

Constellations ° Assemblies: Is context only half the work? Transcript

Emma Underhill 0:05

Hello, everyone. Welcome to the first of our online Assemblies for 2022, *Is context only half the work?* I'm Emma Underhill, Director at UP Projects. I'm a white woman with blonde shoulder length hair and wearing blue glasses and a black shirt with little flowers on it. I go by pronouns she/her. Taking place between March and November 2022, *Constellations ° Assemblies* are a series of free online events open for anyone to attend who is active or interested in the expanded field of public art. And by "expanded field" we mean the work that happens at the intersection of contemporary art and culture, social practice and the public realm. In the UK, while there are increasing opportunities for socially engaged work, particularly in urban development and regeneration programmes, there are very few opportunities to develop sector specific knowledge and skills. So, to address this, UP Projects has developed this programme that's part of our wider *Constellations* Learning and Development Programme. And we're delighted to be working in partnership with Flat Time House, a partner with whom we've been collaborating for a number of years; Liverpool Biennial who are a new partner for this year; and with independent curator Jes Fernie. The programme of six events will explore lines of inquiry that we feel are most vital for the sector to pursue right now. They include questions around sustainability, the role of democracy and social practice, issues relating to the memorial, and of course, the question of context that we're exploring today. So, if you haven't already done so, please do register for the other events in the programme via UP Projects' website. So, I'm delighted that today's event will be expertly moderated by Gavin Wade, the founder of Eastside Projects. But before I hand over to him, I would just like to very quickly run through some virtual housekeeping. So, if you experience any technical issues during the event, please use the chat function at the bottom of your screen to chat with our dedicated tech support. And on the right of your screen, you will see a Slido bar where you can post questions to our speakers using the Q&A function. You can feel free to write your name as Slido uses anonymous as a default. And please note that our chair and speakers will only be picking up questions from Slido and not from the chat function, so please do post your questions in the Q&A to ensure they get answered. We have a British Sign Language Interpretation available for this event, so if you need to BSL interpreter message us in the chat and our tech assistant will give you a dedicated access link. And if you'd like to access closed captions, please select the CC button at the bottom of your video conferencing screen to read along. And just to note that the event is also being

recorded today. I really hope you enjoy the event. And once again, please contact us by the chat if you have any technical problems. But now I'm going to hand over to Gavin to kick off the event. Thank you.

Gavin Wade 3:09

Thanks, Emma. Hi, everybody. Welcome to *Is context only half the work?* It's a great pleasure to be here today to talk about context and the statements that context is half the work, but also a great pleasure to be able to introduce our two speakers today. We have Arman Nouri here with us and Jeanne Van Heeswijk, and I will give you a little bit more information about them before they get into their presentation. As mentioned, there is the question on Slido that I hope everybody's able to fill in and I'm interested to see what percentage figure we get after the presentations before we start our conversation. I want to say a little bit about some of the context here about the Artist Placement Group, and also, I forgot to introduce myself. So, my name is Gavin Wade, I am an artist-curator. My pronouns are he/him. And I am also artist-curator of Eastside Projects here in Birmingham, and I am Senior Research Fellow at Birmingham City University. I very fortunately came into contact out of seeking them out and met John Latham and Barbara Stevani, in around 1999-2000. And fortunate enough to spend quite a bit of time with them and learn from them, ask them a lot of questions. And I still think it's worth considering the Artist Placement Group, as a forming and a gathering of people in an attempted movement within British art is one of the most important moments in the 20th century that I think has informed not only a wide range of artists and practices in the UK, but around the world, but equally to acknowledge that for many still even it is, it is a slightly hidden history. And when I first came across them, it was because I had come up with what I thought was a great original idea. And I came up with an idea for a quick response unit of artists and curators going in to solve problems and work with communities and tricky situations. And then other artists and curators said to me, have you heard of APG? Have you ever heard of Barbara Stevani or John Latham, and I hadn't. And so, I went to seek them out to learn how you know what they'd already made happen. And that I think to talk about in why it's so important is that there is a radical shift in thinking about where art happens, and who it happens with and for and how we value it, how we question it, how we judge it. So, there is a spatial difference, it takes it out of perhaps customised spaces to house art - takes it out of galleries and museums. And it also offers another ideology in they even presented an idea to lose the phrasing "artists". So, there was no longer artists, and people working as a part of the artist placement group, were described as "incidental persons". And there is a great deal of thinking behind that which comes out of John Latham's practice with Barbara leading and forging the way and it was like, where should artists work? Should they work in industry? Can they work as incidental artists with an open brief within a company within an industrial organisation within a business? Which

eventually led to thinking about artists or incidental persons working in government. How can incidental persons be a positive impact on any type of activity happening in the world in a way? It's a very wide-ranging big prompt, and part of that prompt is the fact that context is half the work, which I've been able to use as a teaching tool, as an approach to building an art organisation for public realm projects, for development projects, for just the way that we think about art. I've wanted to mention a project that I'm working on at the moment here in Birmingham for the Commonwealth Games Programme with Amy Lam and Jon McCurley. We just did a talk recently, and it was called *Typhoo and Cadbury's are half the work*. And it was, it's based on their relationship to Birmingham and across a sort of global diaspora position as an Irish - Vietnamese history, a Chinese history through to Canada via Birmingham, and Typhoo - if you're in Birmingham, you cannot escape the impact. And the range of activity that comes out of companies like Typhoo and Cadbury's. They affect and infect many aspects of the city's life even to this day. So, there is a, that the artists that we're working with is an anti-colonial perspective. And I think that context is half the work still links into an anti-colonial agenda going forward. So very quickly, I've spoken too much sorry, always the habit. First, our first speaker will be Arman Nouri. He is a cultural worker with a focus on the role of civic infrastructures and cultural production in community and neighbourhood development. He's currently leading the Mayor of London's 'Culture and Community Spaces at Risk' programme. Arman is also co-founder of Kin Structures, an arts organisation exploring new approaches to building and sustaining community infrastructure. He is a Unit Lead at Central Saint Martins, where he co-delivers Critical Creative Practices, as part of the Cities MA. Arman is also an advisor to Theatrum Mundi, a Public Practice alumnus and a member of music crew Houseplants which is pretty exciting by the sound of all of that. And our second speaker will be Jeanne Van Heeswijk. Jeanne is based in Rotterdam. She is an artist who facilitates the creation of dynamic and diversified public spaces in order to "radicalise the local". Her long-scale community-embedded projects question art's autonomy by combining performative actions, discussions, and other forms of organising and pedagogy in order to assist communities to take control of their own futures. That is a great statement, a great starting point. So, I think I have done all of my duties here. And I'm going to therefore hand over to Arman, and over to you.

