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Design Futures

Phase 2

Covid-19 and Creative Clusters

A real-time study of the impact of Covid-19
and associated support measures on the
creative business community in Hackney
Wick and the QE Olympic Park.

operating
lock gates

ZAKI

Lock gates as
multilateral bridge

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#HWCRAIC

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Humanities
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1. Introduction

This report offers an account of the HWCRAIC research project's second phase: **Design Futures**. Through a series of activities involving actors in Hackney Wick, Fish Island, and the Queen Elizabeth Olympic Park, this phase aimed to develop visions of the creative community beyond its immediate future. The purpose was to find a common narrative that allows for the alignment of need and resources towards attaining what the communities understand as a preferred future after the first year of the Covid-19 pandemic.

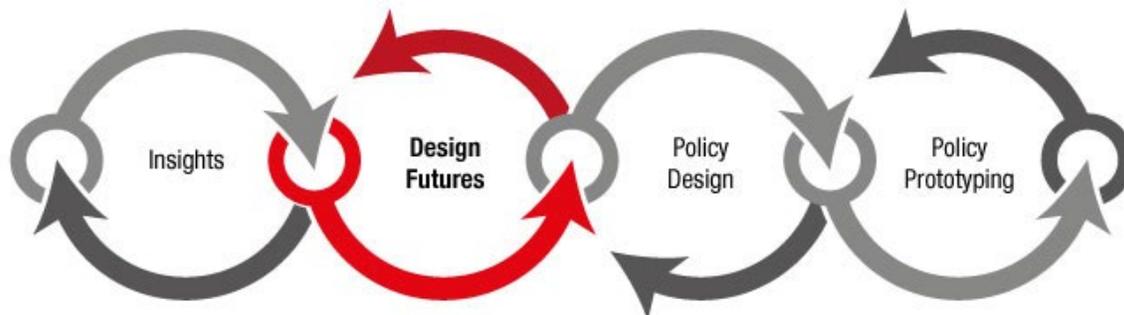


Figure 1: Four phases of the design for policy approach

From Phase 1, the concept of *space* systematically emerged as a preoccupation for the participants. This broad concept was the guiding theme during the participatory activities, which included online foresight workshops with diverse members of the local creative communities. In particular, during the workshops, the participants engaged in activities and discussions around the question:

What does the future hold for ‘spaces’ in HWFI and the QEOP, and how can we shape and develop these so that the creative communities in the area thrive?

Following this introduction, this report comprises four sections. Section 2 briefly explains the motivation to implement a design and foresight approach during this project phase. Section 3 provides an account of the two online workshops with local creatives that informed this phase. Section 4 jointly discusses the themes emerging from these two workshops. Lastly, section 5 offers a conclusion to the research project's second phase.

2. Why design and foresight?

“To design is to devise courses of action aimed at changing existing situations into preferred ones.”

Herbert A. Simon¹

In contexts of upheaval, policymakers often function as ‘policy-fixers’ constantly patching existing policies in response to ever-changing conditions. This sense of urgency operates as a barrier for long-term thinking and may also hinder the development of innovative policy instruments. This has

¹ Simon, H. A. (1969). *The sciences of the artificial*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press.

led many governments at the local and central levels to adopt diverse approaches to policymaking, including service design and design thinking, as well as futures thinking and foresight². The latter is defined as

[...] the capacity to anticipate alternative futures, based on sensitivity to weak signals, and an ability to visualize their consequences, in the form of multiple possible outcomes. It is a means to visualize, rehearse and then refine in the mind, actions that would otherwise have to be tested against reality, where the consequences of error are irrevocable.

Fuerth, 2009³

As a discipline, foresight is based on established principles and methodology that employ future analysis to address complex issues and provide strategic options for decision making in business, policy, and the public sector. Knowledge gained through foresight enables evaluating different possibilities, assessing diverse courses of action to invest in possible futures and developing informed strategies towards shared objectives. It also allows the identification of the relevant forces influencing future developments and how they interact to shape a given system's future. Especially in the face of increasing uncertainty, foresight can be used to augment the resilience and readiness of an organisation or community. In the past decade, the use of foresight has ceased to be an activity reserved for military organisations to be appropriated by decision-makers at different levels of government, including the UK's⁴.

Likewise, several design-based approaches are currently being deployed within policymaking and government services resulting from growing recognition of their capacity to understand and address complex societal issues. Interestingly, there are synergies in the joint introduction of design and foresight approaches. For instance, design plays a significant role in imaging, understanding, and visualising futures by utilising various tools and methods. Thus, design provides a creative and experimental space to explore and assess potential solutions by bringing people's experiences to the forefront as they interact with systems.

Given the project's adoption of *design for policy* as its methodological underpinning⁵, during its second phase, researchers looked at integrating notions of foresight to co-imagine with members of the local creative communities their preferred futures beyond the Covid-19 pandemic. Practically, this was implemented through a focus group and online workshops.

3. Workshops

The ethos of this investigation was based on immersion and active participation. In practice, this meant engaging with the creative communities in and around HW/FI and the QEOP to inquire on the effect Covid-19 has had on them whilst jointly developing understandings of how to enhance their

² Kimbell, L., & Vesnić-Alujević, L. (2020). After the toolkit: anticipatory logics and the future of government. *Policy Design and Practice*, 3(2), 95-108.

³ Fuerth, L. S. (2009). Foresight and anticipatory governance. *Foresight-The journal of future studies, strategic thinking and policy*, 11(4), 14-32.

⁴ See Gov.UK Foresight projects collection: <https://www.gov.uk/government/collections/foresight-projects>

⁵ See 'HWCRAIC: Covid-19 and Creative Clusters' report.

robustness and resilience. During the second phase of this project, face-to-face and online engagement activities were carried out with diverse members of the creative communities.

Initially, all activities in this phase were planned to be conducted as face-to-face workshops at different venues in HW/FI and the QEOP. However, this was not always possible due to the ongoing circumstances around the Covid-19 pandemic. As a result, three activities were carried out as part of this phase:

1. Futures focus group at the Colour Factory, December 15th, 2020.
2. First online Design Future workshop: March 19th, 2021.
3. Second online Design Future workshop: March 26th, 2021.

The time between the first and the following activities reflects the researchers' original ambition to conduct these activities face-to-face. Yet, in order to avoid further delays in the research schedule, the Design Futures workshops were conducted online, utilising digital platforms for communications and interactions (Zoom and Miro, respectively).

A range of participants attended the three sessions, stretching from local creatives in different creative practices, researchers from local universities, new housing development and warehouse residents, and recent and long-standing artists and makers in the area. Invitations to participate were sent directly to local creatives through referents in the community and existing networks such as the HWFI Cultural Interest Group and the HWFI Workspace provider drop-in meeting. Attendees were not paid for their participation but were offered a voucher to spend in a local hostelry for the equivalent of their time dedication according to the London Living Wage⁶.

