

# Transforming Futures through Place-based Creative Practices:

How eco-social change can  
be fostered in place

A Report from Creative Carbon Scotland  
and the EU CreaTures project.

August 2022

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To cite: Gemma Lawrence and Emma Hall (2022). **Transforming Futures  
through Place-based Creative Practices: How eco-social change can be  
fostered in place.** CreaTures and Creative Carbon Scotland.



**CREATURES**

# Transforming Futures through Place-based Creative Practices: How eco-social change can be fostered in place

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Gemma Lawrence and Emma Hall (2022). *Transforming Futures through Place-based Creative Practices: How eco-social change can be fostered in place*. CreaTures and Creative Carbon Scotland. DOI: [10.5281/zenodo.7545189](https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.7545189)

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This project has received funding from the European Union's Horizon 2020 research and innovation programme under grant agreement No 870759

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# Introduction

The aim of this research is to understand how place-based cultural practitioners and organisations can progress sustainability outcomes and act as agents of change in their communities. Our research focused on the Scottish context, however there are many other examples that could be drawn on globally.

The report includes an overview of place policy and a scan of current cultural organisations engaged in place-making in Scotland. It also offers more detailed case studies of three platforms and organisations working in different contexts across Scotland, and identifies themes and lessons learned which are common to them.

The information gathered comes from a combination of first-hand experience, interviews and desk-based research and is intended to appeal to a broad audience of people working within and across the fields of creative practice, research, climate change and sustainability, and policy-making.

## About this report

In late 2021, *Creative Carbon Scotland* (CCS) was commissioned by *CreaTures* (Creative Practices for Transformational Futures), an EU-Horizon 2020 funded project, to explore how creative practitioners were working with communities in Scotland over extended periods of time to bring about transformational changes to the places in which they live and work. Over the past three years, CreaTures has worked with artists, researchers and policy-makers across Europe to undertake experiments, gather examples and develop evaluation methodologies to demonstrate the power of existing – yet often hidden – creative practices to move the world towards eco-social sustainability. While CreaTures has predominantly focused on the impact of recently commissioned work, this report fills a gap by addressing the goals and methods of long-term engagement and collaborative projects undertaken by creative practitioners with communities and organisations.

CCS has a national remit to harness the role of our arts and cultural sector in contributing to the transformational change to a more environmentally sustainable Scotland and its [culture/SHIFT](#) programme in particular has become increasingly focused on the role of creative practices in empowering communities and supporting place-based approaches to climate action. Projects such as [Climate Beacons](#) have shown the great potential for deep-rooted and lasting public engagement with climate change supported by seven Climate Beacon partnerships of cultural and climate-focused organisations working across Scotland, whilst CCS' long running collaboration with the EU I MarPAMM project's *Seas of the Outer Hebrides* has provided with first-hand insight into the opportunities and challenges of supporting collaborative creative approaches to public engagement on marine conservation issues. Our evolving [Library of Creative Sustainability](#) and inspiration from the work of 'embedded artists' such as Frances Whitehead have also allowed us to build an understanding of the practicalities involved in long-term collaborations between artists, communities and organisations and the kinds of outcomes that have been achieved when diverse skillsets and approaches are brought to bear upon environmental issues. We were therefore delighted to be able to undertake this research to deepen our own knowledge, share insights and perspectives from the three case study organisations, and crucially to be able to advocate for the vital importance of this work in our collective approach to tackling the climate emergency.

The Stove Network, Nithraoid Procession.  
Photo: Kirsten McEwan.



## Place policy in Scotland

Place-based approaches are increasingly recognised as central to addressing the climate emergency and supporting more environmentally, socially and economically sustainable places to live, work and play. The Scottish Government and local government association COSLA's [Place Principle](#) sets out an overarching context for place-based working in Scotland. This recognises the need for more integrated approaches to tackle complex problems including health, climate change, socio-economic and financial challenges. At its core, the *Place Principle* promotes collaboration, community participation and improved combining of energy, resources and investments at local and regional levels to address these challenges. It encourages 1) the development of a shared vision for a place and 2) jointly determined actions. Although place-based approaches in Scotland are not new, more recent developments such as the [Community Empowerment Act](#) (Scotland) (2015) and the complex challenges of the climate crises and public health have spurred renewed emphasis and focus on the approach, with public agencies - such as *Architecture & Design Scotland*, the *Improvement Service*, and [Sniffer](#) - making the case for collaborative approaches to achieve the transformation towards a more socially just and environmentally sustainable society.

## Place-based arts and culture

Place-based working is not a new phenomenon in arts and culture. CCS's own work has been inspired by early examples such as artist David Harding's role as town artist for Glenrothes New Town, during which he was a full-time member of the Planning Department and built an understanding of the town's residents into planning decisions along with the production of public art in the town for ten years, between 1968-78. Many contemporary cultural organisations engaged in place, such as the *Beacon Arts Centre* in Gourrock or *Kinning Park Complex* in Glasgow, also have a much longer history of grassroots activism and art which over time has evolved into the organisations they are today.

At a policy level, there is increasing recognition of the role that Scotland's cultural sector plays in contributing to more equitable and sustainable communities. Scotland's Culture Strategy, developed in consultation with the arts and culture sector and published in February 2020, foregrounds the potential of culture to transform society and to empower communities. The strategy points to increasing evidence of the role that culture plays in addressing deep-rooted and complex themes prioritised by Community Planning Partnerships such as inclusive growth and improving employment prospects, positive physical and mental health, children's wellbeing and sustaining fragile communities. Scottish Government-sponsored programmes, such as [Culture Collective](#), provide a tangible example of how this strategy is feeding into funding decisions and priorities. This pilot programme was launched in 2020 with the aim of establishing a network of partnerships including creative practitioners, organisations and communities, working together to create a positive difference locally and nationally in response to COVID-19.

# Current landscape

In our analysis, we see cultural groups and organisations using diverse 'place-based practices' in Scotland, often playing multiple roles simultaneously. These roles are closely linked to the local context and issues that are most prevalent to that place. Roles include, among others, to:

- **Create safe and welcoming spaces for people to be and gather, and providing access to information, services and resources.**

For instance, *WHALE Arts*, Edinburgh, and *Kinning Park Complex*, Glasgow, have played key roles in their local communities in response to the COVID-19 pandemic including by creating educational and creative learning materials to be accessed online or at home, coordinating food distribution and providing free weekly meals, and signposting health and wellbeing support services.

- **Provide opportunities and resources for creative learning, skills development, gaining voluntary experience and having access to entrepreneurial opportunities.**

For instance, *Ceòlas*, South Uist, celebrates, promotes and nurtures Gaelic traditional music, language and cultural heritage including through tuition and performances for people living in the Outer Hebrides. *Old School Thornhill*, Thornhill, has a mission to transform a disused local school into a hub for freelance creatives and businesses to tackle isolation and promote rural entrepreneurship.

- **Contribute to the cultural life and identity of their places through artistic programming including artist residencies, exhibitions, events and performances, and supporting to wider cultural activities such as food growing, cooking or leisure activities.**

For instance, *Findhorn Bay Arts*, Forres, produces a year-round programme of street festivals, artist residencies and creative learning projects as well as participating in regional partnerships and working with the local tourism board to promote arts and cultural activities to visitors. *The Barn*, Banchory, is the only multi-arts venue in Aberdeenshire and manages an allotment site with 120 gardening plots for local residents.

- **Create a critical platform for engagement and participation and empowering people to act on important issues concerning their place, including people who are marginalised or typically less well represented.**

For instance, *RIG Arts*, Greenock, has been embedded in its local community in Inverclyde for over 10 years and uses creativity to engage and empower disadvantaged people in issues including urban regeneration, heritage, mental health and wellbeing and climate change. In Dumfries *The Stove Network's* 'open door policy' actively supports people who are underrepresented in the creative industries to develop new ideas and undertake projects engaged in creative place-making.

- **Act as a conduit or mediator between communities, organisations and policymakers to bring about change.**

For instance, *North Edinburgh Arts*, Edinburgh, plays a key role in amplifying the voices of local communities and acting as an important conduit between local developments and city planning, including influencing the development of MacMillan Square and the recent asset transfer of the North Edinburgh Arts building to full community ownership. An Lanntair, Stornoway, and Taigh Chearsbagh, North Uist, form part of the *Làn Thìde - the Outer Hebrides Climate Beacon* project - which empowers communities to participate in planning for climate adaptation in the Outer Hebrides.

More about these organisations can be found, alongside many others, in an overview of place-based work in Scotland in the appendices.



Inbetween, The Stove Network.  
Photo: The Stove Network.

## Place-based creative practice case studies

We were interested in holding conversations and developing case studies with organisations to learn first-hand from their experiences of place-based working and the context from which their practices had emerged. Three case studies were identified as they provided interesting ways to think about the relationship between creative practitioner(s) and place, and different methods and scales of practice that we believed would be useful for others to learn from. The focus of our research was *ATLAS Arts* (Portree, Isle of Skye), *Fertile Ground* (Aberdeen) and *The Stove Network* (Dumfries). (An appendix of other Scottish arts and cultural organisations in this space and a description of their work can be found at the end of this report.)

The case studies were developed through interviews with some or all of the main practitioners involved. The interviews reflected upon the motivations and values which drive practice, the way in which collaborations and partnerships are structured and managed, practitioners' relationship to policy, funding long-term work, and key strategies and methods used to address the issues pertinent to their communities. Categories and 'tags' were identified for each case study in line with the categories used by CCS's *Library of Creative Sustainability*.

