

EMBERS HANDBOOK

Katharine Wheeler

Embers* Handbook

Using creative placemaking to re-imagine the places we live

‘Although great ideas are usually articulated by individuals, they’re nearly always generated by communities’¹

This publication is for groups and individuals who are active, or wanting to be active, in bringing about positive change in the places they live. It introduces creative placemaking as a way of making those changes led from within communities.

Creative placemaking is the use of creative activities to bring people together in a community and find collective ways of exploring and shaping ideas about the future of our places in ways that benefit all involved.

It offers an approach to asking questions and creating ways of working that bring people together to share experiences and find creative solutions to shared challenges.

**Embers can be used to relight a fire after it has gone out without the need to rebuild. The name is used to represent the sometimes hidden strength within communities to make things happen for themselves and their environment.*

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A Personal Note

My journey into creative placemaking began in 2015 when I first joined the 'Stovie' team (The Stove Network² - in Dumfries, southwest Scotland). As a visual artist I had become disenchanted by the isolation of the studio and the ways in which I was having to work to make even a small living, setting commission prices above the affordability of those around me and having to play the gallery, exclusive art game. There was something fundamental missing.

I had long considered my 'making' practice, the fifteen plus years I had put into growing this, to be the skills I hoped to find different ways of using. A background in community art, activism, youth work and street performance set me up well for a type of practice I did not yet know existed. One that certainly had not been introduced to me in art school in the late 90's which seemed intent on churning out performance and installation art mostly for white cube spaces.

The Stove became an apprenticeship for a new way of working, one that was part of a community committed to deeper long-term change. I discovered the magic that can happen when artists come together with other professionals and non-professionals, workers, residents, non-residents, community groups and other partners to have public and active conversations about the challenges and issues that exist within their local community and environment.

I started to grow a very different kind of practice, one where I could use my creative skills to work collaboratively within communities to initiate and support these conversations. As an artist I can imagine the world around me differently. This is something I can bring into the way I work and think with others. Now I create spaces that bring people together to share ideas, imagine what is possible for themselves and their environments, and think collaboratively and creatively about how to make those ideas happen. I have come to see this work as a vital part of a collective and grassroots approach to placemaking.



² The Stove Network is an arts and community organisation on the High Street in Dumfries, southwest Scotland, that uses arts practice to work from within its local community to address the needs of its town - www.thestove.org

Introduction

Creativity can be used to generate the conditions, grow the environments, and create the spaces that inspire and bring people together.

There is a power sparked when people are inspired to come together and share stories of the challenges they collectively and individually face. This sharing can help us find ways of working together towards a common purpose. Trust can be grown between the differences in our lived experiences, backgrounds, and cultures.

The *Embers Handbook* can be used to think about how creative placemaking can shape new ways of working and seeing with others, inclusive of the diverse voices within our communities. 'Community' here is not a whole or fixed identity but represents the differences in people and environments that make up the places we live.

This *Handbook* will guide you through what creative placemaking can be and what it needs, sharing examples from people and projects as well as ideas and tools of working. It is not a set of 'how to's' but a way to understand how creative placemaking can work for each of us.

At the back is a Glossary which explains the terms that have been used throughout.

1. Creative Placemaking; The Process

A cycle of enquiry

***‘Build a community around your questions,
don’t wait to find the answers’³***

At its core, creative placemaking is a shared journey of exploration with your community and environment through creative activities, expression, and ongoing enquiry. This enquiry is a way to understand the needs of our places by initiating open, public, and active conversations that do not start with pre-planned goals or set outcomes.