Arman Nouri 9:55

Thank you so much Gavin, for that lovely introduction. I'm just going to share my slides if you just bear with me...is that is that loading now?

Gavin Wade 10:06

Yes, well done.

Arman Nouri 10:10

All right. Hi, everyone. Yeah, it's a real pleasure to be with you all today. My name is Arman Nouri. My pronouns are he/him. I have dark long hair; a dark beard and I'm wearing a yellow jumper. Gavin gave a bit of insight into who I am and what I do. And I think just the only thing I'd add to that is that my roots and my ongoing practice spans cultural and spatial work. So, over the last few years, I've really oscillated between independent publishing, music, curating, community engagement, teaching and policy. I think all of these experiences are really feeding into the, into what I'm about to present. So, as the leader of the Mayor of London's 'Culture and Community Spaces at Risk' programme, I'm part of the team safeguarding and supporting the city's culture and community spaces. I regularly describe it as the best job I've never created for myself. Though it's a small programme, it gets down and dirty with the legislative, organisational, and structural issues, culture and community organisations are facing across the city. And we see the positive impact of our work almost daily, which for those of you who know, the public sector will know is a blessing. But today, I'm here to talk about the other half of my week with Kin Structures, an organisation I co-founded in the last couple of years with my creative partner and comrade, Kwame Lowe. Our mission is to explore new approaches to building and sustaining community infrastructure. Just before the pandemic started, we decided to switch gears on a long-held dream Kwame and I both had to develop a permanent space for grassroots arts and culture in London. Over time, we focused our attention on underused, under-loved community centres as the spaces where this sort of arts and culture, community building, intergenerational sensitive to play some people, generative of exchanging connection could flourish. For the sake of both my mental health and your patients, I'll skip the details of the trials and tribulations, though at times painful and unpleasant encounters with institutional machinery and fast forward with joy to the present day. And as will made clear over the next few minutes context, understood as inter scalar and situated across time deeply shapes our work in Lewisham. This is us at Orchard Garden Community Centre in Lewisham, South London, where for the next six months we'll be working with local residents to celebrate and realise their local community centre as a space for grassroots cultural production and consumption. Orchard Gardens is what we at Kin Structures called under-loved. It spends most of its time alone and empty. Its garden is friendlier towards weeds than the residents who live opposite. Some on the estate don't even know it exists. But on the other hand, there's a lot going for it. Built in 2010, it still feels new, it's flexible, able to accommodate different activities at the same time. It's got big windows and lots of natural light. And most importantly, it lies at the heart of a wonderful community who are ready to put some love into it and get some back in return. And over the next six months our job is to facilitate that exchange. Exchange is an important word for us and it's central to the arts programme we have designed; six artists working across six mediums photography, music, movement, food, spoken and written word have been

commissioned to work with residents and produce artworks. Though artistic production is entirely for residents the works will be shown to the wider community later on in the programme. A few weeks ago, we had our first lead artist the incredible Myah Jeffers, two-time winner of the Portrait of Britain Award take residents and the storytelling journey through photography. On this particular day, the participating residents, majority of whom were young people aged between 8-13 were handed a disposable camera and a brief to document the things that caught their eye and help them tell a story about the neighbourhood. It was perfect timing because the photos just got developed recently, they arrived in my inbox yesterday. And so, here's a little sneak peek of what the kids produced. And equally amazing was the fact that for most of the residents, it was the first time they were picking up the camera and they loved it! It was a struggle to get the cameras back at the end and one even made it back to be used as the official camera for a family birthday. So as the arts programme continues, we are hoping that for those residents who want to get involved, this continues to be a valuable space for them to produce, learn and exchange. Another key part of the programme is the work we were doing to transform the centre's garden into a space for growing food and learning about plants, permaculture and ecology. Food growing and gardening has been an integral part of our thinking since we started Kin Structures, the fact that Orchard Gardens having a garden made it very high on our list and the more time we've spent there, the more we've understood it to be critical to the work. So, bear with me here there are particular levels to this. Firstly, as the name suggests, before the public housing arrived, the site was an orchard, so food growing has been a historical activity on this land. Into the present day, and we know residents have been asking for more food growing and gardening opportunities on the estate. We also know that Lewisham and in particular the ward of Lewisham Central where we are located has high levels of food poverty. The community centre itself acts as a food bank for a number of the residents. And again, facing towards the future we recognise food sovereignty and improve access to education about food, ecology and nature as fundamental to the just futures you want to help realise. So, for these reasons, we invited local gardener and food grower, Ella Khafaji, to work with residents and transform the garden. And we've planned it so that the first harvest falls in line with artist and cook, Maia Magoga's residency at the space whose practice centres food as a metaphor to address conversations around the ecology, the geopolitical and ancestral ways of knowing. And for us inclusion of food in the programme is really really vital as it supports the minimum and maximum framework that we have adopted. Perhaps so to dive into more detail, we had the conversation but to summarise, you can't create change on an empty stomach. We need food to sustain, the plan to imagine, and for us Orchard Gardens is about creating a programme that supports people to think proactively about their futures and food is very much the starting point. For Kin Structures Orchard Gardens is the beginning, we are looking ahead to 2015 knowing the physical space and resources are essential ingredients for communities seeking to

