

Sustainable North: a workshop on the role of the arts and humanities in re-imagining sustainable development in the North of England

"Our failure to address environmental issues is not a failure of information but a failure of imagination." - Professor John Robinson, University of British Columbia

The brief for the third workshop in the N8 New Thinking in the North project was to consider how collaborations between arts and humanities researchers and creative and community practitioners might contribute to new models for sustainable living. The day featured keynote talks, a walking tour and building tour on food heritage and urban farming, and case study and research paper presentations which followed a call for papers amongst the N8 universities and their partners. It was organised by Abigail Gilmore, University of Manchester on behalf of the AHRC N8 New Thinking from the North partnership, and coordinated by Jack Welsh.

The future of the North lies in its capacity to imagine, develop and enact economic, social, environmental and cultural strategies for sustainable development. This workshop explores the conceptual and imaginative insights of established experts including academics, policy makers, environmental activists and creative practitioners, to open up questions of sustainability and resilience and consider the role of arts and humanities research.

- How can the arts contribute to making the North sustainable?
- What models and practices have been developed historically and how can we best learn from them?
- In what ways has arts and humanities research uncovered new ways in which to imagine and engineer the North's future?

The workshop took place in the home of an exciting new research-led community interest company, [the Biospheric Foundation](#), which is dedicated to providing practical solutions to urban poverty through collaborative community projects on food production and distribution.

Proceedings were introduced by Steve Hutchings, Director of Research for the School of Arts, Languages and Cultures, University of Manchester, and Dinah Birch, Chair of the New Thinking from the North partnership and Dinah Birch, Pro-Vice Chancellor for Research and Knowledge Exchange, University of Liverpool. Mark Llewellyn, Director of Research, AHRC, spoke of the importance and value of collaborative research and outlined the ways in which the research council supports knowledge exchange and collaboration through [a range of funding programmes and showcase opportunities](#).

The first paper session began with a provocative and moving presentation by [Martyn Hudson](#), Newcastle University on 'Curating the Northumbrian Commons'. With a backing track of birdsong, natural soundscapes and sound art drawn from his work on Northumbrian Exchanges programme, Martyn talked of themes and concerns for knowledge exchange and humanities research on and with rural communities. His keywords included Ghosts, Curating, Walls, Lineages, Fields and Borders and evoked the intrinsic problems of working across different communities of interest and practice, with power differentials. The perception of Universities as "knowledge thieves" within these communities was a striking phrase which resonated throughout the day, problematising collaboration and exchange, and raising issues of time,

sustainability and ownership of knowledge when curating and creating archives. Drawing on the Hegelian notion of 'aufheben', concerning the contingencies of elevation, preservation and cancellation of knowledge, Martyn questioned the role of universities in (co)curating the commons – when it comes to archiving the traditional cultures of these communities, are universities clerks or thieves?



Sustainable North attendees

The next paper by [Deborah Chambers](#) and David Baines, also Newcastle University, explore the public art initiative of [Northumberlandia](#), and touched similar issues of power, perception and defining rural environments and landscapes. The development of Charles Jencks' large-scale land sculpture, made of waste from the surface coal-mining of the South East of Northumberland, produced a literal aesthetic body-block to the landscape it obscured which was damaged by the industrial process. The speakers explored the media relations and discourses surrounding the development, which was part of the corporation's corporate social responsibility arm, under the banner of Restoration First, and argued that the public art work provided an important PR resource for the industry, aside from other social or public values which might be more commonly associated with site-specific public art.

Helen Rees Leahy and Sophie Everest introduced their work with film practice, collaboration and archival research on [Researching the New](#). They presented a film of Grizedale Arts, based in Cumbria who have been working with their locality through the Institute – the [Mechanics Institute building](#) at Coniston established in 1878 which has become the basis for a collaborative project with the local community. The film practice allows the research participants a different kind of voice and engagement to the conventional written research outputs, and although the interview with Grizedale Arts' Alistair Hudson provides the main content for the film, Alistair's narratives of the project, building and its history are interspersed with images and footage will frame and augment his words.



Helen Rees Leahy presenting with Sophie Everest

The keynote speaker for the workshop was Pam Warhurst, co-founder of [Incredible Edible](#) the food and campaign group in Todmorden. Pam gave us an overview of the passions, approaches and principles by which the initiative has flourished from humble beginnings to highlight self-sufficiency, self-organisation, resilience and sustainability and provoking new thinking about food. Amongst the images of 'propaganda gardens' planted in key locations for stimulating debate and highlighting healthy living and eating, Pam sowed memorable and rousing phrases describing the ethos of the movement – most notably “start with something you can get your hands on”, “maximum elaboration from a single focal point” and “we’ve not become Ludlow!”. The talk defined how community-led action can invoke sustainable change by example, with very little funding, by “believing in the power of small actions” and persuading people to see themselves as part of the solution not the problem, each and every one. Before leaving us to lunch, Pam set a challenge for the N8 partnership to explore how we could network across our institutions and introduce the Incredible model to universities, drawing on our institutional resources of expertise in food, technology and horticulture.