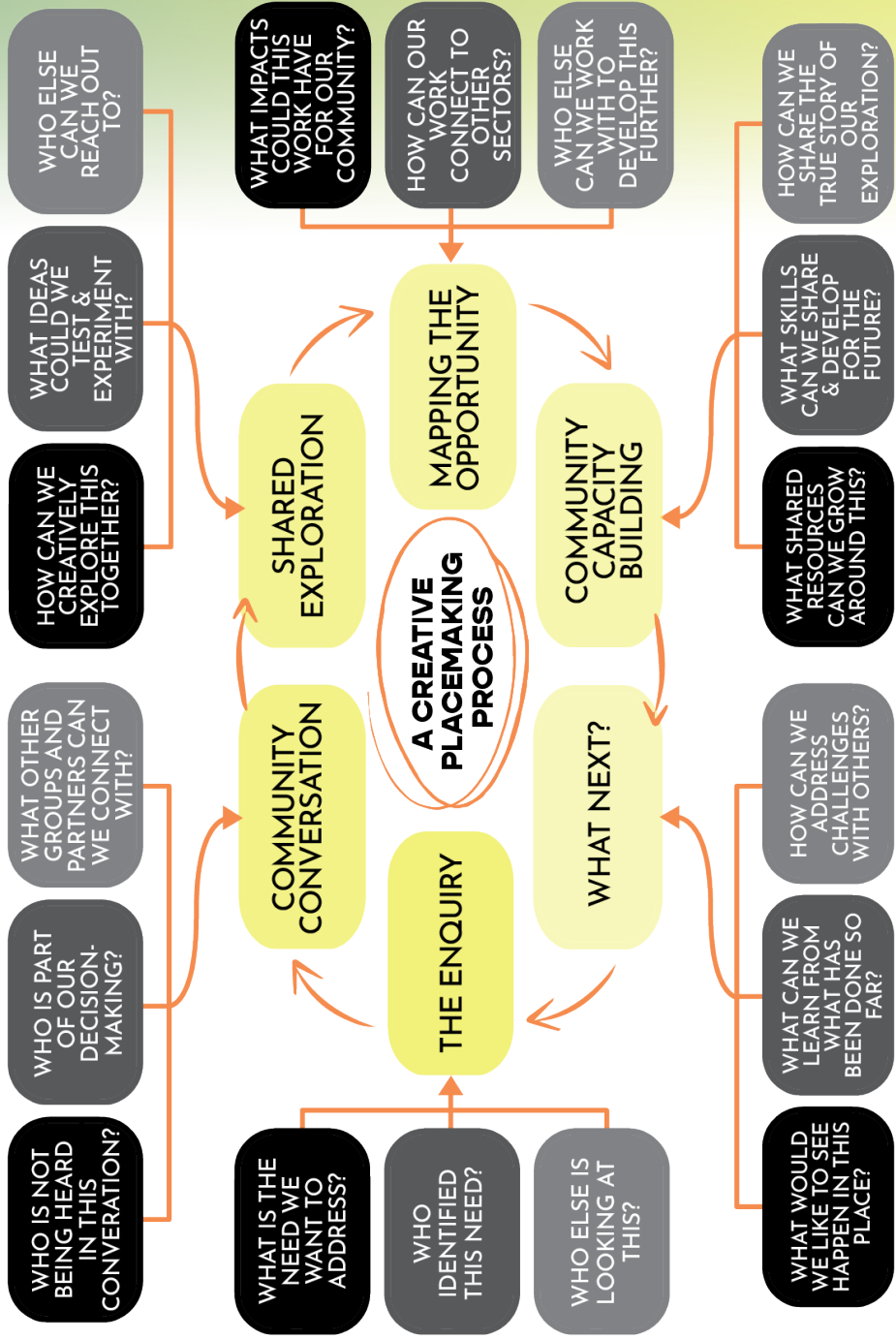
A creative placemaking cycle of enquiry looks at what is happening or not happening already in a place and works to explore what could happen with others in your community. It aims to seek out diverse perspectives and include all who want to have a say.

The enquiry process can start with an idea, or a vision, or an identified need. Importantly it allows the process of questioning to uncover entirely new ideas and directions for the work, deciding together how to take that forward for the deepest impact in the places we live.

This diagram maps the different stages of creative placemaking and the types of questions that each stage requires. You can start at any point and might find yourself repeating or coming back to a particular area.

The Embers Question Cards, available alongside this publication, are available to support this cycle as you start to shape projects and activities with others.

³ Saboteur Cards - Saltmarsh, E and Robinson, C, available from <https://www.uncertaintimes.community/tools/cards>





The Lenses of Creative Placemaking

Creative placemaking can be described as a way of 'seeing' your place through multiple perspectives, like trying on different pairs of glasses. This section introduces those perspectives in order to understand the different ways of thinking, seeing, and working that are involved in creative placemaking.

Many of our systems are no longer working for the majority, particularly for the less wealthy and more vulnerable, in our society⁴. When it comes to communities, and the places we live, we need to grow shared resources and build systems of decision-making that support sustainable and healthy ways of living for everyone, now and for future generations.⁵ We need to think differently about who is responsible for, who benefits from, and how we manage and look after our resources, places, and environments. To do this we need to embrace different, and sometimes challenging, perspectives and come to places of innovation and change.

The lenses⁶ of creative placemaking offered here are designed to help you think about how you could work within each of the following themes:

COMMUNITY
CREATIVITY
SPACE
ACTIVISM
POWER

⁴ Wellbeing Economy Alliance talks about how the current economic system does not address the heart of the problems we face in our societies and does not make life better for all, but in fact often makes problems worse.

⁵ Theorists such as Indy Johar, of Dark Matter Labs, talks about how we need to move to a genuinely connected way of thinking that recognises that how we do, or do not, look after one thing, has a deep impact on something. Therefore decisions cannot, and should not, be made in isolation.

⁶ These were developed through the creative placemaking work of The Stove Network and explored as part of kNOw One Place, Scotland's first creative placemaking conference (September 2022). Unless credited otherwise, statements in the following sections came out of discussions as part of this event.

COMMUNITY

‘Go where they are, start with what they do’

Working through the lens of Community is about the identity and pride that people have in their place and ensuring that work is led from within a place rather than imposed by others from outside. It is a commitment to open working with the people, cultures, and environmental needs that make up our community in order to explore questions relevant to the lived experience of our place, rather than looking for quick answers.

The lens of Community asks that we prioritise the common good of the work and aim to grow the capacity and resources for the long-term benefit and use in a place. It is about bringing together the knowledge and skills present in our community and ensuring ideas and actions come from this bringing together.

It asks that we work with generosity and embrace the tensions found in our differences; that we not only accept difference but seek it out and learn from it; that we look at who is not represented or present in our decision-making and that we work to build new structures to change that.

