

Remembering Together: Co-creating Covid Community Memorials

Final Report for Aberdeen City Artists: Maja Zeco, Caitlyn Main, Roos Dijkhuizen

Lead Partner: Stewart Aitken, North East Culture Collective and Station House Media Unit

Summary of Partners

Station House Media Unit: our lead partner organisation for the project and a leading example of Community Media Development in Scotland. They work to support people across seven of Aberdeen's regeneration areas and they have an active programme for youth in radio and media which we connected to. .

Duthie Park: a central park and recreation ground with glasshouses, cafe, playing fields and a summer programme. We approached the caretaker as we saw the park is organising public engagements throughout the year.

MELA Festival: Celebrating cultural diversity across the North East of Scotland. Through MELA we wanted to reach a diversity of people who live in Aberdeen city.

NESCAN: who we met at Duthie Park and MELA - a regional community climate action support hub, involved with Aberdeen Climate Action and who support many local grassroots initiatives in the city.

Newton Dee: a camphill community of villagers with special needs and care workers living in a mutually supportive environment. We wanted to work with carers and this organisation has a dynamic creative approach to personal development and community living.

Citymoves: An organisation supporting positive impacts through dance in the North East and member of our project steering committee. They were very enthusiastic about our approaches to creative activity and this formed a fast connection.

Grampian Hospital Arts Trust/GHAT: a charity that exists to enhance the wellbeing of all who spend time in the NHS (Grampian) or associated Health and Social Care facilities. Linked to carer roles, we felt it was important to include perspectives of front line workers (nurses) as well as hear from people who use healthcare services, which led us to visit Art Room at Bonnymuir Green.

Summary of Activity and Reach

18 - 20 Sessions delivered (brief overview and numbers attended)

Duthie Park - Environment Event July 31st. Maja and Roos attended an outdoor family event organised by Duthie Park rangers. Stalls were invested in a spectrum of horticulture, educational and vocational

connections to nature and growing. We provided handouts of creative writing prompts and seed ball making.

Session: met with around 40 people, a mix of adults and children. Attending the event introduced us to NESCAN who are keen to share the project within their networks and support it by providing spaces in the city to meet with groups.

Aberdeen MELA Westburn Park Sunday 21st August. Caitlyn, Maja and Roos attended the MELA multicultural festival in Aberdeen and set up a stall with the aim of meeting many of Aberdeen's residents. We made a hand out inviting feedback, sketches, notes etc on what the memorial could be, and had other arts activities like drawing and collage.

Session: approximately 60 people at the festival spoken to, 14 memorial forms completed and 10 'deeper' connections (for example, email addresses taken, participants expressed an interest in being involved further with the project like being interviewed, groups like the Green Party agreeing to share information about Remembering Together with their followers).

SHMU Youth Media Groups

Sessions: Wednesday 17th August 10am-1pm. One young person and two adults who work at SHMU
Saturday 20th August 10am-1pm 9 young people and 2 adults who work at SHMU
Saturday 8th of October 10am-1 pm 9 young people and 2 adult who work at SHMU

Our work with SHMU is very invested in giving the young people autonomy to record their own interviews and interests. We had a really valuable discussion around consent forms. Ideas for memorial were about creating a more interesting/relaxing outdoor play area, something accessible to all with good cycle paths and hammocks. Quote from badge making about covid experience *'a mix of colours and patterns equals a mix of feelings.'*

The last session was extremely valuable as young people worked on visualising the memorial. We recorded them speaking about their ideas.

Creative practitioners Session Friday 26th August 10.30am -3.30pm

Five participants were facilitated by Roos and Caitlyn. Majority of these practitioners are also connected to the project's partners. Incredibly generative, extremely generous contributions. Three artistic activities were planned, but participants were extremely engaged and attentive so less activities were done on the day, lots of time spent discussing loss, support and grief.

Newton Dee - Sessions with house coordinators.

The sessions are held on site in the art room with support workers / carers who live in the community alongside additional needs residents.

