

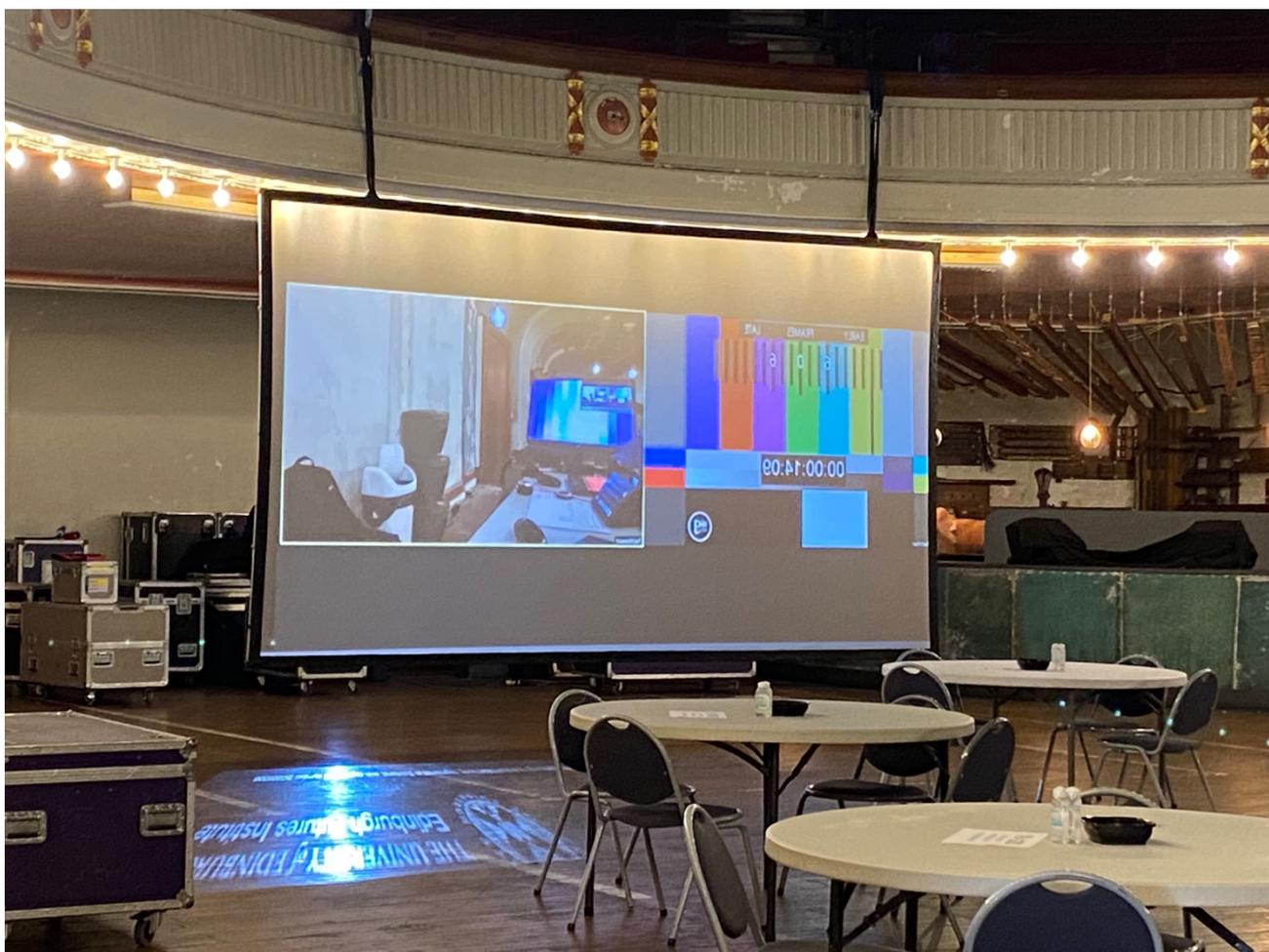


# Future Culture Edinburgh

Vikki Jones and Morvern Cunningham

Version 1.0 – 11 February 2022

Licence: Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC-BY) 



## Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic shut Edinburgh’s arts and cultural sector down overnight. Across the UK, the pandemic highlighted and exacerbated inequalities and precarities across the sector<sup>1</sup> and the pause it enforced opened up time and space to consider ways in which

<sup>1</sup><https://www.theaudienceagency.org/evidence/covid-19-cultural-participation-monitor/inequality-through-covid>



kinder, more equitable and more sustainable ways of working could enrich culture as we move forwards through and away from COVID restrictions.

