Edinburgh Reimagined:
The Future Will Be Localised

Morvern Cunningham

What lies ahead?
Reimagining the world. Only that.

From *Azadi* by Arundhati Roy

A message from the future

We are now twelve months in from the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic in the UK – a moment that when it took place in the spring of 2020, essentially shut down the arts and culture sector overnight. Even now one year later, many cultural institutions and practitioners are unable to return to any degree of normalcy. Early on in the first lockdown, the mantra of "Build Back Better" seemed to be on everyone's lips, (including my own, in *"You'll Have Had Your City?" Building Edinburgh back better post-pandemic*), the phrase itself conjuring an image of reanimated wartime spirit warm in the comforting message that not only would eventually things come back as before, but they would also be somehow miraculously improved at the same time.

The subsequent reality however, has been rather more stark than this initial optimism may have led us to believe. Since the crisis began, our governments have failed millions of people – in particular, the vulnerable and the minoritised. We now know without question that people in care homes, disabled people, people of colour and/or those from working class backgrounds in this country have been disproportionately affected by the crisis. For the arts and culture sector, not a great deal has changed in the intervening period of dormancy as the inequalities and elitism present in the arts pre-pandemic have continued to prevail throughout the crisis. Millions of pounds in bailout funds have been pumped into cultural institutions across the country in response to the impact of the pandemic whilst arguably the most precarious in the sector, creative freelancers, are recognised as bearing the brunt of the crisis. Indeed, precious little of this institutional support has managed to trickle down to the independent artists and freelancers working in the sector, almost wholly dependent on the fundamentally flawed Self-Employment Income Support Scheme (SEISS) or Universal Credit, other than in the form of often small, one-off bursaries and hardship funds that are woefully oversubscribed.

Crucially, as we now find ourselves in the midst of the UK-wide vaccination programme and new roadmaps out of the latest lockdown are variously devised and rolled out, we are at a perilous turning point. With Edinburgh's major festivals expressing 'optimism' in the possibility of returning to the city in physical form in the summer of 2021 and other cultural players putting pressure on the government for dates of reopening, we in the arts and culture sector face a very real and present danger. We face the danger of returning to a kind of normal that we saw pre-pandemic – one that already wasn't working for the vulnerable and the marginalised in our society or in the cultural sector. Only this time however, the normal we are heading back to is likely to be even worse than before, to be even more unequal, increasingly competitive and less caring of its people as a direct result of the crisis.

Amidst this looming hellscape, an element of hope may yet endure through the current darkness. Since lockdown one, conversations both public and personal have been taking place, groups have been springing up to discuss the best paths forward, and there is a palpable sense that it's now even more urgent than ever that we use this enforced pause as an opportunity to shape what our future and the future of our children will be, as we start on the journey to reimagine and rebuild a more equitable society that works for the benefit of the many, as opposed to the few. No longer is it reasonable to assume that structures and processes take place simply because "this is the way we've always done things." In the light of the current crisis, we as a society are increasingly questioning this mindset. Indeed, "Why are we doing what we're doing?", "What is the purpose behind what we're doing?" and "Who is this really serving?" are all important questions to be asking ourselves as we emerge from the pandemic.

What I would like to see as the outcome of questions such as these, is fundamental change across the board. I believe this is the only way we're going to see transformation at a grassroots level. What follows here are my suggestions of positive changes, gleaned from my time working in the arts and informed by a series of creative conversations I've been conducting with people from across the arts sector and in cultural power in Scotland over the last few months. During the course of these conversations, I've heard resignation and helplessness, I've been told that life isn't fair and that for one group to be prioritised, another has to suffer. I've heard from creative practitioners on the brink of, or who actually have, walked away from their sector, but I don't believe it has to be like this. And I still passionately believe that now is the ideal time to implement meaningful change. If a global pandemic which shuts everything down overnight and then continues to keep things closed for twelve months and more isn't the impetus for starting again with care and love and the power of hindsight, then frankly, I don't know when is.

