



Artsbank Meets... Urban Wilderness

Interview with Laurel Gallagher, Jenny Harper and Isla Telford (22 October 2019)

Video Interview Transcript

<https://artsbank.org.uk/artsbank-meets-urban-wilderness/>

L - Hi I'm Laurel Gallagher and I'm a Co-Director of Urban Wilderness.

J - I'm Jenny Harper, another Co-Director of Urban Wilderness.

I - And I'm Isla Telford, the third Co-Director of Urban Wilderness.

(Music)

What is Urban Wilderness?

L - Urban Wilderness is a Community Interest Company and we work with young people to co-create change.

(Music)

How did Urban Wilderness begin?

L - It began as art project called Feral Spaces. For about three years we ran projects in disused spaces, with children trying to find out what activities they might like to do there and what those spaces meant to them.

(Music)

Tell us about the different projects you've delivered.

I - So we've delivered as Urban Wilderness, then we've delivered a summer festival in 2019 in Central Forest Park. We called it Forest Festival and it was the biggest public facing event that we've done. Other than the festival we've done projects with Canals and Rivers Trust, which are about placemaking and always with young people and then we have done...

L - We done some pop-ups as well haven't we, we pop up at other people's festivals and events. We've done quite a lot of cardboard this summer, producing great big piles of cardboard boxes for children to make whatever they want to and go on community walks exploring the areas the people live.

I - We've also done a piece of work with a community group in North Shelton, where they wanted to get their children playing outdoors over the summer holidays so we worked with them to do a pop-up play in Etruria Park.

(Music)

Why was it important to do this in Stoke-on-Trent?

J - We all love Stoke-on-Trent, we live around here so it's the place that we know and we love the



people here. We always co-create with local people, normally young people and it's really easy to communicate with everyone and speak to everybody. Everybody's always really welcoming and friendly, so it's a great place to work.

L - Yeah the projects that we do have really grown out of Stoke. Like I said, we started out doing the Feral Spaces project and the reason we started to do that was because we realised from speaking to the communities, we realised that there wasn't very much for young people to do particularly in Middleport, we've started working. Lots of young people getting into trouble but there was nothing for them to do, there was no for them to play and alongside that we realised how much green space there was in the city, lots of it disused. The area that we worked in the Middleport was called Burslem Port and it just provides this great opportunity, you put together kids who haven't got much to do and then all this disused green space and we thought well there must be something in this. A great opportunity for young people to be a bit more free, to be able to explore the place they live, to take ownership of the spaces and from that, all of these really increasingly bigger scale creative projects have grown.

J - Stoke-on-Trent is such a great place, there's green space everywhere and I don't think that the people who live around here necessarily realise it so a lot of our work is highlighting the access to that space really. It's a really, really green city.

L - It's a really green city and I think part of our company ethos and our mission is about getting positive stories and narratives about Stoke-on-Trent out into the public and Jenny's our photographer, we've got loads and loads of photographs of young people out being creative, being positive in these green spaces and I think that is something quite different when people look at Stoke that's not what they would expect and so I think it's really, really important to get different images and different messages out there about what it's like to live in Stoke-on-Trent.

(Music)

Tell us about the different roles and how you work together.

I - I think the way that we work together is really collaborative and if we're delivering a project then it doesn't matter which one of us, or which two of us, or any combination of us is actually the face whose delivering the project at any one time but we've all got different backgrounds and I think my background is in arts production so I've got a lot of experience in running events from the beginning to the end. Applying for funding, setting budgets, getting nuts and bolts in, planning marketing programs and everything to picking up a litter at the end of the of the event. I've also got a background in social housing, which I think informs my approach to how I work with communities and community engagement and also how I like to work with other organisations and really, I think you get the best out of a project if you spread a wide network and see what people have to bring to the project and what they want to get out of it.

J - So just building on what Isla said, we all come from different backgrounds and my background coming into Feral Spaces and Urban Wilderness is a photography background so a lot of my sort of back office role for Urban Wilderness as a company is involved in the visual side of things. So I was Chief Documenter full-time but also websites and things like that and social media posting, that kind of thing and before I was a photographer, I was a solicitor so I do deal with the legal compliance side of us being a CIC and things like that.

