International network
for contemporary
performing arts

COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Stories, reflections and lessons from practice

Written by Matina Magkou and Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

www.ietm.org

October 2026

IETM Report
Community Building in the Performing Arts

Authors
Matina Magkou
Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio

Editor and coordinator:
Elena Politseva

Graphic layout
Milton Pereira (IETM) on a template by Formula
www.formulaprojects.net

Published by
IETM — International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts
Square Sainctelette 19,
1000 Brussels, BE
+32 2 201 09 15 / ietm@ietm.org

ISBN code
9782930897639

This publication is distributed free of charge and follows the Creative Commons agreement Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives (CC BY-NC-ND). You are free to reuse and share this publication or parts of it as long as you mention the original source.

This publication should be mentioned as follows: Matina Magkou, Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio, “Community Building in the Performing Arts”, IETM, Brussels, October 2026.

www.ietm.org/en/reports

For further information please contact: ietm@ietm.org

Cover photo:
Peóximo, photo: Chão de Oliva

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Forward by IETM - Six Ingredients of Community Building 04
Introduction 07
Methodology 08

CHAPTER 1: UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE PERFORMING ARTS 10
Framing the conversation 11
From audience development to relational practice 12
Community building as relationship 14

CHAPTER 2: STORIES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING 15
Story #1: Building a theatre beyond its walls 16
Chão de Oliva (Portugal) 19
Story #2: Living together - Synikismos Festival (Greece & Cyprus) 22
Story #3: Familiar faces - Plays Aloud (Commedia of Errors, Northern Ireland) 25
Story #4: Held in the tide: reframing opera through community co-creation - ArtHouse Jersey (Island of Jersey) 27
Story #5: Being part of the community - Don Sen Folo – LAB's Practice (Mali) 28
Story #6: Hetpaleis' practice of belonging and participation - (Belgium) 29
Story #7: A place in the audience - Out of the care home, into the theatre (Bureau Ritter, Germany) 30

CHAPTER 3: FURTHER PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY BUILDING 33
The need of finding a community before building one 34
When community building is a form of social infrastructure 35
The role of support intermediaries 36
On commissioning with instead of for a community 37
Community beyond the human 38
Working with rooted communities while being mobile 39

CHAPTER 4: REFLECTING FORWARD: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING 40
What funding for community building? 41
From temporary projects to lasting spaces and relationships 42
Evaluation embedded in community building practice 43
Valuing process beyond the artistic outcome 44
Performing arts as a method for community building across art forms 45
Seeing community building as a situated practice 46
Recognising the labour of care 47
Where does artistic practice end and social work begin? 48

Acknowledgements 49

Co-funded by the European Union

The European Commission support for the production of this publication does not constitute an endorsement of the contents which reflects the views only of the authors, and the Commission cannot be held responsible for any use which may be made of the information contained therein.

FORWARD BY IETM

SIX INGREDIENTS OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

The question of how people live together has acquired renewed urgency. With democratic institutions under pressure, loneliness increasingly recognised as a social concern, and polarisation threatening the spaces in which disagreement can remain productive, serious attention to how communities are built and sustained is essential. There is a pressing need for spaces in which differences can be encountered without immediately being reduced to opposition — spaces for listening, negotiation, imagination and the exercise of agency.

The performing arts have always played a particular role in making such spaces. They bring people together, physically and temporally, around art which comes to life in their presence. They depend on an encounter: between artists and audiences, certainly, but also among strangers, collaborators, institutions, neighbourhoods and the social realities in which artistic work takes place.

But gathering people is not the same as building community. This distinction sits at the heart of this publication. The performing arts may be inherently relational, but meaningful relationships do not follow automatically from simply gathering people. An audience is not necessarily a community; participation does not necessarily produce belonging; proximity does not guarantee reciprocity. And an artistic organisation can operate in the same neighbourhood for decades without becoming meaningfully embedded within it.

Over the past few years, community-building has surfaced with striking persistence across conversations within the IETM network. Discussions beginning with very different concerns — ecological transition, international collaboration, advocacy, working conditions, the value of the performing arts — have repeatedly arrived at a similar set of questions: How are we situated within our local realities? What kinds of relationships do we have with the people around us? Who feels that our spaces and practices belong to them? And how can performing arts organisations move beyond simply reaching people towards developing relationships that are sustained, reciprocal and meaningful?

These questions have become particularly pertinent at a moment when cultural organisations are being asked by funders and policy-makers to demonstrate their social relevance with increasing frequency. There is an important tension here. The growing recognition that culture has a role to play in social cohesion, democracy and wellbeing creates opportunities for the performing arts. But it can also instrumentalise them, turning complex relational processes into promises of measurable social outcomes.

Community-building sits directly inside this tension. This publication therefore does not set out to prove that the performing arts are good at building communities. Nor is it a repository of exemplary practices to be replicated elsewhere. Instead, we wanted to understand what actually happens when artists and organisations attempt to develop sustained relationships with the people and realities around them: what they do, what enables them to do it, where they encounter resistance, what they learn, and what cannot be planned.

The practitioners featured here work in different geographical, political and social contexts. Their approaches are logically very diverse. Yet across their experiences, several conditions recur. They are not a recipe for community-building, but they do offer a vocabulary for thinking about what makes relational artistic practice possible: **time, presence, connection, awareness and quality.**

1. Time

The first is time. Community-building is often funded through projects, while relationships do not behave like projects. They do not begin neatly with an application deadline and rarely mature by the date of a final report. Encounters become relationships through repetition; trust accumulates unevenly; setbacks occur; people disappear and return. Some of the most valuable outcomes may become visible only years later.

Time, in this sense, is the possibility of continuity. This exposes a structural contradiction familiar across the cultural sector: artists and organisations are increasingly encouraged to demonstrate long-term social relevance while being supported through short-term funding architectures. Community-building makes that contradiction particularly visible because its most important resource — trust — is what cannot be accelerated or predicted.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

2. Presence

Time alone, however, does very little. The second condition is presence. The practitioners in this publication repeatedly speak about 'being there': in a neighbourhood, in a room, at local events, in moments that have little obvious connection to the artistic project itself. Presence generates a form of situated knowledge that cannot easily be substituted by research conducted from a distance.

But simply 'being there' does not produce legitimacy. An organisation can be physically present while remaining socially distant; an artist can arrive with participatory intentions while retaining control over the terms of participation.

3. Connection

Presence creates the possibility of connection, but it cannot guarantee it. Connection may be the least 'programmable' element of community-building. It cannot be produced on demand, and it does not necessarily begin with agreement or affection. It may emerge through curiosity, disagreement, recognition, shared work or simply the decision to return.

What the experiences collected here suggest, however, is that connection rarely survives without consistency: returning matters, following up, remembering previous conversations, becoming part of existing and creating new rituals. The seemingly unremarkable and even repetitive act of showing up again may be more important than one spectacular, even if participatory, event.

4. Awareness

Community-building also begins with recognising that there is rarely a community waiting to be built. Places already contain relationships, histories, tensions, informal networks, hierarchies and forms of solidarity. Approaching a territory as an empty social space awaiting artistic intervention can therefore reproduce the distance.

Several practitioners in this publication describe a different starting point: listening before proposing, observing before acting, and allowing their own assumptions about a place to be unsettled and unlearned. This requires a particular kind of artistic humility — the willingness to let one's practice be affected by what is already there.

Sometimes this means entering an unfamiliar context. But sometimes the more radical recognition is that an organisation is already part of a community it has learned to perceive primarily as an 'audience'. The task is then how the organisation understands and renegotiates its own place within an existing relational ecology.

5. Quality

This brings us to one of the most contested questions: artistic quality. Community-oriented practice is still occasionally framed through a presumed trade-off between artistic excellence and accessibility, as though becoming more socially embedded necessarily required lowering artistic ambition. The experiences explored here strongly challenge that assumption.

Working seriously with communities can demand an exceptional degree of artistic rigour. It requires artists to negotiate uncertainty, respond to multiple forms of knowledge, relinquish some control without relinquishing artistic responsibility, and allow encounters to reshape the work without reducing artistic practice to service provision.

If quality is understood primarily through the finished artistic object, much of the intelligence involved in relational practice disappears from view. But if artistic quality also concerns the capacity to create conditions for meaningful encounters, to listen, respond, connect, sustain attention and transform one's own practice through those relationships, then community-building is not a compromise with artistic quality, but one of its expressions.

This does not mean that every community-oriented project is artistically strong, nor that social value should become a substitute for artistic judgement. It means that the relationship between artistic quality and social quality deserves a more nuanced framing than the opposition between 'excellence' and 'access'.

6. Infrastructures of trust

Ultimately, the stories in this publication return us to a paradox. Community-building is increasingly expected of artists and cultural organisations, yet the conditions under which they are asked to do it often work against the depth of relationships they are supposed to create. Trust requires time, while funding is too often short-term. Relationships require responsiveness, while projects require predetermined outcomes. Meaningful connection involves uncertainty, while accountability systems reward predictability. Organisations are encouraged to become embedded locally while remaining dependent on competitive and often precarious funding cycles.

If we take community-building — and art's role in democracy — seriously, these contradictions cannot remain peripheral to the conversation. Funding systems must ultimately recognise the temporalities, uncertainties and relational infrastructures on which such work depends.

The performing arts will continue to generate communities, sometimes intentionally and sometimes unexpectedly. But meaningful community-building asks for something more demanding than gathering people around art. It asks artists and organisations to stay, listen, return, reconsider their position and allow themselves to be changed by the relationships they create. And it asks something equally demanding of those who support them. So, if we expect artists to build infrastructures of trust, we need funding and policy systems capable of trusting them to do so.

We thank the authors of this publication — Matina Magkou and Herman Bashiron Mendolicchio — for the rigour, curiosity and expertise they have brought to this research journey. We are also conscious that many other voices, experiences and practices deserve attention but could not be included within the scope of this study. We therefore invite readers to approach this paper not as a definitive account, but as part of an ongoing conversation — one that connects with IETM's past, current and future work on these questions. It can also be read alongside other IETM publications and stories, including those in this series, such as *Connecting the Dots: Fair Arts Practice in Contexts*, dedicated to fair practice, which brings together five stories from contexts outside the Western frame.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

INTRODUCTION

Across the performing arts sector, there is growing interest in moving beyond audience development — a concept that has traditionally focused on expanding, and diversifying engagement with audiences, as spectators and receivers — and exploring more meaningful, long-term relationships with communities as co-creators and participants. The publication aims to contribute to this conversation through stories and insights from practitioners working in diverse contexts around the world.

But what is community building in the performing arts? There is of course no single answer to this question. This publication explores different ways in which performing arts organisations understand and cultivate this practice. These ways do not point towards a single definition of 'best practice'. Instead, they reveal a diversity of approaches shaped by different contexts, artistic visions and social realities. This contextuality is precisely what makes community-building both valuable and difficult to explain, as it seeks to create the conditions for meaningful connections to emerge — an approach attuned to the uniqueness of each practice and context, and therefore typically difficult to measure or plan in advance.