‘Communities are never finished, meaning their identities are not fixed. New people might arrive; equally, long-term residents might simply change their minds or preferences. Culture and community are living things and you can get into trouble if you picture a community as roughly homogeneous, like-minded or essentially cheerful, joyful places. Disagreements and differences of opinion, conviction, priorities or interests happen. In some sense it might be fair to say that community directly refers to how we negotiate our differences. A lot of time community(-engaged) work gets treated as though it’s fundamentally about solving existing problems and it can do that but I think it’s also, and perhaps more so, about developing and fostering things like pride, identity, what you might call ‘human flourishing’. Rather than seeing community-engaged work, be it artistic, academic or otherwise, as representing the beliefs or preferences of a community, I see it as offering an invitation to anyone who wishes to take a stake in the community to have a say, if they so choose, and accepting a commitment to be responsive to those contributions and open up opportunities for further conversation or debate.’

- **Shawn Bowden, researcher with focus on community.**

CREATIVITY

‘Re-imagine, propose, and test alternative futures’

The lens of Creativity invites us to see and think differently about our surroundings and imagine new possible futures within it. Working through Creativity allows us to look at our place, community, and environment and to experiment with what we see, finding active ways to explore and test ideas. Using creativity in this way can help us talk about the challenges, the opportunities, and the social contexts of our place and community in collaborative and expressive ways. It can create the spaces and the environments that bring us together and support us to come up with creative solutions to challenges we individually and collectively face.

The lens of Creativity can help uncover and celebrate less visible stories, explore our different identities, the needs of those identities alongside the needs of the land and environment, and be a facilitator of spaces to do this. When embraced over time, the lens of Creativity embeds ideas and actions that can lead us in new and surprising directions with people we may not have connected with otherwise.

‘I have been working with Women’s Aid in the Highlands of Scotland with women who have experienced domestic abuse. We use creative activities as a conduit for conversation and the creation of a safe space to connect with others and use their voice. It has been a way to for the women to try something new and have the confidence to do that. To be able to make a mistake and not face any repercussions is huge in this context. Being able to come as they are without judgement and participate in simple creative activity, which is well done using quality resource, is a huge factor in enabling and empowering. An artist can bring a depth of knowledge and experience of the material elements combined with a very human element and skill in working with people. In many cases this has been a huge steppingstone for the women involved, with accounts of the life changing potential that engaging creatively with others can have. For example, being able to join other groups, achieve employment and live a life beyond their trauma.’

- Cat Meghan, artist and founding member of Circus Artspace, talking about work with Women’s Aid in the Highlands of Scotland as part of Culture Collective.

‘One of the first placemaking projects that I led was called Our Norwegian Story. It explored connections between Dumfries and Norway as headquarters for Norwegian’s in exile during WWII. What stays with me about this project is the momentum that grew behind the work and how quickly. It tapped into something that was meaningful to people. What was particularly interesting was how much it seemed to mean to those who didn’t have connections to Norway, currently or in their history, but that had come to Dumfries from another culture or country. In just celebrating something different, others that felt different seemed to be seen. It was one of those projects that we could have done so much more with but just didn’t have the resources to continue, though there are still some very active in this part of Dumfries’ story.’

- Katharine Wheeler, artist and creative producer, The Stove Network

SPACE

'Make spaces that people feel comfortable to speak in'

The lens of Space asks us to think about the different ways our community comes together in conversation and activity, and the spaces required (both physical and virtual) to support this. It recognises we all need places we feel welcome and comfortable, in which we can recognise ourselves and see that they are part of the conditions needed to make things happen.

Looking through the lens of Space asks that we think about what we have available around us, how we can use that differently, and what is not there and may be needed. It asks that we think about the requirements of these spaces, whether they are affordable, visible, accessible, and regularly open. It asks that we look to understand the value of these environments in supporting connections, growing relationships, and building trust in our community.

The lens of Space asks us to be part of creating the spaces we need for our communities and look for those who can help us do that.

'I worked on a project for young queer women towards the end of the 90s rooted in a piece of research around poverty and social exclusion of lesbians and gay men. At that time, it was almost an uncharted community. We took our courage in our hands and thought, 'maybe there is a need here for a group or a space to be created for this community'. We gathered a group of young lesbians, bi-women, queer women, and asked them, what do you need, do you need a space, do you need a group? A clear response of 'Yes' led to six years of a peer-led group, with peer-led education co-developed with The Women's Library. Individuals recently got in touch wanting to reflect on how that group helped shape them as community leaders. It's incredible to think how a group can sustain its contact and development from a space being created. It was one of those projects that had no template and a lot of risk involved. It started with an idea but what was critical was we asked the individuals involved what their needs might be and followed their lead.'

- Adele Patrick, Director of Women's Library, talking about LIPS, Lesbians in peer support.

ACTIVISM

‘Believe in unimaginable futures and make spaces that bring people together to play in that imagining’⁷

Through the lens of Activism, we can give ourselves permission to act for change in what ever way that means for us, quiet or loud.

The lens of Activism encourages us to challenge our ideas of what is possible and asks that we be courageous in our imagination of fairer and more equitable ways of living and making decisions. It asks that we believe in the power of the individual act, to collectivise, bring us together with others and form groups, coalitions, and larger movements to influence change.

Activism asks that we think about power in terms of the steps each of us can make to enact different futures, and that we start to build these futures from the grassroots of our societies. It is a commitment to active exploration and a call for collective work that stands up for new ways of doing things.