### Common themes and approaches

The case studies demonstrate the intertwining of personal philosophy and values with organisational missions and methods of working. Despite clear differences in context and the local issues that practitioners are seeking to address, there is an application of common ethos and values to process and across ways of collaborating with others. In other words, we are seeing an emphasis on:

- Embracing a long-term view: a knowledge and understanding of what has come before as well as a commitment to making changes which potentially take years to come to fruition;
- Maintaining an ethos of localism: facilitating and foregrounding a response from communities even when working beyond the local context;
- Desiring to subvert the economic and political *status quo* by being in opposition to extractive and exploitative methods;
- Remaining optimistic through seeking alternatives, problem solving and building solidarity with others;
- Accepting (and possibly enjoying) uncertainty and working in unfamiliar territory, recognising it can be both a rewarding and precarious position to inhabit;
- Providing a resource to their communities in practical (providing spaces to gather, equipment to lend) and intangible ways (sharing learning and expertise, applying artistic or curatorial skills to connect the local context with global issues).

Our conversations also revealed commonalities in the methods and approaches employed by practitioners including:

- Being unconventional activists – working in slow, measured, and sustaining ways;
- Possessing a strong sense of accountability to their communities: practitioners recognised their role as intermediaries and translators whilst rejecting the notion of being cultural gatekeepers;
- Using their roles as 'adaptors' between the local and grassroots and structures and systems whilst seeking to change the latter at the same time;
- Making conscious efforts to change the discourse around issues: being sensitive to the language they use and creating new words and framing for what they do;
- Imparting principles and values through practice including the ways in which projects are structured and managed;
- Maintaining a self-reflexive practice in order to continually develop their own practice, share learning with others and advocate for greater support;
- Addressing barriers and increasing access to both creative and cultural activities and participation in debate and decision-making;
- Using creative practice to enable imagining and visioning of different futures from within communities: applying creative skills to embrace complexity and interconnected issues.



Town Charter, The Stove Network.  
Photo: The Stove Network.

## Contextual and material differences

While identifying similarities in ethos and methods, it is also important to highlight the contextual and material differences between the three organisations. *The Stove Network* and *ATLAS Arts* are currently recipients of regular funding allocated on a three-year cycle by national arts funding body *Creative Scotland*, whilst the work of *Fertile Ground* is supported by funding on a project-by-project basis, making the development of longer-term initiatives more challenging. The scale of operations also varies massively: *The Stove Network* employs a team of over forty staff and freelancers and manages a network of over 600 members; *ATLAS Arts* has a team of four staff, whilst *Fertile Ground* is run by one freelance curator. Each of these circumstances presents its own challenges and opportunities as organisations seek to maintain agile ways of working and their roots in activism and localism, whilst strengthening their position and ability to influence policies and the systems in which they are working.

The fact that there are relatively few cultural organisations in Dumfries (*The Stove Network*) and on Skye (*ATLAS Arts*) compared to a number of large-scale cultural institutions and festivals in Aberdeen (*Fertile Ground*) may also play into practitioners' ability to have traction and shift the cultures surrounding them. The *Fertile Ground* case study particularly draws attention to the influence of the fossil fuel industry over cultural and social life in Aberdeen, which is a both key challenge and motivator for action.

The nature of the 'place' in which these place-based practices are being used is also relevant. *ATLAS Arts* and *The Stove Network* are both based in relatively small towns and have strong links with their rural surroundings, whereas *Fertile Ground* is based in a large (for Scotland) city which itself has a range of different communities within it. It is notable that in the [wider list of organisations](#) working on place-based practices (see [Appendix 2](#)) those that are longest lived, best funded and perhaps most successful are those which operate in a place with a sense of an independent community. This is obvious in the more rural parts of Scotland where the communities are physically separate from neighbouring communities but it also applies to those organisations such as *North Edinburgh Arts*, *Rig Arts*, *WHALE Arts* and *Kinning Park Complex* which are all in communities that are outside the centre of their cities both physically and in terms of social integration.

Finally, there is a significant difference in the physical location and base of each case study, spanning from *The Stove Network's* multi-purpose venue, café and meeting place in the heart of Dumfries, to *ATLAS Arts'* office and open access studio in Portree on Skye and *Fertile Ground's* temporary use of venues and galleries in Aberdeen to host exhibitions and events. Each of these circumstances again presents its own advantages and disadvantages, but there is perhaps an interesting question of whether community-based work benefits particularly from the provision of a space to meet, build relationships and share values through acts of making and doing together. The large number of venue-based organisations identified in this report is perhaps an indication of the opportunities such spaces afford for sustaining embedded practice over longer timeframes.

# Case study 1: ATLAS Arts

## Overview

ATLAS Arts was founded in 2010, following the closure of An Tuireann Arts Centre on the Isle of Skye and local consensus around the need for the development of visual arts projects which would respond to the local context in across Skye, Raasay and Lochalsh. ATLAS Arts' programme involves a range of creative and cultural activities including film screenings, gatherings, artist residencies, workshops, and community meals, all of which are centred around the aim of "holding conversations which are rooted in this place and this time". The small team works from an office in Portree that includes an open access book making studio, zine library, and filmmaking and screening equipment available to borrow. The organisation runs projects that take place outdoors and indoors in a range of public and private spaces, online, and at the ATLAS Office.

The programme is currently structured around five core 'threads' of Food Cultures, Alternative Education, Archival Power, Stories from the Land, and Rethinking Economies with shorter and longer term projects which engage with and respond to these themes. The thread of Rethinking Economies was a particularly strong focus of our conversation with Joss Allen, Co-director and Alternative Economies Manager with ATLAS. Through this work the organisation seeks to contribute to the local economy through the lending of tools and equipment, sharing of skills and expertise, and building long-term partnerships which foster economic agency, whilst also seeking to resist and challenge capitalist-centric and competitive economic models.

**Website:** [atlasarts.org.uk](https://atlasarts.org.uk)

**Dates:** 2010 - Ongoing

**Location:** Portree, Isle of Skye

**Location type:** island; sea; coast; shoreline; rural

**Location description:** ATLAS Arts organises collective arts projects across Skye, Raasay and Lochalsh on the North West coast of Scotland. The organisation works with artists and local communities to hold conversations that are rooted in place and contemporary issues through a programme of screenings, gatherings, residencies, meals, workshops and sharings.

**Issues addressed:** Economics, Environmental Justice, Resources and Materials, Biodiversity, Community Gardens

**Types of organisations involved:** Artist-led, Community Organisation, Local Government, University or Research Body

**Types of community involvement:** Supports creatives, Civic engagement, Co-creation, Community development

## Rethinking Economies

*'I think we want to work in ways that are slower and give more time for us to be playful and creative and reflective.'*

The Rethinking Economies strand of ATLAS's work focuses on developing and delivering projects which are engaged in imagining, highlighting and enacting economic alternatives based on the principles of solidarity, cooperation, equity, ecology, democracy, degrowth and pluralism. A key concern for the organisation is how it can play a meaningful role as a resource to its local community and the wider arts ecology in terms of fundraising and working in more collaborative ways with other local organisations. This stems from both a practical need to develop the finance and fundraising aspect of ATLAS's work, but also an interest in how the organisation can experiment with its role in building a more sustainable economy and concepts such as economic degrowth.

ATLAS is currently addressing this through the way that it makes and sells editions of artistic works where half of the money made from the sale of works will go towards the production of the next set of editions and the other half to a cause or organisation of the artist's choice. For example, the funds raised by the edition made by artist Isabel McLeish, who has created a screenprint inspired by the writing of environmental philosopher Donna Haraway, will go towards supporting the *South Skye Seas Initiative* (SSSI), a community-based project for the conservation of the local marine environment. ATLAS is interested in how such approaches can lead to new ways of working in collaborating with other local organisations based on mutual support and exchange.



ATLAS Arts work on Skye.  
Photo: Jordan Young.



“It’s a way of developing our network and our group of collaborators, and hopefully doing it a way we don’t want to be seen as just charity... So, it is about maybe trying to build solidarities, connections with other groups, and going ‘okay, if we’re doing this kind of work, there’s crossovers and there’s ways we could support each other. Maybe there’s a way SSSI could also help us.’ So, they’re already saying “come out on the boat with us when we’re doing the seagrass surveys”, and there will be an exchange of knowledge there. We’ll get to learn something that we hadn’t known previously. So, yeah, that relationship building is as important, really. That’s the intention behind it.”

The organisation provides various services to its local community including the lending out of high-quality film screening equipment, and supporting people to make print publications through the *Making Publics Press* run from the ATLAS office which includes a Xerox printer, scanner, binder, and guillotine. As well as helping people to realise their own projects and organise events, these aspects of ATLAS’s work help to create new points of connection with the local communities.

“...it’s as much about providing that resource as it is also about trying to develop relationships with other people in the community that might not engage with other parts of our program but are really interested in getting their Masters thesis made into a nice book, or they are putting on a play and they would like to have the script made into a nice book, or stuff like that.”



ATLAS Arts.  
Photo: Jordan Young.

As well as these approaches to building links and being a resource to its local community, ATLAS is actively engaged in rethinking the structure of its artist residency programme and resisting the predominant model of international artist residencies where an artist travels to make work in a location for a short period of time. The organisation has initiated a new project based on the themes of correspondence and interconnection, rather than internationalism, by putting four artists from Skye, Glasgow, Helsinki and Canada in touch with one another to share their research into the places where they live. The project will invite the artists to correspond with one another by email, taking time to read and craft a response to one another’s emails in a similar way to writing a letter. The approach places value on slower forms of working and allowing for open-ended research, whilst still enabling exchange and reflection on the contexts in which the artists are working. Another key aspect to rethinking residency structures is to ensure that there is sensitivity to the historic and contemporary issues when artists are visiting and undertaking research on Skye, whilst encouraging artists to bring their different perspective to local issues.

