

A Restless Art

The Portland Inn Project

A case study of participatory art



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THE PORTLAND INN PROJECT

'What are our motives? How do we make sure this isn't just about us as artists and what we want? When am I being a neighbour and when am I being an artist?'

Anna Francis¹



Selling the post-industrial city

Stoke-on-Trent is a federation of six English towns that grew up in the 19th century on mining, steel and, above all, a ceramics industry of famous names like Wedgwood, Minton and Spode. It became a city in 1925; a generation later it had 276,000 inhabitants. Since then, however, Stoke has fought a losing battle against deindustrialisation. Its collieries and steelworks have closed, to be followed by the great potteries that made its reputation. The Spode Works shut in 2008 after 230 years of production. Some names survive as brands, but manufacture has mostly gone elsewhere. In 2001, the city's population had fallen by about 35,000 people.

In Stoke, as in other cities devastated by economic storms, local government faces a daunting task of clearing the remains of heavy industry and finding new sources of work and prosperity for its people. The usual public-private sector partnerships are working on the city's infrastructure and attractiveness, while promoting Stoke to outside investors, including online retailer Amazon. The creative industries are seen as part of this future and there is now a cultural quarter. The nine acre Spode site was bought by the Council and its redevelopment includes housing, a museum

and 43 artists' studios. Arts Council England supports Appetite, a participatory arts programme that '*aims to get more people in Stoke-on-Trent to experience and be inspired by the arts.*'² With support from local cultural organisations, universities, media and businesses, Stoke City Council bid to be the UK's next City of Culture in 2021. Though it lost to Coventry, the experience was energising.

On the margins of these grand plans are the many small communities that make up a city and where any improvement in people's lives will – or will not – be felt. Stoke has a lot of run-down Victorian buildings. Many factories, shops and homes stand empty, without buyers. In 2013, the Council decided to sell some of these properties with generous incentives to new residents in the hope of strengthening one fragile neighbourhood. They offered 33 houses in Cobridge at a nominal price of £1, which naturally attracted publicity and some controversy. In fact, because buyers had to take on a share of the renovation cost, the final price of the houses was about £30,000. Still, it was cheap for a two or three bedroom house, even here, and it came with conditions. The first was an earnings threshold designed to help low-income families. Secondly, the buyer had to live in the house for at least five years and could not sell it for ten. And, the sale agreement also stipulated that they must be active in the community, though what that meant was open to interpretation. Within a year, all the available houses were sold and occupied. Among the neighbourhood's new residents was an artist, Anna Francis, and her young family.

Anna Francis and AirSpace

Anna Francis had studied at Staffordshire University in Stoke and returned to teach there after time abroad. She is also a member of AirSpace, a gallery and studio group set up in 2006 to support artists who wanted to stay in Stoke. In 2007, the Council offered AirSpace a disused Victorian building in the city centre, where they made nine studios, meeting rooms and a street-front gallery.

AirSpace sees itself as an active partner in the city's post-industrial renewal, keen to support but also to question local initiatives. Alongside their own practice, AirSpace artists have put on workshops, exhibitions and public events.

They have also developed pilot environmental projects, including the Spode Rose Garden, on the historic site which is also home to the British Ceramics Biennial. Established in 2009, the Biennial has become a regular partner in AirSpace projects, including Anna's work in her new home near Portland Street.





The neighbourhood is a few minutes' walk from the city centre, but it feels much further away. Its terraced houses were cheaply built and there has been little money to improve or even maintain them since. Most are rented, some unoccupied. Unemployment here is twice the national average, while key health, education and crime statistics underline the multiple difficulties faced by residents. Anna was aware of mistrust among her neighbours about regeneration initiatives. There had been too many consultations and too many broken promises over the years. In planning an art project, she faced practical difficulties, notably the lack of a community space in which to work, and human ones, including hostility from people who did not want attention drawn to illegal activities. And there were difficulties unique to the situation. The fact that she and others had moved into the area with Council support caused understandable resentment among some residents who had not received such help. All in all, this was stony ground.