‘In the mid 1990s we worked in a community called the Methleys in Leeds. The kids there wanted space to play, the adults agreed and wanted space to breathe, talk, have events and have fun together. As an inner-city neighbourhood of back-to-back and terraced houses the only shared spaces were the streets themselves and they were increasingly dominated by cars. What if we re-designed the streets with priority for people (something we had heard about in the Netherlands and Germany—woonerf⁸, living streets). That would mean changing the law, the Council said. So, we did. We worked with campaigning groups, Transport 2000 and the Children’s Play Council. We laid 800m² of turf on our street for a weekend festival as a consultation and as a campaigning exercise to get national media coverage. Children from the Methleys launched the Home Zone campaign at the House of Commons, at one point we even worked with lawyers to push for a judicial review. Throughout it all the community continued to play, organise, and celebrate their living streets. In 1997 the law was changed, the Methleys became an official Home Zone and £60m was committed to creating other Home Zones around the UK. Activism of the most beautiful, positive, productive kind.’

- Adrian Sinclair, Director for Heads Together Productions and lead on UNION: The Northern School for Creativity and Activism

⁷ Wheeler, K (2022) Values and Ethical Principles in Practice, available from <https://www.katharinewheeler.com/working-principles>

⁸ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woonerf>

POWER

‘Power lies in the actions we take, not the influence we hold over others’

The lens of Power asks that we take bold moves to understand and think about the different ways power is enacted, by ourselves and by others.

Looking through the lens of Power challenges us to understand the effect of our actions in a wider and more holistic way for our community and environment. It asks that we look at where decisions have been made in the past and are made now and by whom. It asks that we work to open out structures of decision-making and continue to look for ways of working that invite in the views of others.

The lens of Power asks us to work with transparency, re-think processes of control and allow collective action to change the direction of work. It invites us to embrace the risk of more open ways of working and in the process to not be afraid to question established ways of doing things.

Power has its own story in our places and communities. The lens of Power requires that we dig deeply into those stories and understand the healing that might need to take place so that new ways are able to take shape equitably.

'I am always thinking about power in my placemaking work with communities. One of the reasons I do the work I do is to redress power imbalances in the decision-making within places. I work in the service of people in a community, to make sure that the usually quiet or silenced voices are heard, and respected. Sometimes the challenge can be as simple as changing who sits at the decision-making tables – a relatively simple act that can have profound impact. How those people are included and on what terms is key here – it has to be an ethical ask and process. Sometimes you can change the system by being inside it. Sometimes you are invited to a placemaking table you just don't want to sit at, and saying 'no' is a positive challenge. I do believe placemaking work is at a time when it has to challenge itself to be and work better – we need to challenge ways of working that do harm or that don't work hard enough or ethically enough, and call out those projects that aren't placemaking but claim to be.'

- Cara Courage, placemaker and researcher

'I've chosen to work in some of the most deprived communities in Scotland, because that was the work that felt it had the biggest impact and was most important and vital to me. There was a point in this work that I realised, that because of my accent, my privilege, I had the voice of authority, whether I liked it or not. In other groups and other settings, I could just be different. I was 'other' and that can work, you know, you can use that to your advantage of just being different because then you can be more playful, you can be The Joker character in the deck of cards. But in these environments, very close-knit community environments, my otherness stopped the real impact of the work. And that's taught me something about how to be really embedded somewhere, the need to build teams with lived experience, because I was welcomed, I was allowed around the table, but maybe for the wrong reasons.'

- Sarah Longfield, creative producer, coach, facilitator

2. Creative Placemaking; What We Need

The component parts

'Build the scaffolding communities need to move towards change'

Creative placemaking involves **people, place, and community**. This means that people in communities are working together with others in open and genuine ways inclusive of the needs of the place and environment around them. While every place is different, and there are specific needs that depend on those differences, there are some fundamental parts that are needed to create the conditions needed for creative placemaking work to grow from.



COMMUNITY - the people, the identities, the land and cultures that make up a place

CREATIVE PRACTICE - the expertise, experience, and work that supports activities and expression

COMMUNITY HUB - a base to work from, a home that the work can base itself in

PARTNERS - other individuals, groups, and organisations to connect with

WORKING PROCESS - a way of working, or making things happen together, shaped and agreed by those involved

COMMUNITY - a geographical place or environment and a community of identity / interest that are at the heart of the work and lead the direction it takes. We are all experts of the places we live and can work to nurture the environments we need. Creative placemaking requires that we grow a community around the work who are leading the direction it takes and are of the place it is for.

CREATIVE PRACTICE - creative practitioners can be brilliant at holding space to open up conversation about the possibilities of a place. In creative placemaking they co-create programmes of activities for engagement, inspiration, and visioning with community members. A creative practitioner can be anyone (an artist, a gardener, a chef, a writer) who can support creative expression and exploration.

COMMUNITY HUB - organisations that are embedded in their local community. This could be a Development Trust but can equally be a Sports Centre, Youth Club, Community Cafe, or other Community Group. A community hub provides a base for the work and is able to hold responsibility for the long-term vision and strategic impact that comes out of it. It may start with an informal group that then develops into a more established structure long term or be a new way of working with a group or organisation that already exists but a space is important, even if temporary.

PARTNERS - any individual, group, agency, or local authority that gets involved with the project to support the work of the creative practitioner, community hub, and community participants. Partners and collaborators are part of alliances around shared agendas and can help drive the long-term outcomes of the work.

WORKING PROCESS - the process and structure agreed by those involved for taking ideas and work forward. In creative placemaking this should be open, collaborative, and inclusive of less formal structures that form around the work as it develops. Ideally the community hub will provide a base and headquarters supporting this structure as it develops.