3.1 Futures focus group

The first *design futures* workshop was planned for December 15th, 2020. The two-hour workshop was intended to be a face-to-face session with members of the creative communities at the Colour Factory⁷, a live music venue, food court, and multi-functional events space located in Queen's Yard, at the heart of Hackney Wick.



Figure 2: The Colour Factory, Queen's Yard, Hackney Wick

⁶ The London Living Wage is the only UK rate based on living costs: <https://www.livingwage.org.uk/what-real-living-wage>

⁷ Colour Factory: <https://www.colourfactory.com/>

Due to fewer attendees than anticipated, the workshop was transformed into a focus group inquiring about the ‘future of spaces in HW/FI and the QEOP’.

In the run-up to the workshop, a significant number of attendees sent their apologies as they no longer felt comfortable participating in a face-to-face event. This is explained mainly by the rising number of Covid-19 cases and the changes in local restrictions imposed in London during December. The workshop was due to take place at a Covid-secure location in Hackney, which along with the rest of London, had entered *Tier 2*⁸ as of December 2nd after the end of the national lockdown. However, the rapidly deteriorating pandemic situation resulted in London moving to *Tier 3* restrictions from December 16th, the day after the proposed workshop, and *Tier 4* shortly thereafter. Consequently, some members of the communities felt uneasy about meeting in person indoors.

“I’m so sorry to do this at short notice, but I don’t think I can attend tomorrow, there’s some discomfort around looming Tier 3.”

In-person workshop invitee.

The rapidly evolving context meant the constant adaptation of the research approach. Although the first workshop was not conducted as planned, the participants who joined agreed to participate in a two-hour unstructured focus group. Since the workshop would have aimed at exploring the notion of the future of spaces for the creative communities in HW/FI and the QEOP, the discussion focused on the same topic. Three primary strands emerged from this:

- Spaces for trading;
- Spaces for sharing;
- The space between the physical and digital interactions.

3.1.1 Spaces for trading

The participants agreed on the need for spaces to trade.

“Visibility is the main issue.”

Focus group participant.

Despite the renewed momentum of hyper localism caused by the pandemic⁹, mobility restrictions significantly impacted creatives’ ability to sell locally. Especially for artisans, makers, designers, and artists that produce material objects and pieces, the area does not offer them window-shops to showcase their work. Some suggested a need for a local creatives ‘directory’ to increase potential sales and foster interactions and collaborations between creatives who may not be aware their outsourcing needs could be locally covered. There was strong support for solutions that could both provide an online marketplace and a resource network.

At the time when the focus group was being convened, a new open-air market was set to open in the heart of Hackney Wick. White Post Lane Makers’ Market was meant to be a Christmas market showcasing unique gifts from some of the borough’s makers, artists, and designers.

⁸ Formal tiering review update: 30 December 2020: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/formal-tiering-review-update-30-december-2020>

⁹ See HWCRAIC Report 1: Immersion Insights.

“The market is located two minutes from Hackney Wick station, in the centre of one of the most significant creative communities in Europe. Designated one of the Mayor of London’s first ever Creative Enterprise Zones in 2018, the talent here is world leading.”

Tower Hamlets press release: ‘White Post Lane Makers Market’¹⁰, December 11th, 2020.

The market would pilot on the 18th - 20th of December from 10 am-6 pm, subject to safety checks and government guidance. Unfortunately, new restrictions came into force on December 19th, moving London into *Tier 4*: ‘Stay at Home’ alert level¹¹, which meant the market’s premature closing.

3.1.2 Space for sharing

Knowledge exchange appeared as a concern amongst participants. Even though there is a general recognition of community members who act as brokers facilitating transactions and the flow of knowledge/information/resources between people within the communities, some claimed that when it came to their creative practices, they do not necessarily know where or to whom to turn locally to seek advice or ask for help. Although some creative communities within the area appear to have strong personal and professional networks, some are unaware of the possibilities and opportunities available to them.

“[Creatives are] especially dependant on networks for the next job opportunity.”

Focus group participant.

This was presented as problematic since it is common amongst creatives to identify and exploit synergies between different creative practices. Moreover, participants reflected that these spaces for sharing (experiences, knowledge, resources) are key to building trust, which they pointed out as the cornerstone of healthy community development. One participant mentioned that, especially during the lockdown, Masterclasses were offered by and for members of the local creative communities. This seems to have had good reception amongst the participants, although not all were aware of these or how to sign up. Another participant mentioned the possibility of having a mentorship programme for new creatives in the area to integrate them better. Linking this back to the idea of a creatives’ directory, one participant mentioned the possibility of establishing a rotating open-house programme, where local creatives could see and experience first-hand what other creatives in the area do.

3.1.3 The space between the physical and digital interactions

To different degrees, the participants expressed feeling comfortable moving their creative practices online. Whereas some develop their creative practices entirely online and being located in the area simply provides an appropriate environment or context in which to work, some were keen to find alternative ways of interaction within the local community. However, they all agreed on the need for establishing interfaces to bridge the physical and digital divide. Having said that, some participants voiced their concern about being part of a virtual community that will inevitably not reflect the area’s diversity. Similarly, those still working from dedicated workspaces in the area felt they were still able

¹⁰ White Post Lane Makers’ Market: Festive Edition! <https://www.hwfi.zone/makers-market>

¹¹ Prime Minister announces Tier 4: ‘Stay At Home’ Alert Level in response to new COVID variant: <https://www.gov.uk/government/news/prime-minister-announces-tier-4-stay-at-home-alert-level-in-response-to-new-covid-variant>

to benefit —to some extent— from the interactions and exchange of ideas occurring in these spaces, with the caveat of also being a particular representation of the creatives in the area. Interestingly, The Wick newspaper¹², whose first issue was published during the lockdown, seems to have acted as one of the material elements reminding people of the communities' vibrancy.

3.2 Online Design Future workshops

Although the original intention was to convene face-to-face workshops as lockdown eased, to avoid further delays in the project's progress, the researchers decided to carry out the design future workshops online. As a result, two online workshops were conducted in late March 2021. These 1.5-hour long workshops were identical in structure and consisted of 4 activities (see Table 1).

	Activity	Duration
1	Intros: how did we get here?	15:00 – 15:25
2	Analyse the Present	15:25 – 15:45
	Break	15:45 – 15:55
3	Explore the Future	15:55 – 16:20
4	Wrap-up	16:20 – 16:30

Table 1: Online Design Futures workshop agenda

The first online design future workshop (DFW1) took place via Zoom on March 19th, 2021. Invitations to participate in this workshop were sent to 23 creatives working or living in the HW/FI QEOP area. Eight confirmed their participation, and finally, only two attended the session.

The second online design future workshop (DFW2) took place online via Zoom on February 26th, 2021. On this occasion, invitations were sent directly by the researchers and through our partners at Creative Wick's Living Lab to a group of 16 residents who had previously joined the research project as *citizen scientists*¹³. From this, 13 people confirmed attendance, and six joined the session.

Notably, on both opportunities, participants were offered vouchers to spend in local hostelry for the equivalent of their time dedication according to the London Living Wage. Although this was well-received, it appeared that online meetings fatigue might have played a role in the low attendance levels.