Artist and neighbour

'Community Maker', as Anna Francis called her first project, began quietly, with clay workshops over eight days in July and August 2015. She pitched a tent on a patch of green space beside a boarded-up pub, and invited people to work on a clay map of the area, highlighting their hopes and difficulties. Although she made connections with the ceramic industry's use of flowers and their symbolism, the activity was mainly an opportunity for people to meet and talk as they worked the clay. Conversations grew over tea and cake, and the lack of any community space for local activities was a recurring complaint.

That summer, Anna met Rebecca Davies, another socially engaged artist who had been invited to do a project in Stoke by Appetite.³ Davies is from London and much of her work has explored the tensions arising from redevelopment schemes in the capital. With their shared concern about the place of the artist in social contexts and interest in urban renewal, Anna and Rebecca quickly became friends. They agreed to work together on the next stage of 'Community Maker': the opening of a temporary community arts centre over the summer of 2016.

'While we were cleaning, someone started hammering at the door and yelling that she was going to make trouble for us. We were thinking 'Where is our support?', because actually we're quite exposed, in this precarious position. How can we deal with this? Because we want this to be a place for everyone, and that includes the people who are yelling at us.'

Anna Francis



The obvious venue was the Portland Inn, which had stood empty for years but was remembered by local residents as a friendly community hub. The City Council,

which now owns it, allowed the artists to take it over temporarily, and even did some repairs to make the building safe. After cleaning and work to make it a pleasant space for activities, Anna and Rebecca opened The Portland Inn Project on 8 August 2016.⁴ Over the next four weeks, they hosted 600 visitors in 54 different activities, including dance workshops, bingo evenings, cake making, pottery workshops and much more. A photo studio was installed in which people made self-portraits showing themselves enjoying the kind of activities that they wanted to see in the Portland Inn if it could become a permanent community and arts space. And around all these activities, discussions continued about how to make this possible.



The success of the temporary occupation and a solid business plan have convinced the Council that the building could be given to the community as a local asset. In May 2017, the Portland Inn Project was registered as a Community Interest Company, and the process of acquiring the pub and the resources to renovate and run it began. But the artists recognise that the road ahead will be challenging, not just in organisational terms but in artistic and human ones too. There was a key moment early in the developing relationship between the artists and the community. One of the people who'd been most active in getting the pub ready for its reopening brought a large cardboard character from an animated film. She wanted it there for the children, but it was not in keeping with the artists' ideas of the Portland Inn.

'The Minion⁵ ended up being quite a symbol. It was an important moment in making us ask how much say we had in how this looks and what happens. We suddenly realised that we hadn't thought about who has ownership and how much space there is for other people. We both hated the Minion because it was out of place in the programme we put on, but it stayed in the space nonetheless.'

Anna Francis

The Minion was one instance of a difference of meaning between the artists and the people they were inviting to be part of the project. There will be many more, perhaps rooted in questions of power rather than aesthetics or art, and some of them will be much more difficult to resolve. It is the artists who understand that such negotiations are not a zero-sum game who co-create the most valuable work. They see that ceding part of their artistic autonomy can be a route to the emergence of new, richer work than anyone could have imagined, still less achieved, on their own.



The complexities of social action

It is easy to see how selling discounted houses to outsiders in exchange for community engagement could turn out badly. With a terrible shortage of homes in parts of England, housing development is often contested and politicised. The place of artists in urban renewal has also become contested and politicised because, in their search for cheap places to live and work, they often gravitate to low-rent, neglected districts. The association between artists and gentrification (the transformation of rundown districts for and by wealthier residents) has been debated since the 1980s. Some see artists and creative industries as pioneers of urban regeneration.⁶ For others they are dupes or collaborators of speculators whose profits depend on marginalising the poor. But an association is not a cause. Perhaps artists are neither as important nor as culpable in a property development economy driven by far more powerful and remote forces.

Things are not necessarily linked because they occur simultaneously. Since the 1980s, industrial cities have faced huge economic and social development leading to dereliction and – less often – renewal in their physical environments. Since the 1980s, the economic and social importance of culture has also grown immensely, leading to far more artists and creative workers than in the past. The excess of

supply over demand in the creative economy keeps most artists rather poor, so they live and work where it's cheap. Those places tend also to be prime sites for development, especially where, as in south-east England, the real estate economy has an excess of demand over supply. But it does not follow that artists either attract or enable development: they may just be there.