*Future Culture Edinburgh* was devised by Vikki Jones, Research Associate on the Creative Informatics programme at the University of Edinburgh, and ex-producer and freelance creative Morvern Cunningham. The aim was to inspire creative thinking and collective action towards a more equitable and inclusive future of culture in Edinburgh as the city starts to emerge from successive lockdowns and begin the journey to recovery post-pandemic.

The event took the form of provocations from invited speakers and presenters alongside workshop activities for a mixture of online and in-person participants, all of whom joined either in the venue at Leith Theatre or on Zoom.

Speakers were Rob Hopkins<sup>2</sup>, co-founder of Transition Town Totnes and Transition Network and author of *'From What Is to What If: unleashing the power of the imagination to create the future we want'*; Leah Black<sup>3</sup>, Chief Executive at WHALE Arts; Rosie Priest<sup>4</sup>, interdisciplinary artist and researcher; Arusa Qureshi<sup>5</sup>, award-winning writer and editor; Oli Savage and Josie Dale-Jones from Future Fringe; and Morgan Currie, lecturer and researcher at the University of Edinburgh and Principal Investigator for the Edinburgh Culture and Communities Mapping Project<sup>6</sup>.

Operating under COVID-19 restrictions, the event was delivered live in hybrid format, with a mixture of online and in-person speakers and audience each in dialogue with one another throughout, via the large screen in the venue, in the Zoom chat, in physical roundtables or breakout rooms, and via whiteboard tool Miro.

## **Aims of the event**

Activities in the venue and online using Miro were designed to explore ideas and solutions-based approaches to addressing challenges and seizing opportunities for the nourishment and benefit of Edinburgh's cultural ecosystem.

---

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.robhopkins.net/podcast/>

<sup>3</sup> <https://leah-black.medium.com/funding-utopia-five-years-unrestricted>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/intersections/features/how-a-fairer-future-edinburgh-fringe-is-still-possible>

<sup>5</sup> <https://bellacaledonia.org.uk/2021/02/28/people-of-colour-and-the-creative-industries-in-scotland-a-post-2020-reflection/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.edinburghculturalmap.org>



The aims of the event were:

- To create an accessible space in which all interested stakeholders, regardless of their profession or connections to existing cultural infrastructure and organisations, could imagine and engage in open discussion about their ideas for an equitable future of culture in the city
- To explore hybridity in event programming and production, trying as much as possible to ensure parity and balance between the experience of participating in the event on Zoom and at the venue
- To contribute to research and writing being conducted by the event instigators. Vikki's research explores the communication of value and values in Edinburgh's arts and creative industries<sup>7</sup>, and Morvern plans to produce a pamphlet building on two previous pieces of work, "*You'll Have Had Your City?*" (2020)<sup>8</sup> and *Edinburgh Reimagined: the future will be localised* (2021)<sup>9</sup>

Participants were asked to consider what they would keep, lose, and change about Edinburgh's cultural infrastructure, before keynote speaker Rob Hopkins invited them to take a time machine to 2030 and to imagine what the world, and culture in the city, would look like. Following provocations from speakers in Leith Theatre around ideas for the future, participants worked in groups on Zoom and in the venue to consider their own ideas and potential impacts, and how their own actions and those of others could help realise them. The final part of the event looked at initiatives and research already underway towards exploring collective action for an equitable future of culture.

### **Future Culture Edinburgh event as research**

Vikki's research considers the communications of value and values in Edinburgh's cultural sector and *Future Culture Edinburgh* explored value and values from two viewpoints: in the themes, content, and participatory elements of the event, and in its format. In terms of the event content, we aimed to create an accessible space in which all interested stakeholders, regardless of their profession or connections to cultural infrastructure and organisations, could imagine and engage in open discussion about their ideas for an equitable future.