determine their own just futures. We are recognising that some groups have been and continue to be underserved by enduring structures of power. And so, our work centres these communities in the knowledge that their empowerment is crucial for the creation of a just world. As a hope has been made clear, an understanding of, or the very least and an attempt to understand the context and negotiator, run through every scale of this work. The context is that I'm under-loved community centres across the country. It's the history of the land and the empty garden, it's the chitchat by the front door that shapes the detail of the arts programme, it's the future reality and necessary drive towards a smart green revolution that Carlota Perez speaks so beautifully about. A tiny anecdote to end on; for the residents who joined us last month for our first community meal, it was the first time ever that eaten food cooked in the centre's kitchen. In the 12 years of its existence, the purpose-built kitchen had never been used to cook food. Let me say that again, in the 12 years of existence, the kitchen had never been used to cook food! So, on that Saturday, 30 residents of all ages joined us to eat some homemade vegetarian chilli and drink some mint tea, and my words will never do justice to the energy and vibrations of that day. The love was most certainly about. Thank you for listening.

Gavin Wade 18:24

Thank you, Arman. That's great. Okay, we're going to move straight on over to Jeanne's presentation. And I'll hand over to you and hope that it goes super smooth...You just need to unmute.

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 18:47

I thought had everything ready. Hi, everybody. Thank you for having me. Let me describe myself first. I am a white European woman with blond hair and blue eyes full of water. And I tend to smile. I'm wearing a white woollen jumper and I'm actually at home in self isolation because of COVID. In the introduction, it says already a little bit about my work. And I want to give you a little bit more thoughts to that. And then I'll switch over to the presentation. Today's volatile political, social, environmental climate around the globe ask us, all of us, to call upon any and all of us, and strategies to imagine a more equitable, collectible, collective future. Our immediate environment has been for a long time, under the pressure of globalisation and its continued crisis. More and more people feel left out of the way that our daily environment is shaped, formed, governed and financed. And this quite often leads to a serious disconnect between people's institution and governance. To me, the investigative and explorative qualities of the arts should have a process in which we can collectively learn how we can engage and act upon the world in order to renegotiate the conditions of our existence. In my work, I always question the ways in which we can not only take matters into our own hands in relation to the future of our areas, but how we can collectively try to imagine futures that are more just and that include more of our narratives and histories and herstories than at present. The projects are contextual fields of

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interactions, circumscribed by questions around how can we shape the place we live in? How can we find ways in which we want to live together in this rapidly changing world? And how can we get a grip on the process of design, regulation, policymaking and how people can join in and influence these processes? How can people have to say and take responsibility? And to me, these are political questions. They're also questions of the imaginary. They're questions of political imaginary. And today I'm going to talk about a long durational project that I've been involved in for many years from the start, but not actively anymore at the moment on the ground. So, I will be joined by Tom Murphy, local resident and Project Manager of Homebaked who can also answer questions later. I titled this the context is the work or the work is the context, if you want. So here you see a bird's eye view of the neighbourhoods of Enfield in Liverpool. There in the centre is Liverpool Football Club, as many of you know and the project, we are working on is opposite to the high street, about 10 minutes from the centre. Traditionally British terraced houses, traditional working-class community, were also the biggest tourist attraction just after the Beatles. So, we have over 60,000 people from all over the world walk down our high streets up to 30 days a year. Despite that, we are on one of the most deprived areas in the country with many families living in poor poverty and high levels of fuel poverty - so people not being able to heat their homes. Those are statistics, but actually we are an area full of creativity and long traditions of mutual support. This is the time we started working in the area where the government programme housing market renewal where the name was in the key it was about market renewal not about community renewable from the constant. On our High Street for many years, it was more viable to just open on matchdays, so we had little local provision, and lots of takeaways. One of our last family businesses on our neighbourhood was a neighbourhood bakery. Signs like these were often up for 20 years in the area, "A Brighter Enfield is Coming". One of our co-founders often said, we are so sick, so sick of waiting for something to come. The graft of building, the organisation, and the groups it's brick and mortar. Here we set up camp in the recently closed bakery on the corner of the red-light area feed for compulsory sale. The family bakery was one of the last places still open in the area that had been there for 60 years and had been forced to close by the threat of demolition. From this form of bakery, we ran discussions about what a viable alternative to the stalled top-down initiative would look like. Homebaked's mission statement reads: "Homebaked is a community land trust, and a cooperative bakery co-owned and co-produced by people who live and work in the area. We propose to regenerate our high street brick by brick and love by love, using money that is spent in a neighbourhood to benefit our community." And the work is based on the simple belief that we all deserve to live well. For us this means good jobs, secure homes, great food, and welcome spaces to meet share stories to learn and celebrate. From the idea of the bakery building, we have been since been scaling up particularly developing the wider block and discussing public green spaces around. And here you see some images of the work that we have been