Welcome to Edinburgh Reimagined

From the smallest acorns great oak trees are sown, and I wish to sow my own personal acorn here, in this piece, of hope for a better arts sector, a better Edinburgh and a better place for us all to live. Oak trees are not only a symbol of age and strength, but also of adaptability and resilience. One reason for this is that their root systems run deep underground and interconnect with one another, making them better able to deal with crises they may experience during their lifetimes. My particular tree symbol encompasses what I believe to be three vital and interrelated foundational elements, corresponding respectively to the roots, trunk and branches of the cultural ecosystem of the city of Edinburgh. These individual Seeds of change are: Value Systems, Support Structures and Space. In exploring each of these elements in turn, I'm attempting to boil down to the fundamental essence of what I feel is most important for all of us, individually and collectively, to be revising and reassessing at this crucial time in the development of humanity. I'll investigate and explore each of these 'Seeds' in greater detail, identifying specific areas of focus where I believe changes are necessary in order to make access to culture more equitable in the city of Edinburgh going forward.

Seed 1: Value Systems

Everything we do and express in the world is based on our value systems. Our values underpin our actions by forming the roots of our understanding, and acting as the well from which everything else springs, whether the entity we are talking about is a person, an organisation, a city or a nation. However, as value systems are based on hierarchies, imbalances can occur. One example of this is the 'thundering hooves' elitist mentality of Edinburgh's August festivals maintaining their cultural 'competitive edge' globally. This is an ideology which has been taking increasing precedence in recent years, but which could also be seen at the same time to be contributing to the detriment of the city and its infrastructure, its artists and its residents. We need a better balance of the cities' various cultural and community needs going forward in order that no vital element falls by the wayside. Now is the time to revisit and rearticulate our values as we begin to emerge from the pandemic, questioning what it is we value collectively as a city. It is an opportunity to tackle systemic inequalities present in our institutions and our sector, without simply going back to the very value systems on which these inequalities are founded.

Create visionary cultural policy

If our value systems help us to define where we want to go, then the act of writing these values down enshrines them in a vision of what the future we are collectively building could look like. Currently, the City of Edinburgh does not have a robust and visionary Cultural Strategy, merely an ongoing action point 'live' document that stemmed from the well-meaning Desire Lines process that took place in 2015. Though this group of cultural institutions carried out an extensive consultation of Edinburgh's arts and cultural sector over a period of many months, the resulting strategy the City of Edinburgh Council is currently working with is somewhat underwhelming in comparison.

A cultural policy should be the embodiment of a collective vision for the future of the city, a direct public statement of what that city chooses to value, focus on and work towards for the duration of its relevancy.

Response: It is now time for the City of Edinburgh Council to develop a new Cultural Strategy for Edinburgh, unmeshed from what has gone before and that takes learning from the experience of the pandemic. Its form should take a collaborative approach that includes the voices of emerging and freelance artists alongside other local residents in the engagement process.

Diversify those in cultural power

For the majority of art institutions, the bulk of decision making and power lies not with artistic directors or CEOs, but with the often less visible Board of Trustees. It's a widely recognised issue that many Boards are unrepresentative in their make-up, often "pale, male and stale" i.e., made up of old white men – a distant cry from the diverse representation that audiences are keen to see on screen and on stage. If we want to see fundamental change from a cultural programming perspective, we need to revolutionise the Boards of leading cultural institutions in the city.

There needs to be a prioritisation of people of colour, LGBTQ+, disabled and young people, and those from working class backgrounds in taking up these key governance roles. Part of the challenge in attracting people from diverse backgrounds to Boards currently can be the benevolence required on the part of the Trustee in doing unpaid service to an organisation, asking a great deal from freelancers and young people who often have precarious incomes, or from those whose particular lived experience is invaluable to an organisation's operation. We ought to be able to pay people in these circumstances in order for them to devote their time to the crucially important role of governing our cultural institutions.

Response: All of Edinburgh's cultural institutions in receipt of public funding to review the make-up of their current Trustees and make any necessary changes to improve the representation of freelancers and marginalised people at a Board level. Where appropriate, offer remuneration to Trustees for their time devoted to governance in the form of expenses to cover loss of earnings from their regular work.