3.2.1 Intros: how did we get here?

During the introduction, the researchers explained that the project was less focused on the impact of Covid-19 and more on what can be learnt from it going forward. Thus, the design futures workshop was about understanding where local creatives would want to see themselves in 5-10 years and the steps that would need to be taken to make the community more resilient in the future. Likewise, it looked at the government measures that have worked over the last year, those that have not necessarily worked as expected, and what can be learnt from this experience.

In this first part, participants were asked to reflect on their experiences, look back and forward, and particularly think about 'spaces' (see Figure 3). Being an exploratory session, participants were told that the definition of the term remained entirely up to them.

¹² The Wick newspaper: <https://thisisthewick.com/>

¹³ See HWCRAIC Report 1: Immersion Insights.

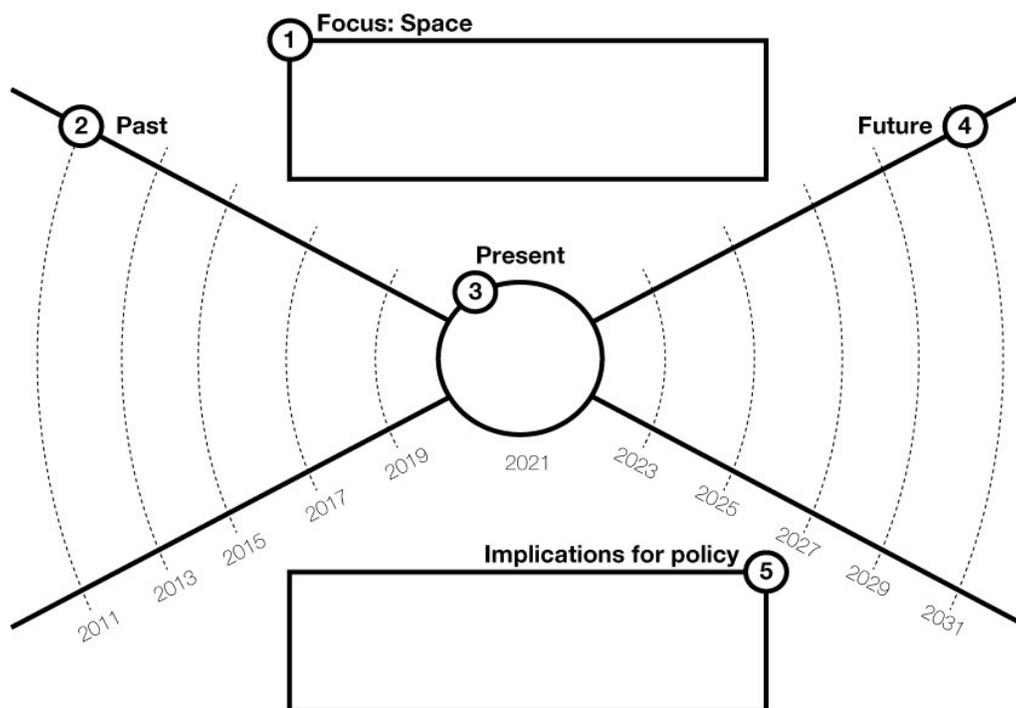


Figure 3: Model utilised during the online design future workshop based on the ‘Janus Cones’.

3.2.2 Analyse the Present

After the introductions, and before moving to the more forward-looking parts of the workshop, participants were asked to analyse the current situation regarding their creative practices and the issues around spaces affecting HW/FI and the QEOP. To ensure an organised discussion, participants were invited to conduct a PESTLE analysis.

Activity 1: PESTLE analysis

The PESTLE analysis is a framework utilised by different types of organisations looking at identifying the key drivers influencing them. It disaggregates an organisation’s macro-environment into the *political, economic, sociological, technological, legal* and *environmental* factors affecting it. Being a flexible analytical tool, it was used during the online workshops to elicit the participants’ understanding of the forces currently shaping the creative communities in HW/FI and the QEOP.

To conduct this analysis, participants were invited to join a pre-designed board on an online visual collaboration platform (Miro). In this way, the researchers facilitating the session were able to translate participants’ comments into digital notes, whilst other participants added their own directly onto the digital board (see Figures 4 and 5).