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doing, which was pretty much DIY, while he was still having a compulsory purchase order on the building, we were trying to do it up and to actually create and show and tell what we thought the future of Enfield should look like. Actually, performing a bakery before it wasn't even a bakery. Brick by brick love by love, doing up the building, collectively, learning how to bake again, and serving to the community around especially as part of the business plan baking pies on match days. But I want to tell you also a little bit about what we've been doing as the Community Land Trust where we are, sort of, over the years, already trying to go on the land and to build collectively the houses, renew the houses on the block, as well as the bakery, we want to actually build our own high streets. So, we want to be developers ourselves as a community. We did a lot of designing planning, workshops, capacity building, budgets, but we're also constantly activating spaces of imagination. When something has been rubbish for a long time, it can be difficult to imagine good stuff to imagine potential. And if you're never asked what you think is good, people start to feel apathy. You got to see and experience to believe it. It opens people's minds to more potential. Homebaked would state it like this, we had to collectively learn about baking land rights, NFC sufficiency, creating a cooperative business model and a community land trust, negotiating the council and all of this as an open conflictual, durational and inclusive process, a steep learning curve full of political uncertainties for all involved. And I've invited Tom Murphy to speak because we are not just artists, activist and community we are all artists activist and community. So, we are all contributing our creative creativity as well as our political skills as well as our learning skills to this, to this thing. At present, we are gearing up to build this larger community scheme consisting of houses, commercial businesses, all being retrofitted with energy sufficiency to combat also fuel poverty. And I think it's important to also speak that we are wanting to create more local co-owned businesses in the area as well. And we are gearing up to a community share offer and a sponsoring pledge to build this amazing community block in community co-ownership. And as we would say it, "we don't want a piece of the pie, we want the whole fucking bakery", excuse me for my words. But I think Tom, you would want to say something about you, your ideas about this sign. Welcome, Tom.

Tom Murphy 27:54

Thank you. And it was just to sort of extend on what Jeanne said, we didn't just want the whole bakery, we wanted the whole block. And it's not just about the whole block. No, it's about the whole neighbourhoods. So, there are a number of different sites and green spaces and buildings coming available across the community within the next couple of months, and us as a community led organisation is gearing up to take advantage of those opportunities and protect those green spaces and buildings in community ownership. And so working with our members and residents and providing a platform for them to develop their talents, hobbies and interests into many enterprises which take their place upon

the rest of the high street, so that the high street not only benefits from the matchday footfall, but the shutters on the shops also in between home games, and the high street is for the benefit of the community first.

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 29:04

So, I would say in this case, yes, the work is the context and the context is the work. And it's a continuous undertaking of all of us that are involved. And we absolutely urge you all to come and visit us to get involved, because we need everybody's support more than ever. And we will share some documents in the chat about our community share offer that's going out and if there's any way you can support Homebaked CLT then come and find us. And this was 10 minutes [laughter]

Gavin Wade 29:45

Great. Well done, Jeanne, thank you very much and thank you, Tom, for that insight. It feels very, very relevant. So, you're just going to un-share that screen? Yeah, great. Okay. There's a lot to think about even within this very short space of time. Thank you for being so precise with the projects, I also realised I forgot to describe myself, I left out a bit of context for some people. So, I will just add, for those who haven't spotted it, that I am, I'm a white man, I am perfectly bald, with very dark blue glasses and a black shirt. And I have an array of framed artworks and books behind me here at Eastside Projects - just to set the scene a little bit further. I am really taken by the fact that both of you have described what I, what I would call as spheres of context, there are scales of context. And I think that that's something quite interesting to talk about. Because then some often with projects, you can feel like you want to find the scale of contexts that you might want to link into. But how far can you go? What if there no scale that isn't too big to consider as context? So, something just because when you were talking about a very up close idea of an event, an activity, a community, but then we scale up to global events, global impacts, and an obviously, politics exists at all of these scales. I think that's the kind of other interesting take on this. So, I suppose I partly wanted to ask you both how you might like, or do you actually use the term context when you're involved in these projects? Or do you use other phrases that really are about context? Because it was a bit of where, what is the difference between the history of a site because both of you mentioned precedence in the orchard and in the bakery, there were both precedents. And then I'm just interested in that relationship of historical context to the present now, what, how else do you describe that? Jeanne, do you want to go first?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 32:26

Yeah, I think what is for me is important is that I don't see context as a, as a static given thing, but something that is a, and I would say, even a nonlinear continuum, that involves past, present and future at the same time. So it's a lived condition

context, and I think for me, it's very important to understand that to work within the context also means working with past, present and future, as well as working at the context within at, and sometimes even without, because sometimes it's also good to experiment with, with positions that are maybe not already given to understand what it is. So, I see it as a as a form of like, like working the ground, literally, you know?

Gavin Wade 33:18

Yeah. And you mean, when you say work in the ground? Do you mean it as the metaphor of gardening as well? Sort of play on that?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 33:25

Yeah, that's like, you know, as....yeah, working in the mud. Being as much as working, as in gardening, but also having your feet in the mud as seeding, as growing but also extending or stewarding. So, like, all the very many ways that belong to that. And I think we lost some, I think, in general, we lost some of the willingness to spend time with context, that is not like, in some kind of idea of like, trying to get somewhere with it, or to fix something, but to really spend time to work at it and to listen with it.

Gavin Wade 34:08

Yeah. Arman, you mentioned, you mentioned time, in your first introduction to how important that is, as part of context. How else do you understand that?

Arman Nouri 34:23

Yeah, time for me is key. And I, I think, as I was doing some sort of reading research before this, I know that was a key part of APG as well and a decision to move towards a different understanding of time, or rather a time based for these kinds of work to evolve from. And that is always a tension in these projects, and certainly has been already in the time that we've been doing it. Mainly, because of the time that it takes to build relationships, the time it takes for change to be, to be delivered and created. And then how that kind of rubs up against the deadlines and timeframes that come with funding applications, with local authority processes, so kind of constant mismatch, perhaps, in one's conception of time, and how others view and kind of needing to hold all of those in one in one place. So, time is a really, really key aspects of it for us. And I think also Gavin, just to kind of go back to one of your earlier comments around the scale of, or the kind of variety of scales. For me, it's all, they all have to be understood in relation to each other. I think for this work, and I would get the sense from Jeanne and Tom's work, it's similar. It started, the starting point is, is that it's the locale, it's the community is the neighbourhood, but that is always understood within a broader change, or within a broader attempt to change how regeneration or how development or how communities are formed.