Issue clear messaging of the arts' importance to wellbeing

Not only is it important to define our values, it's vital to communicate them clearly and effectively. For too long now, the city of Edinburgh has understood the importance of arts and culture to the city in purely monetary terms as opposed to its more vital contribution to health and wellbeing. The current imbalance in messaging sends implicit signals to Edinburgh's residents that the Festivals aren't for them, that even the city centre isn't for them, that instead the primary focus is on a tourist city for economic purposes. Part of the reason for this could be code-switching, where arts organisations and institutions, keen to legitimise investment in their cultural activity, attempt to prove their worth by speaking the language of finance in the form of box office busting ticket sales and international visitor numbers, alongside examples of positive business impact. The media can also be complicit in this touting of increasing numbers year on year, as attention-grabbing figures are designed to encourage clicks and reads and stoke the narrative of commerce, as opposed to that of health and wellbeing.

Response: If we deem arts and culture as central to the health and wellbeing of a city, then this must be the narrative that comes across first and foremost via all marketing channels, at the expense of pandering to economic legitimacy.

Seed 2: Support Structures

The structures of support that grow from our value systems, the trunk of our symbolic oak tree, will define how strong and adaptable the arts and cultural sector in the city is in terms of its sustainability and resilience. It is via our support structures that we demonstrate our value systems. In response to the pandemic, we have seen the swift introduction of a number of support measures that would have seemed radical prior to the crisis. Non-means tested bursaries and awards have been given out to artists with very little paperwork or justification for support, and the SEISS has given millions of people mostly unquestioning support to aid their creative occupations. Pre-pandemic, there were increasing calls for introduction of the Citizen's Basic Income pilot in Scotland, including from the then-newly published *Culture Strategy for Scotland*. This kind of initiative also featured strongly in the Republic of Ireland's recent report from their Arts and Culture Recovery Taskforce. Could this radical non-means tested approach to supporting our citizens endure as we emerge from the current crisis? Now more than ever, we need to interrogate whether current support structures for the arts and cultural sector are robust and fit for purpose or whether they require revision and potentially radical overhaul.

Simplify and scale public funding of the arts

For even the most experienced of form-fillers, navigating the funding language and landscape of cultural funding bodies such as Creative Scotland can be a minefield. Avenues to funding are not always clear from the get-go and the application process itself can be unnecessarily onerous, which can be crucially demoralising and off-putting to those unused to applying for funds. The amount of work required to fill out an application should be relative to the level of support requested – the less funding required, the more straightforward the application. Arts funding itself also tends to be highly risk-adverse, meaning that new and experimental work can struggle to achieve funding, particularly from early-career artists and those from marginalised communities. The system isn't fair to freelancers either, for example regularly funded cultural organisations can afford to pay their staff to fill out funding applications, successful or not, whereas individuals cannot retrospectively claim back the time spent on writing successful funding applications.

Response: There needs to be simplification and scaling of arts funding processes across all levels – from initial application to final evaluation. Applicants should have access to greater support in the pre-applications stage, and throughout the duration of their funding period (if successful), with funders taking a more nurturing and proactive approach to supporting artists.

Advocate for local creative freelancers and community groups

Edinburgh has plenty of cultural and similar sector specific advocacy groups in the city, often the mighty advocating for the mighty. Rather than advocacy groups for those already in power, what Edinburgh needs is increased advocacy for its more vulnerable freelance and community-led sector, in partnership with organisations already working with these groups such as Creative Edinburgh and EVOC. Creative freelancers are rarely invited to the cultural decision-making table to contribute their expertise, and if they are, payment of their time is an afterthought - if thought of at all. In a world that is likely to be increasingly reliant on a freelance workforce going forward, this institution-based mentality has to stop. Freelancers need to be both involved and paid.

Response: The formation of a cultural advocacy group in the city focusing on community groups and creative freelancers could lobby to include this vital component of the cultural sector in key decision making for Edinburgh going forward. The group could also provide advice, support and guidance on issues such as HR support and paying people fairly for their time, with the potential to develop into a new Scottish arts union for creative freelancers.