These components on their own will not create a successful creative placemaking project. They require the **time, commitment, trust** and **collaboration** from those they involve as well as people who have the capacity to manage and facilitate the work. You do not need to have all of these components at the start of a project, and they may not remain at the end, but the process of creative placemaking will require that you bring these elements together through the work.

‘Create processes that have adaptability at their heart’

The skills / the people

***‘Find people who can walk this journey with you,
it cannot be done alone’⁹***

This work is not driven forward by one person’s vision but by groups of people who together bring the collective knowledge, perspectives, and experience needed to get things done, in ways that matter for all involved. A creative placemaking process seeks out those with different skills and experiences to our own, learning together through working and doing. It is about recognising the value of both professional and unprofessional skills and bringing these together within the development and delivery of work and activity to collaborate. Supporting this collaborative approach to working is a fundamental skill of creative placemaking work and requires that we reach out to others who have this if we do not have it ourselves.

Collaborative working is challenging. The most exciting projects bring together diverse perspectives through those involved, and support the challenging conversations these perspectives can bring out. Creative placemaking requires that we try on other perspectives and make space for them within our the work.

The Embers Role Play Cards, available alongside this publication, offer a playful way to explore the different qualities needed within creative placemaking and encourage us to think about how they work together.

3. How it works in practice

Creative placemaking in action

‘Put ideas out into the world as they are forming and let them come back changed’¹⁰

There is no one or right way to do creative placemaking and indeed there are many doing this work that would call it something different (e.g. place-keeping, place-building, creative community development). Whatever words used, it is never a straightforward path but a journey through knowns and unknowns, ups and downs, and involves finding collaborative solutions to the challenges and hurdles that are met along the way.

Thinking of creative placemaking as a landscape each project will have a unique and individual journey through, helps us consider what this work might look like without overly defining its path. As a landscape we can understand some of the known areas and common challenges we are likely to come across and start to think about how we might need to navigate and prepare for them.

Some important areas to be aware of:

- Include activities that inspire and spark imagination
- Think of how you are growing knowledge together through sharing learning
 - Create spaces for regular reflection on work and activity
 - Communicate the journey for others to see and join
 - Be prepared to respond to and support unknown outcomes
 - Build in support for participants and workers within a project/activity
 - Seek out allies and creative collaborators
 - Be ready to let go of singular and individual aims to co-create new ones with others
 - Be prepared to be challenged and find generous ways through those challenges
 - Be open to considerable change

¹⁰ Wheeler, K (2022) Values and Ethical Principles in Practice available from <https://www.katharinewheeler.com/working-principles>

'A lot of people have been burned by projects that allege to be community-engaged, but which use tools like consultations or town halls to manufacture support for their pre-existing plans. An alternative model creates a platform, a space or a medium for people to consider together what they want out of their town or neighbourhood, in a word, community. Often that's through discussion, but takes place through experimentation, creative reimagining's, storytelling. That's one reason I think artists are exemplar leaders of this work, because they don't tend to shift the burden of creativity on community-members but can, through their practices, offer alternative modes of expression and exchange and contestation. There's a careful balance needed between asking people what they want and giving people ideas and inspiration. I guess that's a cycle, a back-and-forth discussion. This can lead to a style of work that doesn't claim to be licensed by, or be speaking for, the community but rather is an invitation, or provocation, for anyone who wishes to take a stake in a community to have a say.'

- Shawn Bowden, researcher with focus on community

'One of our biggest lessons in this work has been to recognise the extent to which we've asked people to work differently from ways they are used to; for the artists, for the community organisations and for other partners involved. This type of work asks people to learn about each other's work and to shape new processes and approaches together. It may seem a subtle shift from how many artists and community groups usually work but in practice it has challenged people tremendously. Community groups and artists often work towards fixed and agreed outcomes, however, the process of 'going on a collective journey of discovery' with all the associated challenges of managing expectations can be very new. For artists this requires them to open out their creative processes, to use creative activities to bring community groups and local people into their processes of development for bigger co-developed ideas. In practice, this also requires that artists recognise how their actions could impact the work, and the relationships, of community groups long term. For community groups this required a trust and surrender, allowing new relationships to form around the work that might lead them in new and different directions.'

- Katharine Wheeler, What We Do Now, The Stove Network





VIEWPOINT OF
ALTERNATIVE
PERSPECTIVES

TRIG POI
INTEG


GARDEN OF
INSPIRATION

KNOWLEDGE
COMMONS


MARSHES OF
DISCOMFORT


FOREST OF
DISEMPOWERMENT


COLLABORATORS
CROSSING


WALL OF CAPACITY

EVALU
PO

RIVER OF BUREAUCRACY
ALLY BRIDGE

PROJECT GRAVEYARD


RECUPERATI
PLACE


NT OF
RITY

WHAT WE
THOUGHT
WE'D DO

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POINT

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OBSTACLE COURSE
OF OTHER AGENDAS