And, and so there's always a linking of everything together, which I find really important to maintain.

Gavin Wade 36:13

Yeah, I'm gonna ask you a question, Tom, because there was a very, it's a really interesting, powerful statement, that idea of moving from the slice to the whole pie to the whole bakery to the block to the neighbourhood. And that actually, like that, you could we could use that as a, as a metaphor to show the spheres of influence, you know, you can just look at what happens inside the shop. Or you could look at what happens outside the shop. And then there's all those structures that sometimes you might think, I can't control this that's happening around me and it sounds to me like you've chosen to control more of the conditions that are around you. How, how have you gone about doing that?

Tom Murphy 36:59

I think it's got to be ambitious, and so Enfield as a community's been victim, I would use the word to be just too many on aspirational ideas, you know, in local government. And obviously, we've experienced, you know, the multiple failed regeneration schemes. So, for us it was, it's been really important and continues to be important to try and sort of challenge back against that, to try and bring a bit more, to bring that aspiration back into the community. And to do that we've got to go; we've got to go bigger than our own community as well. So, we're working on a regional scale with a local enable hub called Breaking Ground. So, what we're trying to do is support create the right conditions as a region to encourage more community-led housing and development as well. And that obviously feeds into our work, which we're doing at a national level with the National Community Land Trust Network too. So, as I think if you if you're trying to, to me real change on the ground, you've got you've got to try and make sure some of the broken things at the top of fixed first, because it's ultimately then where you where you're going to get stuck.

Gavin Wade 38:34

I agree. I think I mean, is that something, Jeanne and Arman, is that something that you think is, is one of the most valuable elements of this type of practice, in a way, as a practice as an approach that, because I was thinking about the fact that you're both, you're talking about underserved communities talking about deprived or unused facilities, opportunities are not there, not seen to be able to be taken, I'm just thinking about is that the fact that you can start at that scale, but as Tom suggests, you want to what you really want to do is change and inform, you'd create a model to affect other scales? Is that Is that something unique to a socially engaged art practice in this way? Or is it a parallel to lots of other things that are happening?

Arman Nouri 39:30

Yeah, just to jump in, I think it's definitely a parallel with any practice that's seeking to affect change in a progressive and more humane way. I think one of my favourite conversations to have when we're doing Kin Structures is with "Immy" who runs Civic Square, and she was she was saying that she wishes that she could get to a place where her work becomes redundant. Because essentially, the spaces and the services that she is seeking to provide are provided by other organisations, in the case of our conversation, the state and the public sector.

Gavin Wade 40:01

Yeah.

Arman Nouri 40:03

Now, I appreciate that that comes from a particular perspective, and I appreciate others on this call might have a different understanding of the kind of role of the state and the role of the local authority and the kind of provision. But certainly, for Kwame at Kin Structures, we're really, really interested in the role of the state in the role of the authority within these within these neighbourhoods. And civic community centres are public, were and continue to be in many cases, publicly owned assets. So, moving towards an understanding of how these spaces and how these services can be reformed through the existing mechanisms and organisations that exist. I think that for us is the end goal, we want to we want to make ourselves redundant, ideally.

Gavin Wade 40:47

Great, I mean, that I actually feel like I probably first learned that idea from you, Jeanne, that I sort of realised that you were trying to do that in your projects like and that statement about be, being part of a process of communities taking control of their own futures, is a really clever way of saying it, but I noticed that, I mean, I actually met Jeanne in the late 90s and I began to see some of those practices. But that commitment, where you it's such a long-term project that you can fade away and go and do something else, because you're not needed anymore. It feels like an amazing ambition. So, I think that's a really great Jeanne, would you agree with that, or if you think I've got that a bit askew? Or wrong?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 41:38

A bit [laughter] because I don't think it is about like and, in the way that I see it. Let's say it is not about an artist doing a project and then fade away and the community taking it over. It is about like starting a collective work process from which we can build together. And at the moment that we are building together, certain skill sets might at certain moments in time more prevalent than others. And I think like this means that we have multiple ways in which people lead parts of the of the ways step up, carry it another way, because like when we talk about the

whole Homebaked journey, we talk about 12 years now probably, Tom? Maybe even more and of course, like, there are also a lot of frustration and happy moments, but also frustrated moments. And so, people need to be able to, to move in and out of these processes also. So, we should understand them, as I always call these living entities and where we try to work together to take these matters into our own hands. And this is not by the lead, or by the conviction of one, but it's by the tremendous effort of all in all of us, and what we can bring to the table. And I think that is super important. And that's also why was very amendment Tom being here today, because he just recently took on the role of pushing this to the new phase. And as a local resident stepping up after being involved for many years to now also take the responsibility to push the still horrendous conversations with the council. I can say it like that not I mean, this is recorded, Tom, but this impossible conversations with the council that now wants to charge us extra money for the land because of our own success. Because we are good at adding value so we can pay more for the land. That's unbelievable. So yeah, so I think, for me, it is like how can we create these structures, that inside enough support, but enough care for yourself and community for it to become an entity that can sustain itself? And that needs a lot of different voices and a lot of different practices? So yeah, maybe Tom, you can say something to that?

Gavin Wade 44:05

Yeah.

Tom Murphy 44:09

I think it's just about energy or maintaining thought energy and not everybody has endless energy to give all of the time. So, I think building a team and building that sort of local support, when we're, when one of us does have an off day, or an off month or an off year, but there's enough people to sort of step forwards to keep, to keep that momentum going.