Invest in networks and training to cultivate peer support

The cultural sector thrives on networks, both informal and formal. Often, it's not a case of what you know, but who you know that presents creative opportunities. It can also be a struggle for freelancers to access adequate training and development opportunities. Networks can also act as alternatives to the dominant system, enhance peer support and empower members to set up their own systems of collective knowledge sharing and self-care. In order to avoid the city's existing networks becoming inward-looking cliques, we ought to seek ways to generate more routes for meaningful cross-sector engagement and reach a wider range of creative people at various stages of their careers. This would make our support structures more resilient and equitable at the same time.

Response: Investment to open up existing networks and in the creation of new networks. Nurture and build resilience in the arts and cultural sector by training individuals in skills such as coaching, as a means of supporting one another and the organisations they work with through challenging times.

Seed 3: Space in the City

Never has the importance of space been more keenly felt than as a result of the pandemic, where we have all been faced with the reality of our immediate environments. These experiences have been far from equal however, with regards to how much space we have access to in our homes, our ability to access online spaces, whether we have another space to escape to, be that a private space like an office or shared public space like a park, or impact on mental headspace. If value systems are our foundations and the roots of everything we do, and support structures uphold these values in forms of tangible support, then space is where the work is able to take place. It forms the final building block of our tree, whose branches are as spacious as the limits of the roots and trunk allow. Lack of cultural space in the city has long been a challenge in Edinburgh, with its independent and grassroots creative practitioners finding it increasingly difficult to access affordable space in which to live, work, rehearse and perform. This doesn't have to be an irreversible trend. If recognised seriously by those in cultural power, steps could be taken to rebalance this ongoing issue in the city.

Manage existing space better

As a city, we need to manage the existing space available for cultural use better. During August, a 'can-do' attitude from the City of Edinburgh Council and other gatekeepers to cultural provision creates the temporary illusion that any available space in the city can be a venue. This liberating approach is sadly not replicated throughout the rest of the year, with artists and creative freelancers experiencing an ongoing dearth of accessible space in the city. Edinburgh promotors ought to be able to lease available spaces used by companies in August throughout the year in the same way that festival tenants do. Working collaboratively, organisations such as EPAD (Edinburgh Performing Arts Development), the University of Edinburgh Festivals,

Cultural and City Events team, the Estate Management Team at the City of Edinburgh Council and the Edinburgh Festival Fringe Society have the ability to make the management of space in the city more accessible to Edinburgh-based creative practitioners all year round.

Response: The further development of EPAD's useful online cultural space directory epad.space to include more spaces leased to Festival promoters during August, including those managed by the University of Edinburgh and listed by the Fringe Society as Fringe venues, with the opening up of these spaces throughout the year for cultural purposes.

Share available space

Another way to make better use of already available cultural space, is the proactive sharing of this space by those cultural institutions that have access to it. This would help to repurpose currently underused space for the purpose of nurturing talent and allowing new creative activity to take place. The move could also help foster a sense of shared collective ambition to mutual support, leading to mentorship, business buddying and other collaborative opportunities as we begin to emerge from the pandemic. This sharing of available space could also be expanded to include the sensitive dispersal of the August and Winter Festival's activity across Edinburgh's neighbourhoods. An initiative such as this could be achieved by investing in cultural activities at a community level and encouraging collaboration between festival promoters and local venues and other public spaces within our communities. As well as empowering residents to take greater ownership over cultural events that take place in Edinburgh, spreading the range and scope of Festival activity to local neighbourhoods would also help alleviate the current saturation of cultural activity in the city centre at key times throughout the year.

Response: Cultural institutions and other local businesses with access to space to provide a portion to Edinburgh-based creative freelancers throughout the year, outside of peak times and ideally at little or no cost. Investment in communities to carry out their own cultural activity at key festive times throughout the year, with the potential for collaboration with established cultural institutions and promoters.

Make additional space for cultural activity

Alongside making better use of our current spaces, we also need to address the pressing need for additional cultural space in the city. Edinburgh has been losing grassroots creative and community spaces at an increasing pace in recent years. A key site for cultural development is the grassroots. Emerging creative freelancers from a range of diverse backgrounds must be supported in the creation and management of key spaces for the benefit of Edinburgh's cultural ecosystem. Collectively, we all ought to be aware of the space that we take up and to actively make space for others to inhabit, as opposed to continuing to offer opportunities to those already in receipt of privilege. Those in cultural power need to stop taking up room and instead make space for others, who can then use this to create more inclusive spaces of their own.