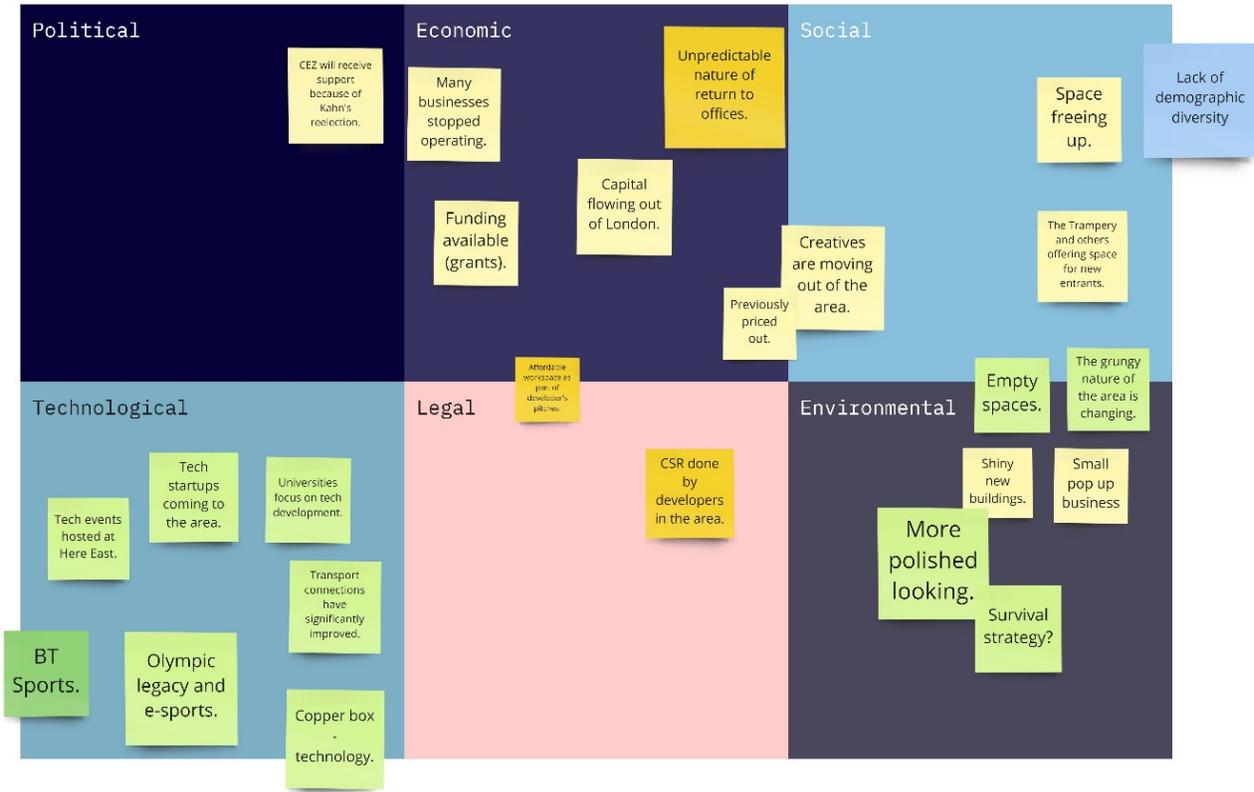


Figure 4: FDW1 PESTLE Analysis Miro board

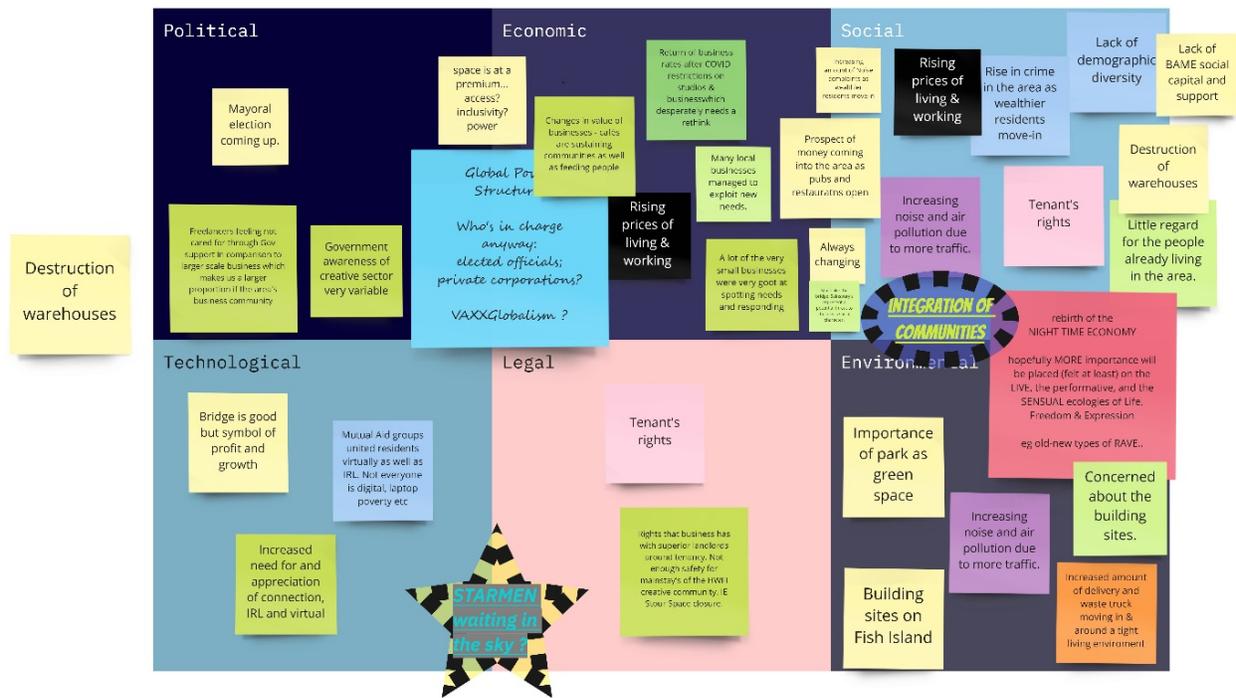


Figure 5: FDW2 PESTLE Analysis Miro board

The collated results of this activity in both workshops are presented below:

- **Political:** On the one hand, the expectation is that the upcoming London Mayoral election will result in the incumbent's re-election, which will imply the continuity of some support policies, such as the CEZ designation for the area. Conversely, participants were concerned with politicians' and elected officials' understanding of the make-up of the creative communities. They claim the inconsistent awareness of their realities has adverse effects, which, for instance, has resulted in a lack of specific support measures for freelancers that, in fact, make the most significant proportion of creative businesses in the area.
- **Economic:** It appears the concerns in this area are manifold and the most prominent. The rising prices of living and working spaces in the area seem to be the first and main preoccupation. Some participants claim creatives have been "priced out" and therefore are moving out of the area. Conversely, the developers' corporate social responsibility actions in the area have resulted in the funding of diverse community-led activities and the construction of new affordable housing. Secondly, the pandemic has pushed the government to divert funds to cover different needs, which means less funding is available for creative industries. On the other hand, various authorities and funding bodies have made many grants available. Thirdly, many local businesses had been quick to re-orientate their strategies to better serve the locals and exploit emerging needs. With the prospect of easing restrictions and more cafés and restaurants opening in the following weeks, a capital inflow was expected.
- **Sociological:** The central societal aspect highlighted by the participants was the accelerated change in the area's demographic. The gentrification process means wealthier tenants occupy the new developments, and many residents, including creatives, are moving out of the area. This has the paradoxical effect in which the increased demand to live in an area with a particularly "grungy" look and feel puts pressure to demolish some of the old warehouses where many local creatives work and live, not only forcing them to leave but also significantly changing the area's aesthetic. Although some new local developments offer affordable workspaces, the perception is that locals are not occupying these.
- **Technological:** Some of the more recent developments, such as Here East and the Copper Box Arena, are seen as spaces to attract technology-intensive organisations, especially in the form of software and tech start-ups and events taking place in the area. The last five years have seen a significant increase in traffic and movement of people commuting to work and study in this area, translating into new bus routes and infrastructure development (e.g., bridges, parking spaces). However, these are seen as primarily disjointed from the creative communities in HW/FI. Similarly, some participants pointed out that whereas the area now has companies such as BT Sport, some residents remain digitally excluded, a condition that has further isolated them during the lockdown.
- **Legal:** The main point raised around the legal factors influencing the area is the lack of rights protecting creatives living in work/live spaces and the precarity of their conditions arising from this. The closing of Stour Space, an iconic workspace and gallery in Fish Island, is seen as a reminder of their fragile conditions.
- **Environmental:** Currently, the numerous construction sites in and around HW/FI and the QEOP appears as the leading environmental concern. These are not only detrimental for those currently living in the area due to the increase in noise and air pollution but will also, once finished, further contribute to changing the "grungy" looking spaces for "shiny new buildings". On the other hand, the QEOP was highlighted as a green haven that made the lockdown months significantly more bearable for the residents.

3.2.3 Explore the Future

The workshops' third stage looked at engaging participants in prospective thinking to imagine what the future can hold for creatives in HW/FI and the QEOP. This involved three participatory activities:

- **Hopes & Fears:** consists of an exercise to evoke participants' aspirations and concerns around a particular issue.
- **Roadmap to a Dystopian future:** Based on the participants' 'fears' drawn from the previous activity, this activity aims at showing how a range of inputs could combine over time to affect the future development of the area of interest.
- **Backcasting a Utopian future:** Similarly, based on the participants' 'hopes' identified during the *Hopes & Fears* activity, this method helps determine the steps that need to be taken to arrive at a preferred future.