“I think that’s the thing, sensitivity is really important. We want to make sure that we offer people who are coming to do research here the opportunity to get a sense of that, the complications of working here, the difficult conversations that have been going on for a long time around land ownership, around tourism, around the fish industry, around Gaelic language and culture, ... there is a responsibility on us as an organisation to make sure that artists are able to find out about that because it is important to people here. But it’s also recognising that the reason we want to bring people here is because they have a different way of looking or thinking, and recognising that sometimes that can be really important in contributing to these local discussions and debates, and I guess it’s trying to find a balanced way of dealing with that. And not trying to shy away from these difficult conversations.”

## The School of Plural Futures

[The School of Plural Futures](#) began in February 2021 and ran until 2022. It was organised in collaboration with artist Emmie McLuskey, *The Skye Climate Action Group* and eight contributors across Skye and Lochalsh with the aim of building an alternative school to speak about the reality and potential of life for young people (aged 16 – 25) living in the area. The school took the form of a series of gatherings that created spaces to think through and respond to the intersecting challenges of the climate crisis and social injustice in a collaborative and supportive environment.

The first iteration of the program took the form of six weekend workshops, which ran over two or three days with contributors including local archivist, Catherine MacPhee, poet, Myles Campbell and Cheryl MacIntyre, part of Talisker Sheep Club, as well as artists working across Scotland and internationally. Activities ranged from film screenings based on themes including environmental activism and land ownership, to walks and site visits (including to a community-owned hydro scheme) to print and book making. The programme culminated in the collective production of a publication titled *A Person Is Not an Individual*. Fundamental to the project is the principle of giving space for open discussion and encouraging self-determination and the agency of participants, with the ATLAS team applying their curatorial knowledge and skills where useful.

**“Part of it is really about listening to the participants in the School, making sure there’s plenty of time for them to have their voice heard and to say the things they want to say, and knowing where we can then bring in the knowledge that we have as a team around certain things. I think it’s sometimes up to us to connect up the dots, but do it in a way that’s not patronising, that is related to what’s going on here, and isn’t us coming in and saying the School now needs to do certain things or act certain ways that are ecological, but maybe trying to address the hierarchies around knowledge when it comes to environmentalism.”**

The project has had a transformational impact on the organisation, particularly in thinking about how it can meaningfully work with young people and create opportunities for co-curating programmes and activities that they want to do. It has also led to some immediate pathways of involvement such as the appointment of a young person from the school to the ATLAS Arts board, creating the opportunity to influence the strategic direction of the organisation



ATLAS Arts.  
Photo: Sebastien Taylor.

## Partners and stakeholders

- ATLAS Arts is currently a team of four staff with expertise in curating, arts production, community engagement and arts administration. The team works together to organise the programme and share responsibilities for some key administrative and communications tasks. The artistic programme is organised into five key ‘threads’ of Food Cultures, Alternative Education, Archival Power, Stories from the Land, Rethinking Economies, with shorter and longer term projects that engage with and respond to these themes.
- The organisation supports a series of artist residency projects with artists from local, national and international contexts participating in the programme.
- ATLAS partners with a wide range of local community partners including *Skye Climate Action*, *Skye and Lochalsh Archive Centre*, local primary schools and high schools, *South Skye Seas Initiative*, local restaurants in Skye and Raasay, and *Portree Community Allotments*.
- The organisation also forges links with national and international organisations and networks including *Enough!*, *Food Art Network*, and the *Finnish Institute*.

## Sustainability issues addressed

- The organisation seeks to explore its role as a resource and participant in the local economy, and experiment with alternative economic models such as through the sharing of equipment, resources and skills, and building solidarity with organisations with similar environmental and social aims through collaboration.
- Projects such as *The School of Plural Futures* address the intersecting issues of climate change, youth empowerment and social inequalities. By creating space for open discussion and applying their creative skills as arts workers, the ATLAS team encouraged self-determination and agency of young people living on the Isle of Skye. One of the youth participants now sits on the ATLAS Arts board whilst others have decided to pursue further education in related fields or become more involved in local activism.
- The organisation places a high value on artistic research and process-led projects that can support the development of different ways of looking at and thinking through recurrent local discussions and debates concerning intersecting social, economic and environmental issues.

## Lessons, tips and advice

- Open access resources such as the *Making Publics Press* and the lending out of cinema equipment can provide a useful first point of connection with members of the local community, which can then lead to participation or involvement in longer-term projects.
- Holding conversations, identifying common goals with other local organisations and being clear about the skills and resources they can bring to collaborations have been important aspects of building alliances and solidarity with other organisations.
- It has been equally important to find a balance between identifying where ATLAS can bring specific skills or insight and responding to local communities' need and interests. This negotiation of roles within projects and assessing what level of involvement is required can be challenging, for instance, requiring time to understand contexts and manage expectations.
- In hosting residency programmes with artists travelling from elsewhere to Skye, ATLAS Arts recognises its responsibility to direct artists to understand the local context and ensure sensitivity in practice. Relationships with key local contacts have been crucial in helping to build artists' understanding of key issues such as land ownership, tourism, aquaculture and Gaelic language and culture.
- The organisation recognises the challenge of matching its strategic aims and values for actual work and practice with slower, more embedded processes or taking time to experiment, be playful and creative, often feeling in conflict with conventional arts funding models and the wider economy. It requires significant time and commitment to fully integrate these changes into everyday working practices: funders expect fast-paced delivery of outcomes, which conflicts with slower, place-based processes that allow for experimentation.

## Funding

ATLAS Arts currently receives regular funding from *Creative Scotland*, the national arts funding body in Scotland, as well as the *Highlands and Islands Enterprise*.

Projects are supported through a mix of grants from trusts and foundations with cultural, social and environmental goals including *Inspiring Scotland*, *Corra Foundation*, *Weston Jerwood*, *British Council*, and *Bòrd na Gàidhlig*. Our conversation highlighted the challenge of balancing the short-term nature of many funding calls vs. fostering longer term, embedded practice in communities.

## Relevant links

*Rethinking economies:*

[atlasarts.org.uk/programme/threads/rethinking-economies](https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/threads/rethinking-economies)

*The school of plural futures:*

[atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/the-school-of-plural-futures](https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/the-school-of-plural-futures)

*Feeling Worlds:*

[atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/feeling-worlds](https://atlasarts.org.uk/programme/projects/feeling-worlds)

# Case study 2: Fertile Ground

## Overview

*Fertile Ground* is the work of freelance curator Rachel Grant, based in Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland. It seeks to foster new ideas and perspectives on Aberdeen's relationship to fossil fuel industries and the development of alternatives, including renewable energy. The platform works with people from different backgrounds and disciplines, including artists, community members, environmental activists, oil workers and researchers, to cultivate new ways of thinking about and responding to the complex interconnections between political, social and environmental issues in Aberdeen and at a global level. The question of where power is held and the desire to disrupt predominant narratives around the city's relationship to oil are driving forces behind Grant's work.

Fertile Ground focuses on longer-term curatorial projects and supporting new commissions of artistic work, which evolve through a process of context-specific research, the testing out of ideas and the development and exhibiting of new artistic works. Volunteering with local community and environmental groups forms an important part of Fertile Ground's practice, both as a 'testing ground' for processes and ideas, and as a two-way exchange that offers a contribution back to communities and opposes extractive methods of working. This approach offers the opportunity to build relationships with specific communities that are **"grounded in some of the connections that the programs talk to"** and to appeal to people who might not ordinarily attend gallery exhibitions. As well as working with specific groups, Fertile Ground uses its relatively autonomous position to bridge conversations between what are often perceived to be disparate sectors, such as environmental activists and oil workers, and identify common ground between them.

**Website:** [fertileground.info](http://fertileground.info)

**Dates:** 2018 - Ongoing

**Location:** Aberdeen, North East Scotland

**Location type:** urban, sea, coast, shoreline

**Location description:** *Fertile Ground* is based in Aberdeen, Scotland's third largest city, known as the offshore 'Oil Capital of Europe' since the discovery of North Sea oil in the late 1960s. Run by freelance curator Rachel Grant, Fertile Ground fosters a critical platform to engage with social, environmental and economic ways of inhabiting the city through projects, exhibitions and events.

**Issues addressed:** Economics, Energy, Environmental Justice

**Types of organisations involved:** Artist-led, Community Organisation, Local Government, University or Research Body

**Types of community involvement:** Supports creatives, Civic engagement, Co-creation, Policy influence

## Petroculture

The ideas of 'Petroculture' has grown in popularity in the environmental humanities in recent years. Broadly defined, it describes a society structured by energy and the production of fossil fuels, and the cultures and ways of living that this dependency upon fossil fuels has created in the Global North. The exploration and critique of the influence of oil on life and culture in Aberdeen is ingrained throughout Fertile Ground's work. Rachel described some of the particular effects that the oil industry has had on the arts and culture sector in Aberdeen, including the continued exodus of young people and students graduating from *Gray's School of Art* to Scotland's highly-populated Central Belt between Edinburgh and Glasgow, and the lack of artist-run spaces due to the high cost of living and rental prices. At a policy level, the more recent drop in oil prices has also seen a refocusing on culture as a new source of economic generation for the city, with a rise in the number of large-scale festivals being imported from elsewhere and a lack of support for more value-driven or grassroots arts activities.

**"[There is a] focus on high budget, short term forms, culture not as needs and values but as part of an economic portfolio."**

**"All of those things in my mind directly connect to this thinking with oil, this kind of extractivist approach that is focused primarily on the economic benefits of cultural work and audiences as footfall. If you're a contemporary artist seeing yourself reflected here, developing a practice here can be challenging. So, really, it's shaped a lot of the kinds of limitations, but also I suppose some gaps and opportunities within the city."**



Fertile Ground, Just Transition event.  
Photo: Fertile Ground.