L - I've got a background as a visual artist and an educator. I worked in high schools for eight years and then I have my own arts practice and really that's where the core ideas I think for the project have come from my paint, my visual art was all about creating a world in which young

people, young children escape their constraints of an urban life and they go and become wild or feral creatures and what that, what might happen and I suppose this this project is really an exploration of what that might look like so it's a realisation of what essentially started out as a creative idea and imagining. The other roles that I do as the organisation then is to build relationships with academics and we go to conferences and have a fellowship with an academic organisation and what's great about that, is that we can put the work that we're doing in a much broader sort of context and relate it to other issues to do with psychology or to do with sustainability and the environment and that really helps us I think talk about our project and why it's important, even though we're working in small local areas with communities and very specific people in small groups and that work can have a big impact on the way that we feel about bigger issues.

(Music)

What is the process for delivering an Urban Wilderness project?

I - When we're coming up with an idea for a new project, we talk to young people about it so with the summer project, with our big festival we set up a youth advisory group and we met with them and the first time we decided that was going to be in Central Forest Park because we wanted to work in a place that had some infrastructure, like a car park and toilets and it was easily accessible for people and also we knew that Appetite had run several events there so we would have some support from local arts organisations in how to run an event in that location. So we decided it was going to be in Central Forest Park, then we set up the youth advisory group and we met with them in the park and took them on a photo walk of the site and they came up with the ideas about what they wanted to see there. So they came up with the idea of different worlds and different locations and they told us of things that they liked doing and the things that they wanted to see there. They told us that it was really important that it had loads of colour and they thought that would attract other young people to come so we wanted to make it as colourful and bright as possible and they told us, they came up with the name Colour the Park which became like the sub-line of the of the event and the idea of worlds, like a Pokemon thing so that became the name of the event so they named it and that's how we... so we kind of let the young people that we work with come up with the initial ideas for the events and then work with them to make them happen.

L - Yeah I think that's consistent with all of our projects isn't it? All of our projects will start with a particular place, so we're really place specific and then we work with very particular groups of people in that place whether that be in Stoke-on-Trent. We've also worked in Sheffield and in Manchester and it's the same process in each time - specific places for the people.

(Music)

How do you fund your work?

L - We formed our community interest company, partly because we had small pots of funding as Feral Spaces from the Big Lottery and they said we think you've got an interesting idea here and asked us how we thought it could be expanded and we worked with them really closely. There's a lovely regional representative of the lottery in Stoke-on-Trent and he worked really closely with us to form our idea of what it was we wanted to achieve and so we were very, very lucky and we're very, very grateful to the National Lottery Community Fund for giving us three years worth of funding to work

in Stoke-on-Trent and what that's enabled us to do is really focus on this process of working with a specific group of people at the beginning, to generate the ideas for the events that we want to run. We'll then go to other funders so for the festival, we went to the Arts Council and we access funded through them we had a bit of startup money, some seed money from Stoke City Council because they support community events and festivals and that was really helpful. We're now looking into quite a diverse range of funders because we want to be sustainable and we want to be able to have long term presence.

J - Sometimes we do get commissioned to do works. So we work with Canal and River Trust from time to time and they'll engage us on specific project ideas that they have so that will fund their particular project.

(Music)

How do you reach your audiences?

J - Lots of face to face it starts with and builds from that really so we do a lot of workshops, work in the community, making friends with people, talking to people especially young people. We know that they have families, they go home and tell their parents and they want everybody to come and see what they've been working on and so that helps to sort of build our initial audience and that's supported by online presence so we do social media and all that kind of thing and have the website and everything. Word of mouth also spreads amongst everybody and you know it's a very friendly city so that's pretty easy to do.

I - Yeah I think word of mouth is one of the main ways that we get, that people actually connect with us. We did some evaluation as part of the festival and some of the feedback was that maybe 60% of the people knew Laurel personally or knew somebody, who knew Laurel or had done one of the projects before so that kind of immediate face to face contact is really, really powerful and like Jenny said, backed up really by social presence and online media. We've got a lot of contacts across the city with different people in the council and different arts organisations and we've had a lot of support from them in terms of like sharing our events or sharing our activities and that's really really, really helpful as well.