PLAINS OF THE UNKNOWN

VIEWPOINT FOR
LONG-TERM IMPACT

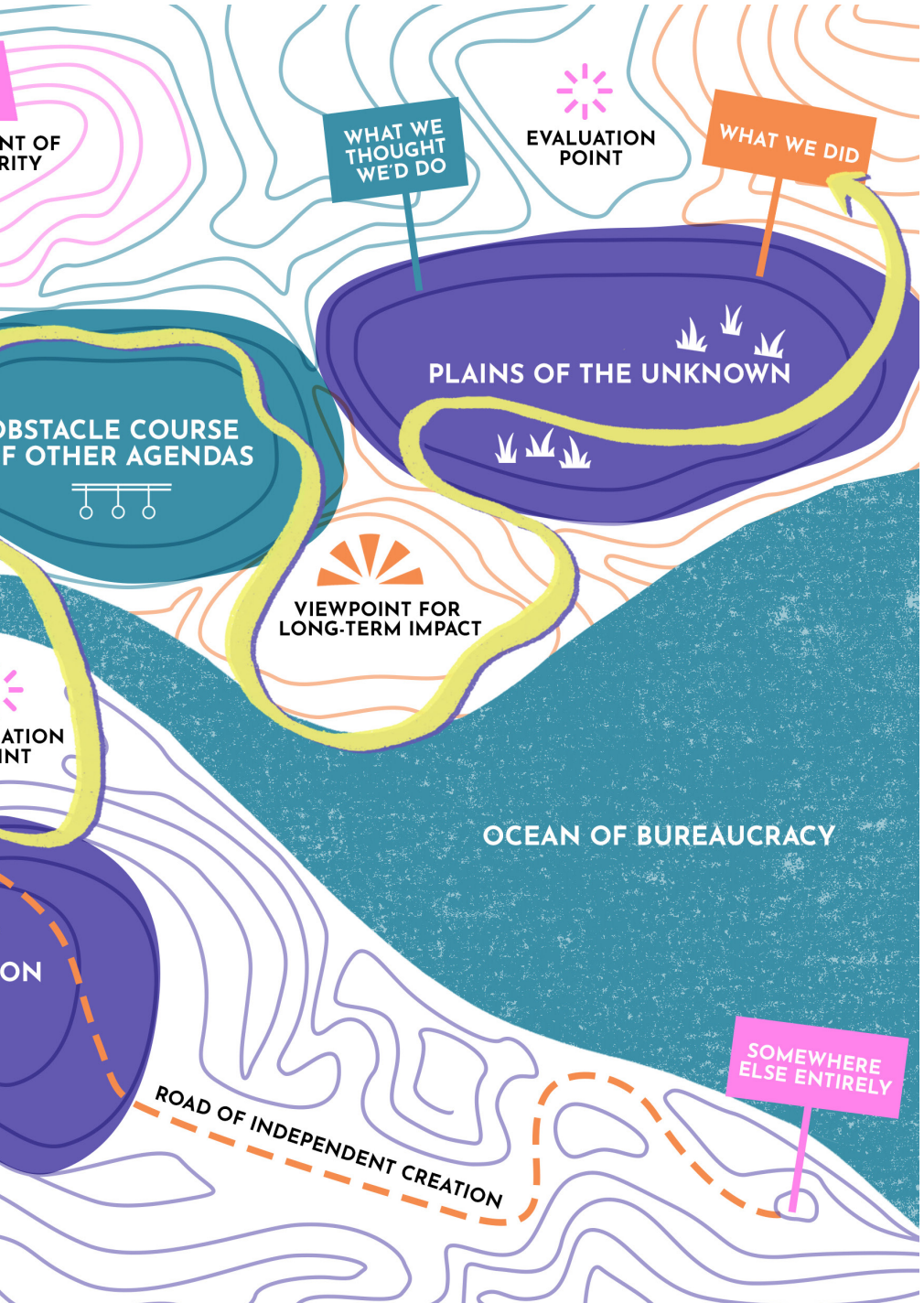
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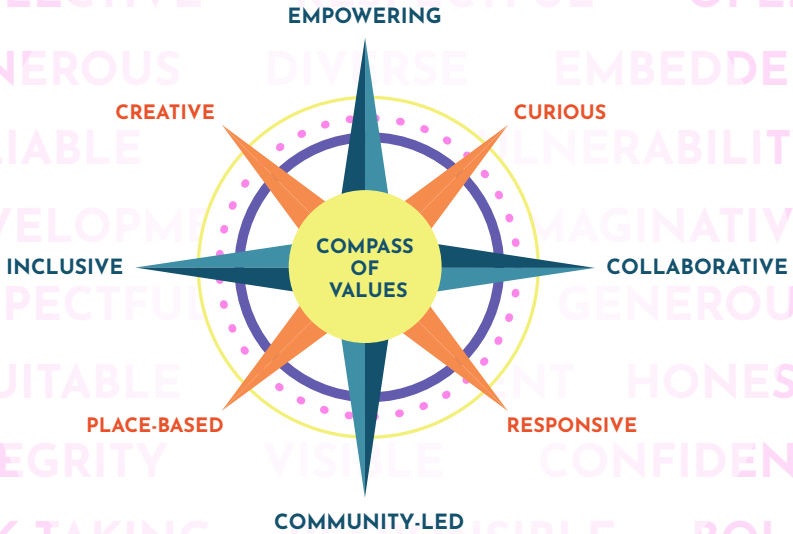
ROAD OF INDEPENDENT CREATION