Sessions:

Monday 8th August, 3.30pm-5pm. Six participants (coworkers), Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating.
Monday 22nd August, 3.30-5pm. Two participants (coworkers), Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating.
Monday 29 August, 3.30-5pm. Five participants (coworkers), Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating
Monday 5th Sept, 3.30-5pm. Four participants (coworkers), Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating
Monday 12th, 3.30- 5pm. Two participants (coworkers), Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating.
Session with Villagers. Thursday 8th of September 9.30am-12pm, Yvette and Caitlyn facilitating. Two coworkers, six villagers

The sessions held with coworkers were varied - Caitlyn and Yvette provided a range of materials, such as clay, paper, paints, pens, pencils and collage materials, which were used whilst conversations occurred. Discussions were held around support, care, community, and the pandemic. The coworkers all were from creative backgrounds, and had extensive knowledge in co-creation. The session held with Newton Dee villagers happened within their creative workshop, and participants chatted whilst producing expressive paper based work.

Further connections

CityMoves Connection made with citymoves - Caitlyn attended four classes, spoke and recorded conversations with participants of 'Silver' group. Caitlyn spoke and wrote down conversations with support workers who were supporting participants at another group. Many attendants were from outside of Aberdeen / people weren't comfortable participating in the project. Reflections / conversations from the 'Silver' group were fairly rudimentary. Most participants had positive experiences of covid - spoke about being retired, spending time relaxing in the garden or drinking wine with friends on zoom etc.

Instant Neighbour (food bank) Connection made with the charity, Caitlyn attended as a volunteer to speak to other volunteers in the food bank. Keen to interview / speak with Evan (Community Connector) further; Maja and Roos met with Evan on zoom and shared his experience working at IN and the challenges of people who use it. Issue addressed - feeling uncomfortable about the ethics of interviewing / recording conversation with volunteers at the food bank potentially - vulnerable group of people.

ARI Nurses Roos reached out to 2 nursing staff connections at the Aberdeen Royal Infirmary. We kept in touch through whatsapp and met up for coffee at Duthie Park. One contact gathered a group of five interested colleagues together during her shifts. Unfortunately we missed our opportunity to meet as a bigger group. Most of these nurses are working in the Infectious Diseases Unit (Ward 111) currently and during the pandemic, which has resulted in a very tight bond between them. Bound together by 'Trust, duty and love'. Experiences shared were extremely personal, difficult and insightful. It was said on a few occasions how talking it all through was very needed.

We think it is important to consider how and when to record and archive accounts and stories by nurses for pandemic and oral history.

ArtRoom at Bonnymuir (Grampian Hospital Arts Trust)

A weekly art studio in the settings of a community garden and cafe, organised by Healthy Minds and GHAT. Art Room was extended to Bonnymuir Green amid the pandemic as it wasn't possible to access the hospital as usual and online sessions became isolating. Since then they have continued sessions here. Roos spent time with around 5 members. Conversations about pandemic experience felt unfair to bring up at times, as this is people's moment to be creative for their own needs and liberties, very beautiful drawing and colour use. A member Ian Campbell shared a bounty of memorial/sculpture ideas for Aberdeen. Overall their project and garden setting felt inspiring examples for co-creation and memorial intentions.

Elphinstone Institute

A valuable connection has been made with the Elphinstone Institute, a centre for the study of Ethnology, Folklore, and Ethnomusicology at the University of Aberdeen. The archive at Aberdeen University, has its own collection of interviews that record the public's experience of the pandemic.

Posters

Posters with a link to an online notepad were used as a way to reach anyone interested who would like to contribute further. Locations; Grey Hope Bay, Station House Media Unit, social media.

Notes from sessions

- Interesting conversations with Newton Dee house coordinators about co-creation in first session. They had lots of questions about the project at our first meeting, and expressed their desire to challenge themselves creatively.
- Second session with Newton Dee - 'improvisation is a key skill in care' / 'support is a creative act' / 'people think community is this thing, everything is great and everyone is helping each other and getting on really well, but isn't that at all? It's being in proximity, crossing paths, all the stickiness, the complexity, it takes lots of different types of people to make the world go round' / 'creativity saved the day'.
- *'I've been thinking how time has been made so strange with Covid – everyone kept saying they wanted to 'move on' or move past covid. But what about the people who couldn't? Who didn't make it? Who wanted to have time to stand still, just to have a bit longer together?'* - quote from conversation with member at Citymoves.
- At the MELA there were many conversations about greenspaces around Aberdeen, and in the city centre - in particular above St Nicholas was mentioned. Conversations around accessibility, benches, places for young people to go. People talked about having wifi, somewhere to visit, a place to sit. 'Put beauty and history before greed' / 'a space we can visit that's free and green' / 'something interactive' / 'a place to visit in town (on union street) that isn't a cafe or shop' / 'a new arts centre in an unused building' / 'a new place to swim' / 'a fountain with names of those

who have passed away engraved' / 'a light on top of every building down Union Street' / ' a space we can come together at, with programmed activities to do with various ages and interests' / 'renovate the victorian tea room and reopen it as an event space'

