



UNIVERSITY OF
PORTSMOUTH

The role of space in networks of practice in a mid-sized city:

Artist's experiences in Portsmouth

Carol Ekinsmyth, Southampton, January 19th, 2024



The argument for/against physical spaces for culture

- *“With the decline of the high street and the closure of so many shared community spaces from public libraries to public houses, cultural buildings play an increasingly vital role at the heart of our towns and cities in helping sustain communities as activity based gathering places. **Bricks and mortar matter.**”*

(Arts Council England/Design Council report Building Excellence in the Cultural Sector, 2020, p3.)

To the contrary, Portsmouth Councillor Pitt (2019) said “**buildings suck life and creativity out of people**” – because the worry about running them takes over – he thought that social infrastructure was more important. He agreed Portsmouth needs spaces – but small ones are possibly better/more creative and inventive. He pushed the idea of clusters – but placeless ones (*Leader for Culture, Leisure and Economic Development*)

“Portsmouth has the potential to be a fantastic cultural and creative hub but is being held back by a lack of space and or funding to help things flourish”
(Creative Census Conclusion 2016)

PCC – City Vision 2040 - Objectives 2 and 4

2. A city rich in culture and creativity

We will:

- Enjoy a vibrant cultural scene that makes the most of our location, our heritage and our creative energy
- Be known as a great, welcoming waterfront and city destination that brings people together

Administration's priorities under Objective 2

- Support for New Theatre Royal and Kings Theatre as community assets
- Support Portsmouth Creates to ensure our cultural and creative community thrives

4. A city with a thriving economy

We will:

- Supercharge local businesses and entrepreneurs
- Attract investment
- Build strong partnerships
- Offer brilliant career opportunities

Administration's priorities under Objective 4

- Put culture at the heart of the city's culturally led regeneration

From PCC Culture, Leisure & Regulatory Services Business Plan, 2021

Does the city need a Peckham Levels?

Leased by Southwark Council since 2017



Research and participation timeline 2016-present: Understanding Portsmouth's creative ecosystem(s)



Top level findings: The state of play in Portsmouth according to ecosystem members

- **Findings** across all research methods found that creatives want more:
 - Business and skills development, mentoring: Creative business ecosystem support is lacking in city
 - Affordable, flexible workspace
 - Representation and visibility

The state of play in Portsmouth *continued*

- Thoughts and concerns about Portsmouth were:
 - Portsmouth punches below its weight, lacks confidence, has an ‘island mentality’, has an image problem within and without (glass corridor)
 - Portsmouth has tremendous natural and physical/heritage resources – Liveability is key to living being there
 - Portsmouth is very fractured – thousands of little people doing their things – no togetherness – no central coordinating drive
 - The city lacks knowledge of its own cultural identity
 - North-south divide
 - Lack of Leadership, funding and strategy

Hotwalls Artists 2021-2024 – Community displaced ...



Community spirit & the search for studio space – Hotwalls Artists

- Moved in summer 2016 for 5-year lease
- Summer 2021 – *Interactive Weaves project* – consolidated community in place
- *“I think the project was a perfect tonic for coming out of lockdown. It demonstrated how a deceptively simple idea can create social cohesion and impact a community.”*
(Recording artist - Painter)



Hotwalls Artists: A community in search of a home? Interactive Weaves and beyond

- Summer 2022 given 1-year extension find somewhere new
 - 2022-present – 8+ artists looking for new permanent home
 - Artists currently want 
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- Short-termism is a threat to arts networks and communities



The need for physical space for networks of small businesses in the creative and cultural industries

- 1. Community and networks: Instrumental role
- 2. Space for networks: Practical role
- 3. Symbolic role: 'Scene'- and business/artist- configuring

To provide an 'organisational milieu' for things to happen

1. Community and Networks: Instrumental role of creative hubs

- Literature says networks are vital for creatives, network ties can be weak or strong and have varying characteristics (e.g. Comunian, 2017). How to form them? How to 'join' or develop a network?
- Variety of opinions on networks amongst creatives but common narratives were:
 - Rich networks in Portsmouth – but you are either in or out
 - Networks are cliquey and *“power is a closed shop in the city”*
 - Gaps between richer and poorer creatives and places in the city – city divided by wealth and class
 - Sub-networks circulate around particular foci – Hotwalls, Artspace, Aspex – but are perceived to be quite closed
 - Hotwalls design is not ideal – took a project to develop community. Artspace is even less ideal.
 - Need to be less lonely and isolated - creative hubs *“build community and opportunities you’d never get from home”*
 - Skills sharing and learning – Collaborations thought to be vital

What skills do you feel are needed? (Creative Census 2016)



Capdevila (2015)

