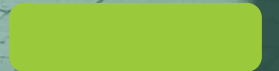


UNTOLD STORIES

A CASE STUDY REPORT ON UNTOLD STORIES
PRESENTED IN THE BIRMINGHAM 2022 FESTIVAL



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This report has been prepared by Amanda Roberts, Fahmida Choudhury, Ammo Talwar and Simon Redgrave of Punch Records, Katy Raines and Tori Moore of Indigo-Ltd, Jordan Gibbs, Kristine Royall, Shannon Pearse and John Knell of Culture Counts™, in association with Jonothon Neelands.

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indigo



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THANKS TO OUR FUNDERS!



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INTRODUCTION

This report represents an element of the wider Birmingham 2022 Festival (B2022 Festival) Evaluation. The B2022 Festival sought to undertake an outcomes-based evaluation, grounded in a Theory of Change model developed by the Organising Committee for the Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games and the B2022 Festival. The Theory of Change and subsequent evaluation framework contained seven short-term outcome areas.

Some of those areas necessitated the development of case studies that would complement the quantitative data within the framework and delve deeper into understanding the impacts and effects of different elements of the B2022 Festival programme. This report is one of those case study reports.

This report and its associated research were undertaken by Amanda Roberts, Fahmida Choudhury and Simon Redgrave of Punch Records, supervised by Ammo Talwar. It focuses on the outcome area 'Community'. This outcome area related to how participants and audiences experienced the work of the B2022 Festival. Case studies in this report focus on 'hidden histories' and 'revealed and/or reimagined stories', aka. 'Untold Stories'.

Punch proposed an adapted research methodology from Scheerens et. al (2003)¹ that would embed them in a selection of projects within B2022 Festival, and would consider the context, inputs, process, and outputs of those projects in a manner that could speak to the overall outcomes of B2022 Festival and its co-creation objective. Projects featured as case studies were selected in consultation with B2022 Festival, based on the implementation of their programming strategy and our understanding of the outcome area.

Can I congratulate Punch on their incredible efforts in conducting and delivering research that meaningfully engaged participants across the programmes featured in this report by embedding themselves into the creative delivery process, all the while maintaining an outcomes-focused mindset to their work. It speaks to the value of embedded research within creative practice, and this uncovers findings that should aid those working across creative policy and practice alike.

In addition to the evidence presented as part of this report, and the two other case study reports produced by this team relating to 'Skills Development' and 'Co-Creation', B2022 Festival has commissioned a further five evaluative reports, which look deeper into particular projects or clusters of work.

These are as follows:

- International Collaboration – The Audience Agency
- Critical Mass – The Audience Agency
- LGBTQ+ Space – Dr Roz Stewart-Hall
- Creative City Grants Programme - M·E·L Research
- Route 34: North Birmingham Alliance – Earthen Lamp

We encourage you to read about the B2022 Festival and its associated outcomes in all eight of the case study reports, as well as in the overarching evaluation report.

Sincerely,

Professor Jonothan Neelands,

on behalf of the Indigo-Ltd Consortium Evaluation Team

¹ Scheerens, J., Glas, C.A., Thomas, S.M. and Thomas, S., 2003. Educational evaluation, assessment, and monitoring: A systemic approach.



Image courtesy of Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery



“LIVING A SHARED HISTORY FROM ALL THE STORIES AND MIGRATION”

– AUDIENCE RESPONDENT - SURVEY

FESTIVAL COMMISSIONING MODEL

B2022 Festival was able to direct the scale, focus and content of its public programme through its Strategic Commissioning and Distribution Model².

This allowed for the development of large-scale collaborative 'major' commissions alongside 'micro' commissions which could 'address remaining programming gaps'. There were 'open calls' for work responding to specific themes - digital, social heritage of transport, sport, black art movement and nature. There was a locally-focused fund with support from the local authority (Birmingham City Council) - 'Creative City Grants' which aimed to fill the city with artworks co-created by communities and artists. There were 'sector development' programmes to support artist and community development, and an inclusive mass participation programme, entitled 'Critical Mass'. Additionally, there was scope for 'aligned' third-party projects to be supported by B2022 Festival's marketing and communications programme and via a brand license.

FESTIVAL CURATORIAL LINES

B2022 Festival developed three clear 'curatorial lines'³ as starting points to shape the thinking of artists and organisations proposing work. These were:

1. Our Place in The Commonwealth - the celebration of Birmingham as the Commonwealth Games host should be in the context of "honest conversations about ... the Commonwealth and its origins."
2. The Present Moment - a conceptual focus on current issues which "can reveal and enable the collective and often unrealised power of youth and youthfulness."
3. Stories Of Birmingham and The West Midlands - exploring "rich, untold and living history" through "stories that shape our identity and perspectives ... that resonate with people ... connect us to our place in the world, that come from here but are universal"

In addition to the conceptual shaping offered through the 'curatorial lines', there was an additional practical focus on commissioning work that would directly involve and engage audiences, for example, through 'public activations' - experiential public art - as well as through more traditional participatory programmes and events.

UNTOLD STORIES

Untold Stories are narratives which foreground community heroes, heritage, and concerns. Often excluded from mainstream narratives, they nevertheless influence the region's collective culture and identity. Birmingham's population exemplifies the concept of 'superdiversity' and 's soon to become a "majority-minority city" ⁴; with ethnic minorities (relative to the whole country's population) making up a majority of the local population. (Community Cohesion Strategy for Birmingham, Birmingham City Council, 2018). Additionally, mainstream cultural providers frequently offer diverse collections and narratives, but have yet to connect with minority communities effectively and consistently. B2022 Festival provided fresh opportunities for communities and institutions to re-engage and "feel connected to a shared history/culture ... shape our identity and perspectives[and] connect us to our place in the world, that come from here but are universal" (Festival curatorial line)

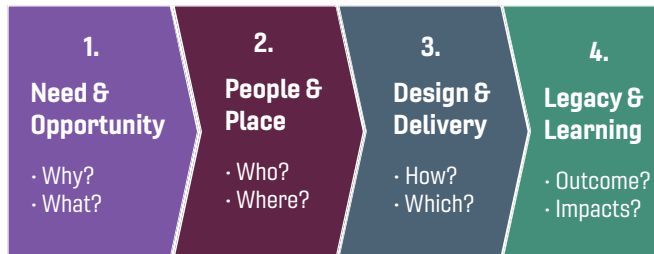
² Birmingham 2022 Commonwealth Games Cultural Programme Business Case, August 2020

³ B2022 Commonwealth Games Cultural Programme Business Case, Aug 2020 and B2022 Cultural Programme Evaluation Strategy, Aug 2020

⁴ Steven Vertovec and B2022 Cultural Programme Evaluation Strategy, March 2020

METHODOLOGY

Throughout the B2022 Festival, qualitative information and non-numerical data has been collected, gathered, and analysed from many project partners. This data includes interviews, reflections, photographs, video evidence, project reports, social media, and artworks, and informs this whole of this report. To aid in the development of our in-depth case studies, additional interviews were held with those directly involved with the projects namely producers, audience members, project teams and artists. Throughout the process the following research methodology has been used to reference the overall Theory of Change and to draw out the key points of the short-term objectives.



This report contains case studies of the following commissioned programmes: On Record (Birmingham Music Archive), Waswasa (Soul City Arts) and We Are Birmingham (Birmingham Museums Trust). Each of the case studies presented follows the four-stage outline presented above. In addition, shorter best practice spotlights have been included for MOBILISE (FATT PROJECTS), Congregation (Grand Union), Dorothy Towers (Vivid Projects) and the Healing Gardens of Bab (Fierce). The report concludes a final section summing up how effectively B2022 Festival commissions revealed and shared community heritage and suggesting implications for future work.

Some written responses have been re-presented 'as-is'; responses from in-person interview transcripts have been edited to remove 'filler words' and duplications. Some interviewees requested to remain anonymous - or that their opinions on particular topics remain unattributed. Accordingly, personal identifiers have been typically redacted throughout the document, unless their identity is pertinent to the point being made. (Following Quality in Qualitative Evaluation: A framework for assessing research evidence, Spencer, Ritchie, Lewis and Dillon, Cabinet Office 2003)



CASE STUDY: ON RECORD

On Record ([Birmingham Music Archive](#) / BMA): 17th June 2022 Album Release; 'Live and in Conversation', Running March To August 2022.



On Record album; Image by Amanda Roberts.