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 44:42

And I think one thing that is important for us that we try to always within Homebaked make sure that these positions are also paid or remunerated in a way that people can afford the time to spend. Because like we said before, like we speak in a, in a system in which we have global conflict with very local specific, specific ways in which that resonates. But like, you know, it's not only the right to housing, but it's also the right to be able to live well, to have food on the table, to have work. So, there's more at stake in that sense. So, it's working in all those conditions at the same time, at relentlessly, but also allowing, as Tom said, people having different moments in which they can, mentally or physically or financially put that kind of energy to the table and we try to rotate that as much. And also, we are okay if people leave for a while. And we're very happy if they join back in so.

Gavin Wade 45:41

So, is that would you say that that is one of the basic considerations about this, a contextual approach is to ensure that the conditions in which everybody is involved, reach a certain level so that there is parity, at least a grounding for parity?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 46:03

Yeah.

Gavin Wade 46:03

Because I'm sort of, I suppose I'm interested in what those other, what a set of basic tools and requirements are needed for the for these projects to be successful. What are there any things that come to mind?

Arman Nouri 46:23

I'm just I'm just thinking about just based on what Jeanne and Tom have said. Just the kind of parallels that the organisation they've described, Homebaked, has in the neighbourhood with, for example, local authorities, organisations or institutions and the extent to which those practices differ and contrast. And certainly, for us in Kin Structures as well, trying to get an understanding of what's going to keep the work going and maintained is really key. And I completely resonate with what Tom said, that's, that's such a big part of the work. It's just keeping the energy going. It's keeping, keeping it focussed, keeping it moving. I think that's such a hard not only hard part of the job, but also something that's spoken about the least, in fact. So yeah, I really appreciate that question, Gavin just in terms of thinking what those actions are for us. Yeah, the paying is key, we're only getting into this position now where because, because with bit in funding and pay for our collaborators. I think what we're trying to move towards more is an understanding of, of how the community centre can be, can be governed, and what are the principles and processes that will allow residents and others in the community to play a more active part in that in the management and programming of it. So, I think the guy the other, the other thing about his governance and really, really putting together in places processes to, to bring in those people into the into the centre and make decisions, which again, Homebaked feels like a really amazing reference to learn from.

Gavin Wade 48:08

Yeah, do you, do either of you see, I sort of want to I want to ask a question about, about art. Because I'm interested in, partly, and we're back in relation to the question of, of his context, half the work. So that means in that statement, half of an artwork isn't context. Now Jeanne has sort of put forward an idea that artwork is his context, and you can't do a, so I'm interested in the way that you've both presented the projects, you haven't identified anything, any, any separate

elements of the projects that could be described as “art”, rather than something else being part of an artwork, or just part of a creative process. So, I'm interested in that and sort of putting this out to the audience here, because we're going to look at what you've all said, you think the percentages, and I want to ask you to redo the Slido, I'm just gonna have a little look and see what that percentage was, what the highest? Oh, I've lost it. It's gone back to zero. So, I think, hold on a sec. When I last looked at it, the winning the winning percentage was 50%, but correct me if anyone else, yeah, so, it was 50%. And it was something like about 27-30% of people were going for that figure, I think. Now, that might just be because we started the talk. And that's what, that's what the old statement used to say. And so perhaps there's a bit of crowd direction towards following you know, it's neither here nor there. And I'm just wondering, at the end of this conversation, I want to ask everyone, to, now that you've heard what's already been presented, whether you've changed your mind, and whether you think there's a different percentage of context in any artwork or any creative process. And in, and by extension, I think the interesting thing here is that just that sense of community process and community building, requiring creativity, requiring an input of art, but that the art is the, is the incidental; it goes back to being the incidental person again, I suppose. So, I'm sort of interested in what that that sense of how, how else, do you do talk about art much in these projects? Or is it just part of your way of working and you don't need to mention the word? Jeanne, how do you approach it?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 50:56

Um, I, the way that I normally would approach it is this to say that it's more than ever important that we try to create collective imaginaries of a more just future or a future that we can collectively inhabit. And as an artist, I have probably some skills set to help assist working with imaginaries. But I also want to stress that, like for Homebaked, as we will always say that art is part of our DNA, it is part of the way that we try to create process in which we try to tap in and work with all creativity involved. The way that we do see, everybody as co-makers of this project are not as like participants in some kind of a project. But as I don't like to work as co-creators, but like, say, as people who collectively built this imaginary about what they would like for the place they are. And so yeah, so art is part of our DNA and I think that is important to see it as such. I don't see it as half of something else. I see context as the word and art as its DNA.

Gavin Wade 52:19

Arman?

Arman Nouri 52:20

Yeah, completely agree with all of that, to be honest, I'm just thinking of what else to say that adds value to what Jeanna just said. For us, it's a tool, it's opening up a door, it's an opportunity and an invitation and nothing else. We're under no

illusions that for a lot of the issues that, that communities are facing in Lewisham, and particularly some of the residents that we're working with art is by no means the answer to their problems, and it probably never will be. And we really, really recognise that and understand that. So for us, it's, again, going back to the question of the scale, and the context is having a very clear understanding of what the issue is, what the problems are, and having an idea of what that journey needs to be, and art being an opportunity to, to, as I said before, invite people into the space to connect people with each other, and to encourage imagination about what those futures look like.

Gavin Wade 53:23

And can I just, I sort of want to challenge that idea that art isn't part of the solution. Because is it just that a separated-out art isn't part of the solution, is it a fully embedded art that is just part of context and can't be distinguished from it is that? Because I've, I sort of want that to be part of the solution. Because, you know, from my perspective, I don't think art is something we imagined separate from being human, or separate from just living and connecting to plants, or working out how to organise ourselves. I think that the Art has always been the leading part of that process, that an "artfulness" and a way of thinking about even exhibition, forms of exhibition are actually human ways of existing. So, I'm I sort of what so what do you think, is there - is that is that a reaction more to the art world, then, yeah...?