Community building matters because it defines what the performing arts make possible: not only what happens on stage, but **who feels welcome, who takes part, whose voices are heard, and what kinds of relationships can grow within and around artistic work.**

At its best, community-building creates spaces where people can connect and develop a sense of belonging, while also enabling organisations to become more rooted in the social realities around them. Community building, therefore, is emerging as one of the dimensions of relevance for performing arts organisations.

The publication is part of IETM's broader commitment to strengthening knowledge and practice around community building, a topic highly relevant to its members and long discussed and explored through network activities. It also lays the groundwork for the **IETM Community Building School**, launching in 2027, which will explore various practical aspects around the practice of working with communities, such as community engagement, participatory approaches and new ways of curating artistic work and developing performing arts organisations and venues. By bringing together experiences, questions and practical reflections from across the IETM network and beyond, this publication contributes to the shared knowledge that will continue to be developed and disseminated through the School and other network's activities, aiming to inspire and inform both practitioners and policy-makers.

Mellowing, photo: Phil Dera

METHODOLOGY

A call for stories

The research approach was to learn directly from practitioners. To identify a broad range of practices, we launched an open call through IETM's communication channels, inviting performing arts organisations to share their experiences of community building. We were not seeking 'best practices', but honest reflections on various initiatives and projects that helped performing arts organisations to create meaningful relationships with their local ecosystem: people, neighbourhoods, and other local institutions and companies — both from within and outside the performing arts.

Interviews

The call gathered around 40 responses from organisations across Europe, Africa and Latin America. We conducted interviews with most respondents using a semi-structured guide that explored motivations, working methods, challenges and lessons learned.

From these conversations, we captured seven short stories highlighting different approaches to community building, complemented by insights from additional examples. Our criteria were not about selecting 'successful' examples, but choosing cases that illustrate distinct perspectives and contexts, and raise specific questions.

Questions asked

The research was guided by a series of open questions exploring how community building is understood and practiced across different contexts:

How do performing arts organisations move from audience development towards community building?

How are meaningful and reciprocal relationships created and sustained over time?

What practices, partnerships and structures support community building?

What tensions and challenges emerge when organisations work closely with communities?

What lessons can practitioners share with others who want to engage with or build communities around their work?

From individual experiences to collective reflections

The stories and cases presented in this publication are not intended as a catalogue of models to replicate. Instead, they serve as starting points for reflection. Read together, they reveal recurring themes, shared and unique dilemmas and practical insights that cut across different contexts. The final section of the publication brings these experiences into dialogue, identifying common questions and lessons that may inspire practitioners developing their own approaches to community building.

While this publication does not aim to be exhaustive, it offers a snapshot of an evolving field, recognising that community building is always shaped by local contexts, relationships and the people involved. We intentionally did not apply a predefined definition of 'community building', letting the interviewees define working with communities in their own terms and through their practices. Three interconnected dimensions emerged:

a. Co-creation — making *with* communities

Artists and organisations work with communities as co-creators of artistic work, involving local people in the development, creation and/or performance of artistic projects. Here, community members are participants in the artistic process rather than primarily audiences. They may also become audiences for the resulting work, but the defining feature is their active role in making it.

b. Audience engagement — connecting with audiences and publics

Artists and organisations expand and build relationships with audiences and local publics, often with the focus on people who may have limited access to or are less engaged with the performing arts, including those from underprivileged or underserved backgrounds, but not exclusively. The emphasis is on bringing people into contact with the performing arts as audiences and participants, through opportunities for access, dialogue, encounter and repeated engagement with artistic offer. Here, people may move between the roles of audience member and participant, but the primary aim is to broaden and deepen cultural participation and make engagement with the performing arts more accessible, meaningful and sustained.

c. **Relationship building — creating lasting social connections**

Beyond participation in a specific artistic project or engagement with an artistic programme, performing arts organisations build more versatile and sustained relationships with local communities and **help create or strengthen relationships among people themselves**. Communities are therefore not understood simply as recipients of artistic work, but as members of a social space that can develop through sustained engagement. Performing arts activities provide opportunities for encounter, debate, belonging, practicing and shaping rituals, mutual recognition and collective action, helping to build social ties, trust and a sense of shared identity that can extend beyond the artistic activity itself. The artistic activity becomes a means through which longer-term relationships and forms of collective life can develop, with social effects extending beyond audiences' engagement with the organisation or its work. Through relationship-building, performing arts organisations and artists not only reach audiences but also become embedded in the social fabric and dynamics of the communities and contexts in which they work.

The three dimensions should not be understood as mutually exclusive categories. Many of the stories presented here may speak more directly to the first two dimensions. This can perhaps be explained by the fact that building relationships between artists and local people beyond the artistic context, and fostering closer relationships among people themselves through participation in art, do not necessarily emerge as explicit goals or starting points, nor are they outcomes that are always achieved. The stories explored as part of this research, however, suggest that these intentions can function as a compass: a longer-term aspiration that shapes how performing arts organisations approach their relationships with communities. This orientation may not always translate into lasting community ties, and projects may fall short of this ambition. Yet the value lies partly in the intention to create conditions for connection, belonging and mutual relationships that extend beyond the artistic encounter.

This relationship-oriented dimension of working with communities is arguably the most ambitious and challenging of the three, but also the most unpredictable, because the development and sustainability of relationships between people extend beyond the direct control of performing arts organisations. At the same time, community building can emerge from more targeted practices of co-creation and audience engagement, when relationships developed through artistic participation or repeated engagement gradually and sometimes unexpectedly evolve into connections, trust, belonging or forms of collective life that extend beyond the artistic activity itself. The distinction is therefore not between practices that do or do not build community, but between different trajectories of impact.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

CHAPTER 1

UNDERSTANDING COMMUNITY BUILDING IN THE PERFORMING ARTS

Before turning to the experiences gathered in this publication, this chapter introduces some of the ideas and debates that help frame the conversation about community-building in the performing arts. It proposes a lens through which to read the practices, questions and reflections that emerge from the stories and insights from the interviews that follow.

SenteMente, photo: Chão de Oliva

FRAMING THE CONVERSATION

Few words have become as popular in the performing arts field as community. It appears in strategic plans, funding programmes, artistic manifestos and policy documents across Europe and beyond. Theatres speak about opening themselves to their neighbourhoods and engaging with public space as a natural extension of the stage. Festivals seek to strengthen their connection with local contexts. Artists develop projects with schools, care homes, neighbourhood associations, migrant communities, young people or residents of a particular place. Community building has become one of the ways in which many performing arts organisations rethink their relationship with the places and people around them, as well as their own role in society.

Yet the popularity of the word 'community' should not be confused with its clarity. The same word is used to describe remarkably different practices. In one context it refers to a theatre maintaining a long-term presence in a neighbourhood through repeated encounters, local activities and relationships with residents; in another, to a participatory artistic process in which local residents or specific groups of people become co-creators; elsewhere it describes artistic mediation, social inclusion, institutional partnerships or new forms of governance. These experiences often share similar values, but they do not follow a single model, nor do they pursue identical objectives.

This diversity is one of the key strengths of the performing arts field, which is highly inventive when it comes to the both natural and challenging task of building relationships with the people around it. Community building did not emerge from a single artistic movement or theoretical tradition. It has evolved through decades of experimentation by artists, cultural organisations, educators and communities themselves, intersecting with broader debates on participation, audience engagement and the civic role of culture[1]. Throughout this publication, community building is therefore understood not as a fixed methodology but as an evolving field of artistic practice, shaped by local contexts, institutional cultures and the relationships that develop between artists, organisations and people.

Bureau Ritter, photo: Phil Dera

FROM AUDIENCE DEVELOPMENT TO RELATIONAL PRACTICE

Many of the questions surrounding community building in the arts are closely connected with the evolution of *audience development*. Its roots can be traced to changes in the European arts policy and practice during the 1980s, when cultural organisations and public funders began paying greater attention to who participated in the arts, who did not, and how audiences might be broadened. Research commissioned by the Arts Council of Great Britain in 1986, for example, drew attention to the representation and underrepresentation of different groups in arts audiences. By the 1990s, these concerns were increasingly articulated through the language of audience development, bringing together approaches from arts marketing, education and outreach. Heather Maitland's influential A Guide to Audience Development (1997), which traces some of these earlier developments, was also one of the publications that helped formalise the concept in the UK.[2]

Since then, the meaning and practice of audience development have expanded considerably. The conversation has moved beyond questions of marketing and attendance to include access, participation, diversity, representation, social impact of culture and the quality of people's engagement with cultural organisations.[3]

Research has accompanied and helped articulate this evolution. Ben Walmsley has argued that audience development should be understood not simply as attendance but as the quality of the relationship between people, artistic experiences and cultural organisations. His work shifts attention from audiences as consumers of cultural products towards audiences as active participants in cultural life, emphasising dialogue, emotional connection and shared cultural value. François Matarasso offers another useful perspective. Reflecting on more than three decades of participatory arts practice, he argues that participation is less about widening access to culture than recognising people's capacity to "make culture" themselves.[4] Matarasso understands communities not as primarily recipients of artistic activity or future audiences, but rather as people who already possess knowledge, creativity, memories and cultural practices of their own.

Community building intersects with these developments, but shifts the point of departure. Audience development generally asks how cultural organisations can reach, diversify or deepen their relationships with existing and potential audiences. Community building begins by asking who already inhabits a place, what relationships and cultural practices already exist there, and how artistic work and cultural organisations might develop through those relationships.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

Comparable developments were visible elsewhere in Europe, although they were not always described as 'audience development'. In the 1970-80s, France combined national research into cultural practices with policies of cultural democratisation, mediation and arts education; West Germany's Neue Kulturpolitik (1970s) placed unequal participation and 'culture for all' at the centre of policy; and the Netherlands developed targeted programmes from the 1980s to reach young people, rural communities and ethnic-minority audiences.

This evolution can also be traced in the EU's cultural policy. The European Commission's 2017 *Study on Audience Development – How to Place Audiences at the Centre of Cultural Organisations*[5] presents audience development through a broad framework that includes access and participation alongside organisational change, extending its scope well beyond increasing attendance.[6] *The New European Agenda for Culture* adopted in 2018, followed by the *Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022*, placed participation in cultural life within a wider discussion of cultural capability, citizenship, social cohesion and local development.[7] More recently, the *Culture Compass for Europe* has reinforced the emphasis on cultural rights, participation and access to cultural life.[8] These developments reflect a growing recognition that cultural participation for the sake of increased attendance is not just a matter of marketing and outreach, but it concerns wider issues and dynamics related to people's capacity to participate in and shape cultural life, as well as sense of belonging, ownership, and representation.

The initiatives collected for this publication illustrate the diversity of approaches organisations adopt to embed their work within existing social realities and, in a spirit of reciprocity, both listen to and seek to shape those realities.. Across the interviews, practitioners repeatedly described communities as already possessing histories, knowledge, creativity, cultural practices and social relationships before an artistic organisation enters the picture. Their starting point was often to spend time in a place, listen and understand what already exists before deciding what form an artistic process might take.