J - A lot of our activities are because we are used to working with young people and our festival in particular was focused towards families with children so we're sort of very aware of that when we're trying to reach the right sort of audience for our activities and that's why we often connect with other community events that are going on. So for the festival, we were at Etruria Canals Festival a month or couple of months before and we went to some community group things so we went to the open day at Portland Inn Project. So that helps to reach people in the local area particularly families with young people and we also do our...Quite a few of our workshops are in schools and schools access is a great way to reach young people and their parents so we use that if we can.

I - We also did make some print material and we thought quite hard about what we wanted the print material to look like. We wanted it to look mostly fun so we had bright colours and not much information on it and we did it quite close to the event, so we did our leafleting about two weeks before the event and we kind of kept it quite local to where the event was because we really wanted to meet people who weren't on social media, who we hadn't managed speak to yet so we kept it kind of on an on foot radius around Central Forest Park.

L - I think one of the nice things that Jenny did as well, we did quite a lot of social media. We had a social media strategy. In fact I think it was Isla who put that together so we thought in advance about the different messages we wanted to get out in the build up to the festival and then we created a website, which was just one page for the festival so that it was separate to our other

organisations so people didn't have to find us in a funny awkward way. They could just type in Forest Worlds Festival and there was the information about the festival and we also pre-released information about the program for the day and a map of the site as well and I think people quite liked that. To arrive at a place and they already knew what they were going to do and they knew quite a lot about what to expect on the day which I think made people feel quite confident about coming.

J - I think it's really important to us when we're getting message out there about events and activities that we do, that we want general people to come to, to reach outside of an arts audience, to use really clear language and be really straightforward about the activities that are on offer and make it look really fun and appealing. That it's not you know, just arts focused really and I think that really worked for the festival.

I - The other thing that we used, which we found quite useful was the website called Eventbrite and we weren't selling tickets but we asked people to pre-register so that we could communicate with people who weren't on Facebook, through email so people registered and they could register in advance so if anything changed we had an email address so that we could contact people.

(Music)

What's been the biggest challenge delivering creative projects in the area?

L - So we had a big think about this and really we think it's been a really positive experience making cultural projects in Stoke-on-Trent. The thing which is the biggest challenge for us is balancing our work against family life and actually being able to keep up with the workload, especially when you're organising a festival and event and it will increase like this and then how do you actually manage to do that when you have other responsibilities at home. You have other bits of your life that you try and maintain and that's kind of constant for us.

I - Yeah we think that that's also one of the challenges with working with community groups as well. That they are trying to make things happen in their community, alongside paid work, families and other commitments. There's a huge want and a huge ambition to make brilliant things happen locally in Stoke-on-Trent, that their time is a big issue and energy I think.

J - You know a lot of our activities are with young people like we've said and that can mean that the pressures and demands on you on weekends, or in school holidays, or after school and that's more difficult for us when you've got children of your own because that's when you're doing your parenting so yeah balancing that...Because we tried to think of all different sorts of challenges didn't we locally and we couldn't. We didn't think that there were any that really applied.

I - So yeah just to talk about the things that we thought were great about working in Stoke-on-Trent.....We think that there's a really lovely network of committed arts organisations, who are all hugely supportive. We couldn't have done what we've managed to do in our first year as a company, without the support of Appetite, the New Vic, B-Arts. The list goes on and on and everybody's given us advice and support and people will do that in Stoke-on-Trent no matter who you are. So people will approach...it's a lot of personal context but if we get an email from somebody who we haven't met then we'll help and I think that's one of the brilliant things about working in Stoke-on-Trent.

J - We've tried to think about engaging local people, that's not difficult. You know everyone is really friendly and welcoming and gets on board with things really quickly. I think there's just a need

there for people to want to get involved with things so that's not a challenge.

I - Yeah that's not been a challenge either so yeah it's been generally a really, really great experience.

(Music)

What one piece of advice would you give to those looking to make cultural projects happen in their community?

L - So I think our best piece of advice, if you know where you want to work, is to go and meet some of the people there. I think this applies if you're working with the community or if you're working with other cultural organisations, is you just sit down and you talk about it and find out what the issues are, find out what the need is if there's a gap there, talk about what you could do so people understand what you can offer and then really, really listen to what other people want to make happen because if you make something happen where there's a need and there's a want for it then you're going to have a really successful event because people essentially want to come to it before you've even started.