For Fertile Ground, the pervasive petroculture in Aberdeen has required the development of less conventional approaches to researching and developing curatorial projects. In the absence of any long-term arts and humanities projects focused on oil or energy transition in the city, Rachel has held conversations with people including oil workers, freelance cultural workers and/or activist groups, to build an understanding of their relationships to the oil industry and its impact on their lives. One of its key manifestations is the *CRUDE* project (right).

“So, in terms of the *CRUDE* project, I wanted to research these kinds of relationships with oil workers and what they think about energy transition, then I spent about three months going to very particular pubs on a Friday night because I knew that’s where I’d find oil workers, because this stuff hasn’t been written about.”

This understanding has also been supported by volunteering with local environmental and activist groups and by researching particular publications produced by and for communities such as *Aberdeen People’s Press*, a radical socialist community newspaper, and *BlowOut Magazine*, a publication produced by and for oil workers in the aftermath of the Piper Alpha disaster.

“in some ways [...] the communities that produced these publications might seem disparate, however in terms of self-organised models, revealing and critiquing the inequalities in oil infrastructure - they actually had a lot more in common than it seemed at first. I think there is something that can be brought into contemporary issues around energy transition, just transition, by looking at these kinds of historic critiques, how those groups organised and their common ground.”



*CRUDE*: Exhibition.  
Photo: Rory Barclay.

#### *CRUDE* exhibition

*CRUDE* was an exhibition (27 Aug – 12 Sept 2021) that responded directly to these issues through newly commissioned work by artists and writer [Ashanti Harris](#), [Alison Scott](#), and [Shane Strachan](#). The project explored the idea of oil as an agent of transformation and invited practitioners to think through the pervasive influence of oil on political, social and economic life at a global scale. The works produced focused on disrupting predominant narratives surrounding oil such as creating wealth for all and an absence of negative impacts on people and the environment, and instead sought to make visible counternarratives. During the exhibition, selected publications including the *Aberdeen Peoples Press* and *BlowOut magazine* were also made available to provide insight into the discourses surrounding crude oil in the city. Alongside the exhibition, Fertile Ground hosted talks that addressed the themes of energy politics and just transition and imagining life after oil, with contributions from researchers, climate and social justice organisations and former oil workers.

## Imagining St Fittick's

*Imagining St Fittick's* was a series of online conversation events convened by Fertile Ground in the summer 2021 in response to a proposal for the development of a new 'Energy Transition Zone' (ETZ) in an area called Torry, which lies to the South East of the city centre. Torry is within the top 10% of Scotland's index of multiple deprivation and has a long history of industrial developments being imposed upon the local community without consultation. This has led to what some have described as the area being used as a 'sacrificial zone' where polluting infrastructure is built to the detriment of the local community and environment, and the benefit of others in the city and more widely. The 'Energy Transition Zone' poses a direct threat to St Fittick's Park, one of the few greenspaces in the area, risking the long-term health and wellbeing of the local community and important ecological features of the park, such as wetlands, which provide a habitat for migratory birds.

One of the aims of the *Imagining St Fittick's* project was to highlight the correlations between the rapid development of renewable energy infrastructure globally and the risk of replicating the same mechanisms used by the oil industry, such as the influence of private finance on public planning and the disregard for negative social impacts on the people and the environment in which energy infrastructure is being built.

Through consultation with [Hands off our Green Spaces in Torry](#), Fertile Ground identified a desire to think beyond the ETZ proposal and imagine a different future for the park through different aspects including community engagement, stewardship, arts and educational programmes. The series of online events created a space for informal discussion led by participants to share the concern, ideas and challenges for the future of the park. It invited a wide variety of people to participate and contribute including local community members, arts professionals, environmentalists, social scientists and city councillors as well as members of the *Friends of St Fittick's Park* steering group.

**"...opposition is of course important and necessary, it's political and practical, however there seemed to be an opportunity to open up a conversation about not just opposition and not just support around opposition, but actually this opportunity for "what else?" basically. "If not that, what else?" Or "if anything", actually."**



St Fittick's Park.  
Photo: Natalie Hood.

## Partners and stakeholders

- Rachel Grant is a freelance curator living and working in Aberdeen in the North East of Scotland. She is the founder of Fertile Ground, where she works with a context-specific approach, supporting the development of long-term curatorial projects, new artistic commissions and collaborations across disciplines which critically explore the city's relationship to energy production.
- Cultural workers and researchers from Aberdeen and further afield, also engaged in programmed events at the intersection of social, environmental and political issues.
- Community and environmental groups such as *Hands off our Green Space Torry* and the *Torry People's Assembly* were also involved alongside climate justice and just transition activists, including oil workers living in Aberdeen.

## Sustainability issues addressed

- The platform creates opportunities for people from different sectors and backgrounds to come together to exchange knowledge, experiences and ideas around the relationships between energy and power in Aberdeen and more widely, and identify creative strategies for a just transition away from fossil-fuel based societies.
- The predominant petroculture in Aberdeen has required forms of local research that resist traditional curatorial methods and allow better insight, including gathering local, historic publications and identifying how groups organised and built common ground in the past; and being embedded in local community and environmental groups as a participant and citizen, rather than as a curator.
- Fertile Ground's work focuses not only the material impact of oil as an energy source, but also on its transformative role in shaping our politics and culture. The platform helps to shine a light on the powerful narratives surrounding oil and raise the profile of counter-narratives, which can help us to think differently about its impact on our lives.
- Projects such as *Imagining St Fittick's* help to create an imaginative space for discussing and envisioning alternative uses for St Fittick's Park in opposition to the proposed 'Energy Transition Zone', including community engagement, stewardship, arts and educational programmes

## Lessons, tips and advice

- "Setting up situations for people to have a chat" is central to Fertile Ground's work. Although they are not a formalised part of its practice, the processes of talking and listening are key to building relationships, understanding diverse connections between people, groups and issues and facilitating conversations between different groups.
- It is important to be sensitive to 'imaginaries' (collectively held understandings) of energy industries. The oil industry has real-life, everyday impacts on people living and working in Aberdeen. This sensitivity to language and how people understand a situation is key to ensuring that arts programmes are reflective of the context from which they have developed.
- The relationship with audiences varies from project to project and is often linked to who Fertile Ground has worked with in the research phase, as well as through the contacts made when volunteering with different community groups.
- Place-based, embedded practice is a deeply rewarding process, however it often does not align with current models of 'career development' in the arts, which tend to place a high value on mobility between places and projects. This can pose challenges for funding and support. There is also a risk of burn out from the precariousness of freelance working and from always being "the critical voice in the room"

## Funding

Fertile Ground has received project funding from arts funders such as *Creative Scotland*, and in-kind support (such as provision of event spaces) from institutions such as *Gray's School of Art* in Aberdeen.

The long-term nature of Fertile Ground's work is necessary to build relationships and foster meaningful creative responses to such complex issues, but it is also difficult to make the collaborative and curatorial parts of the work financially viable.

**"at times I want to be able to focus on ideas and process, without always having set activity or outcomes"**

Funding structures are generally not set up to support curatorial research or more process-led work that involve artists or researchers in the early stage of project development. There is also currently a lack of residency opportunities for curators in Scotland that provide the necessary space to think, experiment, make, build relationships, and produce new work.

## Relevant links

*Imagining St Fittick's*:  
[fertileground.info/imagining-st-fitticks.html](http://fertileground.info/imagining-st-fitticks.html)

*CRUDE*:  
[fertileground.info/crude.html](http://fertileground.info/crude.html)

*Saint Fittick's Story - Save St Fittick's*:  
[saintfittickstorry.com/save-st-fitticks-park-1](http://saintfittickstorry.com/save-st-fitticks-park-1)

# Case study 3: The Stove Network

## Overview

*The Stove Network* is a leading example of creative place-making in Scotland, contributing towards regeneration strategies from its physical location in Dumfries and through regional partnerships across Dumfries and Galloway, whilst advocating for the role of arts in achieving social change in national policy-making. The organisation was initiated by a small group of artists in 2011, who identified the need and opportunity to creatively reimagine the purpose of Dumfries as a rural market town in the 21st century. The organisation now operates as a charity, social enterprise and membership organisation with over 600 members (including artists and other active citizens) and employs a team of over 40 staff and freelancers. We spoke with the Stove Network Orchestrator and founding member Matt Baker, and Katharine Wheeler, who leads The Stove's Partnerships & Project Development work in our interview.

The Stove's primary aim is to use **"embedded arts practice in communities that allows problem solving to come from collective, creative processes"** (KW).

Rather than focusing on individual creative practice, which responds to a community through artworks, the Stove sees the Arts as a means of evolving conversations which are relevant to a particular place from within the community and enable it to imagine, gather and participate in new and different ways.

Its strategy is divided into two key strands: being a place-making hub through its venue, café and offices on Dumfries High Street and working at a regional level to support and enable creative place-making in other towns and villages across Dumfries and Galloway in a way that is grown from those places.

**Website:** [thestove.org](http://thestove.org)

**Dates:** 2011 - Ongoing

**Location:** Dumfries, South West Scotland

**Location type:** Town centre, rural

**Location description:** *The Stove Network* operates within a fully accessible public arts premises and café located on Dumfries High Street, whilst also leading and supporting regional initiatives engaged in creative place-making across Dumfries and Galloway. Dumfries is the biggest town in South West Scotland with a population of 30,000 residents. Its town centre is in the top 10% of Scotland's index of multiple deprivation.

