



**IMAG -
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Learning Review



**HOSPITABLE
ENVIRONMENT**



Passionately Hospitable

Co-creating public spaces in Newhaven

There is a sweet soft smell of polished wood floors, art materials and tomato and red pepper soup. Spoons dip into bowls and people are chatting and laughing. Some 50 people are now in the high-ceilinged art room of the Hillcrest Centre.

There is a warmth that contrasts with the bitter January weather we have all escaped from. People are discussing their favourite places in Newhaven and sharing memories. The atmosphere echoes the core delivery principles of Hospitable Environment – playfulness, acceptance, curiosity and empathy (Hughes 2004).

This photo essay is intended to give you an insight into our 'Imagined Places,' an intensive 3-month residency by three creative teams commissioned by the Sussex Co-Lab at the University of Sussex.

It is designed to give you a sense of the experience, to share what happened on a practical basis, to highlight the concepts behind the work and to show how our wonderful participants expressed themselves.

Hospitable Environment (founded 2020) is a community arts organisation based in Newhaven, East Sussex. We use food and creativity to connect with local people and to explore what it takes to build a safe, happy and sustainable community for us all to live in.

Hospitable Environment aims to advocate for the community at a grassroots level, and to share and celebrate local initiatives through the work that we do. It would be easy to describe Newhaven in terms of the various indices that might define it negatively, but that would not give a true reflection of the context for the residency. The setting for the project is very much about the power of community and recognises that the experts in a place are the people that live there.

The project started at the end of a year that saw the launch of our Soup & Socials and a wider programme of cultural development in the town that has come to be known as Creative Newhaven. This served to recognise the talents that exist in Newhaven and has built a platform of trust on which our events could flourish.



As part of this residency we hosted three public facing events. We drew on our existing Soup & Social projects and the wayfinding work we have been undertaking with Lewes District Council. We opened with a Soup & Social in early January; a free, open invite shared meal and community conversation, exploring and mapping people's favourite places in and around Newhaven town.

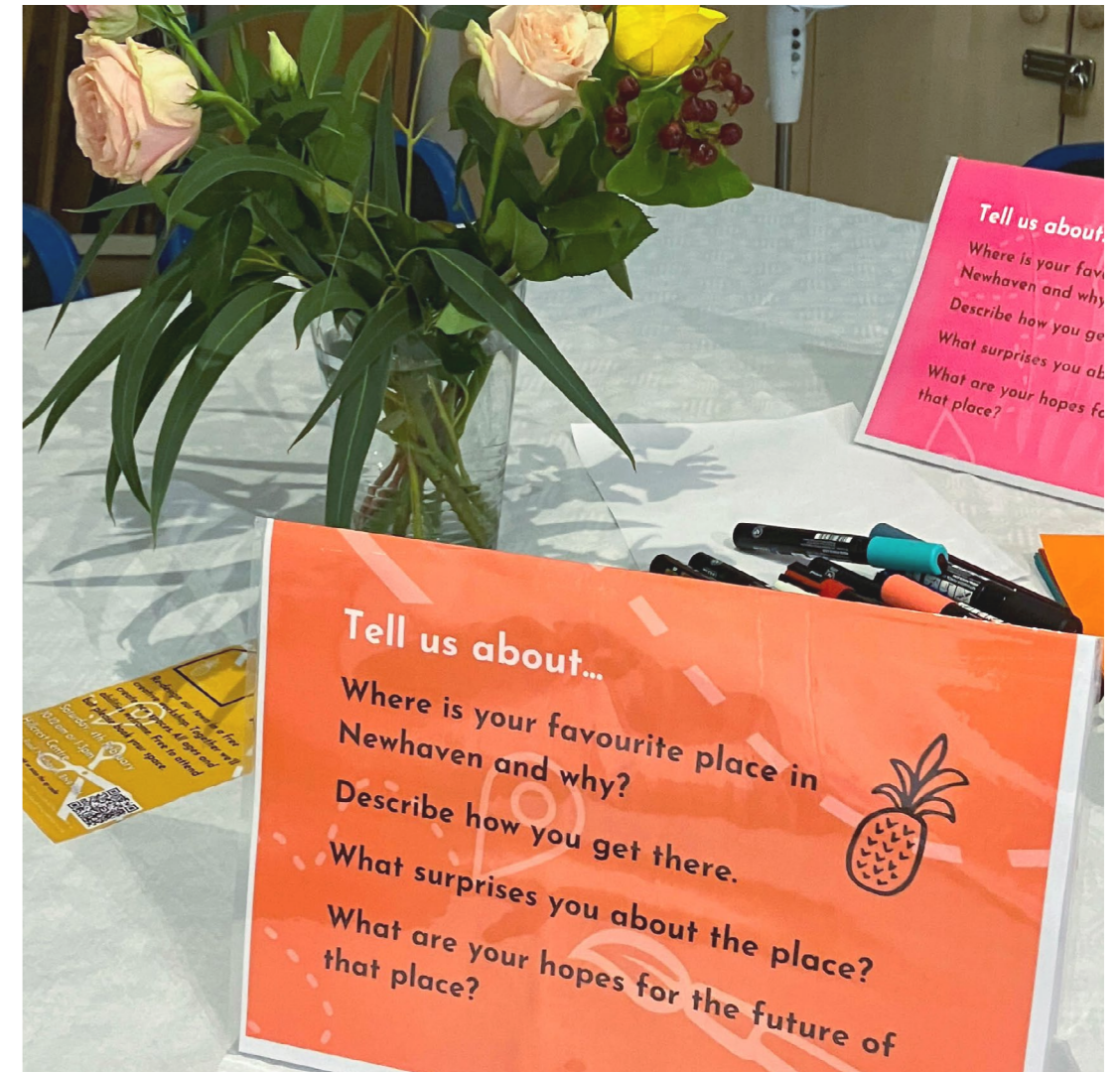
We followed this with two free creative 'Dreamer, Editor, Maker' workshops, where residents were invited to create their dream townscape, first through shared conversation and sketching and then through 3-D modelling one of their ideas to add to a large hand drawn map of the town.