The results of these activities should help to construct shared, preferred futures amongst diverse actors and develop visions of what could help sustain and build vibrant and robust creative communities beyond the pandemic.

Activity 2: Hope & Fears

Organisations in the private and public sectors often utilise this activity before implementing change projects. For example, in their Open Policy Making toolkit¹⁴, the Cabinet Office recommends utilising this tool at the earliest stages of policy development to understand the aims and needs of diverse stakeholders and users involved in a policy area.

Again, workshop participants were invited to join a pre-designed online board to collaboratively write down their hopes and fears (see Figures 5 and 6).

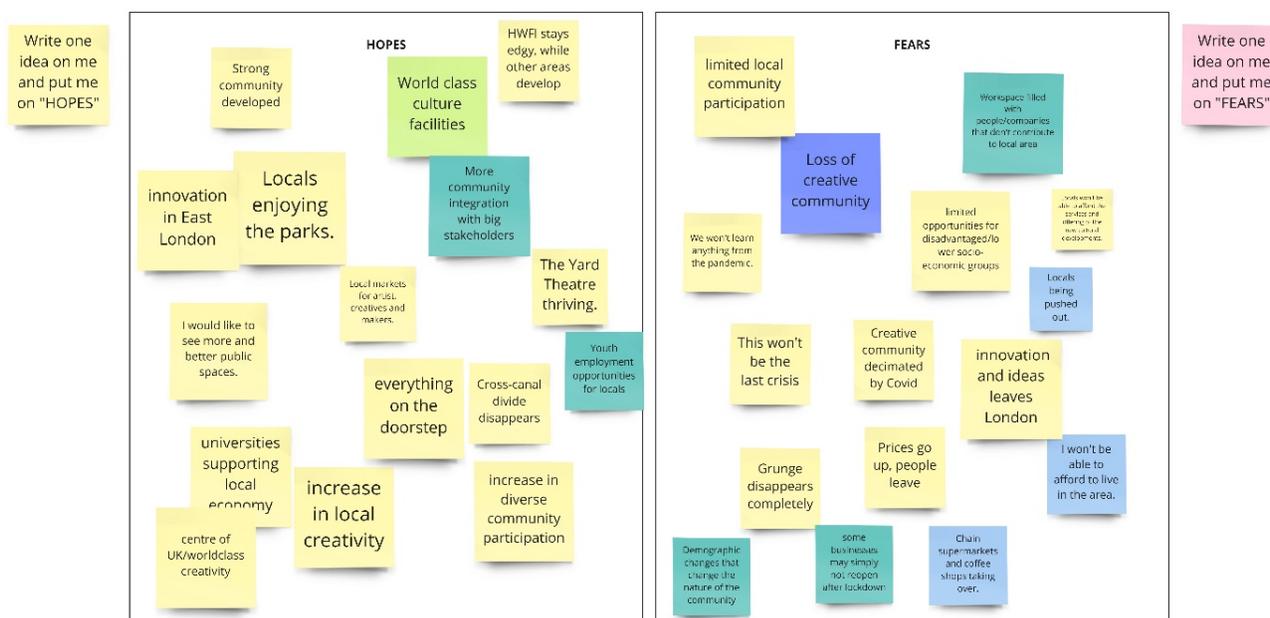


Figure 6: FDW1 Hopes & Fears Miro board

¹⁴ Open Policy Making toolkit. <https://www.gov.uk/guidance/open-policy-making-toolkit/understanding-policy-problems-and-user-needs#hope-and-fear-intro>

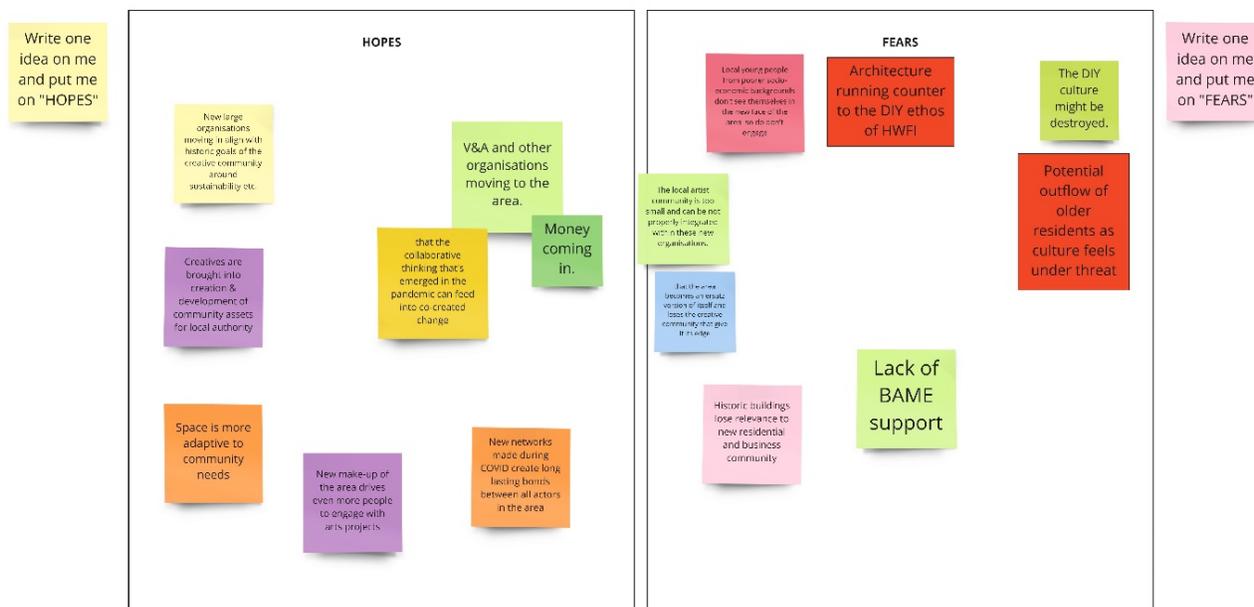


Figure 7: FDW2 Hopes & Fears Miro board

The collated results of this activity in both workshops are presented below:

- Hopes:** The hopes captured in this exercise can be summarised in the idea of ‘local re-appropriation’. Most comments referred to the notion of the local community learning from the pandemic and strengthening its social fabric to make better use of the resources available and exploit future opportunities. Residents would be empowered and drive the area’s development in a more ‘horizontal’ relationship with local authorities. Higher Education Institutions (HEIs) and cultural organisations entering the area would foster local development whilst offering collaboration and job opportunities to residents. Likewise, capital poured into the area would help ensure current residents will not have to leave the area, thus helping to preserve its identity. Also, HW/FI’s characteristic ‘grungy’ look and feel would remain dominant despite new developments. As a result, the local communities would become self-sustained, and the area recognised as a global creative powerhouse.
- Fears:** The main worry for the future is the disintegration of the creative communities in the area. This would take many forms, including the cost-driven expulsion of creatives and waves of new residents disengaged from the creative communities. Likewise, current residents from less favourable socioeconomic backgrounds would feel more disenfranchised, thus less likely to become active community members. Furthermore, the built environment will continue to change until there is no resemblance to the current post-industrial atmosphere, deepening the area’s identity crisis. The ‘new shiny buildings’ would further contribute to residents’ isolation within their apartments, severely damaging the area’s social fabric. Finally, large chains would take over the local businesses extracting capital from the area whilst standardising their offering.

