaces for outdoor performance, having been chosen as the town to host City of Culture legacy event 'LIGHT NIGHT STOKE-ON-TRENT' which will take place between 31 Jan - 2 Feb 2019, the first large event to be staged since Stoke-on-Trent bid to become City of Culture 2021.

"It might be the case that confidence gained by staging WHAT IS NOW helped people in the wider cultural community and in the City to imagine that LIGHT NIGHT location in the historic Burslem Town Centre would be a perfect location (despite negative press in empty shop fronts), with a good will from the community behind it coming to the town. Burslem cannot wait to see this project happen and that says a lot about where we are, I think with thanks to WIN and all involved in it."- Amanda Bromley

CAN ARTISTS RE-IMAGINE THE HIGH-STREET?

“Whether working with clay, working collectively on a temporary installation, antagonising an artist dressed as bear, engaging with a part-fact part-fiction tale of Burslem’s former characters, or interacting with neglected sites through collage and a QR trail, audiences - and participating artists and producers - were given the opportunity to delve into an alternative vision of Burslem - not what it could be, but what it is now.”- Selina, WiN curator

What is Now? (WiN) is a project that proved many important things about the potential value of high street properties in Burslem, for the local people, businesses, visitors and innovators (such as artists).

Inviting artists to take up residence in Burslem has highlighted the dire need for Council and privately owned properties to be brought back into use, and the need for more focused attention and better procedures and support to make this happen. It has proven that, with very little resource, artists can reopen, reanimate and re-purpose spaces that, at present, could command very little interest from profit driven enterprises.

What these spaces have provided is sanctuary for friends and families, opportunities to learn about the town’s heritage, opportunities to make, learn new skills and be inspired. Opportunities to be shocked, challenged and questioned about what Burslem is and can be. They have provided spaces for artists to meet each other and the community, to learn from each other and encounter different cultures. They have uncovered important heritage assets and attracted visitors to the town that would not regularly go there, that in turn became customers of existing businesses and services. They have raised the profile of local organisations, created partnerships and influenced further cultural practice in the town. They have transformed redundant public spaces into performance spaces. Finally, they have reinforced the steely determination of local community campaigners to demand change, based on the generative potential demonstrated in such a short, small scale project.

For these reasons, it is fair to say that the artists and curators succeeded in re-imagining the high-street, for a very short time and with the wind against them. To have realised these outcomes under such unfavourable circumstances, belies the true potential of opening up empty high-street buildings to artists and cultural practitioners. The question must now shift to *‘Will artists be enabled to re-imagine the high-street?’*

“This is the sort of thing that
puts the heart back into the town”

- Local Business Man.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Targeting Artists

Since it was difficult to attract newly graduated artists because of the timing of the project, it may be wise to open it up to second year students and pre-degree students, like Hirmani, who felt that younger artists in the city did not have a platform to share and develop their work. Targeting students who have not yet made decisions about whether to leave the city to pursue a creative career would more likely be effective in meeting Artcity's graduate retention aims, and broaden participation in the arts outside of the educational setting.

Securing Buildings

Owing to the difficulty of acquiring buildings for the project, some of the artists' experiences and outcomes were limited. If the project is to be repeated, a number of buildings would need to be secured before artists are recruited, so that they are aware of the circumstances they are likely to encounter. Securing fewer buildings would not necessarily be a problem if some of the recruited artists were appointed directly to on-street roles. WiN artists found that both of these roles supported each other, so curating this purposefully would benefit the project.

Time

Many of the WiN artists identified lack of time as the reason for many of their difficulties with the project. This included time to develop relationships with each other and the community, time to properly realise their artworks and time to explore the town. Some of the artists and curators who have jobs and family commitments were unable to fully engage with the project, and those with a responsive practice did not have enough time to fully explore the dialogical potential of their work. If the project is repeated, a longer lead time for artistic research would be necessary.

Contingency

From a management perspective, the time lost because of difficulties with accessing buildings made the job of site managers more difficult. Adequate contingency plans should be put in place in the planning stages of the project to ensure site managers can effectively execute these plans and facilitate artists to begin their projects in a timely manner.

The Curatorial Role

Several curators found it difficult to enter the project at the same time as the artists, and felt unsure of their role before any artwork had been conceptualised and produced. If the project is to be repeated, better definition of this role in the early stages would be helpful, which may include specific tutoring on the role and guidance on how to support the artist while they formulate their ideas. If street based artists are recruited, further guidance should be offered to their curators.

Activating The City Council

Given the difficulty of securing buildings for this project, Artcity should put pressure on stakeholders at the City Council to help identify and secure buildings. A direct working relationship with the council should be established to prevent repetition and misunderstanding and grease the wheels of cooperation that is necessary to fulfill the common aims of the stakeholders.