This changes the role relationships play in artistic practice. They are not simply a means of connecting people with a performance or organisation. They can influence what is created, how it is created and who participates in making it. At the same time, artistic processes can create conditions for relationships to develop among people themselves: between neighbours, participants, generations or groups who may otherwise have few opportunities to meet. Community building, in this sense, is not an additional programme accompanying artistic work. It is one possible way of imagining how artistic work is made, how organisations relate to the places around them, and how relationships can grow through cultural participation.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

COMMUNITY BUILDING AS RELATIONSHIP

Discussions about community building often focus on participation, inclusion or social impact of artistic practice. These dimensions are undoubtedly important. Yet they can sometimes obscure another essential question: what happens to artistic practice itself when it builds or stems from a relationship with a community?

Throughout the conversations that informed this publication, one concern surfaced repeatedly. Community-based work should never be understood as artistically secondary, and many practitioners argued that, on the contrary, working collaboratively with communities demands exceptional artistic rigour. It requires artists to navigate questions of authorship, ethics, representation and aesthetics while remaining attentive to the people with whom the work is created. The challenge is not to balance artistic ambition against participation, but to discover forms of artistic excellence that emerge through collaboration.

This debate has long been present within contemporary art. Grant Kester has suggested that dialogue, collaboration and shared knowledge can themselves constitute sophisticated artistic methodologies. Claire Bishop reminds us that collaborative practices should also be discussed critically as art, rather than being valued solely for their social outcomes.[9] These positions suggest that artistic quality and community building should not be understood as competing ambitions. They invite us to ask instead what artistic excellence might look like when creation becomes a genuinely collaborative process.

The initiatives featured in this publication offer diverse answers to that question. Their contexts, methods and artistic languages vary considerably. Some invite communities directly into the creative process. Some work through co-creation; others through artistic mediation or sustained partnerships.

What they do share is an understanding that community building is less about applying a predescribed toolkit than about cultivating a particular way of working that is deeply attuned to specific contexts which makes it highly unpredictable. Community building is grounded in listening. It values continuity beyond one-off encounters. It accepts that artistic processes may evolve as relationships deepen. It takes risks and is open to failure. Above all, it recognises that communities are not audiences waiting to be reached, but active participants in the cultural life of their own places.

Próximo, photo: Chão de Oliva

CHAPTER 2

STORIES OF COMMUNITY BUILDING

This chapter is the heart of the publication. Each story explores a different pathway to community building, revealing how artists, organisations and participants create connections, navigate challenges and sustain relationships over time.

Locus Eater, RESTOKE (2023) photo: Jenny Harper

STORY #1

BUILDING A THEATRE BEYOND ITS WALLS

Chão de Oliva (Portugal)

SenteMente, photo: Chão de Oliva

A conversation with Susana C. Gaspar, Artistic Director, Chão de Oliva

For many performing arts organisations, building a relationship with communities is something that happens alongside artistic creation: a programme, a department or a series of projects designed to connect with local audiences. For **Chão de Oliva**, a long-established independent theatre organisation based in Sintra, Portugal, it has become something much more fundamental: a way of understanding what a theatre is and what role it can play within a territory.

"Community takes time," Susana tells us early in our conversation. ***"There is nothing that can be built around rushing."*** That simple observation runs through nearly four decades of the organisation's history. It explains why Chão de Oliva has never approached community building as something to be achieved through isolated initiatives, but as a long-term commitment to people, places and relationships.

Founded in 1987 by a group of teachers passionate about theatre, Chão de Oliva has always combined artistic creation with education. As the organisation evolved, professional productions became part of its work, while its long-standing engagement with schools and local communities gradually opened new paths into participation, artistic mediation, and social intervention.

The town of Sintra offered fertile ground for this evolution. Stretching far beyond its historic centre, the municipality encompasses rural villages, suburban neighbourhoods and communities with very different social and economic realities. Instead of looking for a single audience, Chão de Oliva found itself building relationships with many different communities, each requiring its own pace and forms of engagement.

This long-term approach is perhaps best illustrated by Chão de Oliva's own festival — *Mostra de Teatro das Escolas de Sintra*, now in its thirty-fourth edition. Developed in partnership with schools and the municipality, it is much more than an annual schools' festival. It has become a shared space where teachers, students, artists and educators learn from one another and celebrate theatre collectively. Its longevity has made it part of the cultural identity of Sintra itself, surviving political changes and accompanying successive generations of participants. Continuity, here, is not simply organisational stability; it is one of the project's greatest achievements.

Yet around 2018 the organisation began asking itself a different question. ***"It wasn't enough to wait for people to come to us,"*** Susana reflects. ***"We also needed to go where people already were."***

That shift gave rise to **Próximo**, a documentary theatre project that turned the creative process inside out. Before writing a script or rehearsing a performance, artists spent weeks in neighbourhoods across Sintra, sitting at bus stops, chatting on benches and joining everyday conversations. They listened far more than they spoke. Those encounters eventually became the material for performances first presented within the communities themselves and only later at Casa do Teatro de Sintra.

Listening, therefore, became the first artistic gesture. The same philosophy can be recognised in other projects by Chão de Oliva, even when their participants and artistic processes differ considerably. In *SenteMente*, developed with women from vulnerable contexts, participants were involved in validating the creative process and were performing on stage themselves.

Susana describes this as a more explicitly participatory form of community theatre, in which the women were not only participants but had a say in what was ultimately presented.

The relationships established during the project have continued well beyond its formal conclusion. In *PARTEJ*, running from 2020 to 2026 in two areas of Sintra, Chão de Oliva worked with young people who were struggling to engage with school. The project did not prescribe theatre as the only point of entry: music, visual arts and other practices were introduced depending on what worked best to help connect with the young people. Here, community building meant adapting the artistic approach to the people and territory involved, drawing both on identified social needs and on relationships already established locally. Across these initiatives, Chão de Oliva does not begin with a fixed artistic model to be applied in different contexts. Instead, each project develops from the relationships that already exist or are patiently built over time, allowing participants to influence the creative process and artistic methods to evolve in response to the realities of each community.

One of the consequences is that people rarely disappear once a project ends. ***"We create an affection network,"*** Susana says. It is an expression she returns to several times during the interview, and perhaps the one that best describes Chão de Oliva's understanding of community. Former participants remain connected to the organisation in many different ways: they continue attending performances and workshops, propose activities of their own and often introduce relatives, friends and neighbours to the theatre. Sometimes these relationships also generate new initiatives. One participant, for example, proposed creating a book club after becoming part of one of Chão de Oliva's activities. The club created another space and another reason for people to continue meeting

Próximo, photo: Chão de Oliva

beyond theatre activities, strengthening relationships that had developed in and around the theatre. None of this had been planned. It grew out of relationships cultivated over time, with participants themselves creating new opportunities for those relationships to continue and develop.

This also changes how the organisation understands success. Attendance figures matter, but they tell only part of the story. Success is equally measured through returning faces, ongoing conversations and the gradual feeling that the theatre belongs to those who may once have seen it as distant or unfamiliar.

Building this kind of relationship, however, is rarely straightforward. Susana remembers working on a project in a prison when one participant looked at her and asked: ***"Why are you even here?"***

The question stayed with her. It revealed how easily communities learn to distrust institutions that appear briefly before moving on to the next project.

Authenticity, she argues, cannot be performed. People quickly recognise the difference between organisations genuinely interested in building relationships and those responding to funding priorities and their fashionable buzzwords. Community building demands consistency long before it produces visible outcomes.

Perhaps this is why Chão de Oliva speaks less about participation than about presence. Presence, in this context, is not simply a matter of being physically present in a neighbourhood. It means returning over time, remaining available between projects, listening before proposing artistic ideas and allowing trust to develop gradually. Over nearly forty years, the organisation has gradually transformed from a venue where performances are presented into a place woven into the everyday life of its territory. Projects begin and end, funding programmes change, but relationships continue to grow.

Towards the end of our conversation, Susana returns to the thought with which we began: ***"Community takes time."*** There is no formula behind those words. Only the reminder that trust, belonging and shared ownership rarely emerge at the pace of production schedules.

Reflection Box

Community takes time. Chão de Oliva's story reminds us that community building cannot be produced through isolated projects or short-term participation. It grows through continuity, listening and genuine presence within a territory.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

What changes when a theatre organisation first meets people in their own neighbourhoods before inviting them into the theatre?

How can performing arts organisations sustain relationships once a project has come to an end?

What makes a theatre become part of the everyday life of its community, rather than simply a place where performances are presented?

More info: https://chaodeoliva.com/

STORY #2

LIVING TOGETHER

Synikismos Festival (Greece & Cyprus)

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

A conversation with Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director of Larnaka 2030 / former Artistic Director of Eleusis 2021

Some artistic projects begin with a script. The Synikismos Festival begins with a neighbourhood.

The word **Synikismos** itself means living together. It also names the refugee housing estates built in Greece and Cyprus for people displaced by war, conflict, and other factors of forced migration. In Elefsina, Greece, these neighbourhoods were created after the displacement of people from Turkey to Greece in 1922. In Larnaka, Cyprus, similar areas were built after the displacement of communities from the north of the island in 1974. Today, they are home to first and second generations of displaced families, older residents, working-class communities and more recent migrants. Different histories of displacement coexist within the same streets.

For Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director of Larnaka 2030 and former Artistic Director of Eleusis 2021, these neighbourhoods were never empty spaces waiting for culture to arrive. They already had their own social life, memories, rituals and forms of belonging. People knew one another. Children played together outside. Families gathered in the street because houses were small and public space was part of everyday life.

What was missing was not culture. It was recognition. As Kelly explains, in Greece and in Cyprus, cultural institutions often turn towards monuments, historic centres or established cultural venues when they tell the story of a city. But other forms of heritage are easily overlooked. ***"People wanted to restore ancient monuments,"*** she recalls, ***"but these neighbourhoods are also part of our heritage."***

Synikismos was born from that conviction. Developed in the context of Elefsina European Capital of Culture 2021, the project responded to a question at the centre of cultural democracy: whose histories, voices and everyday spaces are recognised as part of the cultural life of a city? The festival began taking shape in 2016–2017 and became a public programme in 2018 and 2019. Each edition included a main artistic work co-created with residents, alongside invited artists and international works addressing displacement, migration and memory. Yet the most important part of the process happened long before the public event.

Kelly is cautious about calling this a methodology. For her, the process began with the curators, who took responsibility for establishing the first relationships with residents. This meant ordinary gestures: going to the neighbourhood, talking with people, drinking coffee, spending time in public spaces, learning the rhythm

of local life. Kelly herself had grown up in a similar neighbourhood and recognised this way of living, where much of everyday social life takes place in shared spaces. Months could pass before artists were introduced. Some sort of relationship was needed, before the artistic process could begin. ***"When you become part of the community,"*** she says, ***"then you bring the artists."***

The sequence was deliberate: the curators act as 'bridges', building the relationships through which artists could later enter the neighbourhood. Once introduced, the artists took responsibility for the artistic process, working with residents through negotiation over which stories could be shared, what should remain private and how lived experiences would be represented. As Kelly emphasises, ***"it is not an extraction process."***

Residents contributed memories, gestures, family histories and knowledge of the place. Houses, courtyards, churches and public spaces became part of the dramaturgy. The neighbourhood did not function as a scenic backdrop; it shaped the artistic language of the work. Professional artists brought their own vision and craft, but creation unfolded through negotiation with those who lived there.

Kelly describes this process with care. It is not simply about collecting testimonies. It is about deciding how stories are treated, who carries them, and what responsibility artists have when working with lived experience. The challenge is not only artistic. It is ethical.