Activity 3: Roadmap to a Dystopian future

The road mapping exercise visually identified when and how major events and decision points could influence the area’s future, particularly in relation to the notion of space and the creative communities. This is a well-known method utilised by many organisations, including government

bodies, to combine known events with speculative ones to deepen understanding of the complex relationships between them and build a holistic picture¹⁵.

Once more, pre-designed online boards to work collaboratively were utilised (see Figures 7 and 8).

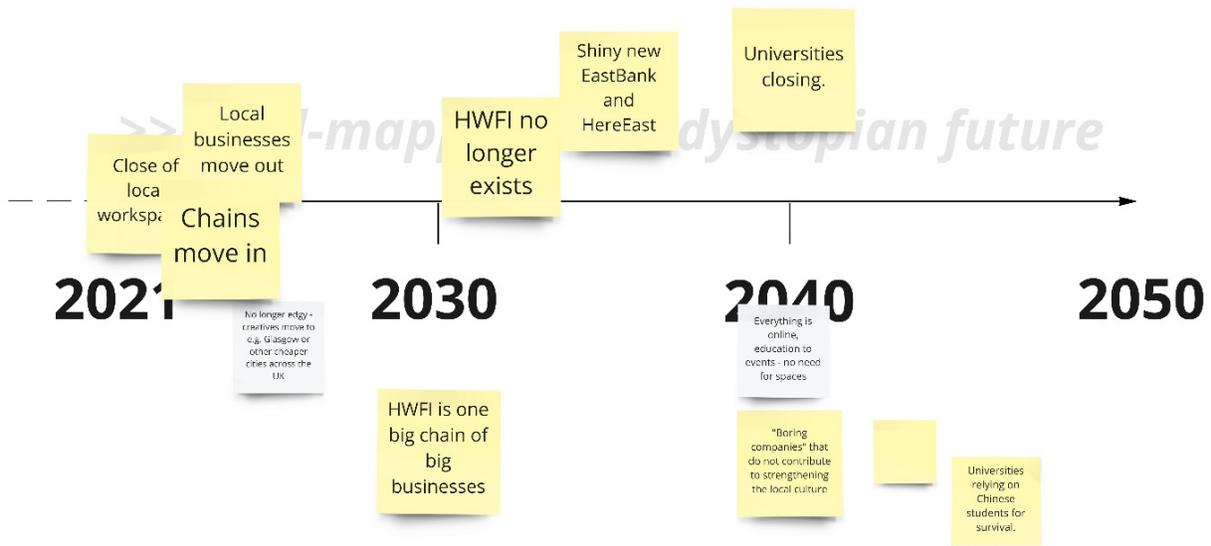


Figure 8: FDW1 Dystopia – Roadmapping Miro Board

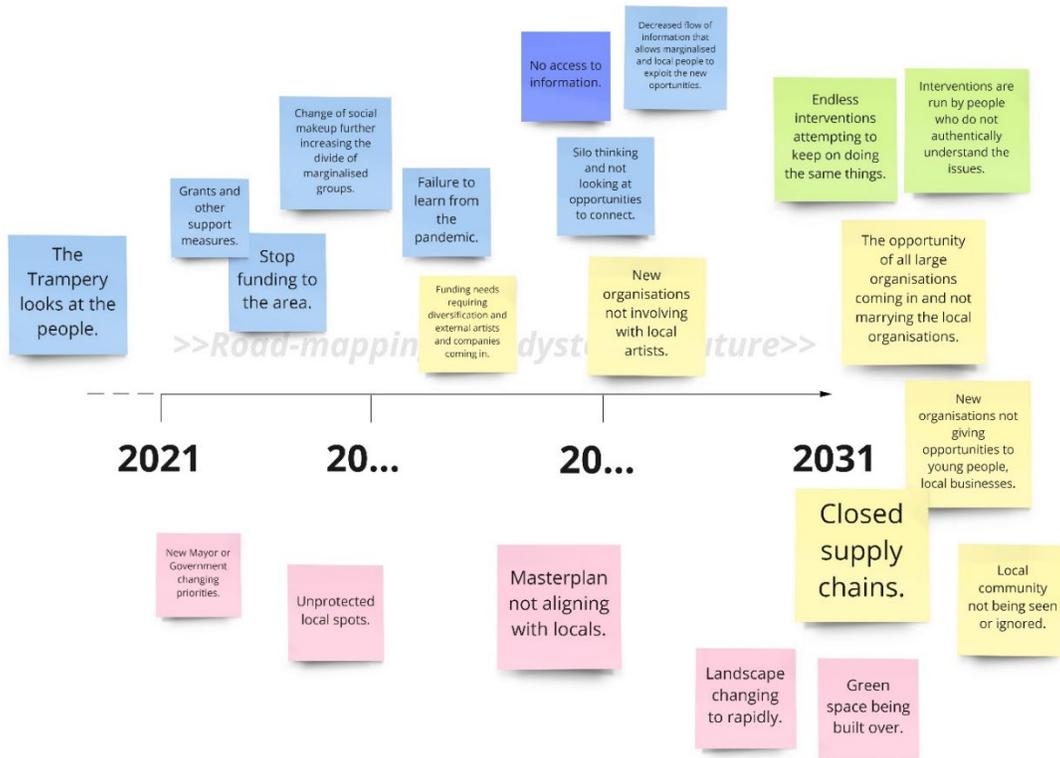


Figure 9: FDW2 Dystopia – Roadmapping Miro Board

¹⁵ Government Office for Science (2017). *The Futures Toolkit: Tools for Futures Thinking and Foresight Across UK Government*: https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674209/futures-toolkit-edition-1.pdf

Participants found the roadmap to a dystopian future to be a relatively easy path to envision. This was mainly associated with a lack of or a weak sense of agency by the current residents and local creatives. In other words, the roadmap to the realisation of their fears is seen as directly related to their capacity to influence authorities' decision-making. In some regards, some of these fears are seen as the inevitable outcome of gentrification, for which explicit actions should be taken to avoid it. For instance, the recent opening of a chain supermarket store in Hackney Wick is seen as the precursor of other chains moving into the area and eventually out-competing local businesses.

Similarly, the redevelopment of old warehouses currently used as live/work spaces being converted into apartment buildings is a concern not only for the inevitable displacement of the current occupants but also because of the aesthetic change associated with it. Furthermore, participants imagined the prominent cultural organisations coming to the area disregarding the existing creative potential and bringing with them closed supply chains, which would mean locking out local creatives and driving new and existing audiences to consume the new cultural offering. At the end of this process is a perceived inability to produce support mechanisms that help the existing communities to survive by systematically misunderstanding their needs.