**Issues addressed:** Place-making, Regeneration, Design, Economics, Transport, Water

**Types of organisations involved:** Artist-led, business, community organisations, Local Government, Partnership, Schools, Regional and national agencies

**Types of community involvement:** Supports creatives, Civic engagement, Co-creation, Community development, Policy influence

In its role as a place-making hub, the Stove focuses on supporting diversity and inclusion by developing more pathways into the creative industries, whilst also playing a key role in shaping and articulating a new vision for Dumfries with a strong climate emphasis through its role in forums such as the *Dumfries Partnership Action Group*. At a regional level, the network focuses on building a community of practice, sharing its methods of creative place-making across a wide range of sectors including in housing, planning and health and wellbeing. In 2021, The Stove launched a new ambitious project titled *What We Do Now*, supported by *Creative Scotland's Culture Collective* programme, which initiated a regional partnership of 'place hubs' to ignite and inspire new imaginative possibilities for five towns in Dumfries and Galloway.



The Stove Network - Speech bubble cards.  
Photo: Katie Andreson.



## Creative place-making

**“We built our practice as a community embedded place-making organisation, although we didn’t call it that at the beginning but that’s what we’ve come to call it and talk about creative place-making as the way that we work.” (MB)**

The Stove uses creativity to actively involve its local community in shaping the future of the town. Its hub on Dumfries High Street plays a key role in the facilitation of an ongoing conversation between individuals, communities, businesses and charities about key issues and opportunities for change, with its shop sign changing numerous times throughout the year with a question or statement provoking a response: “Grow your own culture”. From its inception in 2011, The Stove’s work has grown to encompass a regular programme of activity delivered from its building, alongside large responses and strategic projects on issues that affect local people. Ongoing projects, such as the *Nithraid* (an annual river race and festival), have used creativity to start to change the town’s relationship to the River Nith, against the backdrop of numerous consultations on flood protection schemes for the town. The Stove uses the event as a mechanism for having conversations with people in ways that are meaningful and that connect with the town’s historic relationship to the river.

**“It’s about visioning for places, so using creative practice as a way of visioning, and getting under-represented voices being heard in local decision making and place planning, which I think comes into the sustainable future conversation quite strongly.” (MB)**

Projects such as the *Nithraid* create spaces that help people to gather and participate in different ways and to imagine what change looks like, including those who are normally underrepresented or excluded from decision-making processes. This connects to a strategic aim to diversify the creative industries by creating opportunities for people from underrepresented backgrounds to participate, with The Stove’s “open door policy” supporting local people to build ideas of what they want to do. This joint process of visioning and widening participation leads to a constant generation of new ideas and projects engaged in creative place-making and a more diverse and sustainable creative sector:

**“things are springing up around us all the time” (MB).**

## What We Do Now

In 2021, The Stove launched *What We Do Now*, an ambitious regional initiative collaborating with artists, communities and organisations across five towns across Dumfries and Galloway. The initiative aimed to support a community anchor group, or ‘place hub’, in each of the five towns to host creative practitioners over an extended period. Each place-hub and artist collaboration worked with underrepresented and disadvantaged sections of the community to co-create new visions and develop practical projects. The project worked through key themes pertinent to each town and paired an established and emerging artist with a local place hub:

- Connection & Possibility (Sanquhar)
- Identity & Vision (Stranraer)
- Movement & Play (Castle Douglas)
- Belonging & Pride (Northwest Dumfries)
- Ownership & Voice (Langholm)

The Stove worked with regional partners to support the place hubs by building a community of practice and learning, and provided a framework for working together based on the findings of the organisation’s earlier research project [Embers: Creative Placemaking in South Scotland](#). Rather than describing the types of activities that would take place, the framework offered a clear structure and set of principles to guide the collaborations. Additionally, The Stove worked with a social enterprise in the early project stages to design questions that would help partners to understand the outcomes of the project.

**“...the Embers report proposed a sort of initial framework to trial that way of working, and use the hub and spoke model, but not having a hub that was a centralised power that makes all the decisions, but more being very clear about what was a lot of the power being devolved and it being a bit more of a way of thinking of an organism – how an organism would work together.” (KW)**

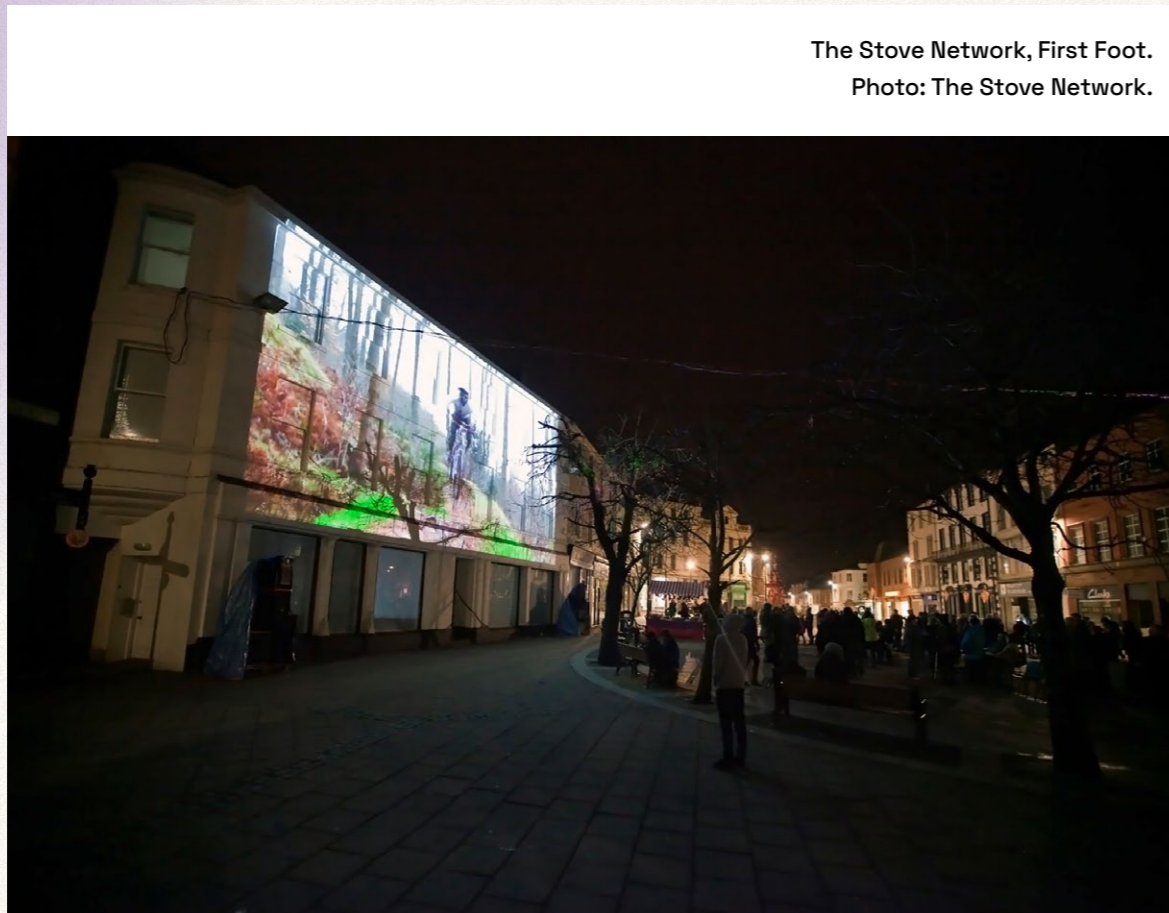
**“the framework is more like an approach to working, it’s like a values and principles based approach because again the project looks very different in each place because of the different set of circumstances at a very different time, and with very different people. So, it’s like who needs to be heard, who’s not being heard who’s involved in decision making. It’s more like a set of interrogations and principles with then a structure that The Stove is looking after” (KW)**

Whilst the Stove was able to bring its knowledge and experience of process-led ways of working and commissioning artists, the place hubs brought their community networks, relationships and a deep understanding of the local context [1]. A key aspect of devolution of decision-making was to maintain the space at the beginning of the project to negotiate the roles between the various partners involved rather than have these being decided these in advance, which has required significant time and resource.

[1] This process is similar to CCS' own *Climate Beacons* model - devolving the power, providing some resource in terms of money and knowledge, but not specifying how it should be used in different locations with different needs: [www.creativecarbonscotland.com/project/climate-beacons-for-cop26/](http://www.creativecarbonscotland.com/project/climate-beacons-for-cop26/)

**“It’s taking a long time, and a lot of that time is about power and relationship building, and trying to devolve that power. We devolved the budget, we gave up as much as we possibly could in the spirit of the places and the artists building their own agency through the project – but it has been challenging for places to take this on.” (MB+KW)**

As the project developed, the partners have observed the emergence of strong sense of accountability between artists and places, with a reorientation of artistic practice from a focus on producing artworks to the impact they were making on particular groups. Equally, the place hubs have developed their understanding and belief in the value of integrating creative practice in the conversation with the town with many of the places at the beginning of that process.



The Stove Network, First Foot.  
Photo: The Stove Network.

## Policy influence

Engaging with and influencing policy is another key area of The Stove’s work as the organisation recognises the need to work across and connect the local and grassroots with the structures and systems to bring about long-lasting change. The organisation’s approach is to apply its understanding of art practice as activism and direct it at policy.