One episode reveals how delicate this work can be.

During one edition of the festival, an artist wanted to involve refugees from Afghanistan and Bangladesh alongside long-term residents of the neighbourhood. The idea was not immediately welcomed. Some local residents were happy to collaborate with the artist, but they resisted the presence of the newer refugees. The tension could have led the project to reconsider how the two groups would be brought together. Instead, the relationships already built made it possible for the project to develop within the tension. Through the trust developed with the artist, the two groups slowly came together. The resulting co-created performance, I Left Asia Minor, brought these different experiences of displacement into the same work and continued to be presented in subsequent years as a community ritual. A project that began with hesitation became a space where different histories of displacement could meet — not through an abstract message of inclusion, but through the fragile, practical work of sharing time, space and responsibility. The community, in this case, did not appear because this was a group of people agreeing with each other, but because people remained in conversation long enough for a shared ground to be established.

This is why Kelly insists that residents are not the audience of Synikismos. ***"The local community is not the audience,"*** she says. ***"They are the creators."*** That reversal changes everything. The festival does not ask how residents can be brought into institutional culture.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

It reverses that movement: audiences, journalists, art and cultural professionals come into the neighbourhood, while residents become hosts, creators and protagonists. Their homes, streets and memories provide the setting and material for an artistic encounter they have helped to create. The neighbourhood does not simply provide a backdrop for the performances; it becomes part of their dramaturgy.

Kelly retained some vivid memories about some small but vital moments. At the beginning, residents looked at the team with curiosity and suspicion, wondering why they kept returning. Later, children followed artists through the streets, eager to see what was happening. On the opening night, one girl arrived beautifully dressed, waiting for the performance to begin. It was a simple image, but it carried pride, importance, and anticipation. For Kelly, this image also convened the feeling that the festival belonged to the neighbourhood.

Synikismos also raises one of the most important tensions in community-based performing arts: artistic quality. Kelly is firm about this: ***"Community-based work needs to be of the highest artistic quality."***

For her, treating community building as less artistically ambitious than work presented in major venues reproduces the very inequalities such projects often claim to challenge. If high artistic standards are reserved for privileged audiences, while communities in marginalised neighbourhoods are offered simplified or secondary forms of art, cultural democracy remains incomplete. This requires artists with specific skills: the ability to listen, negotiate, share authorship, handle conflict, and still create work with artistic strength. In Synikismos, social relevance and artistic ambition are not competing values. They depend on one another.

The festival paused after the pandemic and changes within the **Eleusis** European Capital of Culture artistic direction, but the questions it opened continue through Kelly's new work in Larnaka 2030 and wider Mediterranean collaborations. Its legacy lies not only in performances, but in the relationships, memories and artistic questions that remain.

Towards the end of the conversation, Kelly leaves us with a provocation: ***"What if every neighbourhood had its own artist?"*** Not an artist arriving from outside with a temporary project. Not an artist using the neighbourhood as material. But someone embedded in its social life, attentive to its histories, able to work with residents over time and contribute to the cultural imagination of the place. It is a question that extends far beyond Synikismos.

Reflection Box

Synikismos challenges the idea that community building starts by inviting people into existing cultural structures. Its experience suggests a different movement: beginning from the knowledge, memory and social life already present in a place, and creating artistic processes that recognise residents as hosts, co-authors and protagonists.

The project also reminds us that community-based work is not automatically inclusive or conflict-free. In Synikismos, relationships are built before artists enter the creative process; decisions about which stories can be told and how people are represented are carefully negotiated; and tensions between participants are not necessarily avoided when they arise. All this takes place alongside a commitment to treating community-based work with the same artistic ambition as any other production. Time, care, negotiation and artistic rigour are therefore not separate ingredients added to the work: they are part of how the work is made.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

What changes when a neighbourhood becomes a cultural protagonist rather than a setting for artistic work?

How can shared authorship and artistic ambition strengthen one another in community-based work?

What would it mean for every neighbourhood to have an artist embedded in its everyday life?

More info:
https://2023eleusis.eu/en/events/festival-synoikismos/
https://larnaka2030.eu

STORY #3

FAMILIAR FACES

Plays Aloud (Commedia of Errors, Northern Ireland)

Plays Aloud, photo: Peter Murray

A Conversation with Benjamin Gould, Artistic Director, and Clare McMahon, Co-Creative Director, Commedia of Errors

When the artists from Plays Aloud return to a care home or supported living scheme, they are often returning to people they already know. They remember names, conversations and stories from previous visits, residents recognise the performers, and each new session can build on what happened before. For Clare and Ben, this continuity has become central to the project. The relationship is not created through a single performance, but through coming back, listening and getting to know one another.

This focus on connection was present from the beginning. Clare recalls spending time with her grandmother, who often asked family members to sing, read poems or perform small sketches in her living room. Those informal moments of creativity planted a simple idea: if shared artistic experiences could bring joy and connection to one household, why shouldn't they become part of life in care homes and supported living schemes too?

What started in 2017 as a small project bringing artists into care homes and supported living schemes, gradually grew into a long-term programme reaching older people across Northern Ireland through performances, workshops and sustained partnerships with organisations such as Radius Housing. The ambition, however, has remained remarkably consistent. From the outset, the idea was not simply to bring performances into care settings, but to allow what happened there to be shaped by the people taking part.

"From the beginning there was this idea of sharing, getting proposals, co-creating."

The performances were never meant to be the destination; they were the beginning of a relationship. Ben explains it simply: ***"We're not there to perform. We're there to create a space where the community can express themselves. If someone wants to tell a story or sing a song, everybody feels safe."*** His point is that participation depends on creating an atmosphere in which people feel comfortable contributing.

That philosophy shapes every visit. Before music begins or stories are shared, artists spend time talking with residents, learning names, listening to memories and discovering the songs, poems and experiences that matter to them. Eye contact, humour, vulnerability and conversation become as important as artistic skill. What follows may include music, poetry, storytelling or other forms of performance, with artists adapting the content according to what they have learned about the people in the room.

This gradual process has become one of the project's defining success factors. Plays Aloud does not rely on one memorable event but on returning, again and again, to the same places. Familiarity becomes the foundation upon which trust is built. Residents recognise the artists; artists learn people's histories, personalities and changing needs. Care staff also become part of this relationship, helping to shape each encounter and sharing observations that inform future sessions. Continuous feedback—from residents, facilitators and scheme managers—is woven into the design of every new programme, allowing activities to evolve. Co-creation as community building therefore develops through an ongoing process of listening, adapting and working together.

Song choices emerge from conversations about people's lives. Sessions shift according to residents' interests or energy on the day. Facilitators return with new ideas inspired by previous visits. Care staff contribute their knowledge of individual residents, while participants themselves gradually begin suggesting activities, sharing memories or leading moments within the workshops.

"The art becomes genuinely theirs," Clare reflects, ***"and that is precisely what makes it matter."***

The effects are often subtle. During one residency, the artists arrived to find a handful of residents sitting quietly together, each living largely separate lives within the same housing scheme. Months later, when Plays Aloud returned, those same people had become a group of friends who continued meeting long after the sessions had ended. What had begun as an artistic encounter had helped create relationships that no longer depended on the artists being present.

"Sometimes," Ben says, ***"our role is simply to become the vehicle that allows a community to emerge."***

Familiarity with the artists can also open paths into other cultural experiences. Clare describes how residents followed one of the programme's singers when she appeared on television, and later went to see her perform in a theatre. This does not in itself constitute community building, but it shows how a connection first developed through Plays Aloud can generate cultural participation beyond the programme itself.

The relationships built through *Plays Aloud* also involve care staff. Over time, they have become genuine collaborators. They bring invaluable knowledge of residents' personalities, health conditions and daily routines. Plays Aloud has increasingly invested in working with these professionals too, recognising that building community also means strengthening the relationships surrounding participants, not only those with the artists. The project has also provided training for care staff and, after workshops, produces materials that staff can use to continue creative activities independently between visits. This extends some of the creative work beyond the moments when the artists themselves are present.

Plays Aloud, photo: Peter Murray

When the project first began, Clare remembers how difficult it could be to persuade professional performers that working in a care home deserved the same artistic ambition as performing on a theatre stage. ***"We wanted to pay artists the same, whether they were performing in a care home or in a theatre. We expected the same quality."***

That conviction has remained central to the project. Community building work is not treated as a simplified version of artistic practice. On the contrary, it demands artists capable of adapting to diverse personalities, changing health conditions and unpredictable moments while maintaining artistic integrity and genuine human connection.

Like many of the stories in this publication, Plays Aloud also reveals the practical realities behind long-term community building. Sustained funding remains a constant concern, even after securing important support from the National Lottery. Continuity depends on resources, but also on the ability to respond to changing contexts — from the isolation of the COVID-19 pandemic, when the team quickly developed live-streamed performances for care homes, to the growing pressures facing care staff today, including understaffing, heavy workloads and limited time to engage with creative activities. Every new phase requires adaptation without losing the relationships that have taken years to build.

The project is now taking another step, exploring intergenerational collaborations that bring together older people and young children through shared artistic experiences. It is a natural extension of a philosophy that has always understood community as something that grows through encounter and not through demographic categories.

Towards the end of our conversation, Ben recalls meeting a person who had once participated in the project and had since become a member of staff. Looking back on the experience, they smiled and said: ***"This is better than any medication."***

Whether taken literally or not, the remark captures something that runs through Plays Aloud. Its greatest achievement is not simply that people take part in artistic activities. Over time, artists become familiar faces, care homes become places of shared creativity, and relationships continue long after the music has stopped.

Reflection Box

Plays Aloud reminds us that community is rarely created through a single event. It grows through repetition, familiarity and care. By returning to the same places over many years, the project demonstrates that trust itself can become an artistic medium. At the same time, its experience highlights the importance of recognising community-based practice as artistically ambitious work — requiring time, skilled practitioners and long-term investment.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

What changes when artists are recognised not as visitors, but as familiar members of a community?

How can co-creation be sustained and deepened over time, across repeated encounters?

What would happen if continuity, rather than novelty, became one of the main measures of success in community-based performing arts initiatives?

STORY #4

HELD IN THE TIDE: REFRAMING OPERA THROUGH COMMUNITY CO-CREATION

ArtHouse Jersey (Island of Jersey)

Raise your voice, Art House Jersey and the credits for the photo should be: Georgia Mae Bishop

A Conversation with Robyn Cabaret, Producer, ArtHouse Jersey

Held in the Tide is part of ***Raise Your Voice, Jersey!***, a project by ArtHouse Jersey seeking to expand who opera is for, how it is made, and whose voices it represents. Through story-gathering sessions, residencies, and community workshops, residents of Jersey island have helped shape this work at every stage, ensuring the opera resonates with local experiences and feels deeply connected to Jersey's cultural identity.

The project developed an original contemporary opera rooted in the experiences of people living in Jersey, exploring together themes of belonging, identity, migration, and place. Instead of starting from an existing repertoire, the creative process began with participants' stories and experiences. As Robyn, producer for ArtHouse Jersey explained, the central question was:

"What happens if an opera is built around something that is not about an inherited tradition, but is a new piece of original work that is built around the lives, the voices, the humour, the tensions, the challenges, and the experiences of people who actually live here, in this place?"