Arman Nouri 54:25

That's a good way to reformulate it. And it just speaks to what I was talking about my presentation about the kinds of art practices we're trying to encourage in the space, which, you know, we've described as grassroots, others might describe as community arts, but I think that set of values and principles which, which can act as the foundation and the container for that kind of art - I think if we if we take with that into account, so intergenerational sensitive to place in people, community building, I think with that definition of mine that you have, absolutely right, Gavin, it has to be and should be a part of, of people's lives and solutions. But yeah, I think maybe perhaps in a way that is predominantly practised historically, and continues to be in there in a range of organisations and institutions, not just in the UK, obviously, but across the world, that sort of art has no, has no relevance, no interest to, to me, and I'm sure many others.

Gavin Wade 55:23

Okay. And Tom, do you have anything, any thoughts on that, that role of art and creativity? Is it just like that idea that Jeanne has said about the DNA? I'm wondering how you embrace that without, I actually don't know, whether you've been to art school or whether you've you make art in any other ways? Or, you know, I don't know. So, I'm guessing perhaps not, but...

Tom Murphy 55:48

No, I've not been to art school. No, what I would definitely see myself as a creator and a maker of my neighbourhoods, and everything, no Homebaked being good at using an art programme, as a, as a springboard to bring the book to change which communities needed, and it's something that's always brought us together and keeps us together. So, for that, I'm grateful.

Gavin Wade 56:18

Yeah, I said, as you were saying there it made me think that the learning is the other way. You know, if there is such a thing as art schools carry on or art colleges carry on, then they should be working out how to think about being creatively building a neighbourhood, you know, that you know, any art school worth its salt, I suppose, needs to update its approach. Yeah, Jeanne, you like you had something to say?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 56:48

No, I was smiling. So because I think also, you know, what Tom said about, like, you know, being a maker and a thinker and the creator of the future of his own neighbourhood, I think we also should sort of like, keep in mind that the way that images are brought to us and images about progress or what the future looks like, they're very, like, you know, people say colonised or there's a particular way that we are told success should look like or progress or future should look like. And I think like for us to work diligently together at creating other images or make and create all the ways about how we think we want that future to look like. I think that's super important. And creativity is, like we say also not, not beholden to one not to one of us. So, I think also like, and the possibility to imagine, is not just like an artist tool, maybe the artist has tools that can assist some of these processes. But yeah, we are not having a single propriety of imagination. And to me, that makes it also so powerful. So yeah, that it is something to be shared, you know?

Gavin Wade 58:14

Absolutely, yeah. Are there any particular examples that you use, or have you found yourself using a number of times across projects that you do that kind of share a learning that you've picked up and you share with others, and it might just be another example of something that's happened in the world, not necessarily an art project, or I'm just interested in what you use as your, to sort of measure your success against measure your yourself against?

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 58:48

I mean, if you ask me that, like, and Tom was there, so very happy for that. I just, I think it's already two years ago, now, time goes quick, but that I, I sort of created an exhibition as a series of training called Trainings for the Not Yet in which I brought community learnings from different communities that I've been working

with, and different ways of imagining, of creating imaginary about the future together in Utrecht, at BAK, which we then actively trained, with different communities involved, to learn from each other. Some of the things and to share experiences. So, this was like 16 weeks, five days a week, let's say, training and learning together, and Homebaked community members and participants were there to train alongside people from Utrecht, from Amsterdam, from Barcelona, all dealing with like, I wouldn't say similar neighbourhood situations, but with situations where they were both all fighting for affordable housing and liveable - liveability for their communities.

Gavin Wade 1:00:03

Great, great example. Arman?

Arman Nouri 1:00:07

The question just in terms of references, and it's those that we find inspiring? Yeah, I think I mentioned that before. But organisations like Civic Square, like Maia who always, you're kind of located in proximity to you, Gavin in Birmingham. And that is for me where the future is and it's already being enacted already being practice. And again, I think just to emphasise that future, specifically in the UK context, because you know, what, how we're speaking here, might differ to someone speaking in other parts of Europe, in other parts South America, for example. It's all it's all different, it can be very varied. But for me, just thinking about questions of space and power, thinking about the role of underrepresented groups, underserved groups in the city and in space, and specifically about the role of arts and culture, I think those organisations are really, really pushing it forward and doing the work now. So, if you don't know that, I'd highly, highly encourage you to check them out.

Gavin Wade 1:01:13

Great. Thanks very much. I'm just going to have a look at see where we're at with percentages. Oh, that's very interesting. Okay, so we've had, we've had 28 contributions so far. And it's the two the two top numbers that are jumping around in between, I can see more of you filling it in right now as well. 100% is at the top at the moment with 26%. Just dropping down 70% Interesting about a battle between 70, 80 and 100%. So that's, I mean, I suppose it's just crude mechanism to do it. But I just thought it's quite an interesting one to see how people do feel about that. And I just think there's good there's been some great arguments from all of you that have supported that, that understanding of the relationship of context as being part of any creative process or art making. I've just, just wondering, are there any questions that have come in from the audience that I can't, I don't actually know where to see them I've just realised, I can't see them on Slido.

Arman Nouri 1:02:25

Go. There's quite a few that have come through...

Gavin Wade 1:02:28

Have you seen them? Are they in the chat? Or, I thought because I thought they were going somewhere else?

Tech Support 1:02:33

Gavin, yes, you can go just click on the Q&A button on the top left. So, it says polls on the top right, and then Q&A on the top left...