AFTERWORD BY THE PROJECT INSTIGATOR

I'd do this again in an heartbeat. It created a new younger audience of artists explore the towns creative heritage through uncovering its hidden past behind facades of 20th century wall coverings, remove skips of debris from useless shop fronts turning them into exhibition galleries, creative workshop space, performance poetry, where people reentered the spaces and made it there own again with new memories, locals shared their experiences and tried something new, or visitors a new to the town enjoyed a fulfilling experience in Burslem. The spaces left landlords, agents, neighbours, councilors, artists and community inspired to imagine the space to be a usable space once more, converting the space to be used challenged all of the perceptions which had ingrained in the system and this was overcome through this project. Long closed doors are now open.

The performances and use of the spaces and responses to this exceeded my expectations, to see different art forms using the spaces unexpectedly, and the locals of the town sharing their surprise and delight at seeing creative activity and experiences in the long term empties in the town. The artists mostly loved the spaces in which they worked all on the high street and at street level, a vibe was evident.

The local council property services involvement did not meet my expectations in that it appears to at this time be very difficult to access council owned buildings of all sizes. I would like to see this department of the council consider a more direct working relationship with the arts in order for this sort of project to help to change the cities league standing in the number of empty properties national standings through delivering culture.

I also think this confidence will provide the community and the cultural forum and the council cabinet with tools and cases learned from WHAT IS NOW to overcome future obstacles about empties, including those obstacles posed by council property services. This has not yet been addressed but it should be one which as a cultural champion for Burslem I will be looking to be on the agenda to be addressed.

As for myself I felt the enrichment provided by viewing and attending the performances of new artforms in the town, and what this could mean for the future.

Amanda Bromley

AFTERWORD BY THE EVALUATOR

Having seen what an impact that creative practitioners can have in such a small space of time with such little resource, I was frustrated (as were the project delivery team) by how difficult it was to facilitate. After 5 years of Artcity 2 years of civic discussion about the value of culture during the city's bid for UK City of Culture 2021, it is hard to believe that the City Council is not more proactive in its approach to facilitating embedded cultural regeneration, when the need is so great and the arts community is so willing. There are systemic issues surrounding the enforcement of standards for private high-street property owners that deeply hinder the city's potential to develop new potentialities in a post industrial climate. Valuable heritage towns like Burslem have enormous potential as both a destination and a local resource, which depletes with each passing day. If action is not taken soon, this potential will be lost. I hope that this report can help Artcity apply more pressure to its Council partners.

Nicola Winstanley

APPENDIX

1. Key Findings of The Grimsey Review 2, published in Summer 2018. A fact based review of the state of the high street. www.vanishinghighstreet.com

KEY FINDINGS

Four specific key findings were established that have been used to shape a series of 25 recommendations

- 1** There is a need for all towns to develop plans that are business-like and focused on transforming the place into a complete community hub incorporating health, housing, arts, education, entertainment, leisure, business/office space, as well as some shops, while developing a unique selling proposition (USP).
- 2** The key to success is outstanding, talented and committed leadership. Whether this is elected mayors with the mandate and authority to get on with the job, or local government bringing all stakeholders, including the community to develop and implement a plan for the location, strong leadership and vision are essential.
- 3** The curating of a place based on its distinct heritage is multi-dimensional and complex but should feature strongly when developing the "offer": Why would people want to live, work, play, visit and invest in the "place"? What does it stand for?
- 4** Where we see genuine high street innovation, best practice is often not shared and far too many agencies remain in silos. There is a need for Economically Rational Areas to be established that can draw on the examples of Scotland and Wales to get things done. An independent body (not a membership organisation) is needed to support, question and signpost for local authorities and act as a driver for stakeholder support.

2. Advice for future WiN Curators by WiN Curators 2018.

- Get to know the artist(s) you are working with.
- Give the artist space and freedom to create.
- Facilitate the creativity in what ever way possible – i.e. source materials, provide resources, support the development of ideas, create a comfortable and safe environment to work in etc.
- Connect and work together to create a shared vision that you are both happy with and able to develop and evolve.
- Take care of each other.
- Really listen to each other.
- Check in often and review your work/ concept together.
- Use as much time in the space as you have.
- Get a feel for the area by exploring the local shops/venues of the area you're curating the work in, as it will give you more to work with when you come to putting the event/ exhibition together.
- Don't worry to much about proving yourself, or your project. Whatever comes together will be the "point".
- Spend your budget wisely.
- Be prepared to muck in and do the dirty work.

WhAT is NOW?



art city

BArts
72 Hartshill Rd,
Stoke-on-Trent ST4 7RB
www.artcity.org.uk