**“I think if you see policy as another bit of material to try and sculpt and change and experiment with, I think that’s the way The Stove deals with it anyway” (MB)**

This work is supported by the dedication of staff time and resources to participate in relevant committees and respond to consultations that directly affect the Stove’s work and its communities. For example, the role of *Orchestrator* in the organisation is dedicated to building key strategic relationships, “future scanning” and building political relations and influence. The organisation is a member of local groups, such as the *Dumfries Partnership Action Group*, where it applies its knowledge and experience from incubating projects (such as the *Midsteeple Quarter*) to advocate for a localised economy and climate action in a new vision for the town. Significantly, The Stove functions as a development trust as well as an arts organisation: ‘As the only arts-led development trust in Scotland, we work alongside our local authority, community organisations, local businesses and charities to create a vision for the future of Dumfries High Street.’ ([thestove.org/our-aims](http://thestove.org/our-aims)).

**“And when we’re talking about under-represented voices in decision making processes, I think artists are taking some of those voices into some of that policy decision and discussion, us being able to bash a door down that means you can actually put somebody from Lochside in front of a really quite influential policy maker or agency or large organisation. It’s an important part of the practice in the same way as finding out who owns a wall that people want to make a visible change to.” (MB)**

Another key aspect of The Stove’s work has been to develop an ability to place itself in unfamiliar spaces, build relationships and translate across boundaries, acting as a “sort of adaptor” that helps others connect, ensuring that the organisation is not working in isolation. This includes being ready to forgive institutions for making mistakes and being patient, whilst remaining true to the organisation’s core values and foundational ethos of localism.

**“I think we sort of step over this line of organisation, independent, we sort of come backwards and forwards. And that’s really important. And that we don’t write people off, just because the council might have made a mistake with one project doesn’t mean that we’re not going to talk to them again – we might be careful how we negotiate the working relationship. It’s the same with an individual, but we’re constantly understanding the value of working with institutions as well as working with independent and smaller groups. We’re not ever saying one or the other.” (KW)**

## Partners and stakeholders

- The Stove Network is an arts and community organisation with over 600 members (artists and active citizens), and a team of over 40 staff and freelancers. The network's vision is to help make Dumfries and their region a place where communities thrive through collaboration, enterprise and risk taking.
- Locally, the Stove is a member of the [Dumfries Partnership Action Group](#), a collaboration of Dumfries based businesses, community organisations and social enterprises who want to make things happen in Dumfries and challenge the status quo. The group worked with *Planning Aid Scotland* who were commissioned by Dumfries and Galloway Council to develop a community-led vision for the town.
- Three new arts/community organisations have grown under the Stove Network. These organisations are based at the Stove hub and deliver programming for the network: [DMC \(Dumfries Music Conference\)](#), [D-Lux \(Festival of Light in Dumfries\)](#) and *Dumfries High Street Limited* (trading as [Midsteeple Quarter](#)).
- *What We Do Now* (WWDN) supports a partnership of five place hubs and other regional partners to anchor the project in each town: [OutPost Arts](#) in Langholm, [Stranraer Millenium Centre](#), [LIFT in Northwest Dumfries](#), [A'The Airts in Sanquhar](#), [Castle Douglas Development](#). The project has many regional and strategic partners, including *South of Scotland Enterprise*, *Dumfries & Galloway Council*, *Third Sector D&G* and *Skills Development Scotland*, all of whom supported the development of WWDN and have committed to support the progress of ideas and projects as they emerge.

## Sustainability issues addressed

- The network's methodology of creative place-making supports the development of a more sustainable future for Dumfries through creative facilitation methods which allow for visioning and foregrounding of under-represented voices. Projects such as *Open Hoose* create the space for a **"constant cycling of new people and ideas"** which in turn lead to the development of new projects and a more diversified and sustainable creative sector.
- The Stove has used its skills in advocacy and influence to support the development of local regeneration strategies such as 'Dynamically Different Dumfries', where it played a key role in advocating for progressive action on climate change, equality, diversity and inclusion and supporting a localised economy, through its active role in the *Dumfries Partnership Action Group*.
- The network plays an increasingly important role in supporting creative place-making at a regional level in Dumfries and Galloway. Projects such as *What We Do Now* support the development of a community of practice of artists, communities and organisations to collaborate and develop bold new ideas for the future of their places whilst addressing social disadvantage and exclusion, which has been exacerbated by COVID-19.
- There have been significant changes in perspectives and ways of working in the *What We Do Now* project. For example, many participating artists have moved from a position of focusing on producing art to facilitating a creative process and on outcomes generated by the community.
- Advocacy and influence form a key part of the Stove's role in supporting and promoting creative place-making approaches across Scotland and internationally. The network perceives policy influence as a necessary and important part of art practice, to complement local and regional activity.

## Lessons, tips and advice

- The development of the network has been supported by a strong ethos of experimentation and journeying, which has allowed practices, roles and relationships to evolve through a process of testing out of new ideas and approaches. This has been complemented by the significant time and energy invested by the team in understanding the mechanisms by which projects have worked and enabled collaborations to succeed. This process of reflection is key to developing The Stove's own approach and sharing its methods and expertise with stakeholders and partners, with projects such as *What We Do Now* benefiting from input and support from external evaluators.
- Large-scale projects such as *What We Do Now* have benefited from the provision of a clear framework of principles and values by The Stove, allowing the devolution of decision-making to local place hubs. The partnerships have also benefited from a consistent structure of regular check-ins and maintaining clear lines of communication.

- The development of a genuinely decentralised model of working is very time-consuming and requires trust to allow for the approach to evolve over time, rather than working with pre-set outcomes. At times it has been challenging for community-based organisations to relinquish control and embrace the methods brought by artists. Equally, it has taken time for artists to reorientate their practice to focus on facilitating the creativity of communities to bring about change.
- The Stove has structured its resources and time to feed into relevant consultations and committees to advocate for creative place-making at a policy level. One example of an outcome of this work is the nationwide programme, *Culture Collective*, which has supported 26 regional place-based projects funded by Scottish Government and coordinated by *Creative Scotland*. This partly stemmed from The Stove's recommendations to support more of this kind of practice during the Scottish Government's consultation on the national Culture Strategy.
- Whilst working at a policy level, the organisation strongly maintains its ethos of localism. This ability to act as "adaptor" has become a key strategy, which enables the organisation to move between and meaningfully connect with different contexts.

The Stove Network, Conversing Building.  
Photo: Katie Andreson.



## Funding

Since 2012, the Stove has raised £2.9 million in public and private funding, with nearly £2.2 million of that coming from national rather than local sources.

The organisation receives regular funding from *Creative Scotland* and was successful in fundraising for a major grant from the *Culture Collective programme* in 2020/21. The Stove does not receive regular subsidy from Dumfries and Galloway Council. It has received grants to deliver specific projects based on the public benefit they provide for the local community.

In 2020/21, The Stove issued 81 contracts to regional artists and freelancers for a total of £181,000.

## Relevant links

*Nithraid River Festival:*  
[thestove.org/nithraid/](http://thestove.org/nithraid/)

*What We Do Now:*  
[whatwedonow.scot/](http://whatwedonow.scot/)

*Dynamically Different Dumfries:*  
[drive.google.com/file/d/1op9Rsq0i5-bMVD1ZseZ9QKCrSzN3eDmS/view](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1op9Rsq0i5-bMVD1ZseZ9QKCrSzN3eDmS/view)

# Summary and conclusion

Place-based working raises issues common to most organisations attempting it. In some respects, though, the nature of the potential depends on the place itself and, as noted above, the context is particularly significant, with the character of the area affecting themes, ambitions and what can be achieved.

## Key trends and lessons

<p><b>Energy and capacity</b></p>	<p>Place-based working requires significant investment of personal time, energy and commitment of practitioners. The interviews highlighted the challenge of maintaining slower, more reflective or process-led ways of working when balancing competing demands or working with limited funding and resource. Whilst place-based work is deeply rewarding, the energy required to sustain it can incur risk of exhaustion and burnout. Practitioners highlighted the importance of support networks and, where possible, factoring in the time for research and relationship-building into funding applications or project plans which can help to mitigate against this.</p>
<p><b>Personal philosophy and value-led practices</b></p>	<p>The case studies demonstrated the intertwining of personal philosophy and values with organisational missions and methods of working. In all three cases, it was impossible to disentangle the personal ethos of practitioners from the work being undertaken. Careful consideration is given to how these values are communicated and shared in practice, including the ways in which collaborations are structured and managed, and how organisations can play a meaningful role as resource for their communities. This raises the important question of what happens when key individuals move on and whether these values are lost or can become sustained within the organisation or community (and also the potential power that comes with these roles).</p>

## Funding

Our research highlights the challenges of sustaining long-term, embedded ways of working within the current funding environment, which tends to prioritise shorter-term, project funding over core staff and organisational costs. Practitioners emphasise the significant time required for building relationships and bridges across previously disconnected parts of society, which does not always fit within standard project timelines. The process-led approaches used by the case study organisations often lead to more innovative, but less predictable outcomes, which can be difficult to articulate to funders. Sustaining place-based practices over the long term requires effective communication of the value of this work to funders.

## Co-production and collaboration

The methods of co-production and collaboration are strong threads running throughout our conversations. In fact, conversation itself was a key mode of engagement for our cases. The case studies show a rejection of more conventional models of arts commissioning and instead focus on supporting creative responses or solutions to emerge from within the community. This way of working might require a reorientation of artistic practice from the production of artistic work to facilitating the creativity within other people. Equally, practitioners played an important role in acting as an intermediary with supporting organisations from other sectors, (such as planning, health or environment) to get the most out of collaborations.

## Imagination and the long-term view

A key feature of the work discussed is the long-term view that practitioners apply to their engagement with place and community. This is supported by knowledge of what has come before and a commitment to making changes that potentially take years to come to fruition. Practitioners strike a careful balance being patient and measured whilst simultaneously using creative practices to open up imaginations and visioning of alternative futures from within communities.