Event speakers were diverse and wide-ranging in terms of their experience of Edinburgh's cultural sector, with an emphasis on community-based and other underrepresented voices,

---

<sup>7</sup> <https://creativeinformatics.org/bio/vikki-jones/>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.theskinny.co.uk/art/features/building-edinburgh-back-better-in-a-post-pandemic-world>

<sup>9</sup> <https://www.scotsman.com/news/opinion/columnists/the-future-will-be-localised-morvern-cunningham-3196341>



including that of people of colour and creative freelancers. Specifically, we set out to intentionally platform those voices that tend to be marginalised or absent from traditional forums of discussion within the art sector in the city.

In the exploration of a hybrid format, we wanted, where possible, to produce an experience across online and in person event participants which would not be the same for each platform, but which would strive for a sense of parity in experience, where online audiences would feel as much part of the event as those attending in person and where live experience – online and in the venue – was blended, with each experiencing the other.

There were no invited guests at the event, although relevant contacts and colleagues were of course made aware of it during programming and through direct promotion. Participants were asked to sign up online and then select if they would be interested in taking part in person at Leith Theatre. Forty names were drawn at random from this list and invited to attend the venue. This was to ensure openness and to avoid the sense that those in a more privileged position with regards to their public voice were automatically given a platform. That said however, of course those with a professional or existing connection to Edinburgh's cultural sector are likely to have made up most participants.

In the few weeks' run up to the event, which coincided with the 2021 iterations of Edinburgh's August festivals, there were several press articles<sup>10</sup> which explored questions and views about the future of the festivals and highlighted the need and opportunity to discuss and address known challenges. Examples include equity, diversity, and inclusion in the cultural workforce and in audiences; and infrastructural challenges around 'festivalisation' of the city centre and their impact on sustainability agendas, short-term lets and experiences for Edinburgh's residents and communities.

As far as possible we hoped to steer away from rehashing these known issues, debates, and agendas and to encourage both imaginative and solutions-based thinking. In advance of the event, we asked participants to consider what they would keep, lose, and change in Edinburgh's cultural ecosystem – with a focus on year-round activities, not just on specific points of the year – recording their responses on Miro. We offered time to add to these thoughts at the start of the event before writer and podcaster Rob Hopkins spoke about his work, which is not specifically grounded in the arts and creative industries or in Edinburgh. Instead, he asked participants to reflect on the power of their imaginations to initiate and action change, asking them to imagine what culture in Edinburgh could look like in 2030.

---

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.scotsman.com/whats-on/arts-and-entertainment/edinburghs-festivals-pledge-they-do-not-need-to-come-back-bigger-than-ever-3334819>



Thinking about what could happen now, in the second part of the event three speakers presented ideas: Leah Black, Chief Executive of WHALE Arts on improving funding structures in the arts; artist and researcher Rosie Priest on the idea of a ‘steering group’ for the Fringe, and writer and editor Arusa Qureshi about ways to address the lack of diversity in Scotland’s cultural workforce. We then asked participants to work in groups – at tables in the venue or in breakout rooms on Zoom – on their own ideas, and to consider what the impact of these might be as well as what actions they and others (individuals, organisations, funders etc.) would need to take to make these a reality.

The final part of the event included two presentations about work and research already underway attempting to address some of the challenges we had discussed. Future Fringe, another EFI-funded piece of work which Morvern had also contributed to, put forward their idea – still in development at the time of the event taking place – focusing on the need for accountability in the programming and operation of the Fringe as a festival (not necessarily as or by the Fringe Society as an organisation) to improve access and sustainability. This was followed by Morgan Currie, Lecturer in Science Technology and Innovation Studies and Principal Investigator on the Edinburgh Culture and Communities Mapping project, who showed how cultural mapping can act as a tool to interrogate the physical, but also the social, cultural, and economic structures of culture in the city year-round.

## Findings

Responses from online participants were collected on Zoom during the event. Responses collected on paper in the venue were transcribed to Miro before both datasets were coded. The coding scheme was developed to address responses from both exercises to identify themes and the frequency with which they appeared.