ON RECORD: NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

“There is so much music history in the city, so much diversity and so many different genres. We go back to music halls, the germs of popular music post 1950’s with the birth of Rock ‘n’ Roll, Jazz ... all this was happening in Birmingham at the time. We want to tell and celebrate those stories.”

Director, Birmingham Music Archive - Interview

On Record was designed to give a platform for eleven very different creative interpretations of life in Birmingham - inspired by the city’s musical past, present and future. Described as “a sonic love letter to Birmingham”, On Record sought to commission and present eleven original songs from a diverse range of artists. A “concept album, rather than a compilation album”, each artist responded to the word “Birmingham”, with artists representing a diverse range of backgrounds, musical styles, and career positions. Genres included Afrobeat, Asian Electronica, Folk, Garage Rock, Hip-Hop, Jazz, Neo-Soul, Reggae, RnB, Trip-Hop and UK Rap.

Supporting the On Record album was a parallel initiative - the Live and In Conversation series – comprising performances, and twenty-two public talks, hosted by Birmingham journalists Satnam Rana and Adrian Goldberg. These ran from March to August 2022 at B:Music’s new Jennifer Blackwell Performance Space and Justham Family Room. Live and In Conversation gave a public platform to performers and other figures from the music business associated with the city’s scene. Not all of these were ‘on record’ themselves, but all contributed to the diversity

of Birmingham’s local, national, and international music culture. At the time of writing, these sessions are available online as podcasts.

“(Birmingham Music Archive are) the custodians of Birmingham music, a resource and an asset”

Head of Programme, B:Music



On Record press launch; Image by Fabio De Paulo.

ON RECORD: PEOPLE AND PLACE

“ON RECORD reflected a diversity of genre, age, gender, race, ethnicity and disability. Central to my selection (of artists) was post-war migration, indigenous voices, working class voices ... these are not the usual suspects to be commissioned”

Director, Birmingham Music Archive - Interview

On Record was designed to give a platform for eleven very different creative interpretations of life in Birmingham - inspired by the city's musical past, present and future. This was accomplished through the commissioning of an eclectic mix of unsigned, underground, and internationally known artists across an unusually broad range of genres. The On Record album contains new work from: Bambi Bains, Cherry Pickles, Dapz on the Map, Elle Chante, Friendly Fire Band, Kate Luxmoore and Lekan Babalola, Sanity ft Black Voices, Tj Rehmi, UB40 ft Gilly G, We Are Muffy, and the Xhosa Cole Quartet ft Soweto Kinch.

An analysis of the lyrical content of On Record's songs was undertaken to explore how similar or dissimilar the artists' interpretations were of the city. It looked at narrative themes, personas, perspectives, contexts and auteur theory (the choice of language and lyrical devices to convey specific effects). Artists were then interviewed to explore their understanding of the theme of 'Untold Stories'.

Multiple, and powerful, recurring themes were:

1. the spirit of people and place,
2. the importance of neighbourhoods,
3. a city of duality,
4. civic pride,
5. a city of industry - and hard work,
6. a city of diversity which is a place of welcome.



Kate Luxmore
Image by Ian Davies



Lekan Babalola
Image by Ian Davies

LYRIC FROM WILLMORE ROAD (LEKAN BABALOLA FT KATE LUXMORE)

“The blacksmith's fire, a molten heat to forge and mould ... hammer and nails, metal and iron ... heating the coals ... I stretch out my hand to receive ... what is given to me, what is given to me”

Olalekan Babalola is a Nigerian-born, Birmingham-based jazz percussionist, musician, and creative producer. A two-times Grammy award winner, he integrates native Yoruba iconography and symbolism into his track for On Record. Willmore Road is performed with clarinetist Kate Luxmore and a jazz / funk ensemble.

Willmore Road celebrates the area where we live and work. We used the icon of metal in Ghanaian - OJUN - for Birmingham as a metal city and OSHUN - the icon of the river - for a canal city... (Birmingham is) the Detroit of our culture, a centre point of the colonial realms. The blood and sweat of our people built this country.

Lekan Babalola, from interview - Interview

LYRIC FROM "DYNASTY" (ELLE CHANTE)

"Like a mechanical drum ... city of a thousand trades ... fight to be seen ... a driving force under our feet ... people of Birmingham in pursuit of their dreams ... building our dynasty"

Elle Chante was a strong contemporary choice for the project; an artist very much resting as an undiscovered talent and unheard story; her other works – including, for example, *Seasick* and *Invisible* - are interdisciplinary pieces about coming to terms with chronic and / or invisible illnesses. A self-described 'musical self-expressionist', her performance explores emotions and experiences using looping guitar and emotive song writing.

"I am not working in the genres centric to the Birmingham music scene. My music is a bit of a genre mash: Ambient, Alternative, Experimental; I've struggled to put it in a box ... I appreciate Birmingham but I'm not sure Birmingham sees me as an artist at this time. Birmingham is the last to support but first to recognise when people break through. People should buy tickets whilst we are here! It's complicated."

Elle Chante - Interview



Elle Chante
Image by Ian Davies



SANITY
Image by Ian Davies

LYRICS FROM MIDLANDS CHILD (Sanity FEATURING BLACK VOICES)

"Birmingham made and Erdington raised ... city on my back ... back to build... tell the whole city we winning ... Midlands child dream big, believe it"

SANITY brought a continuity to the On Record project, having previously performed her track *Go the Distance* as part of the 2018 Commonwealth Games closing ceremony in Australia. A self-taught artist from Erdington, Sanity is now a regular on BBC 6 Music and appeared at the Glastonbury Festival in 2016.

"I'm excited to be a part of something so personal to Birmingham. It's such an inclusive project reflecting the true diversity of our city"

Sanity - Interview



ON RECORD: DESIGN AND DELIVERY

“We knew we wanted to reflect the diversity of music coming out of the city, that represented the diversity of the people and communities of Birmingham. There is not a “sound of Birmingham”; but many sounds and I wanted to get that across.”

Director, Birmingham Music Archive - Interview

Birmingham Music Archive (BMA)'s original idea was to tour a music exhibition through the city's neighbourhoods. The idea was co-developed and expanded by BMA and B2022 Festival producers to become a concept album and include a partnership with B:Music reflecting their own renewed branding as the destination for the sounds of the city. The concept album had a limited edition run of its release (1k) which was given to music fans as well as press and media through a series of events and competitions. B:Music's hosting of the parallel Live and In Conversation series of public artist talks added context and 'sleeve notes' to the On Record.

The Live and In Conversation series comprised of twenty-two public talks and performances. These ran from March to August 2022 at the B:Music's new Jennifer Blackwell Performance Space and Justham Family Room. Live and In Conversation gave a public platform to performers and other figures from the music business associated with the city's scene.

The Live and In Conversation series hosted talks and performances from these artists featured on the album – Bambi Bains, Dapz on the Map, Elle Chante, Friendly Fire, Lekan Babalola & Kate Luxmoore, Sanity, TJ Rehmi, We Are Muffy and Xhosa Cole – and additionally featured the following, giving insight into a wider range of the city's musical histories; Bobby Friction, Carl Phillips, Carol Pemberton, Dave Twist, Holly Hollister, James Indigo, John Mostyn, MC Magika, Mo Jones (Mistress Mo), Mykal Brown, Parv Kaur and Toyah Willcox. All were released via BBC West Midlands Radio and held for a limited period on BBC Sounds platform, but they remain accessible on independent platforms for the foreseeable future.

B:Music provided box office, event staffing and technical support to the Live and In Conversation series; additionally hosting the On Record album launch and post-event listening Party. The latter was twinned with B:Music's Beyond The Bricks: a Birmingham 2022 Festival commission with the BBC Symphony Orchestra, representing a co-ordinated programme reaching multiple distinct audiences. Combined it offered a 'destination night for the Birmingham Music Scene'.

ON RECORD: LEGACY AND LEARNING

“It's an amazing thing that we sit in [The Games'] legacy – contributing something concrete. People that didn't know us – including random people – are recognising us now. “You did this!”