SOMEWHERE
ELSE ENTIRELY



Compass of Values

PLAYFUL ACCOUNTABLE COMMITTED
CONNECTION KIND ADVENTUROUS
REFLECTIVE RESPECTFUL OPEN
EMPOWERING
GENEROUS DIVERSE EMBEDDED
CREATIVE CURIOUS
RELIABLE VULNERABILITY
DEVELOPMENTAL IMAGINATIVE
INCLUSIVE COLLABORATIVE
RESPECTFUL GENEROUS
EQUITABLE INT HONEST
PLACE-BASED RESPONSIVE
INTEGRITY VISIBLE CONFIDENT
RISK-TAKING RESPONSIBLE BOLD
COMMUNITY-LED
LISTENING SHARED COURAGEOUS
COOPERATIVE EXPLORATORY TRUST



Navigating the landscape of creative placemaking

‘In unknown territory look for a compass not a map’¹¹

It is often difficult to know where a creative placemaking project will lead us or the challenges we might come up against during the process. Agreeing shared values at the start of the work, and revisiting these regularly, can help keep the work on track. Some of the core values for creative placemaking are that it is community-led, collaborative, inclusive, and creative but there will also be values that are specific to the places we are in, to the people we are working with, and to the wider circumstances the work sits in.

Values can be included in briefs and contracts and they can be used as part of working sessions to reflect on the progress of activity, to look at what is working and what needs to be reviewed and changed.

These values can be thought of as a Compass that guide and direct the work. The Compass of Values tool, available alongside this publication, can be used to explore and agree what is important to us and to the project with those we are working with as well as the people the work hopes to impact.

‘Values are our touchstone, in deciding what we do and what events and activities we put on. We use them to make decisions together, if we’re trying to decide on a project to develop, or partners to work with, or programmes to run, we use our values to ask ourselves ‘How does this meet our values? or How does it allow us to push those values and then stretch them? We encourage artists we work with to also bring a values-based approach to their work within our community. As part of a regular project CAIR: Caithness Artists in Residence, which works with caregivers, artists and residents, usually five or six artists at a time over a six to eight month period, I run a values workshop for the artists and workers involved. It is about how to discover your values and work those out with others and to dig deep into how to use a values-based approach to create a sort of manifesto for yourself but also for how you’ll work with participants as part of your work. It’s really important to us as an organisation in a small rural community, that all the people we work with are advocates for our values.’

- Charlotte Mountford, Director of Lyth Arts Centre in Caithness

¹¹ International Futures Forum, Prompt Cards, available from www.iffpraxis.com/iff-prompt-cards

Embracing the challenges

‘Be in it for the long-haul, this way of working takes time to get going and ongoing commitment to make things happen’

Creative placemaking takes time, commitment, and perseverance. One of the most important places to start in this work is to acknowledge that change is challenging and that embracing those challenges will be a large part of the work.

Communities, and the different groups and cultures within them, have their own stories of exclusion and hierarchy. If change is to happen we must explore this together within our communities, seek out difference and support uncomfortable conversations to happen.

‘Believe in the power of compassionate spaces to bridge divides’

A few things to keep in mind:

- Working through challenges with others is an important part of the work, this will take time, resource, and generosity.
- No one person will have all the skills required for this work, seek the support you need and bring in others to help you.
- Time changes things, something that is not working now may work at another time, something that has worked before may not work now.
- It does not have to ‘succeed’ to be part of change. Getting things wrong is part of working out what is right. Allow for this in your processes.
- Do not be afraid to stop, that can also be part of the process. If you continue, make sure you are continuing for the right reasons.

‘Be prepared to be disappointed sometimes and do something creative with it’

Here are some stories from those working in creative placemaking, what they have come up against and what they have learned through that.

'A difficulty I've come up against as an artist is the notion that an entire place might have a consistent or coherent idea of what the future they want could be. Within this the difficulty is how do you bring people into a project who are not involved, who don't care, who want something else from what the commissioning organisation wants. I have learned that groups of people I get involved with are not fixed in time, things change, different people become involved, and different values and purposes emerge. In a project I did years ago, The Father Day, there were very vocal, very supportive groups of people, interested in talking about notions of family and family support. But that also excluded quite a few 'fathers' who weren't interested in that subject, it wasn't the most important to them and wasn't useful for them at the time. What I've learned is that that is okay. I now know it has become important to some, so also things change, the interest and relevance of the work will change over time.'

- **Anthony Schrag, artist and researcher, Queen Margaret University**

'What I think is often avoided is how people get on with each other. That might be people within communities, groups, people within an organisation, or the relationship between communities and those hosting or holding a project. I've tried to work with this by understanding better what I'm bringing and what others might be bringing and understanding that there's learning to be done here. It's not just about being nice, being kind or being compassionate, but about learning more about tools of nonviolent communication, tools of listening. A basic idea, often overlooked, is about really actively listening to each other and not expecting that individuals or groups will be skilled in this. Understanding that managing groups, managing conflict, is often the last thing that creatives might be buying into when they're involved in a project. So making sure people have as many tools as possible, suggesting and providing the tools people might need, is important. There's a lot of work sitting behind developing compassionate spaces for communities to thrive.'

- **Adele Patrick, Director of Women's Library**

'Detrimental effects on community-led work happen when power inequalities are ignored – the racial part of spatial justice brushed under the carpet as though too hard to front up, the local knowledge taken advantage of, the project funding coming in through a way that obscures the corporate power behind it. Inevitably, whether the ignorance was intentional or not, trust in these situations is eroded, and it is a hard thing to win back, it may never be won back. A lot of damage can be done along the path to losing trust.'