Keynote speech by Pam Warhurst from Incredible Edible

Our half time break included a slow lunch, made on site with Biospheric Foundation-produced ingredients, and a tour of the project's building, outdoor forest garden and wholefoods shop, [78 Steps](#), by Chief Executive, Vincent Walsh. Vincent explained some of the different research and development processes behind the elements of the project on the tour, which ended with a visit to the poly-tunnel and chickens on the roof of the old warehouse building (see below for a commentary on the venue, by Vittoria Caradonna).

The second paper session featured case studies which considered the role and efficacy of art in social change. Following a prologue of Bruce Springsteen cover of an American spiritual, James Cave, University of York, presented some of his doctoral research on an initiative in the Hyde Park area of Leeds which uses arts projects to consolidate and bring together different communities around the resources offered by two churches (Left Bank and All Hallows). The research prompted questions about how arts practices and projects operate in community settings, suggesting that the arts can give a means of negotiating individual and community histories. Reflecting on this and on the keynote presentation, James posed the question of whether community arts activists are able to be more exploratory than conventional community organising, providing a medium for self-discovery and questioning, rather than the means for a campaign to reach a particular set of goals.

Joanne Tippett, University of Manchester, presented a practical project based on her own research which uses as visual model to help engage groups in processes of sustainable development. The [Roundview project](#) – still in development – is a hands on method for encouraging thinking about the 'bigger picture' and science behind sustainability.

Ben Jones, University of Newcastle, explored how his research interventions in communities in Gateshead concerned careful negotiation and reflection on the uses

and practices of social media in places which are not necessarily “digitally immersed”. Drawing on Marcuse’s concept of repressive tolerance from de Bruyne’s “Community Art: the politics of trespassing”, Ben considered how to work as an artist-activist with communities which are relatively disenfranchised using social media as a means to self-organisation and communication. The projects he described used growing and cooking as means for connecting with these communities: the problems of introducing social media technologies were often technical, e.g. lack of wi-fi connectivity but also including communities’ knowledge and familiarity with using technologies as a way of community building and representation.

The fourth and final case study – itself initially beset with technical issues (overcome through persistence, coffee and cake) – was from Stuart Bastik, ArtGene. Stuart introduced us to various projects which ArtGene has developed locally in Barrow-in-Furness which are predominantly about people’s relationship to sustainability, through the prisms of industry and nature. These activities are encouraging communities to collaborate with artists to explore local visions and values – for example, by mapping the “Seldom Seen” assets which have meaning in local everyday lives or by opening up and offering their expertise in design and curation in public art collaborations with communities. Entitled Re-visioning Utopia, the abstract for this talk at first promised to be a critical insight into why we shouldn’t necessarily rely on artists as the midwives for social change, or as Stuart put it “the wind turbines in the Tesco car park of regeneration”. However the case study was far more pragmatic and strategic – encouraging the acceptance that such collaboration can reframe the future “as an exciting set of valuable possibilities”.

The final session, facilitated by Gaby Porter who also chaired the first paper session, used a world-café approach to pose three questions which had emerged through conversations and presentations during the day to breakout groups. Notes can be found on these below.

Interestingly, whilst the delegation to the workshop was a mixture of artist and community practitioners and academic researchers, and the ethos of the day was collaboration and co-production, the conversations within the breakouts mainly concerned critical – and sometimes quite defensive – reflection on the value and idiosyncrasy of arts and humanities in the academy and the institutionalised challenges universities present to sustainable research and knowledge exchange with external communities. This was an opportunity to consider how academic research can learn from the insights and provocations of these communities, to start small, work with the resources we can access easily, use our imaginations and be inclusive of the everyday, the tangible and the ordinary. Hopefully we can take this thinking forward to the final workshop and into further sustainable collaborations in the North in the future.

Acknowledgements and Thanks

Project coordinator: Jack Welsh

Facilitator: Gaby Porter

All speakers: David Baines, Stuart Bastik, Dinah Birch, James Cave, Deborah Chambers, Sophie Everest, Martyn Hudson, Steve Hutchings, Mark Llewellyn, Ben Jones, Helen Rees Leahy, Joanne Tippett and Pam Warhurst

Vincent Walsh, Tree Dietrich and all at the Biospheric Foundation

To all on the N8 Partnership steering group

The venue: commentary by Vittoria Caradonna

Opting for Irwell House as the backdrop for the Sustainable North workshop has been an inspired choice. This formerly derelict mill has now been turned into an urban farm and research lab: the Biospheric Foundation, which seeks to employ cutting edge biotechnologies to change the traditional, and short-sighted, methods of food production and distribution, while also fostering the involvement of the local communities living in the Blackfriars district of Salford.