Still, the accusation that artists can be complicit in the development process must be taken seriously. Developers and local authorities are increasingly interested in using the arts, especially perhaps where social housing is involved. Since the Conservative government introduced 'right to buy' in 1979, the stock of public housing for rent has fallen by 1.6 million. What remains is refurbished to meet modern standards but also to improve the appearance of surrounding areas, Mixed motives and divided management do not foster confidence among tenants so redevelopment schemes are often accompanied by artists' commissions for work on consultation, oral history, documentation and similar themes. Such initiatives are now commonplace in British cities, often supported by a publicly-funded cultural sector anxious to demonstrate its wider relevance.

Does this kind of socially-engaged art lend a human face to brutal processes in which people who have lived somewhere for decades are relocated for a supposedly greater purpose? Perhaps. Does it affect whether or even how the redevelopment will happen? I doubt it. Urban development is driven by politics, economics and social demographics, not art. Its failures and injustices must be taken on where they can actually be changed – and that is not the education suites of public art galleries. If art does have a critical function in social life it might have something of value to offer people whose lives are affected by remote decisions they cannot influence. It might be able to express and make visible other experiences. It might even be able to create symbols and rituals of resistance.

But even in trying to do such things, artists risk being compromised and exploited by greater forces. The troublesome tensions between art and power are not new. How many great artists of the past approved of the princes who paid their wages and whose cultural authority they enhanced?

Even asking such questions is a privilege of sorts. Human beings are interdependent. Their actions, personal, social, economic and political, involve compromise with others. Artists who work with others, whether as participants or partners, relinquish some autonomy in exchange for increased capacities. The nature and degree of the compromises they make are matters of judgement and the only way of navigating these hazardous waters is to apply your critical faculties to your own work as much as to the social world in which it takes place.

'Estate Agency'

The Campbell Works Gallery is in Stoke Newington, a part of northeast London that was once considered poor but has been steadily gentrifying for 30 years. The average house price here is about £670,000: in Stoke-on-Trent it is £140,000.⁷ The gallery was boarded up on 8 April 2017 and remained closed for three weeks before reopening as an estate agency.

The new business was staffed by four young women, smartly dressed in the company colours of tan, custard and blue.⁸ They offered visitors details of houses and workspace for sale in Stoke-on-Trent, under the slogan 'Your life, but better'. Over the following week, a series of promotional events were held including a 'conveyancing focus lunch' and family day with a 'Handbook for Intended Settlers'.



'Estate Agency was asking if there are more artists in a place, is that a good thing? But then is there a point where there are too many of us, when we start to occupy and colonise and change. Is there a tipping point when suddenly what was good about us becomes damaging to the place and its people?'

Anna Francis

Anna Francis is originally from Margate and has seen the transformation of the town by the presence of artists who, priced out of London, are attracted by the magnet that is Turner Contemporary.⁹ Rebecca Davies grew up in the Elephant and Castle district of south London, where massive and controversial redevelopment is making locals fear they will be excluded from their own community: she moved to

Stoke-on-Trent partly because of these pressures.¹⁰ 'Estate Agency' set out to raise some difficult questions about the place of artists in culture-led regeneration:

What responsibility do artists and arts organisations have in this process? Are artists complicit in the developers plans, or are we as much of a victim as the communities that are being forced out? How can we use our collective creative agency to do things differently? As art organisations see the neighbourhoods around them change, do we need to change the way we work to reflect those changes?¹¹

The irony with which 'Estate Agency' gave form to these tensions was not appreciated by everyone and the project attracted some harsh online criticism. It was a bruising experience, but for Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies, it is the sensitivity of these issues and their relevance for socially-engaged artists that make it imperative to debate them.



'Are we not allowed to talk about this? Estate Agency and the Portland Inn Project are really important because I genuinely believe in people-led change. As artists we talk a lot about working with people. We don't discriminate between a baker and a developer. I believe you need to be round a table with all the stakeholders in order to affect change.'

