

CHANGING THE CULTURAL LANDSCAPE ISN'T TOO MIGHTY A TASK

**A reflection on the 2018 People Place Power
conference in Wolverhampton**

Mark Robinson, Thinking Practice



**PEOPLE
PLACE
POWER**

Shifting the narrative
on arts engagement

**CREATIVE
AND PEOPLE
PLACES**

The subtitle of **People Place Power** was ‘shifting the narrative on arts engagement.’ So what is that story changing from – and what to? I was there to be on a panel on inclusive leadership, but mainly to listen in throughout and see what clues I could find.



When Arts Council England kickstarted Creative People and Places (CPP), lower engagement in often deprived areas was mainly depicted as down to lack of access and opportunity. The narrative was a battle against stubbornly low arts engagement stats, a quest for high quality of art to persuade the reluctant: ‘Take it and they will come.’ As a pitch it has some appeal, and some ran strongly with that model. Even in bidding though, many suggested places had much more going on than was acknowledged, it just looked a bit different from funded arts activity. After years of trial, error and conversation, however, the protagonists now see the task differently.

Whether Arts Council, CPP Place consortia members, artists or local people, they now increasingly see

the CPP ‘opportunity’ as more complex and richer. Some argue it is – potentially – part of a transformation of how art and creativity are practiced and shared in communities and who is involved in that task. An appetite for making culture together, not just taking part, is growing. But this demands different skills, relationships and capacity, which need time and experimentation to work out. The second act was, as I inferred in my report on learning from the first two years, both *Faster But Slower and Slower But Faster...*



The themes of People, Place and Power were threaded throughout the Wolverhampton conference. It was noticeable that the ‘inspiring pride in grim places’ lines present in previous years had been replaced with a concern for how the power to lead could be transferred or shared. There was a greater presence of participants and more participant voices in the panels which helped to root discussions in actual lived experience. It also reduced the amount of abstraction or appropriation of the participant’s experiences. One of my

fellow-panellists, Simon Thirkill from Heckmondwike and Creative Scene, described his personal journey from 'non-leader' to community leader. He said there were just two types of person: leaders and those not yet leaders. This was a powerful push against the 'take it and they will come' narrative.

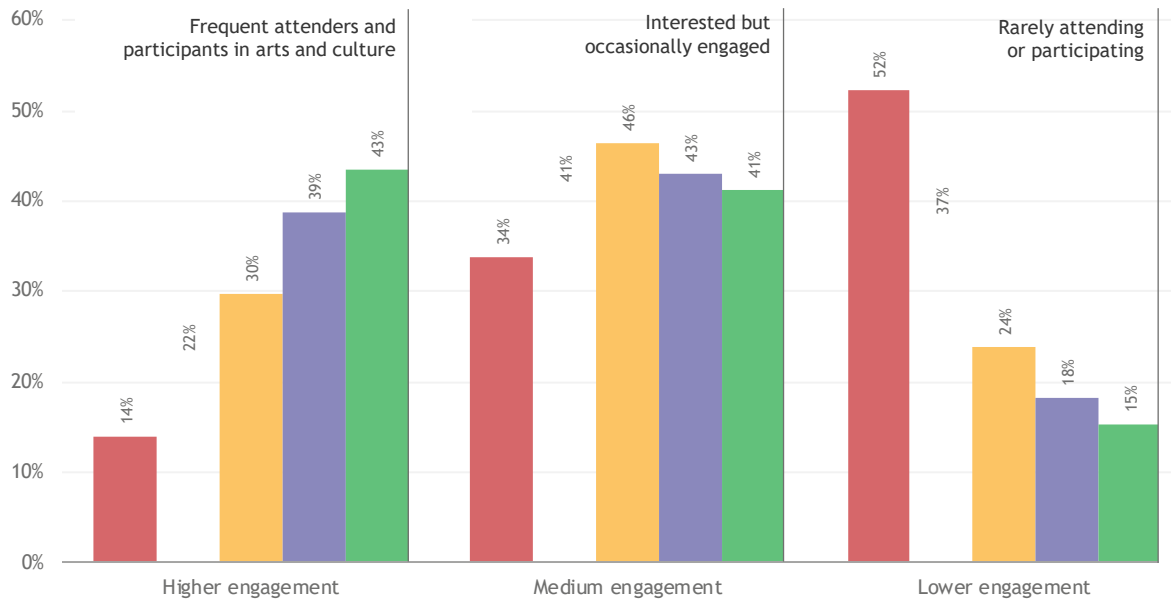


That some are excluded from 'power' by others holding onto privilege came up in several sessions and 'unconference' discussions. The factors of age, class, gender, ethnicity and a disabling culture circled many conversations. This is a debate which has changed during the lifetime of CPP, as issues of inequality have received greater focus. Continuing to grapple with power and privilege – even as clumsily as I did when our panel was asked about it – will be important to the next phases of development. Put crudely there are three ways those in real power in the arts will let go of it: by passing it over, by sharing leadership, or by having it taken away from them. We heard examples of how CPP Places and others are doing the first two, but those are often

organisations or consortia with a very specific kind of 'power dynamic' to do with their remit. Deep-rooted power and the vast, *vast* majority of Arts Council funding remains with larger institutions. With some honourable exceptions, few were present or vocal in Wolverhampton. This may partly account for the make-up of the audience I noticed looking out at the room when wrestling with my own privilege. The next narrative shift will need to include those older white males busy exercising power elsewhere as we spoke.