While participants later engaged with other Arthouse activities and became audiences for its wider programme, *Held in the Tide* emerged from relationships developed during the project rather than from a predefined strategy to attract audiences to Arthouse's programmes with the focus on raising attendance numbers. Robyn reflected on the importance of vocabulary, especially given the context of working in a small island:

"This project was never about the audience. It was about the people that came along the journey with us, and the people we brought together, the stories that we wanted to tell."

Working with communities meant creating spaces where participants could contribute their experiences, regardless of their previous artistic knowledge or experience. Workshops began with accessible entry points—exploring voice, storytelling and musical creation—before gradually introducing more specialised artistic practices. The demands of a co-created performance also highlighted that meaningful participation requires time, resources, strong partnerships and a willingness to share ownership of the creative process.

As Robyn explained:

"To have a genuinely community-rooted project takes time from everyone (...) That shared ownership of a work means everything."

The island context brought both opportunities and challenges to the project. Jersey's scale and close-knit nature allowed for close relationships between various organisations, artists, and residents. Robyn explained that this community building process succeeded thanks to a partnership with other entities: support from the local opera house, private sector sponsors and BBC radio, was essential—not only financially but through recognition of the value of the process:

"It's a risk-free place to be able to test new ideas (...) You are only one step away from somebody that might be able to support and help you. There really is that island mentality of sort of coming together."

At the same time, working within a small community required attention to trust and representation. The opera's narrative thread developed through conversations around young people's experiences of migration, leaving and returning to the island, and questions of belonging. The final work aimed to represent Jersey not through inherited narratives, but through contemporary lived experiences.

The project required a different understanding of artistic development. The final work could not be fully defined from the beginning because the content emerged throughout the collaborative process. This created challenges when communicating the project to funders and partners, as Robyn emphasised: ***"We had to explain that we can't tell you what the show's going to be about, because all of that is being formed in the process."***

Robyn further underlined the challenge regarding funders' narrow impact measures mainly focused on audience numbers:

"Some people can take the perspective of going, 'Oh, it was two nights, and you reached 860 people? That's a lot of money for that.' But this project was never about audiences".

Robyn also evaluated the process herself, documenting the methodology, learning and impact to inform future practice, avoiding to focus only on predefined funding criteria, but paying particular attention to **the relationships developed, her observations and what emerged through the process.**

Reflection Box

Held in the Tide reminds us how even "established" performing arts formats can become methods for working together with communities. It also highlights the need to rethink how this work is valued: instead of focusing primarily on audience numbers, its impact may lie in meaningfully engaging with those who take part, and the partnerships built throughout the process.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

How can organisations explain to funders that the artistic outcome cannot always be defined in advance, but may emerge through the process of working with communities?

When does calling something a "community artistic work" help recognise its character, and when might it unintentionally suggest that it is a less valid form of artistic production?

How can community-based artistic work be meaningfully evaluated?

More info:
On the project: *https://new.express.adobe.com/webpage/1O8vlxa9JUzF6*

On ArtHouse Jersey: *https://www.arthousejersey.je/*

STORY #5

BEING PART OF THE COMMUNITY

Don Sen Folo – LAB's Practice (Mali)

A Conversation with Kone Lassina, Artistic Director and Agnès Quillet, Administration Director, Don Sen Folo - LAB

Community building for an art organisation often begins with a question of how to enter an existing community. For Don Sen Folo – LAB, the quest is different: how to recognise they are already part of one. Located in the village of Bancoumana, Mali, Don Sen Folo – LAB is an artistic residency and research space that encourages resident artists to approach the territory with humility, taking time to listen, observe and build relationships before creating. Founded by choreographer and artistic director Lassina Koné, the space grew from a desire to offer artists a place to live, work and create in connection with their surroundings. Since its opening in 2020, the residency has welcomed more than a hundred artists.

But the creation of the space was not only about building infrastructure — it was about building relationships. As the team explains, they did not arrive in the village with the intention of 'bringing' art to the community. They worked with local leaders, elders and residents to develop trust and understanding, supported by community figures such as Madou Camara, a traditional griot who helped create the link between the project and the village. ***"We don't come to integrate into the community; we are part of the whole. We cannot create a community — we live within one.***", explained Agnès.

This perspective shapes the way Don Sen Folo – LAB works with visiting artists. Residents are not simply hosted in a venue separated from the village; they are invited to immerse themselves in its everyday life. They work in different spaces within the village, interact with neighbours and allow the creative process to unfold in public view.

For Lassina Koné, this relationship goes beyond outreach or audience development. It is about recognising art as something historically rooted in collective life: ***"An artist who creates in their context but does not make the effort to be connected with that context is an artist who is absent from their own presence."***

At Don Sen Folo – LAB, community is understood as a practice of reciprocity and care. The village becomes not only a place where art is presented, but a place where artists question their own role: what do they contribute to the communities that surround them, beyond their artistic practice?

At Don Sen Folo – LAB, this means taking part in everyday village life — working the land, making bread and sharing daily tasks alongside villagers.

The approach requires patience and humility. As the team explains, entering a community is not about imposing an artistic project, but finding one's place within existing relationships. Sometimes this means small acts of attention — learning names, understanding local routines or adjusting a rehearsal space so that a neighbour's goods are not covered in dust.

Reflection Box

Don Sen Folo – LAB challenges the idea that community building is something organisations do to or for communities. Instead, it proposes a different starting point: recognising existing relationships, histories and forms of belonging in the community itself, but also allowing artists and organisations themselves to be transformed by the contexts in which they work.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

How can residency programmes move beyond hosting artists and create meaningful, reciprocal relationships with the places and communities where they are located?

What changes when artists and organisations see themselves as part of a community rather than as external actors engaging with one?

What conditions — time, support, local partnerships and care — are needed for residency models to foster genuine exchange while respecting both artistic autonomy and community needs?

More info:
https://donsenfolo.com/

STORY #6

HETPALEIS' PRACTICE OF BELONGING AND PARTICIPATION

(Belgium)

Hetpaleis, Hetdoek photo credits: Karolina Maruszak.

A Conversation with Koen Haagdorens, Artistic Coordinator and Dramaturg, Hetpaleis

Located in the heart of Antwerp, Hetpaleis is Belgium's largest performing arts venue for young audiences. As a production house, presentation venue and meeting place, it creates contemporary performances while also working to connect children, young people, artists and the wider city.

For Hetpaleis, community building did not begin with a strategy to ***"create a community"***. As Koen explains, the team only recently started to describe this work through the language of community:

"It was funny that we never thought about what we are doing as community building (...) It is actually very interesting that we never called it that way. For me it is a kind of proof that it is very authentic."

Throughout the years, Hetpaleis has developed multiple points of connection with their audiences: theatre workshops with schools, activities outside school hours, young ambassadors, artistic residencies and collaborations with local organisations.

As Koen describes it, ***"we started to work with small bricks, and the result is a community."*** For Koen this approach starts with recognising what already exists within the city. Hetpaleis works with an educational team, although Koen questions whether this term fully captures their role:

"When you talk in terms of education, it's a very reductive way of talking about what you are actually doing. These people are really, for me, kind of city experts. They know very well what it means to live and to grow up in this city."

The city is home to people of around 180 nationalities, and this diversity shapes both the audiences entering the theatre and the ways in which artists are invited to create. Unlike traditional models where audiences may be considered mainly as spectators, Hetpaleis works to involve young people as contributors to artistic processes. This is particularly visible through its artistic residency programme, where artists are invited to research themes connected to the realities of local young people growing up in a diverse urban environment. Rather than presenting children with a finished artwork, the organisation invites them into the creative process itself: visiting artists' studios, encountering unfinished research and sharing their responses.

The same philosophy shaped a large-scale embroidery project around the creation of a new theatre curtain. This project, named hetdoek, was a collaboration between hetpaleis and DOEK vzw, an organization led by artist Lies Van Assche. Instead of inviting people to 'leave a mark' on the curtain, Hetpaleis framed the activity as a collective artistic project: an invitation to create a work of art together. Over one year, people of different ages and backgrounds — including children, families, schools, social organisations and older residents — came to embroider the curtain. The youngest participants were toddlers, while the oldest were in their nineties.

The project created encounters between people who might not normally share the same space. A collaboration with a local embroidery workshop involving women from other countries, such as Iran, Afghanistan and Ukraine, brought additional knowledge and experiences into the process. For Hetpaleis, the value was not only the final artistic object, but the relationships created around it: a shared practice where people could enter the theatre, contribute and feel that they belonged.

Koen emphasises that community does not simply appear because people are invited into a cultural venue; it requires sustained attention to how relationships are built and maintained. At the same time, he acknowledges the challenges of operating from a venue located in the city centre. For some residents, entering a theatre can still feel like entering another world. This raises questions about accessibility and the difference between artistic and social-artistic approaches. For Koen, however, the two cannot be separated:

"You can't do this artistic output without taking care of the social, and moreover, I think that you need the social energy or the social situation in order to create this artistic output."

For Hetpaleis, community building is therefore not an additional activity alongside artistic work. It is part of the artistic methodology itself: creating the conditions in which different experiences, voices and forms of imagination can meet.

Reflection Box

Hetpaleis shows that communities around cultural institutions are often not built through short-term participation projects, but through long-term infrastructures of trust, familiarity and shared ownership.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

What enables a performing arts venue to become a place where people do not simply come to see art, but come to contribute, create and feel that they belong?

What happens when a performing arts venue creates belonging through practices that are not traditionally part of its artistic repertoire?

Can performing arts organisations foster forms of community that bring together people from different generations or cultures that might otherwise rarely meet—and what conditions are needed for these intergenerational connections to last?

More info:
https://www.hetpaleis.be/

STORY #7

A PLACE IN THE AUDIENCE

Out of the care home, into the theatre (Bureau Ritter, Germany)

Mellowing, photo: Phil Dera

A conversation with Laura Böttinger, Project Director Care in Motion & Artistic Director Dance On Participation, Bureau Ritter (Germany)

A woman carefully chose her clothes before leaving the care home. She had not dressed up for years, but this was a special occasion: she was going to the theatre. At another venue, staff welcomed residents by rolling out a red carpet at the entrance. During one performance, the rhythmic sound of a participant's medical device unexpectedly became part of the choreography, as the dancers adjusted their movements to its steady pulse.

None of these moments had been planned. Yet together they capture the spirit of **Out of the Care Home, Into the Theatre**. The project is about reclaiming something that is often lost once people enter residential care: the opportunity to participate in public cultural life, to be present in shared spaces, and to take part as audience members with the same cultural rights as those living outside care institutions.

The initiative grew out of Bureau Ritter's long-standing exploration of aging and dance. Bureau Ritter, a Berlin-based non-profit cultural organisation working across artistic production, cultural policy and funding, has developed a particular focus on dance. Through the internationally recognised **Dance On** programme, the organisation had spent years challenging assumptions about age in the performing arts. Gradually, however, another question emerged.

"We were always thinking about who we were addressing and who we were not addressing," Laura Böttinger from Bureau Ritter reflected.

The answer led them towards older people living in care homes: a group whose relationship with cultural life is often interrupted not because of a lack of interest, but because of physical barriers, institutional routines and the simple assumption that theatre is no longer for them.