Activity 4: Backcasting a Utopian future

In a back-casting exercise, participants connect a given scenario (in this case, a preferred future) with the present whilst identifying the key milestones leading to it. This approach aims to pinpoint what is in the decision makers' control, and thus can be delivered, and what is beyond their control and then needs to be managed¹⁶.

For this activity, participants were also invited to collaboratively work on pre-designed online boards (see Figures 9 and 10).

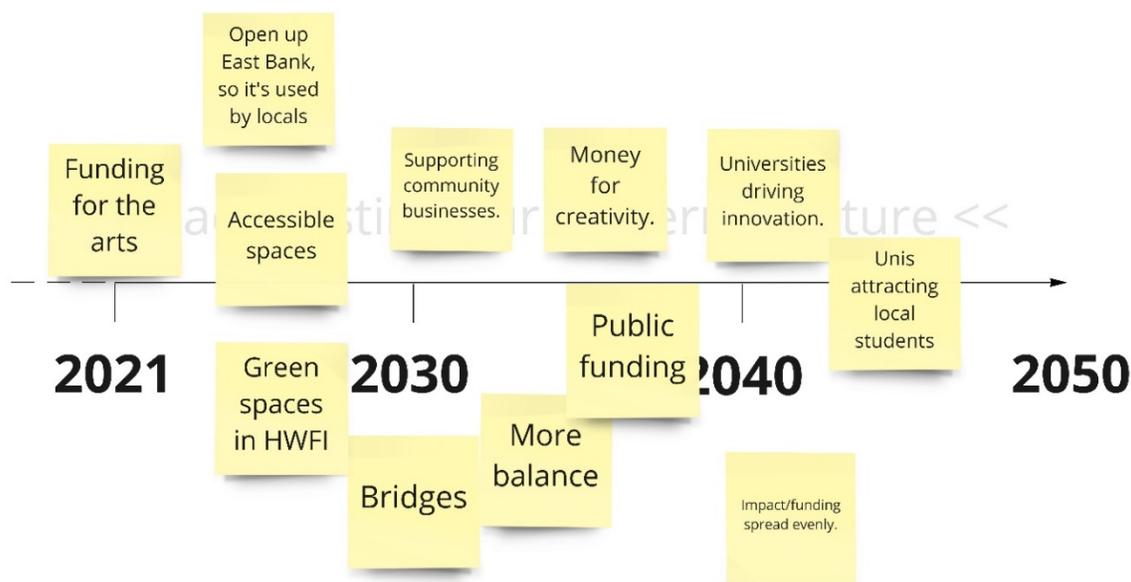


Figure 10: FDW1 Utopia – Backcasting

¹⁶ Government Office for Science (2017). *The Futures Toolkit: Tools for Futures Thinking and Foresight Across UK Government*. https://assets.publishing.service.gov.uk/government/uploads/system/uploads/attachment_data/file/674209/futures-toolkit-edition-1.pdf

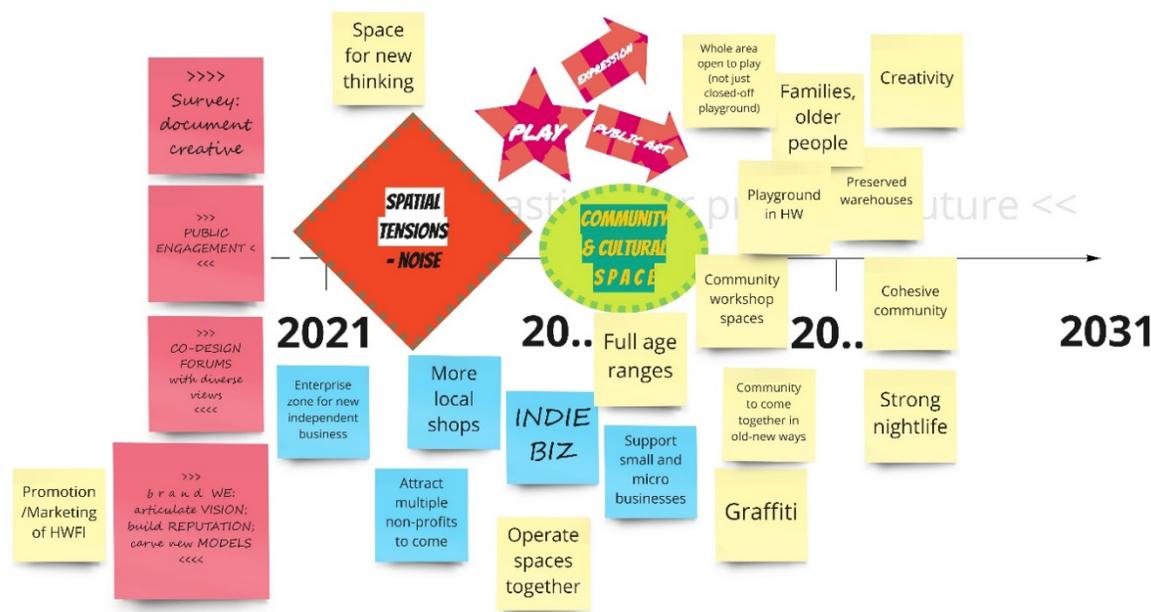


Figure 11: FDW2 Utopia – Backcasting

The utopian future envisioned from the *Hope & Fears* activity is one where a cohesive and empowered local community is in charge of its own destiny. The elements that once made HW/FI a lively area, such as vibrant nightlife, remain strong and coexist in harmony with families and the elderly in the area. The warehouses and other live/work spaces have been preserved, and HW/FI is an area for creative experimentation that transcends the workshops, studios, and ateliers spilling over the streets and public spaces. To achieve this, the newly established HEIs play a role in channelling funding into the area, driving innovation, and benefiting the local communities from these developments. The steel bridges are followed by metaphorical ones that unite both sides of the canal, thus building and widening a customer base for local creative businesses. As a starting point, participants see the creation and strengthening of local forums that enhance resident participation and foster local engagement in decision-making forums and processes.

4. Analysis of the workshops’ themes

As intended, the notion of *space* dominated the conversation when looking at the creative communities’ future in the area to different degrees. Perhaps the first point to make is that moving to or locating their creative practices to HW/FI/QEOP is for these creatives a very conscious decision taken to a large extent based on the prospect of embedding themselves in the local creative atmosphere, becoming part of its communities, and enjoying the benefits that come with a lively creative network.

“I like that sense of being around people who are doing creative things [...] I wanted to put myself in the middle of that”.

FDW2 participant.

From the three sessions carried out in this phase, three main facets of ‘space’ were identified:

- Workspace;
- Living space;
- Public space.