- **Cara Courage, placemaker and researcher**

Getting started

‘Start before you feel ready’¹²

Getting started can be the hardest part, or getting started in ways that support changes in the direction and focus for the work. Often we want to plan and work out the whole process of a project or idea, and it can be challenging to find a way to start that is simply that, a starting point.

Let us ask ourselves this: How can we plan by ‘doing’, by looking for ways to gather around initial questions? How would we like to come together and what could we start to do together? It could be a meal, a meeting, a dance. It could simply be starting to have conversations in a space.

Other barriers to starting can be not having the right people, experience or time. Reach out to people who might be interested, look for individuals, groups, organisations that might be interested in collaboration. Look for the experience you need and people who are able to bring creative ways to start doing something and often the momentum will build from there.

The Embers Questions Cards, available alongside this publication, have some starting questions that can be used to support this process.

¹² Saltmarsh, E and Ronbinson, C (date unknown) The Uncertain Times Workbook, available from <https://www.uncertaintimes.community/tools/workbook>

Telling the story

‘Tell the story of the work, inclusive of multiple perspectives, so that it can continue to evolve’¹³

Documenting and telling the story of our work means it is available for others to learn from, continue, and develop for themselves. It is important in the documenting process to ask ourselves whose story we are telling and find ways to capture the multiple experiences and perspectives of those involved. It is easy to tell a good story, it is harder to tell a real one.

The learning and documentation of work can be a creative exploration of its own, commissioning different artists, creatives, and researchers to **walk the journey with us** through the stages of development and activity with the aim of reflecting back to us as we go (not just at the end). These commissions can support a variety of creative outputs (reflective writing, film, performance) and evaluation approaches (collective working sessions, one to one feedback and support work) and help to identify when additional listening and support is required (peer groups, resolution support, mediation).

The story is not only about documenting and evaluating a project but about making spaces and finding creative ways for people to reflect together, and individually, on the work. Creative practitioners and artists can play a huge role in this with creative techniques allowing for different ways for people to contribute that are best but it is also important to recognise that additional skills can also be required to ensure inclusion and access needs are met for those involved.

Documenting and sharing the story of the work and the processes of reflection can become a valuable tool in understanding the impact of the work for those involved. Sharing it with others allows us to reflect on its ongoing relevance.

‘There is an age-old pattern with traditional place projects that an initial burst of energy and enthusiasm is often followed by a period of silence where ‘decision-makers’ disappear behind closed doors to ‘get on with the plan’ and everyone else is left wondering if this was really anything to do with them at all. Taking the creative route means that maintaining community momentum is actually as important as anything else – creatives will keep communicating about the process and understand the need for visible signs of progress – ongoing creative projects, small physical changes and/or ongoing groups and workshops are ideal to keep the energy live and people actively engaged as partners.’

- Matt Baker, co-founder and orchestrator of The Stove Network

¹³ The Uncertain Times Workbook - Saltmarsh, E and Ronbinson, C, available from <https://www.uncertaintimes.community/tools/workbook>

Glossary

Language is used and understood differently by us all. This Glossary does not aim to put a fixed definition on words but to share the way they have been used throughout this *Handbook*.

ACTIVISM - an approach to organising and campaigning, often through provocative action, to bring about social or political change.

ARTIST / CREATIVE PRACTITIONER - someone who creates things with imagination and with skill. In the context of this *Handbook* this includes anyone who uses creative activity and/or making in their process of working such as a writer, woodworker, painter, musician, performer, chef. They may not identify as an artist or a creative practitioner.

CO-CREATE - a process in which people with different experiences, skills, and knowledge come together and work in non-hierarchical ways to make something.

COLLABORATE - activity between two or more parties to work together towards a shared goal where all engaged can shape the direction of the work with equal measure.

COMMUNITY HUB - an organisation, or community group, that acts as a hub/resource for local people and plays an active role in what is needed for their community.

COMMUNITY-LED - when the direction of work and activity is decided and led from within the local community.

CREATIVE PLACEMAKING - is a community led approach that uses creative activity to support collective decision-making and positive change for people and the places they live.

CREATIVE PRACTICE - the work of an artist, maker, or other creative professional (could be a chef, gardener, woodworker for example), to develop or practice a skill.

CREATIVITY - the use of imagination and original thinking to make something new or reimagine something differently.

GRASSROOTS - an approach that comes from, and uses, the people in a given area, region or community as the basis for collective action, movement or change.

PLACEMAKING - the development of spaces by people, groups, and organisations for communities and encourages connection and creativity.

4. Tools

The following Tools are available alongside this *Handbook* for digital download or in physical format from www.katharinewheeler.com

Question Cards
Role Play Cards
Compass of Values

The Embers *Handbook* and associated Tools aim to support those interested in creative placemaking as a grassroots way of working from within their communities and it would be valuable to hear whether they work for you. Please get in touch with your thoughts.

Thanks and Inspiration

This *Handbook* has been developed by Katharine Wheeler, a social practice artist, producer, and core team member of The Stove Network. It draws on the work of What We Do Now, a creative placemaking project in Dumfries and Galloway, southwest Scotland, and Scotland's first creative placemaking conference (September 2022) that Katharine co-ordinated for The Stove Network. Unless credited otherwise, statements throughout the *Handbook* came out of open discussions as part of this work. More resources and information can be found on the website - www.whatwedonow.scot

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