The first step was not to organise performances, it was to build relationships. Before anyone enters a theatre, artists and community art workers spend time in the care homes through a series of workshops. Residents become familiar with the artists, the venue and the performance, while artists begin to understand the rhythms, characters and everyday life of the people they will later welcome into the theatre. The workshops also create unexpected encounters within the care homes themselves. Residents who may have lived in the same building for years often discover one another through creative activities.

Conversations begin, friendships emerge, and care staff witness people relating to each other in entirely different ways.

For Laura, trust is the real starting point: ***"Building trust is a very personal thing. I needed to go there, into the care homes, to talk to people."***

That trust also has to be built between institutions. Care homes and theatres rarely collaborate, and when they do, they often speak different professional languages. Accessibility, scheduling, expectations and responsibilities are understood differently on each side. Much of the project's work therefore happens behind the scenes, patiently connecting professionals who would otherwise have few opportunities to meet. It is slow work, but it lays the foundations for relationships that continue beyond a single visit.

Once the theatre visit finally arrives, something shifts. Residents do not simply attend a performance; they take part in a social occasion that many had assumed was no longer available to them. Dressing up, travelling together and entering the theatre become part of the experience itself.

Laura remembers one participant arriving elegantly dressed after years without such an occasion: ***"It was her way of saying: 'I'm still alive.'"***

Another memory stayed with her for different reasons. During a performance, the steady sound of a medical device accompanying one audience member could easily have been treated as a disruption. Instead, the dancers adapted their rhythm and allowed it to become part of the performance. At that moment, care needs were not hidden or corrected. They simply became part of the shared artistic experience.

Throughout our conversation, Laura returned repeatedly to one idea: ***"When residents come to the theatre, they are seen as people as they are, not for their disabilities."*** Within residential care, people can easily become identified through their age, support needs or disabilities. At the theatre, another dimension of their identity comes to the foreground: they are audience members, responding to an artistic experience according to their own tastes, emotions and interests. Their care needs do not disappear, but they no longer define their presence in the room.

It is not only older people who experience something different. The theatre changes too. One collaboration unexpectedly revealed this. A theatre that considered itself fully accessible welcomed six wheelchair users to a performance. Suddenly, staff realised how many practical barriers remained. The experience sparked conversations involving technicians, artistic directors and even the local municipality about how accessibility was understood and implemented. What began as a single visit developed into a broader institutional reflection about who cultural spaces are designed for. In other cases, theatres involved in the project have expressed an interest in continuing their relationships with care homes independently, suggesting that the encounter can lead not only to greater awareness of access within theatre teams, but also to their different understanding of who belongs within the theatre's regular cultural life.

Bureau Ritter, photo: Phil Dera

The effects also extend to people surrounding the project. Laura describes artists as deeply touched by performing for an audience very different from the usual contemporary dance public. Care workers, too, often discover and build new relationships with culture. Laura recalls one care worker who had never been to the theatre before joining the project. Today she regularly attends performances with her family. The experience travelled far beyond the original participants, reshaping habits and expectations in unexpected ways.

If the project demonstrates what becomes possible when care and culture meet, it also reveals how difficult these collaborations are to sustain.

Funding remains one of the greatest challenges. The initiative sits between two sectors whose funding structures rarely overlap. Arts programmes often regard care as someone else's responsibility, while care systems still tend to treat cultural participation as an optional extra instead of a meaningful part of wellbeing. ***"We're always looking for funding because we are in between two worlds."***

The question now is how these relationships might continue. Laura has seen theatres involved in the project express an interest in maintaining contact with care homes themselves and inviting residents back without Bureau Ritter always organising the encounter. For Bureau Ritter, this is an important ambition, but also an unresolved question. The preparatory workshops have been essential for building trust, and it is not yet clear whether this role will always require an intermediary or could eventually be taken on directly by theatres.

At the same time, Bureau Ritter is testing how the work might develop in other contexts. The project is expanding beyond Berlin, with conversations involving theatres and care homes in other German cities, while collaborations with universities and care-training programmes are helping to examine what these encounters require from both the cultural and care sectors. The aim, then, is not simply to replicate theatre visits, but to understand what would allow relationships between these two worlds to become part of their regular practice.

When asked what advice she would give to another cultural organisation wanting to begin similar work, Laura's answer is remarkably straightforward: ***"Look around in your neighbourhood. See if there is a care home. Go there. See the situation. If there is a way to include them, just do it."***

It is an invitation to begin with curiosity. Before designing programmes or searching for funding, take the time to meet the people who are already part of your local community. The rest, she suggests, can grow from there.

Reflection Box

Out of the Care Home, Into the Theatre reminds us that community building is not simply about widening access to cultural experiences. It can also change the roles people occupy within those experiences. Residents enter the theatre as cultural participants, while theatres are confronted with questions about who their spaces, practices and programmes are designed for. The relationships created through the project can extend further, affecting artists, care workers and the institutions involved in ways that were not necessarily anticipated at the outset.

At the same time, the project highlights an important contextual challenge for the performing arts sector. Community building across different systems—in this case, culture and care—requires time, trust and long-term commitment, but also funding structures capable of supporting work that does not fit neatly within a single policy field.

Questions this story invites us to consider:

What changes when older people in care are recognised as regular participants in cultural life and not as exceptional visitors?

How can theatres and care institutions build relationships that continue beyond individual projects?

If cultural participation is a right, what would it take to make it a regular part of life in care settings, and not something treated as an optional extra?

More info:
https://bureau-ritter.de/en/project/care-in-motion/

CHAPTER 3

FURTHER PERSPECTIVES ON COMMUNITY BUILDING

The stories presented in the previous chapter are only part of a much wider conversation. Throughout the research, practitioners from different countries and contexts shared experiences, questions and reflections that could not all be developed as full case studies. This chapter brings together some of these voices that enrich our understanding of community building in the performing arts.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

THE NEED OF FINDING A COMMUNITY BEFORE BUILDING ONE

Several interviewees challenged the assumption that community building begins with the relationship between art and its social context. Instead, they argued that art organisations often need to find first their own community of practice — bringing together artists, researchers, cultural organisations and people around a common concern.

Case in Practice:
Breaking Multilingual Silence in the Nordic Performing Arts (Finland)

Led by director David Kozma and playwright-researcher Vanja Hamidi Isacson, and coordinated by Post Theatre Collective (Finland), Breaking Multilingual Silence in the Nordic Performing Arts illustrates how inclusive engagement can begin within the performing arts sector itself. Instead of asking how to attract multilingual audiences, the project asked why multilingual artists, languages and experiences remain largely absent from Nordic stages.

For David, himself a Hungarian-speaking Romanian who moved to Finland, multilingualism was not simply a topic but a lived experience that shaped the project's direction. As he observed: ***"You have to have some sort of a personal interest in order to want to work with different communities."***

The project emerged from artistic research exploring how multilingual performers experience and negotiate identity, belonging and exclusion within Nordic theatre. Through workshops using 'language portraits' — participants visually mapping the languages they carry and translating these into movement — the project brought together professional and amateur artists, researchers and performing arts practitioners across different Nordic cities, creating a community around a shared condition. Importantly, the project's objective was not to 'create a community' as an end in itself. As David reflected: ***"Our starting point wasn't—and isn't—to create community. That is part of the process."***

By connecting multilingual artists who often occupy marginal positions within national theatre systems, the project built relationships that challenged dominant assumptions about language, representation and belonging. This case demonstrates that wider community building may first require cultural organisations to identify and strengthen their own communities of practice before seeking to engage wider publics. In this case, working with artists who shared similar experiences also created new ways of connecting with multilingual audience communities, and eventually enabled the project to bring together more diverse groups around a shared artistic experience.

The project combined workshops, seminars, and artistic research with a final performance outcome: SILENCE – A Multilingual Performance, premiered in September 2025.

More info:
https://www.theatrecollective.com/projects/breaking-multilingual-silence

WHEN COMMUNITY BUILDING IS A FORM OF SOCIAL INFRASTRUCTURE

In contexts where social inequalities and limited opportunities shape everyday life, some performing arts organisations understand their community building work as a form of social infrastructure: creating sustained spaces for encounter, learning, expression, and support. Even when education and artistic training are at the core of their mission, their role extends beyond skill development, as they contribute to strengthening relationships and creating opportunities for communities to imagine and pursue different futures.

Case in Practice: Escuela Musical de Teatro de Petare (Venezuela)

The case of Escuela Musical de Teatro de Petare in Venezuela illustrates how performing arts can become a long-term social infrastructure. Founded nearly 15 years ago in Petare, one of the largest popular neighborhoods in Venezuela, the school uses musical theatre as a platform for creative expression and social connection among children, young people, and their families.

The project emerged from the idea that theatre practices can strengthen democratic values: working collectively, listening to others, and inhabiting perspectives beyond one's own experience. It was, therefore, important to include as many people as possible in the creative process. The school deliberately moved away from selective models of artistic training: instead of auditions, the project created space for more diverse and collective forms of participation, allowing young people to take on different roles and thus giving them greater agency. Alongside performance, they could contribute to the production, photography, video, design, and other aspects of creative production.

For many young participants, the school provides a safe and structured environment and a space to develop confidence. The school tries to challenge gender stereotypes and enable young people to imagine futures beyond the limitations often associated with their social context. As the initiative's Development Director, Sara Valero, explained, the impact extends beyond individual participants: ***"For every child who enrolls, the school does not only transform the child, but transforms the whole family."***

This broader community effect became particularly visible during periods of crisis. During Covid-19, restrictions on working with others led families to become active collaborators in the artistic process, taking on roles in costumes, set design, filming, and production, helping young people in the rehearsals and performances. What initially emerged as a response to the constraints of the pandemic has endured over time, creating deeper and more sustained links between the artistic practice, families and the wider community. Over time, the relationship between the school and the community evolved. The school was no longer simply a cultural initiative operating in Petare; it became a shared space defended and shaped by those involved: ***"At some point the line disappeared between us, who come from outside, and them, who are there. It became a more collective practice, a collective construction"***, explained Sara.

More info on Escuela Musical de Teatro de Petare: *https://etmpetare.com/*

THE ROLE OF SUPPORT INTERMEDIARIES

Community building in the performing arts depends not only on artists and participants, but also on the intermediaries who accompany, connect and sustain this process over time. Their roles may include providing information, practical guidance and resources, creating opportunities for exchange and collaboration, supporting the development of projects or even doing advocacy work for the sector. By performing these connecting, facilitating and capacity-building functions, intermediaries help community-centered practices to develop and be sustainable. However, while intermediary organisations can play an important role, they are not present in all geographic contexts.

Case in Practice: The Berlin Performing Arts Program (Germany)

When the Berlin Performing Arts Program (PAP Berlin) launched its Community and Neighborhood Projects in 2024, the objective was to strengthen the relationship between Berlin's independent performing arts community and the people living around it. As the programme team explains, ***"We want to provide ideas, inspiration and practical guidance for practitioners already engaged in community work — as well as for those who are only just thinking about starting a small project."***

Through an open call, PAP Berlin supports theatres, artists and cultural organisations in developing projects rooted in their local neighbourhoods, enabling performance spaces to become places of encounter, dialogue and participation. From intergenerational dance workshops in community gardens to mobile artistic interventions in public space, the supported projects demonstrate that community building can take many forms, each shaped by its local context.