Friendly Fire - Interview

Before It's a Brum Ting became the unexpected hit of the Birmingham 2022 Festival, the self-managed, seven-piece Friendly Fire band was a local success, performing their own material and backing better-known Reggae artists for over ten years. It's a Brum Ting wasn't the official B2022 Commonwealth Games anthem – Champion by UB40 (also an On Record track) filled that role, yet Friendly Fire as the unsigned underdog won the public day! Friendly Fire performed their song live only once during the Games – at the Victoria Square Festival Site on the 8th August 2022 which seems a missed opportunity for the band to maximise commercial benefit from this success. Likewise, understanding it was considered by the B2022 Festival team, there was no resource for a live On Record album performance, which would have held potential to bring new audiences to BMA and cross pollinate audiences for B Music.

It's a Brum Ting gained rapid prominence through the BBC's Commonwealth Games promotional campaign, having been made aware of it directly from producers in the B2022 Festival team – “Without the Festival team sending It's a Brum Ting to the BBC; that song wouldn't have become the sound of summer for Birmingham 2022,” (Director, Birmingham Music Archive).

Friendly Fire were involved in storyboarding the BBC's promo clip and featured in the finished piece. The song went viral on social media; at the time of writing, it has 36k views on YouTube. Britain's Got Talent finalists The Flawless Dance Group's Learn the Brum Ting Dance on Tik Tok has over 10k views. It was also played at B2022 Commonwealth Games venues and was reportedly accessed in 223 countries. However, it is unclear if B2022 Festival offered any resource or support to the band to ensure they maximised commercial success for their creative efforts. Likewise, BMA pointed at other key gaps and skills in the regional music ecology - and within the delivery team - including reputable Radio Pluggers, Music PR with National and International reach. He recognised the limited gravitational pull for the 'industry' to engage i.e., labels, commissioners, Artists and Repertoire (A&R) etc. who did not come to the Album launch or express interest in the album/individual artists with limited press coverage from specialist or mainstream sources.

Friendly Fire plan to build on what they have achieved through the On Record project. They do, however, want to stay in Birmingham and are looking for booking agents and management to help them leverage their unexpected exposure as well as their new audience reach across the Commonwealth.

On Record was a project that evolved organically to achieve - through It's a Brum Ting - national and international reach. It additionally provided the opportunity for B:Music to engage with more of the city's emerging artists and genres via one of its newly redeveloped spaces earmarked for community engagement and outreach. This collaboration created the opportunity for more partnerships, for example Sanity's On Record track was subsequently selected and arranged for

orchestra at B:Music's Beyond the Bricks event; a celebration of the city's cultural scene held at Symphony Hall in June 2022.

This event was itself part of B2022 Festival and featured music and spoken word performances backed by the BBC Symphony Orchestra. However, the online exposure (recording and videos held on YouTube) reveals a patchy picture for other individual artists, with Dapz on the Map faring well - largely without BMA support - (35k YouTube views at time of writing) and he secured a supporting artist role on UB40's Games Anthem. However, others on the album fared less well, with YouTube views at time of writing reaching 100-300 views. Indeed, the videos supporting these tracks were awarded some small additional resources during B2022 Festival when its popularity was starting to gain traction (£1k each), but its reach was inhibited by this not being part of a more robust over-arching campaign strategy with more effective independent PR embedded.

Like some other commissions, much rested on brokerage and/or efforts of the inevitably stretched B2022 Festival Marketing and Communications team. Considering the musical programme across B2022 Festival and its opening/closing ceremonies, with the benefit of hindsight the B2022 Festival perhaps could have done more to communicate the 'story of Birmingham's Music' as a cohesive narrative to national and international audiences.

Future consideration might be given for On Record to plan strategies to further expose the album and a podcast series to reach its full audience potential (hyper local to international). This might extend to education-led projects in collaboration with Birmingham Music Service, Birmingham Education Partnership, and Arts Connect aimed at building young people's appreciation, appetite, and insight into its musical heritage - and promoting

wider exploration of themes and issues the album raises.

The tenacity of BMA brought this project to life and in any future iterations, there is scope to commission with a stronger creative and collaborative brief to push the boundaries for the city's sound and raise opportunity and ambitions for emerging and established talent. However, curatorial/musical producing expertise would need to be brought to the delivery team to harness its potential. Likewise, outside of the confines of the B2022 Festival partnership with the BBC, BMA might also build wider networks with independent radio stations, podcast platforms, and journalists to diversify its future audience base.

Looking forward, On Record can offer the potential for the city to distinctly mark and brand its musical heritage with a collision of its musical roots with the most contemporary artists/cultures of the future. However, how can BMA secure other sector partners such as the West Midlands Music Board to cultivate a strategic commitment to, and investment in the musical archive of the city? Notably, a commitment which also optimises different creative strategies and co-authorship with artists and diverse communities for its continual access and use. BMA expressed a longer-term ambition for the city to become a UNESCO Music City, a global platform in which to tell the city's musical stories. But with only a handful of commissions with a dedicated focus on the music industry and sector, perhaps this has been a missed opportunity to have galvanised and promoted such ambition, though there is a clear opportunity to locate within the B2022 Commonwealth Games and Birmingham City Council legacy vision going forward.



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT - MOBILISE

MOBILISE ([FATT PROJECTS](#)) - April - September 2022; venues across the city.

“(We) did consultation work in 2020 and around 90-95 per cent of people who we surveyed said having a safe space to dance was really important to them. Only half of the people we spoke to felt like that already existed.”

FATT PROJECTS’ lead artist - Interview, Pink News, September 2022

Prior to B2022 Festival commissioning process, FATT PROJECTS had identified that some in the LGBTQ+ community felt excluded from the community’s clubs and dance venues. As a result, they felt that their stories and experiences were being under-represented at events and spaces often seen as central to mainstream LGBTQ+ culture, for example, Pride.

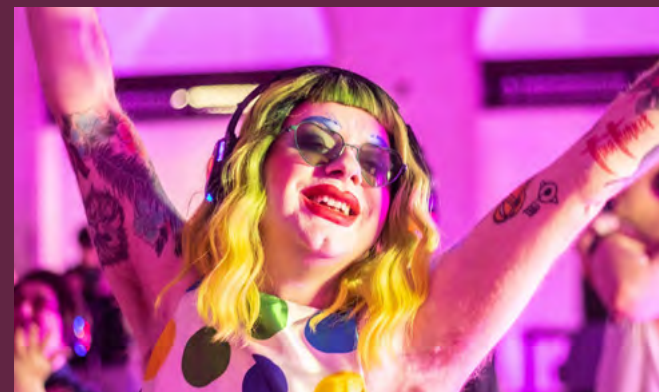
“In years gone by, often the first thing people see is the corporate sponsors of Pride. But this year it is going to be marginalised queer bodies leading the parade ... not just the narrow subset that goes clubbing or gets onto RuPaul’s Drag Race.”

Crip Ladywood - Interview, Gorgeous Radio, September 2022

Responding to their research findings, FATT PROJECTS developed the MOBILISE programme to explore ways of building a more inclusive LGBTQ+ events landscape in the city. FATT PROJECTS’ ultimate goal was to use MOBILISE to raise the profile of people who are rarely seen in the dominant stories of the LGBTQ+ community. MOBILISE activities were an opportunity to build more representative social networks and explore new ways of organising club experiences for queer people whose bodies have been marginalised. Twenty-five MOBILISE participants and artists ultimately went on to lead the procession at the 25th Birmingham Pride (September 2022).

“Historically, Prides have been dominated by a particular kind of representation ... I’m really excited to get out in front of people and say: “This is our community as well.” ... I want people to feel that, even if it’s just for the 10 minutes that they happen to see us walking by, they feel that their whole experience is valid.”

FATT PROJECTS’ lead artist - Interview (Pink News, September 2022)



MOBILISE (FATT PROJECTS) - images by Emma Jones

CASE STUDY: WASWASA - WHISPERS IN PRAYER

Waswasa - Whispers in Prayer ([Soul City Arts](#) in association with Birmingham Hippodrome, University of Birmingham, University of Warwick and Guildhall Live Events, part of the Guildhall School of Music & Drama); 25th August to 3rd September 2022; Birmingham Hippodrome - Patrick Studio with development work in new homebase (Sparkbrook).

WASWASA: NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

“I wanted to boldly and unashamedly create a celebration of Islamic prayer and portray it in a form never seen before. For too long many have had to constantly code-switch and leave our faith and culture off the table, suppress it and keep it hidden from public view. That time is over and that’s why Waswasa was needed”.

Artistic Director, Soul City Arts - Interview

Islamic prayer (‘Salah’) is a practice performed by tens of thousands of people across the West Midlands region each day, is central to their identity and culture, yet is rarely seen or portrayed positively in mainstream cultural institutions in the city. Waswasa successfully brought some of the city’s key institutions on board as partners to present an authentic narrative of how religious practice might feel and might be perceived in our largely secular Western society.