Gavin Wade 1:02:45

Ah, okay, so that's one bit that I didn't know about. Okay. Let's see. So...oh, that I think that's an interesting question. So, the question is saying, I'd love to hear about how Kin Structures identifies these underused community spaces and begins negotiating the reuse or extension of these places. And I think that that is something that we haven't really touched on how, how do the projects begin? How do you find them?

Arman Nouri 1:03:15

yeah, happy to answer that. And I think it also links into a couple of the questions that have been asked about how local we are, which I think is also kind of banded into this into my answer. So, both Kwame and I are born and raised in London, Kwame himself is Lewisham born and raised and he's done a lot of community and cultural work in the borough. And so, for us, the starting point was, we needed, we kind of developed a model, we wanted to pilot it and that's essentially what we're doing at the moment. And so, we need to find somewhere to pilot it and Lewisham because of the experiences and conversations that me and Kwame had been having for many years felt like the right place to focus to work. And also, it's also Borough of Culture this year - so, it felt like a good opportunity to kind of intersect with a few other conversations and movements taking place. In terms of the actual community centre, we had a few on our list that we found either just through walking around, desktop research, or actually reaching out specifically to local authority and, and housing providers. And again, it was through, through dialogue with one, one particular housing provider, Clarion, who we felt there was a good, good centre to focus on for the purpose of this pilot. Long term, we're still seeking to get into a public sector space into a Lewisham council-owned space for another local authority. But it proved quite difficult to do that without having an initial kind of proof of concept, let's say, so that's the that's the next step is to start with, with this one and then move in so council-owned space.

Gavin Wade 1:04:57

Jeanne, how do you approach that? Starting the projects and your relationship to being local or not local? Oh, you're on mute.

Jeanne Van Heeswijk 1:05:16

Sorry for that. Yeah, I first want to say that I see the local not so much as a space but as a condition that an emotional condition that sort of like, embodies global conflict with local specificities. So, this means for me that you can be local in many different ways you do not necessarily have to be from there. In order to be, be able to be part of a local context. I always give as an example that in another place where I worked for a long time, we have a market that is there two days a week, there are people that have come there for 30 years, they don't live in a neighbourhood, but they participate in this neighbourhood, over 30 years, twice a week - the market stall holders - so they have knowledge of the place. So, in Homebaked, at some point, we needed bakers, everybody wanted to bakery to reopen, but we're not really bakers. So, we know, baking was a skill that was not there anymore. So sometimes I think the desires to build collectively not always match one to one with what is local. And so, what I normally spend huge amounts of time on, on place listening into the context, and then starting to set up like camp to create collective working places. And from there, it grows. So and it's about like, a continuous involvement, although with like repetitive visits, so it's like, yeah, because if it is for to create something that just is not about a project timeline, but about change on the ground, we need to you know, build something that can as we said before, that a lot of people can take part in to take energy with and we need everybody's energy to, to carry this forward. So, yeah.

Gavin Wade 1:07:21

Great, thank you so much. Thank you to Jeanne, to Arman and to Tom, we have run out of time. And I guess it's a good thing that there's way too many areas for us to explore in this amount of time. Sorry that I didn't get to more questions. But I think that Arman in particular, integrated some of the other questions into his answers. So well done for doing that. I want to just sort of end a little bit just talking, just mentioning about, I think that these approaches are so, are so important to how we develop not only as individual practitioners and as collaborators, but as organisations. So, I mean, it's something that we are trying to learn from and continue to implement at Eastside Projects, we have an Incidental Artist Programme, and we're part of a very complex and wonderful project to re-design the new market of Birmingham. And so, I've really felt a lot of connections coming back that, to remind ourselves about how we connect and are part of a local agenda in that way. So, I want to thank you all for your, for your, your extreme generosity with coming out with all these, these points and pointers. And just to end on a fact, a fact that we have created from this event is that we can answer our question. So, is context only half the work? No, it is more than half the

work, we have an answer! So, we have achieved something, and I hope that many of you will carry on the good work. Thank you very much, everybody, I hand back over to Emma, thank you.

Emma Underhill 1:08:59

Thank you so much, Gavin, and Jeanne, and Tom, and Arman for this hugely valuable discussion. As you just said, Gavin, there's clearly so much for us to learn and think about in relation to context you're working. And also, clearly the role of art itself in all of this. So, thank you. And thank you, to you, the audience for joining us this lunchtime and for participating, and for all your comments and for your questions. And hopefully, we might be able to answer more of those at future events, too. It's been fantastic to see so many of you here today. And as Arman said so beautifully, you can't make change on an empty stomach. So, I hope you find time to some nourishment this lunchtime as well. This is the first event in the series and we really want to listen and build on your feedback for future events. So, to that end, you'll see in the Slido bar, a questionnaire which would be really grateful if you could complete before you leave. And hope that we'll see you at the next event which will explore how socially engaged practice can inspire structural change, so very much picking up on some of the themes that were already covered today. We'll be asking how the incredible range of knowledge experience that artists, curators and communities bring to these projects can be used to challenge existing power structures. And the event will be chaired by Jes Fernie, the writer and curator who as I mentioned at the introduction has also been working with us on the curation of the whole programme of 'Assemblies' will be announcing the full line-up of speakers via social media channels and on our website in a couple of weeks' time. So do sign up to our Instagram or Twitter if you haven't already. And we'll also upload a recording of today's event on our YouTube channel that will include captions, and you'll be able to link to that from our website. So please do sign up to our mailing list for more information about *Constellations* ° *Assemblies* and our wider programme. And finally, another huge thank you to our amazing speakers and to the Art Fund and Arts Council, The Barrington Hibbert Associates and Constellations Patrons and Supporters for supporting this programme and to our partners Flat Time House and Liverpool Biennial and to the *Constellations* programming team. So, let's keep the conversation going and really looking forward to seeing you at the next one. Thanks everyone. Bye.