Biospheric Foundation CEO Vincent Walsh leads lunchtime tours

Sustainability is at the centre of the project's ten years vision. Chief Executive Vincent Walsh and his team are using aquaponics, forest gardening, vermiculture, namely agricultural techniques that respond to the need for alternative, sustainable ways of producing food. But the Biospheric Foundation is not a closed-off research facility. Its fish tanks and vertical herb gardens are often open to the public. Tours and workshops are a crucial aspect of Walsh's strategies to "reconnect people with food". As workshop attendees, we have had the chance to experience firsthand how Biospheric's own brand of sustainability, exceeds its usual meaning: here, not only the outcomes but the whole research process strives to be sustainable for the environment but also for individuals. The centre works as a virtuous example of sustainability on different levels: the symbiotic environment in which the by-products of aquaculture support the growth of plants and vice versa, mirrors the way the centre aims to grow food and knowledge, sharing techniques and 'nutrients' with the locals. By embedding its practice in the community, the Biospheric Foundation is bridging the gap between research and people.

Hyperlocalism, community-based practices, social responsibility were some of the topics discussed during the workshop. The academics, practitioners and community activists in attendance presented several compelling case studies about how arts-based and community-led projects are contributing to the economic growth and social and cultural regeneration of the North. However partnerships between industry and public bodies, Higher Education Institutions and local communities, does not always result in a happy union. How can grassroots energies, creative practice and innovative research cooperate to build resilient communities?

Collaboration between researchers, practitioners and communities is a sensitive topic, too often these type of partnerships are perceived to be exploitative: for example, when discussing his experience with the curatorship of the Northumbrian Commons, Martyn Hudson from Newcastle University noted that often the locals are resistant to researchers seen more as “thieves of knowledge” than as equal partners. The hierarchy within expertise that differentiates between official and unofficial knowledge is often the reason why many attempts at collaboration have not been completely successful. Toolkits and frameworks are not always useful when it comes to community-based initiatives: what successful experiments such as Todmorden’s Incredible Edible have shown is that often, a DIY, almost anarchic attitude will go a long way to galvanize people.

The N8 Research Partnership envisions and supports models of collaboration and development that take into account the specific features of a community and its long-term needs, building partnerships that are ‘forever projects’. For collaboration to be truly sustainable, researchers and communities must find a common language. The Biospheric Foundation embodies the challenges and rewards related to finding new and creative ways to share and coproduce knowledge: its symbiotic environment offers a model of good practice, while also providing us with delicious food and food for thought.

Sustainable North workshop - breakout session notes

A. What’s the “added value” of collaboration in arts and humanities research within N8? How can we build on this to make a case beyond 2014?

- Different kinds of collaboration – interdisciplinary, between institutions, with external partners etc.

- Can we treat “community/ies” in same way as industrial partners (e.g. either instrumental partnerships or simply no-go areas)?
- What is the uniqueness of N8 arts and humanities researchers? (are they unique?)
- Barriers to collaboration with HEIs – the “arrogance of power”; “thieves of knowledge”

What are the models and lessons to take from this particular project for future collaborations?

- Timescales for partnership development and collaboration – these are “very long conversations”; “forever projects”, social responsibility is a long game

Facets/factors that we need consider:

- Can collaboration happen with different interests and outputs for each partner?
- Issue of scale – local and hyper-local is much more interesting and valuable than the ‘regional’
- No toolkits! Methodologies can be shared but are responsive, contingent and creative
- The right language is required for context
- Communities are not homogeneous
- Researchers can bring their own tools
- Does it need to be all 8 partners? (no)
- Trust between partners
- Collaboration should start at home – the N8 should aim for a shared research manifesto, not necessarily collaboration

B. How do we make Incredible Universities? How can we transform our campuses to make sustainability visible, tangible, everyday “conversation points”?

1. Establish propaganda gardens in central locations – e.g. raspberries, herbs, rhubarb, kale, wild ,strawberries as ground cover, lavender, borage
2. Perennial not annual
3. Use expertise (design, botany, horticulture)
4. Go through students (also staff – not just academics)
5. Water-usage conservation and re-usable
6. Apply principles to teaching buildings and halls
7. Take it beyond the campus
8. Volunteering opportunities – and learning through existing activity
9. Build links within and without campuses (across the North)
10. Educational landscape – engage with schools
11. Need for leadership and coordination – active, dealing with institutions

C. How can researchers learn from creative and community practitioners? How can this shape academic research practices?

- Is there a rigid divide between research and creative/community practice?
- Change can happen through creative actions – how do researchers use this?
- Professional doctorates can offer models – of practice-based research by practitioners

Characteristics/lessons from creative and community practice:

- Honour and respect communities – share something of yourself – collaborations need to be reciprocal
- Work with people not institutions/mediators who may not themselves be connected in
- Question our assumptions about social media – be sensitive to others
- Express ideas in lots of different ways – aural, taste, visual
- Time and trust are needed – don't just fly in; don't breach the trust placed on you
- Consider what's driving the project – funding or research enquiry?
- Start small – see what sticks!
- Notice how extraordinary the ordinary is