Themes identified were:

- Value, values, and vision; the practice of valuation; balance of social, cultural, and economic value
- Festivals
- Digital, online, hybrid, technology, data, and innovation
- Community – a sense of community and Edinburgh’s communities
- Cultural work and structures; collaboration and sharing resources
- Finance and funding
- Space, infrastructure, and dispersal of cultural events
- Access; equity, diversity, and inclusion; learning and education
- Sustainability – structural and climate



Further analysis of the content of the responses identified four core and interlinked areas which participants felt could improve across Edinburgh's cultural infrastructure:

- Equity – of access to cultural activities and work
- Access – facilitating broad opportunities for creatives, communities, and audiences
- Diversity – of stories and representation
- Sustainability – the sensitive integration of environmental and economic strategies for long term benefit and support for the sector

### Keep, lose and change

In the opening exercise on things to keep, lose and change, the theme of community and communities scored highest for things to keep. This was linked to Edinburgh's year-round variety of cultural spaces and events, as well as the city's festivals, large and small, and to the spirit of collaboration in the sector which all contribute to a rich cultural ecosystem.

While festivals were most frequently cited in things to lose, the focus of these responses was on perceived concerns with access for a diverse cultural workforce, a known issue<sup>11</sup> not specific to the Edinburgh festivals. Another broader concern, again not specific to the festivals, was economic, social, and cultural barriers to access and a sense of a lack of engagement with communities from cultural organisations. Recent research by the Culture and Communities Mapping Project<sup>12</sup>, working with festivals and community arts hubs, has shown that this perception is not just the case in work specifically with and for communities, but also in a feeling that festivals are not engaging Edinburgh's communities with their central ticketed cultural offer.

These issues were core areas for discussion during the event. However, the fact that most participants completed this activity in advance speaks to the centrality of these issues for the sector beyond specific stakeholders and organisations. This is reinforced by responses in this activity which pointed to opportunities for positive structural change, with most referring to cultural work – particularly the need for increased support to facilitate the development and sustainability of creative careers – and for an increased commitment to engagement with Edinburgh's communities.

---

<sup>11</sup> See Brook, O., O'Brien, D., & Taylor, M. (2020). *Culture is bad for you*. Manchester, England: Manchester University Press.

<sup>12</sup> <https://www.edinburghculturalmap.org/wp-content/uploads/2022/02/Festivals-Mapping-Report-FINAL-070222.pdf>



Other points of interest in the responses included recognition of the importance of the online events and activities that sprung up in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, and the perceived need for the dispersal of the city's cultural offer, both as a response to crowding in the city centre and as a means of improving access to culture for Edinburgh's satellite communities<sup>13</sup>.

It was also interesting to note the extent to which some participants valued Edinburgh's reputation as an internationally recognised and globally connected cultural city, as well as the potential danger of ignoring international perspectives from both within and without the city. In addition, responses discussed the importance and value of considering the need for approaches which balance social, cultural and economic needs of the sector in what comes next, as we move on from the pandemic and in response to climate action. This requires a rethinking of what internationalism means in and for Edinburgh and a vision for the future that preserves the best of the local and hyperlocal focus, which was so prominent during lockdowns, alongside an environmentally sustainable approach to maintaining the open and positive spirit of global collaboration which Edinburgh's cultural sector is both renowned for and proud of.

#### Making a change: what, who and how

The second exercise asked participants for more detailed ideas on what actions they could take, the impact of these and who they would ask to help them. Here, value and values were also prominent, although level (and overlapping, as before) with responses about cultural work and collaboration. This suggests high awareness of and the perception of a link between changes to the structures and practice of cultural work and the development of a values-led cultural sector for Edinburgh.

As acknowledged above, the quantitative analysis of responses to workshop activities is of only limited use in understanding the layers and complexities of the issues discussed. In a general, top-level frequency analysis of the findings recorded through the Miro activities, the volume of responses suggests that participants were very comfortable generating ideas and comfortable in thinking about what their impact might be, but responses recorded about actions for participants and others were far fewer. This could be due to lack of time for the activity, or a reflection of the complexity of the questions we asked during this exercise but could also suggest a less developed sense of connection between value and values as ideas, principles, and visions for the future, and what it might mean to produce and consume culture in a sector that is values-led.