- A couple quotes from Mela reflecting on pandemic "covid broke barriers between people and communication and made us ask our neighbours - do you need help?" "A reflection on what else we have lost : time, opportunities, education, mental health support" - "a celebration of togetherness and connection."
- People are disappointed and frustrated with current city planning and want to feel more like public spaces are for them and they can interact with them.
- Creative Practitioner session; lots of references to water - *a place where lost things go, tides coming in and washing away, sitting in a collective pool of water, currents, minerals and resilience forming layers, swimming into the deep end* and circles - cycles, rings, pearls, sitting in a circle. (Ideas of a wishing well, mineral water feature, salt layers building up on rock)
- Young people at Shmu and their experience of pandemic - missing milestones and celebrations, stressed about missing school, sense of feeling behind with learning, technical difficulty online learning, parents becoming their teachers, loneliness and self isolation.
- Shmu Youth Group; discussion about there not being places for young people to go and feel comfortable in the city raising concerns about ageist / anti-social architectures i.e. high pitched sirens in public spaces only teenagers can hear.
- Duthie Park Environment Day; Conversations were mainly light and about seed ball making and gardens. There were some useful surprising encounters such as speaking with someone who lost their Dad to the vaccine and is against vaccines, believes covid was set up by the government.
- Creative Practitioner session: discussion about memorial sustainability - whatever gets made or organised to be looked after and considering its longevity. If it was something within a park setting, would it be maintained? Discussing how community gardens become spaces people want to look after; there's a cycle to the care as the garden gives you something in return.
- Ongoing conversations with nurse staff about working through the pandemic. 'Covid restrictions go against human nature at the time of losing someone..' 'We needed to get through' 'We were last to speak with people' 'It did feel like war' 'We held together, we were strong, we were a tribe' 'Sheer tragedy and loss are too much to comprehend' 'We should have been better prepared' 'I have to dig deep to remember specifics of the last 2 years because I fear the trauma of it all has made me forget.'

Sharing Event at Aberdeen Art Centre 30th November

We invited participants and partners to come together for an evening where we presented the project's findings (through a loop of images, presentation and video collage) and discussed together (nurses, park ranger, council coordinators, academics, artists, art organisations) how to take the research forward for the next phase.

Summary of the first phase

Throughout the project, we documented interactions with people carefully through audio and video recordings, photographs, and drawings. We also continuously took notes of what was being said. Some of these materials are available in the Appendix.

We also created an audio-video collage that brought some materials together creatively to reveal the depth, joy and playfulness that was unleashed by creative engagement with numerous people across the city.

By reflecting on collected materials at the interim stage of the project, we recognised three broad areas of concern emerging from the conversations. These are concerns and ideas about the memorial, co-creation, and community. The interaction of these areas makes this project challenging and deeply meaningful.



Further analysis and reflection revealed the overlapping of themes and ideas that we brought together in the sections on what, how, location, the specific ideas of individuals, and notes on care and support. These sections will be discussed next.

Considerations on support

All the groups and numerous individuals that we have been in contact with touched on notions of care, community and support. Most explicitly, the group of nurses, villagers and co-workers of Newton Dee discussed the support structures. One of the health workers we spoke with highlighted support as intelligence ‘understand that I understand, approach someone with intelligence to receive intelligence’.

There is a need to recognise that community and support are not easy and simple and that society needs to recognise the value of informal and formal support structures. For instance, saying thanks, ‘you are doing well’ by helping, and taking time to understand the job’s experiences would be supportive. There are always bumps on the road, and support is never simple, although it has to be strong (the visualisation of hexagonal shapes and jagged points is in the appendix). Support as a ‘human gesture’ is messy, ‘it isn’t clean, because it is hands-on, hands-on heart’.