‘Waswasa’ - as explained during the play’s narrative - is an Arabic word for ‘whispers’ - used here in the context of unwanted distractions. While Waswasa touched on issues of discrimination and of experiences of daily life familiar to many

in South Asian communities, the project - and in particular the performance itself - celebrated the physical act of prayer in a secular society.

Waswasa used the B2022 Festival as an opportunity to bring diverse audiences together around this theme. Waswasa’s central creative component was an immersive theatrical experience consisting of a walkthrough prayer mat tunnel, a central black box... and ending with a glimpse of a replica of Birmingham’s Qur’an - one of the oldest known copies in the world.

Here an audience of around fifty were seated together on artificial grass around a central pool; city centre theatregoers alongside supposed traditionally ‘hard to reach’ audiences⁵ from South Asian and other Muslim communities.

“I think the kind of thing that touched me was that anxiety of knowing it’s time to pray, you know you’ve got that constant worry of” Am I going to make it in time? ... Do I pray here, or do I pray in my car?” ... it’s nice because here you don’t feel isolated or don’t have to keep apologising”

Audience member - Interview

⁵ Taking Part 18/19 (DCMS) suggests that 59.7% of people of Asian Ethnicity engage with the Arts vs 79.3% of White Ethnicity.



Performance of Waswasa at Birmingham Hippodrome - Image by Soul City Arts



Prayer Mat “Corridor” - Image by Soul City Arts

**"THOUGHT-PROVOKING BECAUSE THOSE
ARE YOUR INNER THOUGHTS AND THOSE
ARE THE BATTLES WE ARE FACING AS
MUSLIMS WITHIN OURSELVES"**

– AUDIENCE MEMBER - INTERVIEW

WASWASA: PEOPLE AND PLACE

“I think the [Birmingham Hippodrome] is fine. I think it kind of makes it more legit and gives it a bit more validation. [If they had] done it in Sparkbrook I think that would have limited the audience - it would have made it just for Muslims whereas here it's open to everyone.”

Audience Member - Interview

The Waswasa experience began with an immersive prayer mat 'corridor' or 'tunnel' funnelling audiences into the performance space. This was constructed from collaborative artworks previously co-created with community members. These artworks were the product of a programme of 'Mini-Academies' held offsite, at Soul City Arts' warehouse venue in Sparkbrook.

Audiences for Waswasa's performances were a diverse mix of families, couples, and friends including gender specific groups, predominantly hailing from Muslim faith groups. Interviews revealed that audiences were enthused and impressed with the concept of the work and its implementation. Feedback from non (and non-practising) Muslims suggested the project was successful in its attempt to position 'waswasa' as an experience potentially common to everyone. Waswasa effectively welcomed both secular and non-secular audiences to reflect on the environmental distractions that disturb inner peace - social media, stress, work, and family commitments.

The following five prominent threads emerged from thematic analysis of audience feedback:

1. A resonance with the purpose of the commission
2. A feeling of being educated about Muslim prayer
3. An interest in the representation of Islam by the work
4. A sense of gratitude that the piece had been commissioned
5. A state of reflection through a written prayer activity

“I do feel that the female experience wasn't fully there. There's a part they talk about you can walk into the mosques in every street corner or something; but that isn't the truth for Muslim women.”

Female Respondent - Interview

“You can be completely secular - I don't think you have to have a faith to find that an important thing to watch.”

Audience Member - Interview

WASWASA: DESIGN AND DELIVERY

“The prayer matt tunnel made me very emotional, WHAT AN AMAZING EXPERIENCE! Thank you, Soul City Arts, for putting this together. May we all learn from each other and unify.”

Quote - Response Wall

Waswasa was an immersive journey comprising four linked creative experiences - visual arts, theatre, film, and heritage - that took place in an elaborately constructed setting at the Birmingham Hippodrome. Waswasa's performance area was reached through a constructed corridor formed by hanging 'prayer mats' - collaborative artworks co-created by artists and community members. After each show, audiences exited into an exhibition space featuring a replica of one of the earliest surviving Qur'anic fragments - on loan from Birmingham University. Support for the Waswasa's immersive elements came from research time spent at London's Guildhall. Existing relationships with both University of Birmingham and University of Warwick were extended (each investing £30k), with workshops, conversations and engagement with students and staff feeding creative direction and building the layers of Soul City Arts' story and the wider universal narrative. Additional input also came from the Artistic Director's faith network including direct prayer advice for the actors from the local Green Lane Mosque.

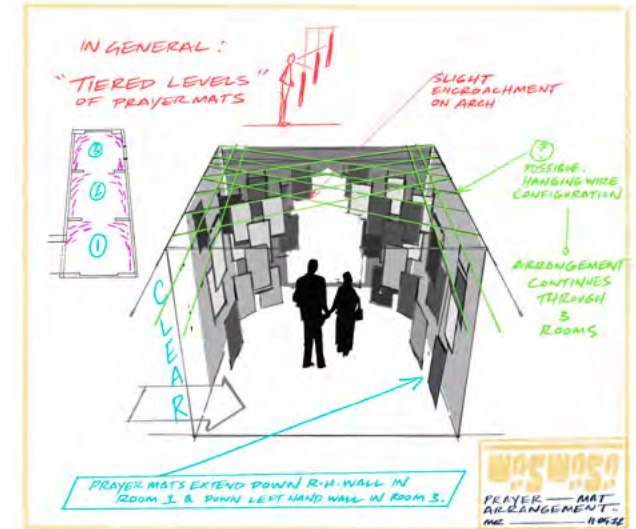
A solo actor moved amongst the audience, performing a dramatisation of real-life community situations. Alongside the performance were filmed segments featuring the same actor along with members of the Muslim community, effectively internationalising the work and its potential for future touring through solo prayer calls, held in Birmingham, Dudley, Toronto, Bangladesh, Cape Town, Melbourne, and New York. The practice and purpose of Islamic prayer were uncompromisingly foregrounded throughout, as the protagonist struggles to carve out time, space and focus to complete the prescribed ritual for Salah. However, the play's emphasis on 'waswasa' - unwanted distractions - foregrounded a clear commonality of experience across all faiths - and even with secular practices such as "mindfulness".

The full Waswasa performance ran three times a day for nine days. Additionally, a 'walk through experience' gave additional opportunities to engage with the Waswasa set, prayer mat corridor and Qur'an exhibition with 'video snapshots' of the storyline giving a sense of the play's narrative. Following the conclusion of Waswasa, Soul City Arts installed the 'prayer corridor' at their new warehouse venue in Sparkbrook, where it has so far been used during a 'Reflection and Sharing' event in October 2022. This will provide a new platform where the audiences it engaged, and the project stakeholders, can continue to collaborate.

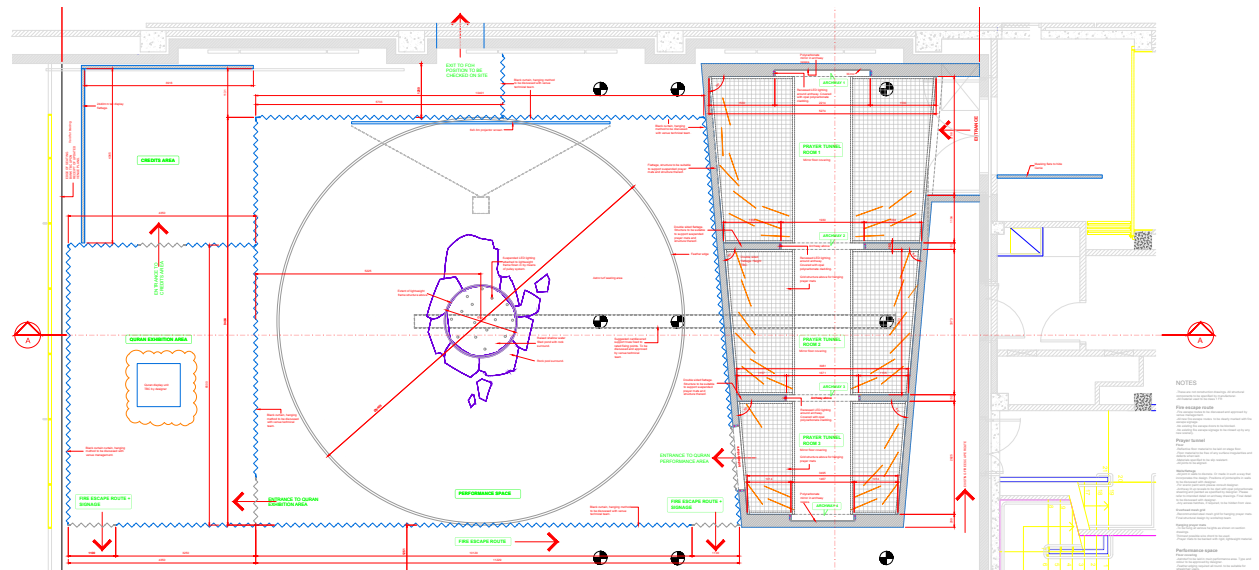
"You can be completely secular - I don't think you have to have a faith to find that an important thing to watch."