---

<sup>13</sup> See the Culture and Communities Mapping Project's festivals and communities report above



Ideas put forward by participants focused most prominently on the restructuring of arts funding based on long-term support, trust and positive risk-taking, as suggested by WHALE Arts CEO Leah Black, and what this could do to support a wider distribution of funds to underpin cultural activities around the city. Alongside these ideas were the suggestions of more structured support schemes for creative freelancers, as well as the need for increased access to space for year-round cultural activity.

The suggested impacts recorded were broad but very much values-led: the reduction of precarity in the structures and work of the sector, tackling inequalities, facilitating access, and increasing diversity in programming and the cultural workforce to create a sustainable cultural sector. These ideas and imagined impacts are of course interlinked. It is logical that increased distribution of funds would increase equity; support schemes for creative freelancers would reduce precarity; and increased access to space for cultural activity would contribute to greater diversity in the creative workforce. As such, as noted above, equity, access, diversity, and sustainability seem to form the core ambitions for *Future Culture Edinburgh* participants.

In addition, suggestions included increased collaboration opportunities for exchange of ideas and approaches across the sector, greater visibility for local arts and cultural activities, more focus on year-round programming and, more generally, an increased recognition of the importance of culture for our society were all required to take us towards a shared future of culture for Edinburgh. As those with careers or other interests in the sector were of course heavily represented in our participants, it is no surprise that our findings show a very clear articulation of cultural value and its part in Edinburgh's future beyond the city's arts and cultural programmes. The ideas put forward in presentations at the event – imagining futures without constraints, rebuilding funding structures, developing principles for equitable access to cultural events and careers, shared responsibility for tackling inequalities of access, cultural dispersal of activities across the city – felt, and this was intangible but present during the event, both positive and transformative but also radical, sometimes divisive, and complex.

Yet on studying the findings and reflecting on the content of the event, these ideas feel worth navigating despite their complexity. In the face of a global pandemic, there was a place for being reactive, and in Edinburgh and all over the world we have seen broad and hyperlocal examples of where swift responses to a crisis have had positive impact. However, as we reflect on what has happened and begin to take steps towards what comes next, the collective findings from this event begin to show that to be radical we do not necessarily have to be reactive, and that long-term, collaborative, people-centred, and



values-led approaches to change can be both radical and sustainable. As Rob Hopkins put it, recalling a quote from the German poet Rainer Maria Rilke:

*“The future must enter into us a long time before it happens.”*

That said, and as noted above, ‘Who?’ and ‘How?’ were questions we also asked through this activity, and these were areas of the workshop for which far fewer responses were recorded than in the other sections. The responses that were recorded spoke to a need for cultural leadership in the city through which to tackle the core issues around precarity, equity and diversity that the event raised, together with a clear, transparent, and public articulation of the values through which this leadership would operate. Some participants also expressed an interest in the programming of more events of this type to continue to facilitate conversations about putting the values articulated at *Future Culture Edinburgh* into action.

On that basis, the assumption might be that it is the job of those identified as leaders to initiate and facilitate change. And, while some of those stakeholders perceived as cultural leaders may have been present, either in Leith Theatre or on Zoom, we asked participants not to focus too much on biographies and to respect the voices of those who are not always invited to these kinds of conversations, which may account for these representatives’ holding back from public facing conversations during the event.

Together with leadership, our findings speak to the need for collaboration with grassroots artists, organisations, and practitioners to encourage inclusivity and work towards a more equitable balance of power across the sector and a sense of reciprocity, shared responsibility and accountability for the value and values of Edinburgh’s cultural infrastructure. Some of our speakers – addressing perceived challenges around open access at the Edinburgh Festival Fringe in their examples, but also speaking more broadly of the need for equitable and inclusive practice across the sector – considered the idea of devising a set of principles, guidelines, or rules to achieve this. In some ways, the introduction of a framework to address issues around equity may feel counterintuitive, particularly regarding a policy which professes openness, however, there is already a framework of tacitly agreed actions and practices in place for accessing cultural professions and activities and these arise from current business and funding models and programming structures. What our speakers and data from *Future Culture Edinburgh* suggest is that we are at a point in the development of the sector where these principles need to be recalibrated and rewritten to address our core themes of equity, access, diversity, and sustainability.