We found this quote particularly poignant:

‘people think community is this thing, everything is great and everyone is helping each other and getting on really well, but isn't that at all? It's being in proximity, crossing paths, all the stickiness, the complexity, it takes lots of different types of people to make the world go round’.

Participant of the workshop at Newton Dee

Further, it would be helpful to recognise support structures as a network consisting of organisations, families, volunteers, and national bodies:

I think it's really important, the systems that support, rather than placing pressure on the individual – we should change the question. It shouldn't be ‘WHO supports those who support’ but ‘WHAT supports’.

Participant of the workshop at Newton Dee

While this section of our report can seem abstract, we ask our readers and future partners to recognise and value support structures they are directly part of. Moreover, any future work on the memorial has to consider the above notions, remember that working with people is not simple and easy, and take time to reflect and consider their actions in the context of a wider community.

What

Distilled ideas for memorial

- Outdoor space
- Green space
- Accessible (this was important to people of all generations)
- The space where people can gather and be together because public benches are often far away from each other
- places for young people to go and feel comfortable
- The space needs to allow interaction, and people to leave a trace or a mark to contribute it over time (mosaic, community flower bed, wishing well)
- circular, oval shape feature or a seating. A circle is mentioned a lot in relation to support, gathering, continuity, grief, life, etc.
- Include elements of water (due to it's symbolism), minerals (in relation to longevity)

How

- Consider longevity, sustainability and maintenance (if possible with communities)
- Motivation for people to engage ('community gardens become spaces people want to look after')
- Nourish creativity ('creativity saved the day')
- Keep awareness of support structures and co-creation

Location

Central Aberdeen

- Giving space for healing (its presence shouldn't be too direct so you can choose to spend time with it or not)

Currently, there are ongoing consultations regarding the location:

- Bon Accord Terrace Gardens is appealing due to its proximity to Union Street, while due to low footfall could offer a place for contemplation and healing. However, this park might have limited accessibility and parking.
- Westburn Park is interesting for its central location and availability of parking. It is accessible and within walking distance of the hospital, which resonates with the project's theme.

Specific ideas of individuals

- places to cycle
- renovate the Victorian tea room and reopen it as an event space
- 'a space we can come together at, with programmed activities to do with various ages and interests'
- 'a light on top of every building down Union Street
- 'a fountain with names of those who have passed away engraved'
- 'benches with names of those who have passed away engraved'
- 'a new place to swim'
- 'a new arts centre in an unused building'
- 'a place to visit in town (on union street) that isn't a cafe or shop'
- ideas of a wishing well, mineral water feature, salt layers building up on rock
- Wooden hands (Ian held out his hands pinky to pinky palms facing up) 'for example this could be hands catching something or opening up to reveal something'.
- creating 'active sculptures' using the sea as a channel. Sound of rocks being taken by the tide can be soothing, to connect to ourselves.
- Buskers Festival
- spontaneous offerings to a tree
- creating rainbows with light and water. Around it you would have meeting places.
- Benches both socially distanced and close together
- Subtle, not everyone wants to remember but it can still be a nice place for everyone
- People can come and see each other and care for each other and care for the trees - there is space for planting trees
- No concrete or the only concrete is pavement

Who delivers Phase 2?

Although we have varied expertise, designing public green spaces is somewhat out-with our experience. We can continue supporting community consultations throughout phase two or ensure a smooth transition between phases 1 and 2.

For future consultancy or advisory roles, primary contact would be Roos Dijkhuizen. Maja will be available for any additional support, while Caitlyn Main could offer some of her time to engage with particularly vulnerable groups and individuals that she developed relationships with during phase 1 as required.

Considering the inputs from participants and the factors for a future memorial (allowing interaction, site specifics) we think a suited practitioner for the project would be someone in landscape architecture or an artist who also works with functional structures outdoors.

Continuing consultations

The groups that were most keen to continue their engagement with the project were the group of creative practitioners and youth group at Shmu. At the present stage it is difficult to envisage when the consultations will be needed during phase 2. However we would suggest that phase 2 creative practitioners respect the time and energy of group participants.

Some other groups we engaged with (Newton Dee, Art Room) have vulnerable participants and any further consultations should proceed with care.