"There were bits in there that were thought-provoking because those are your inner thoughts and those are the battles we are facing as Muslims within ourselves."

Audience Members - Interview



Prayer mat "corridor" - artist's impression - Image by Soul City Arts



Plan including tunnel, performance space and gallery - Image by Soul City Arts

WASWASA: LEGACY AND LEARNING

“I’ve been collaborating with Soul City Arts for some years now. There aren’t many organisations that deal with faith so boldly as they do.”

Dr James Hodkinson, University of Warwick - Interview

Waswasa successfully used the Birmingham 2022 Festival as a platform to secure another major city producing partner - Birmingham Hippodrome, and to bring diverse audiences together and enable mainstream institutions to better understand and respond to community needs. For example, over the duration of the performance, the Hippodrome converted a meeting room into an accessible prayer space for use by audiences and participants, creating a prominent and welcoming community resource. However, with its transparent window panes, we would anticipate this was less viable for any females that wanted to make use of this space (i.e., barrier as a mixed gender space given visibility of the act itself in the public domain) – a female only space might have been welcomed by some audiences and deepened the shared experience. A wide range of perspectives were heard throughout the performance, although during our audience interviews, Muslim women did comment that they would have liked to have heard female voices with more agency in the play; for example: “There was only [one woman] in it [and] she was speaking just in general. She wasn’t actually identifying with particular female needs or the female voice in Islam”.

‘Global feel, naturally universally international connectivity, subtle and necessary’

B2022 Festival Producer - Interview

The process of co-creating Waswasa’s ‘prayer mat’ tunnel before the launch of the play through community workshops held in Sparkbrook is noteworthy. The work produced through these sessions was integral to, not additional to, the performance. It formed a substantial part of the fabric of the audience experience and showed a real commitment to enabling the community to directly add their own voices and stories into the programme narrative. These workshops additionally provided an opportunity to embed researchers from University of Warwick within a traditionally ‘hard to reach’ (see footnote 5) community and extend the project’s legacy through parallel academic programmes.

‘Waswasa is a truly sublime experience. It resonated deeply with audiences of all ages and backgrounds, who were united in a deeply moving, truly immersive experience. Waswasa is a truly international event and will speak to people across the world.’

CEO, Birmingham Hippodrome - Interview

A fitting legacy for this work is the company’s clear intent to develop the show and to build audiences which would sustain a longer run in Birmingham (though at time of writing it is unclear whether Birmingham Hippodrome remains a sustained producing partner), and they are also considering a collaborative touring model for UK and International reach. This

outcome also depends on what eventual scale of ambition Soul City Arts wishes to locate in future iterations, including an early desire to secure the main house at the venue (1845 seats), which would require significant investment in the immersive visual and sonic environment and script development to meet large scale potential. However, in the current mid-scale format, the potential resources required for touring seems more achievable.

The commissioners and company agree that the scale of the partners and collaborators for the work, would only have happened with the Elevate/Diversity in Leadership investment (see Skills Development Case Study Report). It enabled the lead artist to offer sole focus on realising Waswasa creative ambition, which secured Soul City Arts’ new homebase whilst being held by a new experienced team and put in place refreshed governance arrangement. The new homebase is on a lease with Birmingham City Council and has a key role to play in not only the restaging of the installation but the sustained opportunity for the company to build consistent presence and dialogue with local communities. Likewise, the Birmingham Hippodrome has benefited from nurturing this distinct British Muslim voice. There are plans to hold a direct producing/production related relationship within the new Soul City Arts venue, along with wider outreach endeavours.

The commission enabled Soul City Arts to afford national PR support which paid dividends securing a diverse range of interviews from BBC Radio 3 to Raaj FM. Whilst the marketing and comms plan were comprehensive, longer-term range might expand the organisation’s focus to harness the significant potential drawn from multi-faith and interfaith, spiritual, or other humanist networks to build audiences and amplify the diversity of unheard voices.

" I THINK THE KIND OF THING THAT TOUCHED WITH ME WAS THAT ANXIETY OF KNOWING IT'S TIME TO PRAY... IT'S NICE BECAUSE HERE YOU DON'T FEEL ISOLATED OR DON'T HAVE TO KEEP APOLOGISING CREATIVITY ALWAYS UNITES"

– AUDIENCE MEMBER - INTERVIEW



There was limited evidence of any 'access strategy' in place throughout the project including no BSL Interpretation at events or workshops, nor captioned film material, audio description or even within the physical staging, all of which needs to be addressed in their future iteration. Likewise, the production could have utilised Talking Birds' [Difference Engine](#), captioning even written in another language to connect audiences where English is not necessarily their home language.

There was no formal evaluation consideration for the lead up participatory work which might have offered insight and informed gaps in future provision. During the run itself, the company undertook audience vox pops and staged a feedback wall to capture immediate responses which will be utilised in their ongoing digital campaigns. The lead artist also 'hosted' impromptu post show sharing points which were well attended, but which could have been more formally structured as part of the experience i.e., an invited safe space to share responses, drink tea together. This would have facilitated more balanced dialogue between artist and audience.

The company had a desire to do this but was prevented on two fronts: first, the Birmingham Hippodrome charging for the additional space to make this possible (beyond budget limit) and secondly, the timings of the show would have prevented this happening within theatre operating times (8.30pm show time with 10pm exit time). However, his relationship to the audience inside and outside the presenting space is vital to deepen the experience and to encourage the Birmingham Hippodrome's recognition and support of the value in this depth of audience engagement/development.

Understanding capacity challenges on both partners' side, it seems a missed opportunity for the project to not have located a public programme around this initial run of the show e.g., pre/post show talk, hybrid talks series or even a symposium with university, faith based and community partners in place to reach a national/international level audience.

Other lessons concern improving wayfinding for first time audience journeys, for example, putting front of venue signage and/or human host to ensure they were directed to the Patrick Studio (area was very busy and may be uninviting to those less engaged with city centre life) - with lots of independent females and social female attenders. Whilst the use of the large digital screen outside the main entrance of the venue was striking, it happened for the short period of the run itself, instead of beforehand extending potential for cross pollination of their 'core audiences' with first timers (implicitly under-represented groups e.g. of Muslim faith).

Soul City Arts has a distinct British Muslim voice, and through the security that Arts Council England National Portfolio Status 2023-26 brings, is now in a healthier place to release the communities' unheard voices through their continuing work. It would be brilliant to see that continuity extend into the legacy period to not least place Waswasa or an authentic collaboration within the next Commonwealth Games 2026 to be held in Victoria, taking the Birmingham Muslim experience to a global audience.



**"TRULY EXCELLENT, AN INCREDIBLE,
INFORMATIVE, HEARTFELT FILM. WAS
WONDERFUL TO WATCH IN THE CATHEDRAL
IT WAS FILMED IN"**

– AUDIENCE MEMBER - SURVEY

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT - CONGREGATION

Congregation ([Grand Union](#) with artist Alberta Whittle); March - September 2022; Minerva Works (Digbeth), Birmingham Cathedral and other neighbourhood locations

“This work will ... centre the histories of communities and growing in the city. We will connect with Uplands Allotment, Handsworth, and the work of Eunice McGhie-Belgrave, the founder of community group Shades of Black, created in 1989 to unite a fractured community in the wake of the 1980s race riots.”

Grand Union - Project Document

Congregation provided a platform to celebrate the ideas and practice of local activist, Eunice McGhie-Belgrave. Eunice's important and timely work in sharing and growing food sustainably at the neighbourhood level remains little-known outside the community growing movement - even in her own city. The exhibition “We Gather and Dream of New Congregations” (Grand Union; September- December 2022) was presented as the final public phase of the Congregation project. It screened two films; “Making Family Through Listening to The Land” and “We Gather and Dream Of New Congregations” in which her work and powerful personality featured.