Rebecca Davies

Changing the world

Deindustrialisation is changing Stoke-on-Trent in profound and complex ways. How art and cultural development will influence that change remains to be seen, but Appetite, the British Ceramics Biennial, AirSpace, Restoke and other local organisations are bringing new opportunities and ideas to the city. So are individual

artists, including Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies in their commitment to the community around Portland Street. Their work is valued by their neighbours, and from it may come a permanent new home for creative, educational and social activities. But the questions they are asking might be even more important. Other agencies could take on the Portland Inn and turn it into a community centre, but who else would raise their questions about the city, its culture and its people?



Even when artists' work is not immediately approachable to others, it has the capacity to surprise and disrupt. In creating a Spode China Rose as a ceramic object *and* a living plant, AirSpace also made a symbol of how the old factory site might be renewed.¹² In creating a performance with people who have migrated here in the derelict Wedgwood Institute, Restoke showed that new inhabitants can be a chance for learning rather than a threat.¹³ In working with a real estate agency to question attitudes to property, community and social engagement Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies are helping artists to think more critically about their actions. These initiatives are very different from one another, but they all have a depth that means they stay in the mind. Where others might preach, they accept the complexities of people's experiences and feelings. They do not tell people what to think, only that these things are worth thinking about.

Underlying the different ethical dilemmas of The Portland Inn Project and Estate Agency is a larger question that concerns everyone involved in participatory art: what effect can I have? The scale of the issues artists engage with is often out of all proportion with their own resources and capacity. Cardboard Citizens and Streetwise Opera work only with homeless people; In Place of War supports art in conflict zones; 'Bed' and 'The Crystal Quilt' challenge prejudice about ageing women. What effect can an art project have on such major social issues?

The answer, for people who continue with this kind of socially-engaged work, within and beyond the arts, lies somewhere between 'a little' and 'who knows'. It lies in believing that doing is better than not doing, that small change is better than no change; that speaking about wrong is better than remaining silent; that bearing witness can be a moral act, even, or especially, when no other is available. Most of all, perhaps, it is in believing that a critical, self-aware and questioning spirit is a foundation of better action, even if it is difficult to do and its consequences can be painful. That is the best available guarantee that the work we do in participatory art will do more good than harm. It is also an honourable place to stand.



Projects mentioned in the text

- The Portland Inn Project: <http://theportlandinnproject.tumblr.com>
- Airspace Gallery: <http://airspacegallery.org>
- Spode Rose Garden: http://www.airspacegallery.org/index.php/projects/the_spode_rose_garden
- Appetite: <http://www.appetitestoke.co.uk>
- Campbell Works: <http://campbellworks.org>
- Turner Contemporary: <https://www.turnercontemporary.org>
- Restoke: <https://www.restoke.org.uk>
- Cardboard Citizens: <https://www.cardboardcitizens.org.uk>
- In Place of War: <https://inplaceofwar.net>
- Streetwise Opera: <http://streetwiseopera.org>

Notes

- ¹ All quotes from interviews with Anna Francis and Rebecca Davies
- ² <http://www.appetitestoke.co.uk/about> (all links checked 19.06.18)
- ³ <http://www.appetitestoke.co.uk/blog/2015/06/OSC>
- ⁴ <http://theportlandinnproject.tumblr.com>
- ⁵ [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minions_\(film\)](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Minions_(film))
- ⁶ Most famously, Richard Florida.
- ⁷ <http://www.zoopla.co.uk/house-prices/> Prices in June 2017
- ⁸ The two other estate agents were also from Stoke-on-Trent: Nicola Winstanley, an artist with a socially engaged practice, and Penny Vincent a lecturer at Staffordshire University and specialist in volunteering, active citizenship, community engagement and participation.
- ⁹ <https://www.theguardian.com/society/2016/aug/17/coastal-towns-trendy-arts-help-local-community>
- ¹⁰ <https://southwarknotes.wordpress.com/the-elephant/>
- ¹¹ <http://www.campbellworks.org/content/estate-agency>
- ¹² http://www.airspacegallery.org/index.php/projects/the_spode_rose_garden
- ¹³ <https://vimeo.com/201142504>