4.1 Workspace

Unsurprisingly, gentrification was highlighted as one of the most salient threats to the local creative communities’ survival. Although housing developments are often seen as the most obvious risk, the arrival of large cultural organisations is also perceived as both an opportunity and a threat. For example, during the *Futures focus group*, concerns were raised about the East Bank development¹⁷. The fear is that this ambitious culture and education district will “parachute” into the Olympic Park, ignoring the local creatives. This worry was echoed in both subsequent *Future design workshops*, indicating that the participants see themselves as mere spectators of these changes that will undoubtedly significantly impact the area. Some, however, are hopeful about the impact this might have and see it as an opportunity to strengthen the local creative communities.

“The Southbank is a good example of a big cultural institution which has helped spawn a big, really vibrant local creative community, and there’s a potential to do something like that in Hackney Wick.”

FDW1 participant.

Irrespective, all participants agreed on a preferred future where ventures such as the East Bank are co-designed with the residents and local creatives to preserve and strengthen the existing communities.

Participants also expressed their concerns about workspace affordability and the demolition of warehouses that provide special conditions not only for developing certain creative practices but also for exploiting synergies in these settings.

“Beyond emotional support, for resource sharing, for knowledge sharing, a good example that I like to use is that I’ve had situations where I’ve had to fix things in my room, fix my bike, fix my guitar, and I’ve never paid for a tool, I’ve never paid for someone to do it for me because I always know someone who has that tool or has that knowledge and is able to help me do it.”

FDW2 participant.

Although most participants do not live in the remaining live/work spaces in HW/FI, most show explicit support for their existence as they see them as staples of the creative communities in the area and an intrinsic part of its identity.

4.2 Living space

Space seems to be the central resource in dispute in HW/FI. This is a contentious issue for the creative communities since they believe it is their interventions in the built environment and creative practices that make the area unique. However, the large majority – and especially those in live/work

¹⁷ What is East Bank? <https://www.queenelizabetholympicpark.co.uk/east-bank/what-is-east-bank>

spaces— are not the landlords or freeholders of their accommodation and find themselves at the mercy of what is perceived as an inevitable gentrification process.

Moreover, the issues around living spaces are intimately related to a particular way of living and an ethos that some claim is quintessential to the area.

“I really see Hackney Wick and other warehouses and communities like that as a model for not only sustainability, but as a model for community-led living, and I think that oftentimes there’s a big focus on creativity when people are discussing the area but something that is very important about this community is the grassroots kind of DIY ethos but also the support network, which is intimately tied with the space in which people live.”

FDW2 participant.

In a way, and not unlike many other gentrified areas worldwide, it is the creatives’ success at making a unique place that eventually expels them from it.

Moving forward, participants envisage safeguarded pockets within the area where work/live spaces remain a reality and continue to offer an alternative way of living for creatives wanting to reap the benefits of the flow and influx of ideas and resources.

4.3 Public spaces

The pandemic has made clear the need for different kinds of public spaces. It became clear for the residents that having the QEOP on their doorstep enabled a significant improvement in their quality of life since HW/FI does not have green areas for leisure and recreation besides the nearby Victoria Park. The participants clearly expressed their views of a more localised community that enjoys the newly developed park and green areas whilst also appropriating it.

Furthermore, the government-imposed restrictions on mobility had a direct effect on residents’ use of local public spaces and amenities.

“...as a resident, the thing that has changed during Covid is that the area is alive in a way that it wasn’t before, especially during the week”.

FDW2 participant.

Participants remarked on the fact that, even during the lockdown, new local businesses opened, thus taking advantage of captive consumers. They also signalled the need for markets that allow local creatives to showcase and trade beyond the pandemic. However, there were concerns about a well-known supermarket opening in HW, which is seen as a potential invasion of commercial chains that would displace local businesses (interestingly, this is despite residents’ complaints about the lack of competition and consequent high prices in local off-licenses).

Lastly, the notion of public spaces was highlighted in terms of forums for debate and exchange. In this regard, one participant referred to the importance of the Cultural Interest Group meetings as a way of becoming part of the local creative communities:

“...the CIG meetings have been really helpful because you get to see who is part of that ecosystem and it becomes more of not just satelliting in but being part of the Hackney Wick / Fish Island communities”.

FDW1 participant.

Similarly, another participant expressed how the rotating venues in which these meetings used to take place¹⁸ facilitated the creatives discovering and occupying local spaces:

“[the CIG meetings were] never in the same place twice during the time that I was physically attending. Which was great because that would be in cafés or the workspaces or in rooms for hire or whatever, and it was a really nice way of getting to know back rooms at the brewery and things that I hadn’t been into.”

FDW1 participant.

It became apparent that this type of exchange is crucial to businesses in HW/FI. The geographic proximity of one another in the area has enabled people to more or less casually meet, which in turn propitiated the exchange of ideas and gave place to business opportunities.

5. Phase 2 conclusions

Hackney Wick and its surrounding area are presented as a creative hub of global dimensions. Evidence of this is the Creative Enterprise Zone designation, which aims to secure London’s “future as a cultural capital and ensure artists and creatives continue to call this place their home”¹⁹. Despite these efforts, local creatives face precarious living and working conditions, often resulting in their relocation outside the area. From insights gathered in the previous stage of this research, the notion of ‘spaces’ appeared as a central feature of the creatives’ narratives during the Covid-19 crisis.

The three sessions conducted for the second phase of this research offered rich pictures of how the creative communities see themselves moving forward. From them, three main aspects of ‘space’ were identified:

- **Workspace:** The creative communities see HW/FI as an inspiring area that offers plenty of development opportunities. They aspire to see affordable workspaces in which knowledge, ideas, and resources are available and shared.
- **Living space:** The rising housing prices added to the demolition of warehouses to build new apartment buildings puts increasing pressure on creatives that have suffered significant financial drawbacks due to the Covid-19 crisis. The participants involved in this project clearly stated the need to guarantee affordable housing whilst safeguarding the remaining work/live spaces. The latter not only responds to the need for affordable housing but also to preserving the area’s ethos and aesthetics.
- **Public space:** The influx of capital in the area has been beneficial for developing green areas, which proved vital for the residents during lockdown periods. These, however, are located mainly in the QEOP, and there is still a divide between it and HW/FI. Furthermore, in terms of the creative businesses’ health, mobility restrictions and social distancing measures have negatively affected the interactions and flow of ideas and resources that used to take place in HW/FI. However, the participants expressed their confidence in incorporating the lessons learned during the lockdown period, where social support networks and online forums made a significant difference for the subsistence of residents and local creatives.

¹⁸ The Cultural Interest Group meetings have been taking place online since March 2020.

¹⁹ Creative Enterprise Zones. <https://www.london.gov.uk/what-we-do/arts-and-culture/culture-and-good-growth/creative-enterprise-zones>

Naturally, the issues around each of these types of spaces are intertwined, and their assessment should be considered systemically. For instance, the fact that the area has been transitioning from its industrial heritage to a more residential destination means appropriate living and public spaces are just being developed. Conversely, the limited available space means new homes will be built in the former industrial buildings that attracted the creative communities in the first place. Arriving at a healthy balance will require conscientious planning. Notably, the participants preferred future for the area involved a high degree of autonomy of the local communities and the prospect of creating an area to live and work where creative experimentation is at its heart.