Eunice was born in Jamaica, coming to join her husband in Handsworth in the early 1950's. A volunteer, activist, gardener

and community development worker, Eunice and four other local women founded a charitable neighbourhood organisation to “reconcile, reassure and rebuild the community” following the 1985 Handsworth riots.

The organisation, Shades of Black adopted an holistic approach, working to enhance the community's practical skills and promote healthy lifestyles through the growing and sharing of local allotment produce, a model adopted by other projects around the UK.

Eunice was awarded an MBE in 2001, which she considers a badge of visibility and recognition not for her, but for her community. Congregation successfully brought a contemporary audience to her ideas and practice. The Bothy, Apothecary Garden and the Growing Project which are all central to Congregation (see case study in the Skills Development report) all resonate with her work and influence. The films give Eunice the opportunity to share her own garden, her new community and teaching space and her current cohort of local volunteers, Eunice continues to work as a community organiser and food activist in the city, with 40-years' experience in community gardening practices that address wider issues of poverty and wellbeing.

“Gardening is a healing practice... it's outdoors ...planting...talking to one and other. Air, lungs, body health: it gives you a really good night's sleep!”

Eunice McGhie-Belgrave - Interview (Project Film)



Eunice McGhie-Belgrave at Bothy launch - Image by Nina Baillie



Harvest Dinner - Image by Nina Baillie



PROJECT SPOTLIGHT - DOROTHY TOWERS

Dorothy Towers (Sean Burns, [VIVID Projects](#)); 23-25 September 2022)

“This is a project that’s about material memory... the experience of people and how it becomes embedded in the fabric of the building and the material of the city.”

Dorothy Towers’ Lead Artist - Interview, BBC News

Dorothy Towers was a 16mm film-based project that focused on the untold stories of the city centre; in this case the popular mythologies surrounding the Clydesdale and Cleveland Towers in central Birmingham. These 31-storey blocks are adjacent to Birmingham’s Gay Village and have long been a home for the city’s LGBTQ+ community. Over successive decades residents have given the towers new pseudonyms and many different stories have circulated around them. Dorothy Towers retold many of these narratives, based on first-hand testimonials from current and previous residents of the Towers. Its inclusion in the B2022 Festival gave those in the wider mainstream community a fresh insight into familiar city centre landmarks.

“This being a centre of the gay community in Birmingham I think is part of the pleasure of living here and worth historicising and documenting.”

Towers’ Resident - Interview, BBC News

Dorothy Towers was developed through a two-year dialogue with residents and stakeholder organisations and explored ideas of queer kinship and cultural inheritance.

The artist explored how, as custodians of their own heritage and narrative, LGBTQ+ people might document contemporary experiences alongside those who came before. One aim was to ensure that queer experiences in Birmingham, including those of the HIV crisis, can be represented as ‘equally significant to, but different from’ those in other city communities.

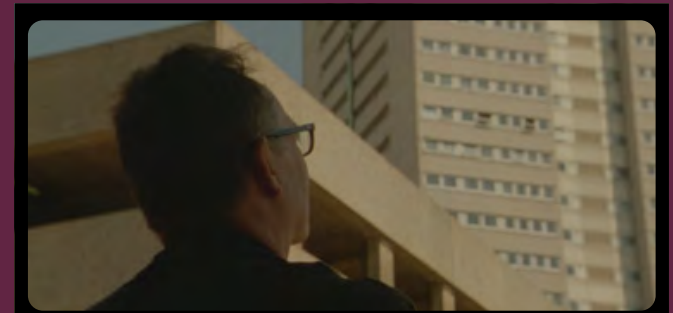
“I think it’s the responsibility of my generation to look into that shadow and those people that were lost”

Dorothy Towers’ Lead Artist - Interview, BBC News

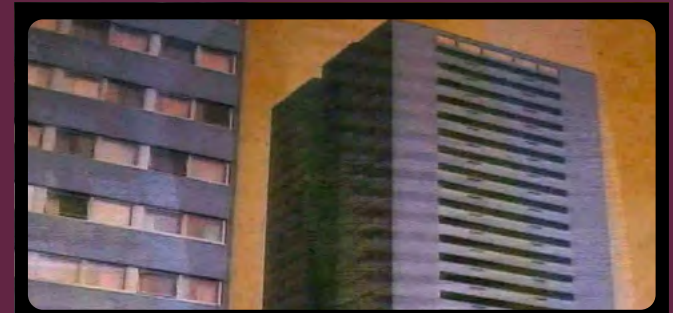
Dorothy Towers contrasted the cinematic potential of Birmingham’s powerful Brutalist architecture with the stories of the communities resident in and around them. “[Birmingham is] a place with many layers, particularly architecturally... the cars are elevated, where the people ought to be.” (Lead artist, interviewed in Frieze magazine.)

“The whole process has been a tremendous learning experience in both artistic and practical terms. It has raised ethical quandaries about coming into a space and representing it in a certain way, but it’s important to not be overwhelmed into inaction.”

Dorothy Towers’ Lead Artist - Interview, Frieze Magazine



Still from Dorothy Towers (Sean Burns, 2022)



Still from Dorothy Towers (Sean Burns, 2022)



Launch event - Image by Emma Jones

CASE STUDY: WE ARE BIRMINGHAM

We Are Birmingham ([Birmingham Museums Trust](#), [We Don't Settle](#), [Beatfreaks](#)) April - October 2022, Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery.

WE ARE BIRMINGHAM: NEED AND OPPORTUNITY

"If you told [me] at 18 I'd be the first black woman under 20 to curate an exhibition in one of Birmingham's most historic venues, that I'd have my name in writing on the wall of the Round Room .. I probably would have said you're lying."

We Are Birmingham 'activator' - Interview

We Are Birmingham addressed the challenges of representation and complex, colonial histories within the heritage sector; suggesting ways the city can represent itself and its heritage in a more inclusive and contemporary way going forward. We Are Birmingham was delivered in collaboration between a group of six young people - 'activators' from We Don't Settle - and Birmingham Museums Trust.

We Are Birmingham's activators selected items from Birmingham's collections and co-curated an exhibition which was a "radical transformation of [the] iconic Round Room... to reflect the people of 21st century Birmingham ... a vivid celebration of the city that Birmingham is now, as well as aspirations of what the city could become" (project website). In redisplaying this high-footfall heritage space, We Are Birmingham harnessed stories from the city as told by the people of the city themselves; seen through the lens of a younger and more diverse generation. Project "activators" had

access to works of art and heritage from across Birmingham's collections, as well as practical and curatorial support from the museum's internal teams.

"To empower 16 – 25-year-olds from minority communities in Birmingham and the Black Country to change the voice of heritage through the arts, research, and governance. [To] actively support young people of colour to explore their heritage and to ensure that they and their stories are represented, reflected, and connected to the cultural organisations that narrate the shared history of Birmingham"

We Are Birmingham's stated aim, from internal project document



Round Room redisplay images; Amanda Roberts

WE ARE BIRMINGHAM: PEOPLE AND PLACE

“We Are Birmingham is a 21st century vision of Birmingham Museum, both for young people and Birmingham audiences generally”

Museum Learning and Access Manager - Interview

Activators created three representative themes for the We Are Birmingham redisplay: ‘Our City’, ‘Our Journeys’ and ‘Our Joy’. Each themed area contained eight to twenty exhibits and all these reflected work by established and emerging artists and items of community heritage. For example:

- Our City examples included works from the 1979 Handsworth Self Portrait series by Derek Bishton, Brian Homer and John Reardon; Benny’s Babbies, (2020) by Cold War Steve and an advertisement for Cadbury’s Cocoa Drink from around 1895.
- Our Journeys examples included classic reportage photography from Vanley Burke, an illuminated mixed media installation piece by Faisal Hussain and a Birmingham Pride banner produced by the Unmuted peer support network for Queer, Trans, Intersex People of Colour (QTPOC).
- Our Joy examples included a 1960’s commercial art painting from the Koh-I-Noor curry house, the wall menu from the Arena Café in the old Bull Ring shopping centre and a portrait of Andy Hamilton.