A second Soup & Social in February pulled together the threads from the two workshops and the previous Soup & Social allowing new people to interact, see the ideas that had already emerged and to add their own.

Guests were invited to each event through word of mouth, our social media and local advertising. At the second Soup & Social a number of guests who had been before brought friends, family and neighbours.



The main corridor of the Hillcrest Centre leads you through the building. On your right is the café and kitchen where soup is bubbling. To the left is the artroom where the magic happens. It is transformed into a space for shared dining and dialogue.



We started our approach with a single question:

How do we create hospitable environments in our town?

At each event we asked our guests for their help with our inquiry. On each of the dining tables we posed a few more questions to get the discussions going. Everyone was welcome to share their perspectives but no-one was obliged to join in if they didn't want to.



Soup and Social One:

- Where is your favourite place in Newhaven and why? (Describe how you get there).
- What surprises you about the place?
- What are your hopes for the future of that place?





WEST BEACH
 WALK There. Surprisingly beautiful, but poor access. Hope for good facilities and safe access

cliff top, next to Fort, looking out over Channel, arm + light House
 Best view EVER....



This was the first time we had held a Soup & Social in January and we were uncertain about how many people would brave the inclement weather. Arrivals were slower than usual but built steadily during the evening. Some people who had other commitments even made the effort to come along later.

Everyone seemed especially pleased with their flavourful bowls of heartening soup. The chatter soon started as people joined their tables and our guests rightly focused on their food to start with.

Adding their comments to the map started slowly but once the first few appeared momentum built. By the end of the evening, we had over forty responses. Favourite places ranged from McDonalds because the staff are nice to the Baguette Shop on the High Street and from cliff tops to the beaches. The atmosphere was positive and good humoured throughout, but guests did express some of the challenges of the town in relation to their favourite places, which mainly concerned the dominance of the road network.

Favourite places

Go over the footbridge
 Between the trees
 Secret silence
 Walk, sit or relax
 Feel free
 My favourite place
 Is the harbour wall
 Welcoming you home
 It's great to be next to
 The working river
 It's central to
 Newhaven's identity
 I hope for
 Less pollution
 And
 Better public spaces

(Found poem from Soup & Social comments)



Dreamer, Editor, Maker and Soup and Social Two:

- Dream: What would you like to see in Newhaven?
- Write, draw or make this and add it to the map.

The Dreamer, Editor, Maker workshops took place on a Saturday in February, during the day. Informed by Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider, 1986) two small groups (10-12 people) were encouraged to dream about the future of Newhaven. We began with a warm up doodling exercise, which created a lot of laughter and people were able to start making connections.

Everyone then sketched their ideas and were encouraged to share their thinking. Glue guns at the ready and the modelling began. It wasn't long before a sauna, DJ school, cinema and safe road crossings appeared. By the end of the day the map was filled with improvements, some large and some quite modest.

The map with its models was then shared with the guests at our second Soup & Social and they were encouraged to add their own ideas. Present at this session were representatives of other community groups and the local authority who were able to witness the discussions and hear what people care about in the town.



Throughout the residency we have used an action research approach which has involved planning, running and reviewing each event with a focus on continuous improvement. Rather than being standalone this has meant that each event was enriched by and built on what had gone before, and now informs the work that has yet to come.

Our methods reflect our individual professional expertise and experience. This ranges from trauma support and counselling to communications and publishing, and from ceramics to visual arts. We're pretty good cooks too!





Through this residency we have evidenced how working as an established and trusted community group can feed into and inform the planning and placemaking process. We have facilitated genuinely place-based research, through socially-engaged community fora and events.





“In extending hospitality, we greet the person, spend time together, talk, enjoy each other’s company and afterward feel enriched or ensouled by the visit.”

(McNiff, 2004)

It feels as though we have only just made the last batch of soup so we still need time to reflect and review. A few themes have already emerged that have reinforced things we were aware of before but there are also new insights we will build on:

- 🏠 Building trust within a community means working with trusted community members and groups.
- 🏠 Allow time and space for serious play.
- 🏠 Work from a place of power alongside rather than power over.
- 🏠 The experts in the place are the people that live in the town and interact with the place.
- 🏠 Stay true to the format and the community, no matter who else is watching.
- 🏠 Be brave and trust the process.
- 🏠 Allow time for reflection and processing as the practitioners, the project and as an organisation.
- 🏠 We can open windows into different people’s worlds in Newhaven, we have discovered a breadth and depth of experiences and relationships.
- 🏠 Be mindful of making assumptions, people will surprise you.

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Image credits

Page 1: Hospitable Environment

Cover, pages 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 9 (top), 10, 11, 12, 14: Dawn Langley

Pages 7, 8, 9 (bottom): Phoebe Wingrove





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