The programme has progressively built an ecosystem around community building by connecting practitioners, making projects visible and creating opportunities for collective reflection. This is particularly evident in SPIELRAUM – The Days of the Independent Performing Arts Community in Berlin, where audiences are invited to discover not only performances but also the processes, places and relationships behind them through workshops, neighbourhood events, open rehearsals and discussions across the city.

PAP Berlin tries to transform these experiences into shared knowledge. Building on the projects it has supported and discussions emerging from the common pARTs symposium on artistic community work, PAP Berlin has developed a practical publication that documents practitioners' perspective without proposing a fixed methodology, but through sharing experiences, practical advice and lessons learned: from developing partnerships and identifying funding opportunities to navigating the everyday challenges of community building practices.

More on The Berlin Performing Arts Program: *https://freie-szene-tage.de/en/*

More on the Community and Neighborhood Projects *https://pap-berlin.de/en/community-and-neighborhood-projects*

Link to the publication : *https://pap-berlin.de/sites/default/files/2026-07/260619-pap-community-publikation-web-en.pdf*

ON COMMISSIONING WITH INSTEAD OF FOR A COMMUNITY

Community building is often associated with being rooted in a specific place, yet many artists and collectives today work across multiple territories. This creates an ongoing tension between the desire to develop deep, long-term relationships and the mobility that is inherent to contemporary artistic practice. The solution lies in rethinking artists' relationships with the places and communities they encounter. This also gives rise to slower forms of mobility that explicitly aim to explore local realities and build relationships.

Case in Practice: Las que tienen que servir (Spain)

Commissioned by Teatro del Pradillo in Madrid as part of its commitment to working with local communities, Las que tienen que servir emerged from a call for artistic proposals involving the theater's neighbourhood. The selected artist was chosen through a process that involved both the theatre team and residents: after the theatre reviewed the proposals for their artistic, technical and logistical viability, the shortlisted proposals were shared with these participants, who were invited to recommend the artist they considered most appropriate. Choreographer Fernando López's project was selected through this process. Fernando had been developing the idea behind the work for some time but was looking for the right framework to explore it through a sustained relationship with participants from outside the art field.

The project brings together women who have worked in cleaning and care roles to reflect on their experiences through movement, conversation and collective creation, but was also open to other residents. Most of them had no theatre-related experience, while some had already participated in similar activities convened by the Theatre. For Fernando, the key was not to achieve a fixed outcome, but to remain open to the realities of the group:

"You need to arrive without a pre-fixed idea about the result that you want to have. Sometimes it's a bad day, people are tired, they can't come, or they don't remember what happened the week before. You have to repeat everything, or change everything. You need to be open and adapt."

For him, flexibility is not a limitation but a fundamental part of community-based artistic practice, creating the conditions for something shared to emerge.

More info on Teatro de Pradillo's open call: *https://www.teatropradillo.com/home/nosotros/interesados-en-la-programacion/convocatorias/convocatoria-proyectos-barrio-prosperidad/*

More info on Las que tienen que servir: *https://www.teatropradillo.com/las-que-tienen-que-servir-muestra/*

COMMUNITY BEYOND THE HUMAN

Community building in the performing arts is usually understood as a relationship between people. But what happens if we expand our understanding of community to include the landscapes, rivers and other natural ecosystems that sustain us? Choreographer Tania Soubry, based between Brussels and Luxembourg, invites us to rethink community not as exclusively human, but as a web of relationships that connects people, places and the living world. Her practice starts from the idea that communities are not created in isolation from their environments: they are shaped by the land, histories and material conditions from which social, cultural and economic life emerges. Working with places marked by extraction and transformation, she explores how artistic practice can help reconnect people with these histories and with forms of belonging that extend beyond the human.

"How might we facilitate a sense of community with and through the terrestrial: a shared experience of connection with land, and from within that connection, with one another? Working with the Terres Rouges, a recovering former mining landscape in Luxembourg, I use choreographic attunement and worlding, including eco-somatic practices such as walking, listening, sounding and moving-with — to explore community as more than exclusively human. This sense of connection extends toward lands I have never visited — toward people bound to this landscape through the same extractive system, now displaced elsewhere. I also practice this community within Still Here — An Alliance of Care with the Senne River project by the Natural Contract Lab in Belgium, with a river long buried beneath the city of Brussels, and its human and more-than-human ecologies and communities. Reconnecting with land and rivers as our ancestors – the ground from which the social, cultural, and economic layers of any community emerge, and of which they remain part."

Tania Soubry's written reflections shared with publication authors

"Blurring The Edges" workshop, Common Threads Festival Sheffield 2025 (credit: Adele Drummond)

WORKING WITH ROOTED COMMUNITIES WHILE BEING MOBILE

Community building in the performing arts is usually understood as a relationship between people. But what happens if we expand our understanding of community to include the landscapes, rivers and other natural ecosystems that sustain us? Choreographer Tania Soubry, based between Brussels and Luxembourg, invites us to rethink community not as exclusively human, but as a web of relationships that connects people, places and the living world. Her practice starts from the idea that communities are not created in isolation from their environments: they are shaped by the land, histories and material conditions from which social, cultural and economic life emerges. Working with places marked by extraction and transformation, she explores how artistic practice can help reconnect people with these histories and with forms of belonging that extend beyond the human.

Case in Practice: ARDA Collective – a situated practice on the move

ARDA Collective brings together eight women artists from different countries working across dance, performance and activism. Formed through an international residency, the collective has continued to develop its practice through residencies in Italy, Malta, Galicia and other contexts. Its starting point is a shared conviction that artistic work cannot remain disconnected from the places in which it is created. As Chiara Bosco and Elena Brea, two members of the collective, explain throughout our conversation, this means thinking carefully about how artists enter and relate to a place. As Chiara puts it, ***"Theatre should not be closed inside a room; it needs to move outside, with communities, within communities and alongside communities."***

This means taking time to understand a place before deciding how the artistic process will unfold. ARDA works through existing local networks and intermediaries, meeting associations, artists, researchers and residents and using workshops and informal encounters to develop relationships. In Galicia, for example, members of a local women's association shared basket-weaving, traditional singing and tambourine practices with the artists. In Malta, encounters with academics and residents included a walk exploring colonial histories in Valletta, while community feedback during the residency directly influenced the developing performance.

For the collective, these exchanges are also a way of questioning who has the right to speak about a place. ***"You cannot arrive like an alien spaceship landing in a territory,"*** Chiara explains. If artists want to engage with the social and political realities of a context, they need to spend time with the people who inhabit it and allow those encounters to affect the work.

Slowness and care therefore shape both ARDA's relationships with communities and the way the collective organises itself. Living and working together during residencies requires attention to communication, conflict, responsibilities and the risk of burnout. As Elena explains, ***"Care is at the very heart of our collective."***

At the same time, ARDA's experience reveals a tension inherent in international, residency-based practice. The collective is not permanently rooted in one community; its role, as Elena describes it, is ***"to connect"*** across places and around shared concerns such as migration, coloniality and ecological questions. Maintaining those relationships after a residency depends on local partners, personal connections, return visits and, inevitably, funding. ARDA therefore raises an important question: what does it mean to work in a situated way when artistic practice itself is mobile?

CHAPTER 4

REFLECTING FORWARD: CREATING THE CONDITIONS FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING

The interviews informing this publication repeatedly highlighted several shared issues concerning the conditions needed to foster community building in the performing arts. They also made clear that community building cannot rely solely on the commitment, creativity, and efforts of practitioners; it depends on a wider ecosystem of support and enabling conditions. This chapter brings these recurring issues together as questions that practitioners continue to navigate in different ways, and that merit further discussion and exchange across the sector and at the policy level.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

WHAT FUNDING FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING?

Funding remains one of the key conditions determining whether community building practices can develop sustainably. Opportunities to support this type of work remain highly uneven across the world, and often are dependent on different cultural policy histories, institutional infrastructures and levels of public investment. Some funding systems have begun to recognise the need for a shift in how cultural organisations engage with communities.

One example is Arts Council England's Let's Create strategy (2020–2030)[10] that places engagement with communities and the ambition to create cultural experiences with, not only for, people as part of its vision for the sector. This strategy represents a significant policy shift: recognising the relationship between cultural organisations and communities as an essential dimension of publicly supported cultural work.

However, some interviewees, reflecting on how the funding context evolves, have raised concerns about the risk of instrumentalising community engagement or turning it into a funding requirement. Interestingly, similar criticism has emerged in the independent review of the Let's Create strategy. Baroness Margaret Hodge's assessment for Arts Council England (ACE) found that, while many in the sector supported the equality principles underpinning Let's Create, some felt that the strategy had become 'a straitjacket', with applicants feeling compelled to 'tick all the ACE boxes' to secure funding rather than articulate their artistic strategies and ambitions. ACE acknowledged these concerns in responding to the review, recognising the need to avoid overly prescriptive requirements[11].

Indeed, across the wider cultural policy context, important questions remain: when does funding for community engagement genuinely support long-term relationships, and when does it risk becoming a form of 'community washing'[12]—using the language of participation and inclusion without creating meaningful change?

For some practitioners, supporting their community building practice means engaging with diverse funding environments, including those that do not necessarily recognise artistic processes, which requires adopting new ways of explaining the value of artistic practice. As Vikram Iyengar, co-founder and artistic director of Ranan Performance Collective and initiator of the Pickle Factory Dance Foundation (India), explained,

"We cannot articulate it as an arts project. Because once funders see the word arts, they will back away. Once you say 'education', and 'we're using arts for education', they will listen."

This reflects a wider challenge: community engagement in the performing arts often operates across sectors, yet this hybridity can make it difficult to find appropriate support. Reframing and rearticulating the value of the performing arts to engage with non-cultural funders can be both a useful exercise and an exhausting challenge, requiring the arts to fit into unfamiliar value frameworks.

Bureau Ritter, photo: Phil Dera

FROM TEMPORARY PROJECTS TO LASTING SPACES AND RELATIONSHIPS

Community building requires time, continuity and trust; yet many practitioners continue to work within short-term project frameworks and funding lines that are not designed to support long-term relationship building. As Gry Worre Hallberg, co-founder and Artistic Director of Sister's Hope, a performance group and movement from Denmark reflected:

"The funding system of the 20th century has really had originality as the core value of arts production. Artists have been trained to create something new, something short, because you cannot repeat or iterate. We need to address permanence versus the temporary, otherwise we end up with a lot of high production that only scratches the surface."

For Lora Krasteva, artist and cultural producer (Bulgaria/UK), the question is not only about funding artistic activities, but about what remains after a project ends: "I'm really against this idea that the artist sits outside everything and just comes in, does a thing, and then goes away. It's important that art and projects are made with people, and that they leave some sort of scaffolding behind, so that it's relevant and interesting for the people who might be there for the longer run."

Supporting community building therefore requires funding models that recognise not only the creation of artworks, but also the infrastructures, relationships and capacities developed through the process. This means moving beyond financing temporary interventions towards investing in the conditions that allow communities and cultural practitioners to build and sustain social links over time. Many interviewees highlighted the importance of having a permanent space for developing their activities, allowing them to move from short-term community-engaged projects towards long-lasting community building.