The programme’s producer outlined in interview the key factors that he felt had influenced activator’s choices: the impact of Brexit, rise of UKIP and the far right; ‘huge social change which impacted on their decision making and their future lives’ and the ‘notion of Commonwealth’ providing a context for ‘live discussion framed by lived experiences’.



Activators in the Round Room, via @agbeolivia / @itzmemasharah on Instagram



WE ARE BIRMINGHAM: DESIGN AND DELIVERY

“[When we selected the works] there were no arguments, but there were strong feelings”.

Programme Producer - Interview

The six ‘activators’ – Lauren Vidal, Justine Luaba, Kiran Samra, Masharah Powel, Gabriella Songui and Olivia Agbe – were recruited through the We Don’t Settle project to lead on the development of We Are Birmingham. The intention was they would ‘activate’ both the collection and the museum, reaching between curatorial, collections and front of house teams. The programme producer explained in interview that when recruiting for activator’s roles, “young people of colour” were his primary focus. Recruitment was through an open call, placing value on both “lived experience and school experience” as part of the candidate review process. We Don’t Settle was an original project based within the youth activist led Beatfreaks as part of the national Kick the Dust programme supported by National Heritage Lottery Fund. During the project lifecycle, We Don’t Settle became its own independent organisation with different governance arrangements in place.

Activators roles were “exploratory ... activating [the] space... to shake conversations and processes” (Producer interview). The relationships that developed between the museum’s professional teams and activators was described as “an organic transference – a knowledge exchange... a professional exchange... [with] shared agency. There was a change of language, and a shared language co-developed.” (Producer, in interview)

All activators had previous experience of ‘how museums worked’; gained through We Don’t Settle’s projects at other museum trust sites – Aston Hall and Soho House. However, the scale and impact of working at the Trust’s central Chamberlain Square site presented a significant challenge, especially as We Are Birmingham formed part of the visitor offering for a partial reopening of the venue. Additionally, lockdown due to the Covid-19 pandemic limited participants’ physical access to the collections and the museum teams, but activators successfully persevered through remote collaboration online. The programme producer felt that progress was sustained by the activators’ enthusiasm for the aims of the project; “they could see the change ... we can [still] see it now”.

Loaned work from artists Hira Bitt, Faisal Hussein and Rou Dissou were brought in to supplement the existing collections and fulfil the vision of the activators. Three of the museum team worked on the project, and the day-to-day operation of the space was supported by a pool of volunteers provided by the museum.

Activators additionally co-curated an events programme including four artists’ residencies; for example, Poets Corner: a ‘takeover’ of the Round Room with contributions from ten local poets. In total ten artists and two ‘campfire facilitators’ were commissioned across the project. A designer was co-commissioned to help re-interpret the space, the strong design of which informed the creation of a We Are Birmingham ‘zine’, further supporting the interpretation and storytelling of the exhibition.

“It was always impressive, but I guess quite stuffy ... Now it seems [there is] a real reflection of Birmingham and the community, which my piece [Bennie’s Babbies] is all about – it’s a celebration of Birmingham and its diversity, creativity, and inclusivity”

Christopher Spencer, artist “Cold War Steve” - Interview



Round Room redisplay images; Amanda Roberts

“THIS CITY HAS SAVED ME IN MORE WAYS THAT I CAN EXPRESS... SO, I BELIEVE THAT THERE WAS NO BETTER TASK THAN TO TRANSLATE THIS IN THE ARTWORKS CHOSEN FOR THE EXHIBITION”

– ACTIVATOR - INTERVIEW



WE ARE BIRMINGHAM: LEGACY AND LEARNING

“We are all doing this for the city and its people, and we are part of this too, so: “We Are Birmingham!”

We Are Birmingham ‘Activator’ - Interview

We Are Birmingham represented one part of a substantial commitment on behalf of Birmingham Museums Trust to enable a diversity of voices to be heard in the selection of their displays and the interpretation of their collections (see best practice spotlight on the Healing Gardens of Bab in this report). Whilst the We Are Birmingham project was one part of a larger established collaboration with We Don’t Settle, there was still a substantial reputational risk in offering such a high-profile public space up for open-ended redisplay .

The museum team supported its ‘activators’ throughout, offering both practical professional help and advice on curatorial practice; enabling ‘activators’ to bring in loans from culturally diverse artists and to run their own events programme. The programme’s producer played a vital role in successfully bridging the two ‘worlds’ - that of the young ‘activators’ and the museum establishment. He described his role as “almost that of a translator” rather than another expert voice in the “sea of other expert roles involved in the process” (see best practice spotlight in Inclusive Practice report). His role was also central to pulling out the emerging themes from the process, which included the need for stronger and better youth governance, embedding the voices and participation of young people.

Birmingham Museums Trust, under new co-CEOs Zak Mensah and Sara Wajid committed itself to change in its 2021 Visioning Study: “Our programmes will nurture the city’s youthfulness and energy in all its diversity, using these qualities as a force for change and transformation of Birmingham Museums and across the city and beyond.” The Trust is keen to disseminate what it has learned from We Are Birmingham across its work teams and held a two-day symposium in October 2022. “We need to think about how we can really embed the learning.” (Museum curator / curatorial team leader). The commitment to change was fiercely held by the Head of Learning & Young People, and his tenacity and willingness to think and act differently and to encourage and cultivate other internal departments and colleagues, was key to the project’s success and the scale of ‘activations’ which took place. It is disappointing that the public facing events programme was not so visibly marketed with one cancelled at short notice. Likewise, the ‘activators’ chose to locate themselves only by name in the space, and greater visibility of their role and ‘behind the scenes decision making’ might have served to inspire and empower other young people to join future projects and to facilitate dialogue with the more traditional Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery visitor.

Going forward it is evident that Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery’s maturity in opening channels for effective co-design and its learning applied to sustaining authentic relationships with diverse practitioners and perspectives, superseded We Don’t Settle’s role as a broker or intermediary. In the legacy period, we feel confident that Birmingham Museum and Art Gallery will remain restless to pursue this curatorial step change, and more confidently face the challenge of unearthing new perspectives that will influence every part of the business,

from collections to interpretation policy, and we would endorse their contribution to the Birmingham story to be prominent within the future legacy festival.



Round Room redisplay images; Amanda Roberts

PROJECT SPOTLIGHT - HEALING GARDENS OF BAB

Healing Gardens of Bab ([Fierce](#)); 27 June - 17 July 2022. Various locations around Birmingham.

“The artefacts (are) in suspended animation and “sleeping” when they are in museum stores; “silenced” when they are taken away from their original cultural contexts; that gives us so much to think about for the future. Who needs to make the decisions on how those collections are shown, used, handled?”

Museum Curator / Curatorial Team Leader - Interview

The Healing Gardens of Bab transformed various locations around Birmingham city centre with bespoke installations, art, and events. As part of this wider project, Birmingham Museums Trust worked with New Zealand / Aotearoa artists Rosanna Raymond and Jaimie Waititi to create and install the SaVAge K’Lubroom in the museum’s city centre site at Chamberlain Square. The Healing Gardens of Bab commission was developed by Fierce to confront colonial histories; platforming the voices of First Nation artists and others most affected by colonialism. In particular, the project foregrounded the untold stories of those impacted by homophobia across the Commonwealth.

The SaVAge K’Lubroom addressed the “rupture of the Vā (a Samoan term for ‘space’) that was brought about by the exchange between European explorers and Polynesian peoples” (project review document). The project’s artists had full access to the museum’s Pacific collections and were able to work collaboratively and proactively with the museum curators and team: “It was great working with [the museum] and with an

audience that just came across the projects in an unexpected spontaneous encounter.” SaVAge K’Lubroom artist, from interview.

The SaVAge K’Lubroom provided opportunities for the museum to explore new ways to display and interpret its collections; enabling museum curators to re-contextualise their collections alongside First Nations artists, leaving a legacy in interpretative practice which can challenge the accepted myths of colonialism.

“A number of the artists ... didn’t want huge amounts of interpretation... it’s objectifying ... a refusal to be defined within colonial terms ... we put SaVAge K’Lub in the museum and then we have to put this text up about how that relates to colonialism and invasion, and they just want to work to speak for itself.

Fierce Team Member - Interview

“It will affect how we think about the Pacific collections and how we display them and interpret them in future. We definitely want to build on this project. One of the great values of this project is the legacy it will have in ... how we present the collection.... We need to think about how we can really embed the learning.”