One encouraging sign that the third cause of power-shift might, just possibly, happen came from the warning flare in Sir Nicholas Serota's speech. He suggested future Arts Council funding for National Portfolio Organisations (NPOs) will be linked to their ability to connect, reflect and engage local communities, in what they do and how they do it. Of course, some narrowed their (*ok, our*) eyes a bit at that, given Arts Council's decades-long track record of tinkering at the edges of regular-funding rather than restructuring embedded privilege. It will take the steely resolve I hope lies under Serota's dry approval to make those shifts. The new money announced – £37m, £24m for new 'places' and £13m for the first CPP cohort to complete their ten-year visions – is positive, but small beer compared to NPO funding.

English Population Audience Spectrum Profile
 compared to NPO ticket-buyers, all arts NPOs, museums
 CPP audiences and participants 2017



Sources 1. Creative People & Places audience profile, 2017 4. Audience Finder All Organisations survey, 2015/16
 2. Population analysis by Audience Spectrum, 2017 5. Audience Finder ticketed NPOs, 2017
 3. Audience Finder Museums survey profile, 2015/16
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I left the conference flipping from the three Ps, to three favourite Ms: Mission Model and Money.

The Mission of CPP is being taken up more broadly. Involving people in co-creative endeavour to build on local skills and arts/creative expertise for the benefit of local communities is on a rising tide. The CPP Places and others such as 64 Million Artists and Fun Palaces are seeing it work, Arts Council see it as one way forward, and the diversity of non-arts organisations involved testifies to local appetite. The work is also beginning to influence other arts organisations, just as they have influenced it.

Anne Torreggiani of The Audience Agency illustrated that CPP roughly reverses the usual patterns of who engages with the arts, compared to NPOs. The mission is *not* impossible. Claire Doherty from Arnolfini suggested that this new wave may successfully pick up practice that had a moment of potential power in the 1990s but was deflected off course in the noughties. She argued for what I might call disruptive holism, an unsettling of place instead of going with the grain of place and people. Crucially in terms of Models, approaches to co-creation, power-sharing and engagement are being defined and set out so others can use and adapt them. Publications such

as Sarah Boiling and Clare Thurman's **mapping of engagement processes** and Chrissie Tiller's **Power Up** turn learning into tools. They also reinforce the point made a number of times in discussions: although one can talk about 'the CPP approach', this contains many variants, strains and differences of emphasis, opinion or method. An unresolved tension in the conference was between narratives based on individual transformation and those based on collective or system change. Hassan Mahmadallie described the social capital model which he saw underlying CPP as a discredited model. (The recent report on this subject by Karen Smith does not suggest CPP has adopted it unchallenged, nor that it should.) Sathnam Sanghera, returning to his home town, essentially argued creative working class young people in such places should build connections (a form of social capital) so they could navigate the networks of privilege and get the hell out. This seems far from the mission of people involved in participatory, socially engaged or indeed most arts work in the kinds of town represented here. Geographical inequality in the creative industries is well-understood – certainly by those outside the M25 – but arguably taken as 'given' more than other forms of inequality. It certainly was by Sanghera's 'just the way it is' attitude, which did not go unchallenged.

Money is perhaps more one for the sequels. Arts Council England's emphasis on involvement, if carried through seriously, should undoubtedly affect funding patterns. This may include direct 'descendants' of current Places moving across to the National Portfolio as Heart of Glass in St Helens has done. Remaining part of a 'movement for change' and part of a supposed national infrastructure would be a creative and design challenge for CPP practice.



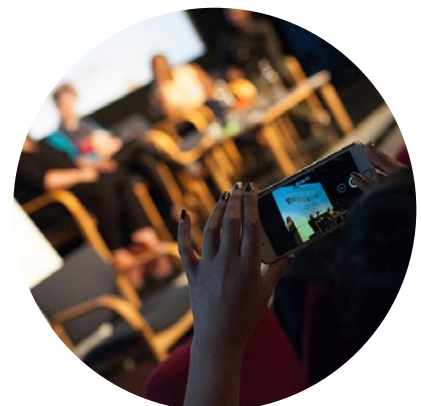
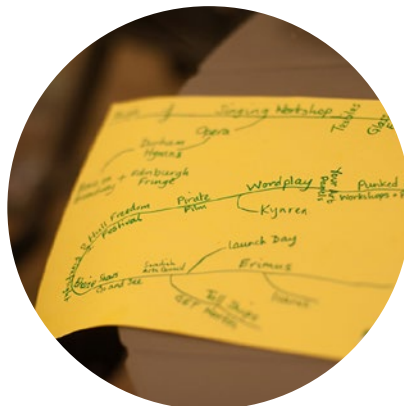
Another important aspect of Money was raised by Tina Redford: the unusually sensible level and longevity of funding directed at each Place. This has allowed them to adopt what Anne Torreggiani pointed out was essentially a Human Centred Design Process – something NPOs often seem structurally incapable of. Some undoubtedly see CPP's funding as luxurious. But maybe the final twist in the tale is that it is actually regular funding models that have become unrealistic, as expectations of what can be done with available funding have become stretched and distorted?

A better question for the next ten years than how to squeeze community co-creation into the regular funding pot might be what would happen if all arts activities were resourced in the way CPP has been? Can you expect new results from old models? Those involved in social engagement know it takes time, and NPOs cannot be expected to shift models on a sixpence. Would ten year funding, on a vision not delivery-basis, be fantasy?

I want to end by echoing the brilliant Jess Thom's words: 'changing the cultural landscape isn't too mighty a task'. Most people I spoke to seemed to leave thinking: 'This is possible. And

now for what comes next...' I did not find many examples of new forms of art – those things that in fifteen years may look like clichés for a while – but there were signs of a signature form in the co-created commissioning process. The IRL human-centred approach mirrored that of the digital realm and could be taken online more in future. How the spectacle was becoming more than 'arty pyro' was promising. The conference felt, at times, as if the unpredictable outcomes so carefully nurtured have a chance of maturing rather than fading. Change is possible.

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