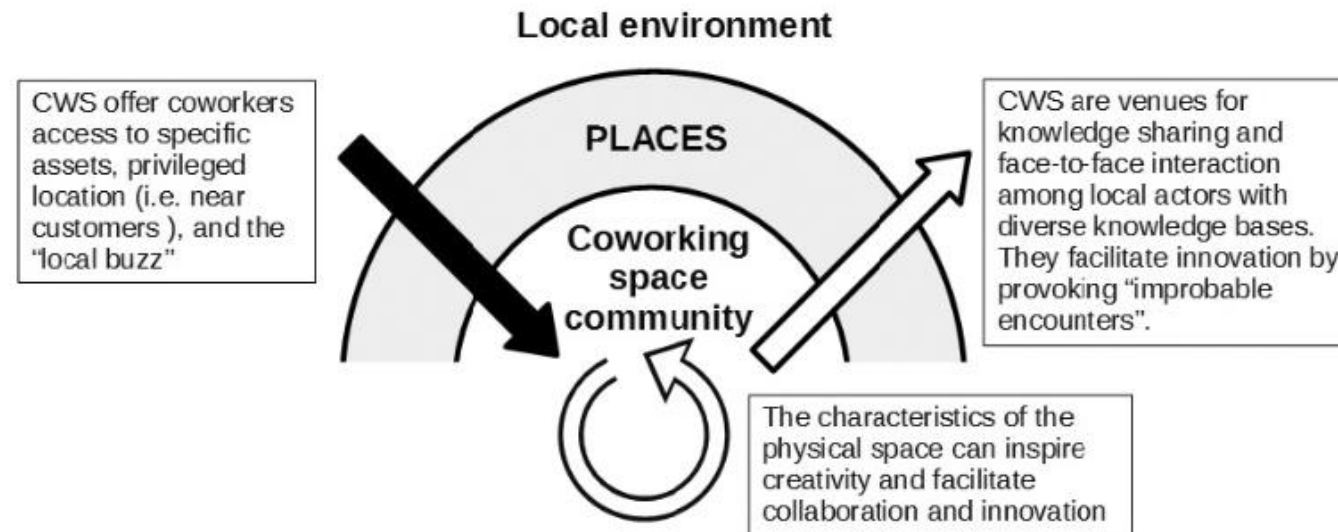


Fig. 2. Dynamics of innovation related to places.

2. Workspace: Practical role

- Space to work, exhibit, collaborate, share facilities and equipment, separate from home, feel inspired by surroundings and ‘buzz’
- Common narratives across all research methods were:
 - No opportunities for artists to be proactive in making spaces they want
 - Artists not being listened to or involved in space decisions
 - No affordable spaces in the city
 - Not enough space to meet demand
 - Not enough exhibition space
 - Not enough opportunity to sell to or interact with public
 - Need space to grow or continue the business
 - “Having private space to work but within a community of other studios and shared facilities” (Hotwalls Artist, 2022)
 - To be on a site with other creatives to create a community.
 - An ongoing lease. *“I want to move into a space that I can stay in.”* Mitigating precarity

Creative Census: Please detail any additional resources you feel are required for you or your business in Portsmouth. (91 respondents answered)



Please detail any additional resources you feel are required for you or your business in Portsmouth. (91 respondents answered, 576 words in list)

91 respondents answered
576 words in list
105 words pertaining to space
in some way (18%) on this table

Frequency	Word
45	space
28	studio
20	creative
18	affordable
15	portsmouth
13	spaces
13	work
13	city
12	facilities
11	business
10	studios
10	local
9	resources
9	artists
9	office
8	support
8	use

3. Symbolic Role of creative hubs: ‘Scene’-business/artist- and city- configuring

- A hub gives a business/artist a place-image, legitimacy “*A Hotwalls Artist*” was an identity, a badge and symbol – occupational identity (a way to perform this)
- Hotwalls artists narratives in October 2022 – theme of loss
- Buildings have ‘agentic structures’ or ‘sensory affordances’
- (Is it profoundly disturbing to move if business is rooted in place?)
- Symbolically – creative hubs develop CONFIDENCE – for artists and city
- Creative hubs can become part of the narrative of the city, what it feels about itself
- Scene-configuring through its presence and activities
- BUT – artists are wary of being a tool for urban regeneration

The perfect creative hub? Hotwalls Artists 2022 and 2023 ...

- Transportation links
- Interesting heritage building
- Shared facilities
- Coffee shop/Cafe
- Public facing
- North or south of Island
- Parking
- Space for teaching/workshops
- Front stage – Back-stage (privacy)
- Training and business development
- Lots of natural light
- Space for display and performance, open studios and events
- Mixture of “practices and disciplines helps in supporting and developing collaborations, feedback and ambitious projects”
- Social role (benefitting disadvantaged groups)
- **‘Middle-class’ aesthetic**

To Finish - Contentions

- Buildings matter – artist communities need them for a variety of reasons
- Characteristics of the perfect hub – a contradiction? (Middle class aesthetics, serving a social purpose?)
- Local embeddedness matters
- Creatives fall into different categories regarding what they will get out of a hub
- ‘Portsmouth Frustrates’ – Too much repeated talk, not enough action, timeframes too long
- Portsmouth Creates – huge hope for them and new grant (1.5m) is promising (set up 2019 to be “independent, flexible, light and efficient, inexpensive and economically sustainable” – 2 people with 2 laptops – no ‘place’ £150,000 budget for 5 years
- Project-based nature of funding for culture support/business support – Outcome of *Interactive Weaves* (and Hotwalls) ‘Have community nowhere to place it’
- Ecosystems, and within them, networks, need continuity to thrive
- Portsmouth needs a significant, symbolic, bricks and mortar Creative Hub – or a network of them