Museum Curator / Curatorial Team Leader - Interview



Images @saVAge Klub via Instagram

CONCLUSION

Our focus in researching this report was to address the short-term outcomes of the theory of change underpinning the wider B2022 Festival evaluation by identifying and closely examining B2022 Festival commissions that reveal or share community histories.

This report gathered, and presents evidence of participant engagement with historical themes, shared heritage, and untold stories. Our evidence is presented in the form of case studies which draw out the lived experience of the participants, audiences, artists, and project teams who were engaged with the commissions - as well as pinpointing specific highlights of good practice. These case studies additionally indicate where B2022 Festival's curatorial lines and strategic commissioning and distribution models were directly aligned with the aims and objectives of the individual commissions and contributed to the overall goal of a 'Games for Everyone'.

Most of the commissions we researched had a focus on enabling the voices of young people to be heard, directly addressing B2022 Festival's "Present Moment" curatorial line. They also all had a substantial element of interactivity or "public activation". Additionally - although the commissions we researched presented a broad range of artforms and diverse development models - several common themes, approaches and structures were apparent in how they successfully addressed the short-term objectives of telling 'untold stories'. These approaches included:

- 1. Commissions which platformed a wide variety of participants' views instead of offering a single narrative line; addressing here the Theory of Change 'Bringing People Together' Mission Pillar of the B2022 Commonwealth Games, the inclusion of different groups, and participation in cultural events by a more diverse audience.**

For example, On Record and We are Birmingham foregrounded their identities as collectives. On Record was a 'concept album, not a compilation album' and the artists it featured were 'not the usual suspects'. This open curatorial approach enabled the individual artists' viewpoints, lyrics and styles to come to the fore and each to potentially represent the whole project. The unplanned global visibility of It's a Brum Ting is an example of the success of this approach.

- 2. Commissions which presented a bold, uncompromising, and potentially challenging collective public identity; addressing here the idea of 'a positive disruption of the everyday experience of the city' outlined in The Present Moment curatorial line.**

For example, MOBILISE, which had a powerful, uncompromising outcome, to enable 'marginalised queer bodies' to march at the head of the Pride parade. Equally, Waswasa was a "bold and unashamed celebration of Islamic prayer". The 'prayer tunnel' formed from hundreds of messages collected from the community during pre-workshops was central to Waswasa's audience experience, which was encountered immediately by audiences on entering the space, had to be engaged with and could not be bypassed.

- 3. Commissions which enabled audiences to experience a multiplicity of equivalent, often parallel or potentially contradictory stories and to 'make up their own minds' about them, fulfilling B2022 Festival's curatorial lines on 'Our Place in the Commonwealth' and 'Stories Of Birmingham And The West Midlands'**

For example: We Are Birmingham's bold redisplay of the museum's Round Room had the same uncompromising impact as Waswasa's prayer tunnel because audiences had to pass physically through it to enter the venue. In contrast, while We are Birmingham's young team of six were celebrated by the project, they were presented as 'activators' of heritage, not expert curators who were defining a new history for the city.



Several commissions prototyped new methods showing how public spaces and the public realm can be used to gather and foreground more community narratives, going forward.

The platform given to MOBILISE (Fatt Projects) to lead the Birmingham Pride suggests how emerging and marginalised voices can be heard directly on the streets of the city. Dorothy Towers shows how those same streets are a physical archive of community histories still to become part of any mainstream narrative. There is an urgent need to collect and archive these stories whilst experiences and networks are still fresh and accessible.

Conversely, We are Birmingham and the Healing Gardens of Bab reveal that many artefacts and archives required to tell 'untold stories' are already held in the public collections. By working inclusively with more artists, experts, educators, and volunteers who are rooted in their communities; more representative and diverse narratives can be told.

LOOKING FORWARD

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given the success of the commissions evaluated in this report, it is impossible to read this case study report and not be struck by the vibrancy and power of the untold stories that were given prominence through the investment of B2022 Festival.

The forward-looking lessons that flow from this case study are therefore much less about technical observations about how to improve co-design processes, and about how best to support artists, producers and curators to forge new methods of co-design and storytelling - covered in the legacy and learning segments of each case study.

Rather the forward-looking lessons are more about how to build on Birmingham's new capabilities and resources that have emerged as a result. It is vital that key stakeholders actively reflect on the depth and future potential of the skills, networks, mindsets and channels for effective co-design and storytelling that have been nurtured and created as a result of B2022 Festival investments.

How can these foundations be built upon and leveraged so that ever more authentic relationships, and in turn untold stories, can be fostered in the future as the public, participants, artists, producers, curators, and others bring to bear a shared commitment to listen, learn, and surface ever more diverse voices and perspectives?

Authentic approaches and relationships have been tested and built through the B2022 Festival. During the legacy period forensic attention should now be given to how to further nurture and sustain these new pools of agency, capability, and authentic practice across Birmingham's creative ecology.



APPENDIX

PARTICIPATING ORGANISATIONS (A-Z)

Anawim, Arts Council England, B:Music Symphony Hall, BBC Sounds, Beatfreaks, Birmingham Hippodrome, Birmingham International Dance Festival, Birmingham Museum & Art Gallery, Birmingham Music Archive, Birmingham Quakers Meeting House, Birmingham Settlement, Black Country Freelancers, Cannock Chase Leisure Centre, Compass Support Services, Coventry Canal Basin, Craftspace, Creative City Grants, Crisis, Culture Central, Curiosity Production, DanceXchange, Deaf Explorer, Earthen Lamp, EGO Performance Company Ltd, Elevate, Empower, EMpower, Fatt Projects, Fenton Town Hall (Stoke), Friction Arts, GirlGrind UK, Go Woman! Alliance CIC, GRAEAE, Grand Union, Humanhood, Indigo-Ltd, Ironbridge Town Events, MAIA, MATT+FIONA, Modern Clay, More Than A Moment, National Lottery Heritage Fund, Oasis Community Hub Hobmoor, OPUS, Rugby Art Gallery, Scrapstore, Seedbeds, Selina Thompson Ltd, Sense Touchbase Pears, Shambala Festival, Sifa Fireside, Simmerdown, SIPS Sandwell, Soul City Arts, Spring Housing Association, St Anne's Hostel, Stephen Gaskets, Strawberry Words, Talking Birds, The Cloud Cuckoo Land Collective, The Core Theatre, The Emma Press, The Parakeet, The Patrick Trust, The Springfield Project, UB40, Unity Hub, Warley Woods Community Trust, Warley Woods People Park, Wild Lives Forest School, Woodland Tribe, Xhosa Cole Quarter.

PARTICIPATING INDIVIDUALS (A-Z)

Amy Dalton-Hary, Amy Martin, Andrew Fowles, Andy Brown, Anji Barker, Bambi, Bobby Friction, Carl Phillips, Carol Pemberton, Carolyn Morton, Channi Dorset, Cherry Pickles, Chloe Deakin, Chris Sudworth, Claire Birch, Clare Harnett-Man, Dapz on the Map, Dave Twist, Dee Manning, Deidre Figueiredo, Derek Nisbet, Dr. Vishalakshi Roy, Dwayne Hardball, Elizabeth Lawal, Elle Chante, Erica Love, Friendly Fire, Gilly G, Hassan Hussain, Helga Henry, Hira Butt, Holly Hollister, Jack James, Jenny Peevers, Jenny Sealy MBE, Jenny Smith, Jez Collins, Jo Capper, John Mostyn, Joy Scott-Thompson, Kalandra McFarquhar, Kate Luxmoore, Kim McAleese, Kirsty Clarke, Lateesha Johnson, Laura Grigg, Laura Nyahuye, Lekan Babalola, Lou Lomas, Mahawa Keita, Martin Green, Martin Holcombe, Matt Cox, MC Magika, Mo Jones aka Mistress Mo, Mohammed Ali, Mykal Brown, Namywa, Omar Hanif, Parv Kaur, Pottinger & Cole, Rachel Chui, Rachel Vargas, Rajpal Pardesi, Rashta Butt, Reload, Robin Campbell, Rodger Rinkwell, Sanity, Sarah Gee, Sarah Robins, Satnam Rana, Simon Duggal, Siphon Ndlovu, Sophina Jagot, Soweto Kinch, Steph Tyrrell, Stephanie Ridings, Stephen Pennel, Sylvia Chan, Tamara-Jade Kaz, Tinisha Williams, TJ Rehmi, Toyah Willcox, UB40, We Are Muffy.



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