

a driver for engagement and activity.

The project is as rigorous as it is open-ended. Underpinned by a working philosophy which explores Systems change, beliefs, visions, values, structures and behaviours.

The preliminary research material touches upon ‘a selfless writing’ and a desire to create some sort of order from different elements, that move materially from one thing to another. Ffiwsar discusses ideas about ‘cymhethlodd bywyd’ – the complexities of life, about going beyond standalone art projects, connecting different elements of our lives, armed with the premise that ‘we all see the world differently, my experience is not the same as your experience.’

‘We don’t know everything, we don’t have all the answers, we learn and discover by exploring and doing.’ There is a striking similarity in this quote (Iwan at Ffiwsar) to the creative process itself – whether making a painting, sculpture, piece of writing, or as in this instance, a socially engaged approach over a whole valley.....

Thinking about it like this helps me understand more about the shape of the project.

A questioning approach runs throughout this project – in fact it is the essence of it. Ffiwsar’s principles are embedded within the planning process of the creative practitioners, so the multiple community events contain the same philosophical attributes of the organisation – the macro reflected in the micro.

“When we approach economies as sub-systems of Nature, we place a higher value on living assets (people and Nature) than on non-living capital assets. That’s because people and Nature are the source of capital assets and indeed all value creation.” 1

This quote illustrates the Dyffryn Dyfodol approach to this multi-faceted and far-reaching research and development project. In the illustration (adapted from the original article) the 10% we see above the water (community activities) is in fact supported by a much larger mass of thoughtful activity below the surface.

Looking at the miro boards – at the breadth and depth and diversity of the ideas for events – you can tell it has been devised by artists. Who else has that imaginative, process? I was struck by the extent of the work, the myriad ideas, the dedication and stamina to evolve some of those ideas into real, working, real-life happenings. Organisationally, the Partnership Agreement makes me realise how extensive this project is, the allocation of roles to different people, the cascading of information within partner organisations. It formalises all the elements and pulls everything together to a cohesive whole.

So on the surface it all looks so light as to be easy-peasy, but underneath the surface there is this whole layered system of clearly defined protocols underpinning the approach to the project, which have been honed from hours of meetings. I felt a bit awed by the details within the miro boards, the meeting minutes, cementing in me the conviction that while this project may seem superficially very abstract (‘we don’t know what to expect’) it is actually very serious and bound up in a philosophy that seeks to engender change.

The Creative practitioners can act as a conduit for voices within the community. As such, there is a lack of overbearing quality, it's a careful weave between direction and letting the ideas or events shape themselves, to some extent.

“When we work in a community engaged context, our fundamental business is human interaction...our main responsibility will be to listen”²

In the participatory workshops, the declaration that there is no ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ way to visually express the given task reinforces the experimental nature of the activity. This is borne out in Ffiwsar’s partnership organisations, Natural Resources Wales (NRW) and Cartrefi Conwy (CC). Both organisations are investigating changes in the way they connect with communities, about new ways of thinking.

“If we really want to achieve sustainable management then we need to do a lot more things– we need to do a lot more and we need to do it differently to the way we have been doing it up til now” says NRW.

Their approach to connectivity focuses on “More listening, asking questions, not being the experts” and ‘replicability’ – how easily they could take the model they have devised with Dyffryn Dyfodol and do it again somewhere else?

NRW took the opportunity to start working with each other in a different way, developing a strand called ‘Llifor’ (flows) – of people, of stories, of water, of money, of heading for transformative change.

How collectively can decisions be made? Who is making the decisions? The questions continue throughout the process Cartrefi Conwy elucidated how the principles of the project related to their very live and ongoing project with a new affordable housing build in Llanrwst. In particular the theme of the organisation ‘not having all the answers’ for the tenants who were living very near the site, so could see the design evolve. The artists’ intervention brought to the surface tenants desires to ‘feel closer to nature’ and the activities and involvements caused people to feel really glad to live there, ‘just a lot closer to the things that were around them’ Continuing and embedding the theme of ‘doing things differently’ provided a new perspective on established working patterns, challenging assumptions, and an acknowledgement of the benefit of being persistent, in very practical terms.

In a NRW partner’s meeting Justin gives a visual example – a map – of his regular way of thinking about a project – diagrammatic, linear, modular, bound by the financial year – to a new map of current thinking. It’s really interesting to see someone who is trained scientifically begin to take his line ‘on a walk’, through this process of working with Dyffryn Dyfodol.

On Justin’s map ‘X’ marks the spot of the treasure, but to get there we follow a nonlinear route. We even take in some cake on the way. We have a conversation, we follow a lead, we meet at different points to discuss where we are. Though things may sometimes get circuitous, we are bound by a compass, so always know due North (the purpose of the project.) Most excitingly, Justin has *burnt the edges to the map*, adding an authenticity, searing his relationship to it.

This ‘satnav *versus* process’ conversation – from the formulaic to the process-driven model – is a good metaphor for this project as a whole. The ‘process driven’ model is a very natural part of the creative process – all artists will be familiar with this way of thinking. Many ‘happy accidents’ or serendipitous events occur through the making – whatever the medium. ‘Making mistakes’ is very much part of that process, encouraged and celebrated, even, just as making mistakes is anathema to large-scale, corporate

institutions, where the spreadsheet is king, and the move from one point to the next is as calculated and risk-free as possible.

Science relies on information and data – as we have become increasingly underpinned by this ideology as a society, then the room for manoeuvre (mess, stuff, things) has become marginalised to the world of artists and poets, and people who work with their hands. Vocational work is looked down upon, however it is the qualities inherent within this type of work (listening, allowing time, experimenting, being ‘creative’) which are now being touched upon as an alternative route forward to the binary model of ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and the implications are that it can bring about transformational change, as indicated in this project.

To paraphrase Clare Pillman, NRW –

“The next decade is decisive in terms of response to climate crisis, people and nature thriving together – a vision, resilient, recovery, pollution minimized.

Partnerships are key to this, but not just traditional partnerships, which are comfortable. If you do the same thing with the same people over and over again you might get good results, but if you’re looking for Transformative change we need to do things differently, with different people.

Evolved, grown, spread with Dyffryn Dyfodol. Big system change things – they are huge, can feel really daunting. What can we do to contribute to them? But actually what you see in a project like this is those small actions, growing, which give communities and individuals real agency, real power to make a difference.”

1 Leverage Points and the Iceberg Model in Economic Development, Academy for System Change

2 The relationship is the Project, Jade Lillie et al, 2020

Notes on design: From the huge wealth of material generated by Dyffryn Dyfodol I began making notes from the conversations and meetings with partners, communities and creatives, which turned into little pockets of poetry. I approached this typographically, then began to take screenshots and layer images, splicing images and text over one another, enjoying the lo-tec ‘work in progress’ anti-aesthetic-aesthetic, which seemed to reflect the ethics of the project as a whole.