## Reflections from the authors

Many of the reflections which practitioners express in this report resonate with our own experience of developing CCS's culture/SHIFT programme, the objectives of which include broadening and deepening connections between cultural and climate sectors, and strengthening our ability to act as a trusted intermediary within the cultural sector and across different sectors and parts of society. Although there are clear contextual differences in the place-based nature of the case studies and CCS's national remit, we strongly related to several of the key findings: first, playing the role of 'adaptor'; second, the need to promote change from the individual, through to organisational and policy arenas; and third, the 'long-term view' which working on climate change necessitates. Our [culture/SHIFT methodology](#) has also identified similar values, which have helped to guide cross-sectoral partnerships, including fostering mutual respect and understanding, and foregrounding creativity and imaginative thinking in our response to the climate emergency.

As Creative Scotland's [Climate Emergency and Sustainability Plan](#) (April 2022) highlights, there is a role for our arts and cultural sector not only to comply with carbon reduction regulation but to act as an agent of change in the transformation to net zero and climate-ready society, including by working in partnership across sectors. As this report demonstrates, place-based creative practitioners and organisations are well equipped to apply their skills, resources and sensibilities to address our most urgent challenges from public health to the climate emergency. Given the world's climate crisis is ubiquitous and manifests in physical, material and cultural dimensions, it is no surprise that place-based work is essential to both mitigation and adaptation strategies. The local aspects allow practitioners to concentrate on the meeting of the ecological and the social – to address their interdependence (a pattern which we see repeated in the most successful strategies). This report marks out the needs and opportunities identified by practitioners and provides evidence that will help to position place-based cultural approaches as a key mechanism for building a more equitable, just and environmentally sustainable society.

# Appendices

## Appendix 1. About us

This report was created by Gemma Lawrence, culture/SHIFT Manager at Creative Carbon Scotland and Emma Hall, PhD researcher at the University of Glasgow, with contributions from Joss Allen, Co-Artistic Director (maternity cover) / Alternative Economies Manager, ATLAS Arts; Rachel Grant, Curator, Fertile Ground; and Katharine Wheeler, Partnerships and Project Development, and Matt Baker, Orchestrator, The Stove Network.

Developmental editing was supplied by Ann Light, University of Sussex, with additions from Ben Twist, Creative Carbon Scotland. The design and layout were conducted by [Savannah Vize](#) for CreaTures.

The report was commissioned by Ann Light and Lara Houston of the University of Sussex, for [CreaTures](#) (Creative Practices for Transformational Futures), an EU-Horizon 2020 funded project exploring how creative practices can contribute to transformative social and environmental change.

### About Creative Carbon Scotland

[Creative Carbon Scotland](#) believes in the essential role of the arts, screen, cultural and creative industries in contributing to the transformational change to a more environmentally sustainable Scotland. We work directly with individuals, organisations and strategic bodies engaged across cultural and sustainability sectors to harness the role of culture in achieving this change. Through year-round work and one-off projects, we combine strategic expertise and consultancy, bespoke carbon management training and guidance, and a range of programmes supporting the development of artistic practices that address sustainability and climate change.

### About CreaTures

[CreaTures](#) (Creative Practices for Transformational Futures) is a three-year EU-Horizon 2020 funded project identifying those aspects of creative practice that contribute most effectively to positive eco-social transformation with the goal of producing an open-access framework to support practitioners and policy-makers in driving positive change. The project's process of identifying and evaluating the design of significant aspects (and the impact of different contexts) involves four interrelated components: an Observatory, identifying and mapping existing, fragmented

and often hidden transformational creative practices; a Laboratory, supporting new experimentation; an Evaluation phase, testing new and existing creative practices in a systematic and concerted way for their impact, and; Engagement with diverse stakeholders, including the members of the public. The project combines insights from these undertakings into a transdisciplinary, evidence-based and practical framework to propose paths to achieving eco-social futures, social cohesion and peaceful co-existence at a time of rapid change.

## Appendix 2. Overview of place-based arts and cultural organisations

### Venue based practitioners and organisations

Organisation	Location	Description
<a href="#">An Lanntair</a>	Stornoway, Isle of Lewis, Outer Hebrides	<i>An Lanntair</i> is a multi-arts venue opened in 2005 with art gallery, café, cinema and workshop spaces offering a year-round creative programme celebrating Outer Hebrides culture and Gaelic language, as well as residencies and events with national and international visiting artists. The organisation supports education and creative learning programmes in several venues and community spaces across Lewis and Harris and is a key partner in <i>Làn Thide</i> - the <i>Outer Hebrides Climate Beacon</i> project.
<a href="#">The Beacon Arts Centre</a>	Greenock, Inverclyde	<i>The Beacon</i> is a contemporary theatre, arts venue and café. Originally founded as the <i>Greenock Arts Guild</i> , the organisation was an amateur-run touring and producing house for music, art and drama from 1947 to 2012 when the <i>Beacon Arts Centre</i> was built and became the new home for <i>Greenock Arts Guild</i> . The venue hosts performances and exhibitions as well as supporting a wide range of creative activities and education programmes for the local community with a particular focus on accessibility and inclusion. <i>The Beacon Arts centre</i> is also one of the cultural partners in the <i>Inverclyde Climate Beacon</i> .
<a href="#">Findhorn Bay Arts</a>	Forres, Moray	A multi-arts producer and hub established in 2012, <i>Findhorn Bay Arts</i> works with a range of regional partners including their local communities,

		Moray Council, Community Planning Partnerships and the regional tourism board. The organisation runs a wide range of activities including festivals, residencies and commissions and creative learning projects. They are attentive to making sure the connection to place and languages is appropriate for each project including Gaelic, Scots, BSL and embracing languages of new Scots living in their communities.
<a href="#">Gaada</a>	Burra Isle, Shetland	An artist-led visual arts hub and workshop set up in 2018 and housed within a renovated former chapel, <i>Gaada's</i> work encompasses providing accessible and inclusive workshop spaces and opportunities for people living in Shetland to produce creative work and hold conversations about relationship to place including recorded and undervalued histories of Shetland, as well as hosting residencies for visiting artists. The organisation has also contributed towards the Scalloway Local Place Plan which includes plans for a new printmaking and ceramics facility alongside studio spaces in the area.
<a href="#">Govanhill Baths</a>	Govanhill, Glasgow	<i>The Govanhill Baths</i> community trust was established in 2004 from the <i>Save our Pool</i> campaign and occupation of the pool after its closure by City of Glasgow Council in 2001. The baths are situated in Govanhill, an area with a rich history of migration and one of the most ethnically diverse neighbourhoods in Scotland, and also an area of high multiple deprivation. As a grassroots organisation, the trust is supported and developed through members of the local community. It runs a wide range of wellbeing activities and a series of long-term programmes including <i>Govanhill Multicultural Festival</i> , upcycling projects and the <i>People's Pantry</i> , a membership-based initiative aiming to tackle food poverty and reducing waste.
<a href="#">Kinning Park Complex</a>	Kinning Park, Glasgow	<i>Kinning Park Complex</i> is an independent multi-use community space with a long history of education and activism. Originally built for use as a primary school in 1910, the building was converted into the <i>Kinning Park Neighbourhood Centre</i>

		in 1976. In 1996 community members staged a sit-in for 55 days when the building was closed by the Council after falling into disrepair. Eventually a new lease was agreed and the centre remained open under the management of a new community organisation, <i>Kinning Park Complex</i> . The centre promotes core values of community, citizenship, creativity and wellbeing and runs a wide range of activities including pay-by-donation community meals, contributing to a Local Place Plan for the area, supporting digital inclusion and organising neighbourhood response to the COVID-19 pandemic.
<a href="#">Lyth Arts Centre</a>	Lyth, Caithness	<i>Lyth Arts</i> became a registered charity in 2017 but has a much longer history spanning 40 years. The organisation presents live performances and exhibitions at their arts centre and also supports performances across 12 village halls and community spaces across Caithness and North Sutherland. Lyth also hosts artist residencies and development opportunities as well as special projects such as <i>Caithness Young Creatives</i> and as a member of the <i>Caithness Climate Beacon</i> .
<a href="#">North Edinburgh Arts</a>	Muirhouse, Edinburgh	Over the past 20 years <i>North Edinburgh Arts</i> has harnessed the role of arts and creativity to improve the lives of communities living in Muirhouse, an area of high multiple social deprivation in North Edinburgh. The organisation has three interlinked strands of work which support this aim: providing a place to meet, a place for art and a place for debate, influence and example. It is host to a café, community garden, theatre, workshops spaces and offices for local creative organisations. As well as providing these important meeting spaces and running year-round projects, the charity plays an important role in amplifying the voices of the communities with which they work, acting as an important conduit between local developments and city planning including leading the recent asset transfer of their venue into full community ownership.



<a href="#"><u>Old School Thornhill</u></a>	Thornhill, Dumfries and Galloway	<i>Old School Thornhill</i> has the vision of transforming the old village school building into an innovative and design led community asset. In 2018 the charity was successful in securing funds to purchase the building to return it to community ownership and to commence remedial work. Their aim is to create a hub which combats rural isolation and cultivates rural entrepreneurship, creativity and innovation with space to support community groups, small businesses and freelancers based in Thornhill and surrounding villages.
<a href="#"><u>Out of the Blue Drill Hall</u></a>	Leith, Edinburgh	Initiated in 1994, <i>Out of the Blue</i> has grown to develop numerous cultural and creative spaces across the city. The Drill Hall is owned by the charity and is home to artist studios, workshops, festivals and a café, as well as projects including cookery classes and 'Park Life' which engaged the local community in the revitalisation of nearby green spaces.
<a href="#"><u>RIG Arts</u></a>	Greenock, Inverclyde	<i>RIG Arts</i> was founded by practising artists, Karen Orr and Jason Orr, with the aim of using creativity and innovation to influence change and make a positive different to the lives of people living in Inverclyde. Working in an area of high deprivation, their objective is to engage disadvantaged people through cultural activity through skills development, encouraging citizenship and community development. RIG Arts supports a year-round programme of creative workshops and activities as well as key projects focused on climate change, urban regeneration and mental health.
<a href="#"><u>Scottish Sculpture Workshop</u></a>	Lumsden, Aberdeenshire	<i>The Scottish Sculpture Workshop</i> is a creative workshop facility which foregrounds the development and sharing of tools, knowledge and reimagining ways of living and making together. Their facilities include a foundry, wood and metal workshops, ceramics studio, fabrication room, studio and library. The organisation hosts a year-round programme of artist residencies, creative learning courses as well as instigating, supporting and participating in long-term projects with national and international partners engaged in a range of social and ecological themes.