Response: A comprehensive audit of vacant space in the city should be carried out, including spaces owned by the City of Edinburgh Council. Development of a joined-up council-run plan to manage these on a short-term basis to cultural tenants. Invest in, support and create new grassroots cultural spaces in the city that are run by, platform and centre those from minoritised communities.

To recap on the seeds of change and subsequent areas of focus:

Roots – Value Systems
- Create visionary cultural policy
- Diversify those in cultural power
- Issue clear messaging of the arts' importance to wellbeing

Tree trunk – Support Structures
- Simplify and scale public funding of the arts
- Advocate for local creative freelancers and community groups
- Invest in networks and training to cultivate peer support

Branches – Space
- Manage existing space better
- Share available space
- Make additional space for cultural activity

The flourishing of the human spirit

We find ourselves in a similar position now to over 70 years ago and the genesis of the first Edinburgh International Festival, where it was recognised that art and culture were a means to healing a broken and exhausted society, then coming out of the end of the Second World War. It is certain that the full impact of the global crisis on our way of life and on our communities long-term is yet to be fully felt. Even so, I cherish the hope that out of the pain and heartache of the last 12 months we can begin to rebuild a cultural sector in this city in a better image, one that will help process the communal trauma we've all experienced to some degree, and that can reflect the myriad of human stories that need to be told as we start to emerge from this crisis.

This time however, Edinburgh's cultural sector has to be rebuilt sustainably. It has to be recognised that the cultural sector in the city operates as part of a larger ecosystem, and each component within it needs to understand their place and contribution as well as respecting each other's role within it. Regarding the oak tree analogy that has threaded itself throughout this piece, we now have to focus on creating the best conditions for the seeds of change to grow and thrive. Cultural activity doesn't generate in a vacuum, it needs to be nurtured by a supportive system that gives it room to grow. Our value systems must be nurtured in order to produce resilient support structures, which will in turn provide an abundance of space in which a diverse arts and culture sector can flourish. We cannot simply go back to how things were before; that way we'll simply retain a flawed system that was unhealthy from its roots. A radical cultural shift in our value systems and the support structures that uphold them is required in order to generate a tangible change in the way cultural activity is expressed in the city. This isn't the job of any one person or entity to address, we all have to be willing to do the work in order to collaboratively achieve a better balance of cultural power going forward. The work of change is for all of us.

Seeds of change

The recalibration required will only be achieved through fundamental change at all levels. It's not about ripping up the rulebook and starting again; even the smallest of actions can lead to larger systematic changes down the line, generating a ripple effect across the whole of the city with the potential of improving our systems immeasurably. Change undoubtedly needs to happen, the most equitable and constructive form of which will take place upwards from the (grass)roots. Going forward there needs to be greater focus on improving things at a local level, which will naturally lead to improving city-wide engagement with arts and culture for everyone, locals and visitors alike.

The COVID-19 pandemic has acted as both an amplifier and a fast forward button in terms of current inequalities rising to the fore and the speed of development. It has proven that we need to pay attention and invest in the local, in our immediate environment. We've all been shopping, working and socialising locally as a result of the restrictions experienced in the last 12 months. These trends towards the local are projected to continue post-pandemic, with a general societal move towards supporting local independent businesses, flexible working patterns and greater use of local green spaces. As our future will be localised, it is up to all of us to contribute to a better outcome for ourselves and others as we go forward into the great unknown of a world post-pandemic. We no longer find ourselves in a Build Back Better scenario, but instead one of rebuilding. Let us rebuild a city of care, one that values its people first and foremost, one that nurtures its grassroots arts and community activity, that is committed to representation at each and every level, promotes health and wellbeing above any other model and that includes everyone in discussions about the future of their city.

This is my portrait of Edinburgh Reimagined.
I look forward to seeing yours.

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What I keep telling myself and everyone I love is that the world before this pause was imagined. The world we will have after is currently being imagined. We are all part of that work.

From *Reality Is Plasticine* by Eloghosa Osunde in *The Paris Review*