

– Culture Central –

PROVOCATION PAPER **New & Renewed Places** *Geraldine Collinge, Director of Creative Placemaking and Public Programmes, Royal Shakespeare Company*

We know that the decline in the high street has further intensified with an increase in shop closures as a result of COVID and fewer people turning to the high street for their regular shopping.

Increasingly placemaking initiatives are being looked upon to regenerate declining high streets and to help develop new economic infrastructure. Developers are looking to bring experiences to the High Street and the storytelling that the arts and culture can offer is vital to make them successful. We are seeing more and more mixed developments of residential, leisure and very little retail with the anchor now more often being a cultural offer. What self-respecting town doesn't have a cultural quarter in the making?

There are great examples of where towns have been transformed by culture – the V&A Dundee is a stunning building that has no doubt had an impact on visitor numbers to the city since opening, Turner Contemporary can demonstrate the enormous value it has brought to the economy of Margate, in addition to great exhibitions of course. I love culture and I love cultural buildings – you might have noticed I work for quite a big one – but I wonder if now is the time to be thinking about new buildings. What is the role of an arts organisation in the civic life of a place and what changes do we need to make to deliver this successfully?

Can we ask what do people and places need and want or whether we can imaginatively use existing infrastructure? Most high streets have a library that is free to enter and where people feel welcomed, whether to borrow a book, use the internet, study or simply keep out of the rain. Many towns have empty shops and landlords are increasingly willing to let cultural organisations run creative projects in their buildings and understand the benefit it brings to the high street.

Coventry's Theatre Absolute have been running their Shop Front Theatre since 2009 as a space for the community. It's the only theatre of its kind in this country but imagine if there were more – or that each community made its own shop front. The right project for the right place.

A new Pride crossing has just been unveiled in Leamington Spa and in New York streets are being painted to encourage office workers back to the city.



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Kitty's launderette, Liverpool

When non-essential retail reopened in April this year the RSC was not able to open the theatre in Stratford but we opened 'The Kindness Shop' where the community could come together and be in a safe space, drawing and talking and sharing what had kept them going through the winter. Commissioning Saadia Hipkiss to work as artist on the project.

We also need to ask who runs the community spaces, and who the best people are in each area. Maybe you could work in partnership? And as a larger organisation you need to ask yourself if there is an organisation already doing the work you are thinking about.

What if we all imagined our own pop-up shop or garden or parklet and there were micro grants to help make things happen. What would the high street look like then Of course we need the beautiful buildings and the more permanent interventions but right now I'd love to be in a launderette listening to a story...



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