<a href="#"><u>Taigh Chearasbhaigh Museum and Arts Centre</u></a>	North Uist, Outer Hebrides	<i>The Taigh Chearasbhaigh Trust</i> was formed in 1993 by the <i>Uist Arts Association</i> and the <i>Comann Eachdraidh Uibhist a Tuath</i> (CEUT - North Uist Historical Society) to promote the heritage of the Western Isles and contribute meaningfully to the sustainability of the island's community. The venue includes a café, art gallery and workshop spaces, and hosts a series of artist residency opportunities through the year. Taigh Chearasbhaigh is also a member of the <i>Làn Thìde - Outer Hebrides Climate Beacon</i> partnership.
<a href="#"><u>The Barn</u></a>	Banchory, Aberdeenshire	<i>The Barn</i> is Aberdeenshire's only multi-arts venue supporting a year-round programme of events, performances, screenings and exhibitions with a longer history dating back to the 1990s. The venue is also host to 120 community allotments, a café and a wild garden. Recent longer-term projects have included a collaboration with internationally acclaimed ecological artist Newton Harrison exploring how to build climate resilience in the rivers Dee and Don catchment areas.
<a href="#"><u>The Stove Network</u></a>	Dumfries	<i>The Stove Network</i> is the only arts-led development trust in Scotland with a membership of over 600 artists and citizens. The charity is recognised for its highly innovative approach to creative place-making in Dumfries, and acting as an advocate for this approach in the Dumfries and Galloway region and more widely.
<a href="#"><u>WHALE Arts</u></a>	Wester Hailes, Edinburgh	<i>WHALE Arts</i> was initiated in 1992 and has a mission to be the creative heart of a thriving, vibrant community. The organisation provides a wide range of arts and educational activities and services to its local community including arts workshops, performances spaces, darkroom and digital media facilities and a gardening group.

## Non-venue based practitioners and organisations

Organisation	Location	Description
<a href="#">ATLAS Arts</a>	Portree, Isle of Skye	<i>ATLAS Arts</i> has been an organiser of arts projects across the islands of Skye and Raasay, and Lochalsh on the North West Coast of Scotland since it was founded in 2005. <i>ATLAS</i> hosts artist residencies and runs projects between artists and local residents to hold conversations which are rooted in place and of social, environmental and economic importance. It does this through a programme of screenings, gatherings, residences, meals and workshops which currently centre around five key 'Threads': Food Cultures, Alternative Education, Archival Power, Stories from the Land, Rethinking Economies.
<a href="#">Ceòlas</a>	Daliburgh, Isle of South Uist, Outer Hebrides	<i>Ceòlas</i> is a music and performing arts charity supporting and celebrating Gaelic culture and heritage through music and dance classes and performances with communities based in the Outer Hebrides. Established in 1996 <i>Ceòlas</i> has grown from weekly music and dance classes to a leading Gaelic culture, heritage and arts organisation in Scotland. As well as their work in the Outer Hebrides, they are also engaged in forging connections with Celtic diaspora in Canada.
<a href="#">Deveron Projects</a>	Huntly, Aberdeenshire	<i>Deveron Projects</i> was established in 1995 by three artists including Claudia Zeiske who was the artistic director for 25 years. Its '50/50' methodology places an emphasis on finding a balance between art and community, following the mantra of Scottish town planner and ecologist Sir Patrick Geddes 'think global act local'. <i>Deveron Projects</i> uses the framework of 'the town is the venue' to support its approach to contributing to the social wellbeing of the town and celebrating and facilitating the creative power in all individuals. Projects have focused on diverse themes including migration, cultural exchange, food growing and climate action.
<a href="#">Fèis Rois</a>	Dingwall, Ross-shire	<i>Fèis Rois</i> is a music and traditional arts organisation focused on supporting and preserving Highland and Island culture and traditions through music tuition, performances and special projects in Scotland and with international partners. It is currently a partner in the <i>Dandelion Project</i> , a large-scale harvest festival

		taking place across Scotland in 2022 and the <i>Highland Culture Collective</i> responding to the impact of the pandemic on older people, families and carers.
<a href="#">Fertile Ground</a>	Aberdeen	<i>Fertile Ground</i> is the curatorial project of curator, Rachel Grant, focused on fostering new 'social, political and environmental ways of inhabiting the city'. It aims to engage diverse communities living and working in Aberdeen in the intersections between the city's relationship with the fossil fuel industry and its culture, through artist residencies, exhibitions, events, publications and collaborations with local and national cultural and activist groups.
<a href="#">Nevis Ensemble</a>	Glasgow	<i>Nevis Ensemble</i> , 'Scotland's street orchestra', began in 2018 with the vision of music for everyone everywhere, focusing on taking music out of concert halls and into everyday spaces from supermarkets to trains, parks and homeless centres. Alongside one-off performances, <i>Nevis Ensemble</i> run community-based projects in partnership with other third sector and community organisations to increase access of marginal and vulnerable groups to music tuition, composition and live performance.



The Stove Network, International Women's Day.

Photo: Kirstin McEwan.

## Appendix 3. Glossary

### [Creative place-making](#)

### [Community engagement and empowerment](#)

### [Embedded Artist Project](#)

### [Eco-social practices](#)

#### *Creative place-making*

This can be understood as creative process that explores, addresses and celebrates the qualities which combine to make a place what it is and invites people living, working, playing in or visiting that place to be part of this process. In Scotland this type of practice often manifests in artistic or cultural organisations with a physical venue that acts as an important meeting place in the community, within which different activities, events and projects can take place. Equally, some organisations focus on running projects within their surrounding built or natural environment, sometimes seeking to blur the boundaries between formal arts institution and wider society. These type of organisations and spaces often play an important role in bringing people together from diverse backgrounds to discuss, explore and determine the future of their place. The types of roles they can play in the context of the climate emergency and addressing sustainability could include:

- Addressing issues of social justice and inequalities which are exacerbated by climate change,
- Empowering people to be part of decision-making processes which affect the future of their area,
- Acting as an important conduit between communities and planners/policy makers,
- Embodying different values, eg. challenging models premised on economic growth and encouraging sharing materials, resources and skills within the community.

Relevant sources: [katharinewheeler.com/glossary](http://katharinewheeler.com/glossary)

#### *Community engagement and empowerment*

The processes of community engagement and empowerment are often closely linked to artistic practices which are engaged in issues relating to climate justice and environmental sustainability. Artistic works can reach people on a more personal or emotional level, and artists and cultural organisations can also be skilled in creating the conditions for inspiring collective thought and action. Whereas community engagement can refer to awareness raising and educational activities, empowerment goes a step further to focus on harnessing existing skills and knowledge within communities and building capacities for people to play a stronger role in determining their own or their community's future.

#### *Embedded Artist Project*

An Embedded Artist Project (EAP) is a process-oriented project that mixes the skills and competencies of artistic and non-arts partners to address key societal issues. Key features of embedded artist projects include:

- Process-oriented, mixing the skills and competencies of artistic and non-arts partners
- Employs 'creative logic' to address complex issues
- Differs from a commission which tends to have pre-set outcomes
- Highly collaborative: requiring skills and knowledge from different disciplines and sectors to address complex problems
- Involves artists in the early stages of project development
- Occurs over extended timeframe, ideally 1 year +

In Scotland, the origins of this type of project can be found in the work of groups such as *Artist Placement Group* who advocated for artists as free agents of creativity who could bring a different perspective to civil service and industry contexts, and David Harding who worked as Town Artist helping to build Glenrothes new town with planners, architects and the local community for ten years in the 1960s. Modern day examples of this type of practice include civic artist, Frances Whitehead, who coined the embedded artist term, and individuals and groups such as *Eve Mosher* and *City as Living Laboratory*.

Relevant sources: Embedded Artist Toolkit - Cultural Adaptations

#### *Eco-social practices*

Arts practice which addresses social and ecological concerns, often combining artistic and non-artistic aspects and valuing different kinds of knowledge including art, science, traditional and local knowledge, and experiential knowledge. Such practices include similar aspects to socially engaged or participatory arts practices which involve the audience through the creative facilitation of dialogue and exchange.

Relevant sources:

*Cathy Fitzgerald - Hollywood Forest Story:*

[hollywoodforest.com/portfolio/what-is-eco-social-art-practice/](http://hollywoodforest.com/portfolio/what-is-eco-social-art-practice/)

Grant Kester - *Conversation Pieces, Community and Communication in Modern Art* (2004)

*Peat Cultures:*

[creativecarbonscotland.com/library/peat-cultures/](http://creativecarbonscotland.com/library/peat-cultures/)

*Black Wood of Rannoch:*

[creativecarbonscotland.com/library/the-black-wood-of-rannoch-future-forest/](http://creativecarbonscotland.com/library/the-black-wood-of-rannoch-future-forest/)



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