One theme that might have been expected to have more prominence, particularly given the development of online cultural events and activities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic, was that of digital, hybrid, online, technology, data, and innovation. References to the potential of digital and data-driven innovations for enacting change to cultural infrastructure were mentioned as things to keep in the keep, lose, change activity, but had the fewest mentions by a significant amount for the activity working through ideas for the future. This finding suggests that the sector does not currently readily connect digital communications and technologies with values-driven agendas for cultural infrastructure in the broadest sense, and perhaps also infers a preoccupation with emerging from lockdowns towards a model that is as close to ‘business as usual’ as we can make it, despite the acknowledged potentially democratising aspects of online and digital programmes, particularly in terms of equity and accessibility for some audiences.

## Conclusion

*Future Culture Edinburgh* found a great deal to celebrate and value in Edinburgh’s cultural sector. Data from the event foregrounded a shared sense of the value of culture and cultural activities as a core aspect of our city and our society.

The activities included in the event focused on imaginative, creative, and values-led prompts to consider current challenges in the sector and the use of the pause in activity brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic to think about what changes could be made, why, how and by whom.

Participants identified four core themes and values for change – equity, access, diversity, and sustainability – with associated calls to action to reduce precarity and develop an equitable and sustainable sector; increase equity through collaboration, responsibility, and accountability; commit to and act to increase diversity in access to cultural work and programmes; and embed sustainable business models, funding structures, employment practice and programming in our cultural policy.

These calls for change are, of course, broad, complex, and wide ranging. As noted above, our data shows that we find it hard to ideate the detailed and probably incremental actions required across the sector to bring about this change. Future research may wish to go further in encouraging articulation of changemaking, for example exploring the potential of specific themes such as digital and data-driven approaches to programming and participation.



Participants looked towards existing cultural leadership for structures through which to continue discussion and to collaborate and engage with core themes and values which the sector seems to share. However, they also hoped to act to achieve change through the collaborative development of specific structures and approaches which support values-led change. This, we found, was seen to be a step towards addressing the power imbalances between cultural gatekeepers and the more vulnerable workforce in the sector, and encouraging sustained collaboration, shared responsibility and accountability.

*Future Culture Edinburgh* was an exercise in solutions-based futures thinking, harnessing the activism of the imagination and belief in positive change to consider new solutions to the complex cultural challenges that stakeholders in Edinburgh's cultural sector are very familiar with. As noted earlier, ideation was not an issue for participants, though the recording of detail describing how these changes might be made were fewer, reflecting the complexity and breadth of the issues the event addressed. While the rich and values-led conversations held at the event were collaborative, positive and hopeful, future research could further develop methods which focus on provocations exploring the link between values and active problem solving to ideate multiple futures for the city's cultural infrastructure.

There was recognition at the event that to achieve the positive change so desired by participants, it is vital for those in cultural power to initially recognise and accept the existence of deep-seated problems within the arts, and to both listen to and honour the experience of those at the receiving end of resulting cultural inequalities. There is a sense that, with shared responsibility and accountability from all stakeholders across Edinburgh's cultural sector, steps can then be taken towards significant action and implementing fundamental, but incremental and sustainable change, at a deep structural level.

Since the event took place in September 2021, our contributors who presented work-in-progress findings have continued to develop ideas and produce outputs, and we are aware of conversations taking place about the future of culture in Edinburgh, as well as around Scotland, the UK and further afield. *Future Culture Edinburgh* and these findings are part of what we hope will be an ongoing dialogue and collaboration towards an equitable, accessible, diverse, and sustainable cultural sector.

\*\*\*\*\*

*Future Culture Edinburgh* was funded by the Edinburgh Futures Institute

Additional support was provided by the Edinburgh Centre for Data, Culture and Society at, with PhD research assistant funding from Creative Informatics