Plays Aloud, photo: Peter Murray

EVALUATION EMBEDDED IN COMMUNITY BUILDING PRACTICE

How do we recognise, value and capture changes related to trust, belonging, confidence and collective agency? Community building practices can benefit from evaluation processes that become part of the community building itself. Clare Reynolds, Co-Director of Restoke, a UK-based participatory arts organisation working in Stoke-on-Trent, explains the role of evaluation in their projects:

"With communities, it's about asking: are we taking from, are we extracting, or is it actually empowering for people? We want to make sure that it is alongside people, not doing something to people. This process [evaluation] has been valuable for us to hold ourselves accountable and to understand what is happening — to make sure that our work with communities is ethical, empowering and based on solidarity."

Restoke worked with an arts evaluator (Nicola Winstanley) to develop creative approaches to understanding the impact of its participatory projects. Rather than evaluating the project only at the end, the evaluator was present as an observer, becoming part of the community and facilitating moments in which participants and Restoke's creative practitioners reflect on and articulate their experiences together. These conversations generate insights that feed back into the development of the project, allowing the organisation to adapt its practice while also creating space for participants to make sense of what the process means to them.

Evaluation requires time, resources and expertise, which are not always available, particularly to smaller organisations. Moreover, funders' criteria do not always reflect the realities of community-building practices, often focusing on quantifiable and output-oriented indicators. When conditions allow, however, evaluation can become more than a reporting exercise: creative and participatory approaches to evaluation can make the value of community-based work visible to the outside world while also supporting more thoughtful, responsive and meaningful ways of working that benefit both artists and communities.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

VALUING PROCESS BEYOND THE ARTISTIC OUTCOME

Several interviewees questioned the assumption that community-building work in the performing arts should necessarily lead to a performance or other predefined artistic output. While an artistic product can provide an important focus for collective work, making it a required endpoint can risk overlooking the value of the process itself: building relationships, creating trust, exchanging knowledge and creating conditions for future connections.

This is illustrated by the experience of Mia + Eric[13], an interdisciplinary artist duo from Calgary (Canada) whose practice combines artistic research and community engagement across visual art, performance, writing and multi-species approaches. For them, an artwork is not necessarily a predefined condition of working with communities:

"Communities may not want or need one. Sometimes the most important work is listening, gathering, connecting people, sharing knowledge, or creating conditions for future exchange."

This perspective was echoed by other interviewees, who also raised concerns about more extractive approaches to participation, in which communities are invited to share their stories, experiences or knowledge primarily as material for an artistic work. Community building therefore requires attention not only to what is produced as an end result, but to what the process means for those involved.

Photo: Courtesy of Mia + Eric

PERFORMING ARTS AS A METHOD FOR COMMUNITY BUILDING ACROSS ART FORMS

Several interviewees pointed to the potential of performing arts practices to cultivate community building within cultural institutions working across different art forms. In museums, exhibition spaces and other institutions where encounters have often centred on looking, learning or mediation, performance, with its agility, flexibility and multi-format nature, can introduce more embodied, participatory and relational forms of engagement and create situations where people meet, contribute and experience something together.

The European project Perform Inform Transform - Participatory Performance in Arts Museums[14] offers an example of such approaches. At BOZAR, an institution historically rooted in visual arts, exhibitions and cultural mediation, performance is being explored as a new way of creating connections with communities, building on its established mediation work with schools, associations and diverse groups. As Paul Briottet from the BOZAR team explains, ***"Performance is a tool that creates links, and by creating links, it also creates bridges for audiences to become interested in other forms of art."***

The example points to a broader potential: performing arts can become a method for community building not only within the performing arts, but also across other art forms, offering cultural institutions new ways of creating relationships and encounters with communities.

00 Satellites performance, BOZAR Photo: Lotte De Beer

SEEING COMMUNITY BUILDING AS A SITUATED PRACTICE

In many European cultural systems, artistic practice and community-based cultural work have become relatively distinct fields, with different aims, methods and sometimes funding structures, treating creating art and building community as two separate activities. Yet this distinction is often culturally and institutionally situated and does not apply in the same way everywhere.

For Argentinian researcher, creator, writer, curator and educator Paula Baró, the separation is less pronounced in some Latin American contexts. Popular cultural traditions such as carnival, music and neighbourhood theatre bring professional artists and community members together without clearly differentiated roles. Artistic practice can be embedded in relationships with the territory and local knowledge, with artistic and social dimensions developing together.

This hybridity also reflects different structural conditions. Where cultural infrastructures and institutional support are less established, artists may combine multiple forms of work, and professional practices may naturally overlap. While this can increase precarity, it can also enable more flexible and collaborative forms of cultural practice. The implication is not that one model is preferable, but that policies and funding need to recognise that artistic and community practices are organised differently across contexts, rather than imposing a single understanding of what cultural work should look like.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Eleusis European Capital of Culture

RECOGNISING THE LABOUR OF CARE

Community building relies on forms of labour that often remain invisible. Building trust, listening to personal experiences, responding to vulnerability and creating spaces where people feel safe require emotional investment and specific skills that frequently extend beyond artists' and cultural practitioners' formal roles. Yet these dimensions of work are rarely fully recognised in funding structures, project plans, budgets or institutional expectations.

For practitioners working in this field, the emotional dimension of the work is inseparable from the relationships they build. Mercedes Kemp, writer, educator, and theatre maker and co-founder of Wildworks, a Carnwall-based UK company creating site-specific theatre with communities locally, nationally and internationally—including work in Palestine and other contexts—reflects on both the demands and the rewards of this approach:

"It is very demanding work, and you need to come into it very open. We meet people that just tell us things that they kind of break you emotionally, and you have to be there for them and for yourself."

Her reflection highlights the need to better prepare and support cultural practitioners: not only by developing skills to work responsibly with communities, but also by creating conditions where they can establish boundaries, access support and sustain their own wellbeing. Recognising the labour of care therefore also means moving beyond the assumption that community engagement can be sustained through individual commitment and goodwill alone.

In some contexts, psychological support mechanisms for cultural workers engaged in community-based practices exist[15]. However, these remain the exception rather than the norm. In many countries and contexts, practitioners are expected to navigate complex social realities without specific preparation, recognition or resources.

Synikismos Festival, 2023 Elefsis European Capital of Culture

WHERE DOES ARTISTIC PRACTICE END AND SOCIAL WORK BEGIN?

Community building in and through the performing arts often create profound social impacts, yet several contributors questioned whether focusing on community building also risks redefining the role of the artist. As policy agendas increasingly recognise the social value of artistic work, there is a danger that artists will be expected to compensate for underfunded social services. Artists may willingly choose to work with communities, but expecting them to replace social workers is not compatible with artistic freedom. This prompts a broader policy question: how can cultural policy recognise and support community-engaged practice while ensuring that artists and cultural practitioners are not asked to shoulder responsibilities beyond their remit?

We have chosen to end this publication with this question deliberately, as it illustrates the wider tensions surrounding community building in the performing arts. As artists and cultural organisations increasingly engage with complex social realities, questions of responsibility, recognition and support become impossible to ignore.

We hope that these reflections, and the many other questions raised throughout these pages, will continue to be explored collectively through the upcoming IETM encounters and beyond. While there is no single approach for community building in the performing arts, there are, however, shared challenges, emerging practices and valuable experiences that can only be understood through ongoing exchange.

Bureau Ritter, photo: Phil Dera

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

We would like to thank all the people that shared their insights and experiences during interviews.

Robyn Cabaret, Producer, ArtHouse Jersey (Jersey Island)

David Kozma, Actor and Director, Post Theatre Collective (Finland)

Melisa Cañas FID Córdoba, Festival Internacional de Danza (Argentina)

Marta Pastorino, Independent practitioner, storyteller and trainer (Italy)

Sara Valero, Development Director, Escuela Musical de Teatro de Petare (Venezuela)

Ivanka Apostolova Baskar, Independent practitioner (Northern Macedonia)

Dmitrii Zenkov, Drama and Visual Director and Producer, Kamon-kamon-theatre (Russia/ Serbia)

Susana C. Gaspar, Artistic Director, Chão de Oliva (Portugal)

Kelly Diapouli, Artistic Director, Larnaka 2030 / Eleusis 2021 (Greece and Cyprus)

Laura Böttinger, Project Director Care in Motion & Artistic Director Dance On Participation, Bureau Ritter (Germany)

Benjamin Gould, Artistic Director, and Clare McMahon, Co-Creative Director, Commedia of Errors (Northern Ireland)

Fernando López, Choreographer and Founder of Fernando López Dance Company

Kone Lassina and Agnès Quillet, Artistic and Administrative Directors, Don Sen Folo -LAB (Mali)

Paula Baro, creator, writer, curator and educator (Argentina)

Chiara Bosco and Elena Brea, performers, ARDA Collective (Europe)

Eric Moschopedis and Mia Rushton, Eric + Mia (Canada)

Clare Reynolds, Co-Director, Restoke (United Kingdom)

Carla Andolina, Chrones SRL (Italy)

Tania Soubry, performer and choreographer

Linus Lutz, Berlin Performing Arts Program (Germany)

Koen Haagdorens, Artistic Coordinator and dramaturg, Hetpaleis (Belgium)

Frédéric Meseeuw, Paul Briottet and Zoe Toulemonde BOZAR (Belgium)

Lora Krasteva, Artist and cultural producer (Bulgaria/ UK)

Gry Worre Hallberg, Sisters Hope (Denmark)

Vikram Iyengar, Co-founder and Artistic Director of Ranan Performance Collective and initiator of Pickle Factory Dance Foundation (India)

We would like to thank all the people took the time to reply to the questionnaire even if we did not manage to do interviews with:

Maria Banova (Art Land Theater, Bulgaria); **Mayu Shirai** (Ikiiki Theater Company, Japan), **Caeterina Giangrasso Angrisani** (PAMPA, Italy), **Bikumu Kanza Khelvin** (Corps en Migration Congo), **Sigurður Unnar Birgisson** (LÍK, Iceland), Francesca Penzo (Micce), **Caterina Giangrasso Angrisani** (ArtGarageDanceCo/ Italy).

Endnotes

1. Matarasso, F. (2019). *A Restless Art: How Participation Won, and Why It Matters.* London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation.
2. European Commission (2017) *Study on Audience Development – How to Place Audiences at the Centre of Cultural Organisations.* This study marked an important shift by presenting audience development as an organisation-wide process rather than a marketing strategy.
3. Other European funded projects such as ADESTE+ or Be SpectACTive! challenged the distinction between spectators and creators, proposing new ways in which audiences might actively shape artistic processes. See Bonet, L., Calvano, G., Carnelli, L., Dupin-Meynard, F., Négrier, E. and Zuliani, E. (2018). *Be SpectACTive! Challenging Participation in Performing Arts*. Editoria & Spettacolo, Rome. Available at: https://www.bespectactive.eu/storage/2019/09/Be-SpectACTive.pdf; see also Bonet, L. and Négrier, E. (eds.) (2018), *Breaking the Fourth Wall: Proactive Audiences in the Performing Arts*. Kunnskapsverket, Bodø. Available at: https://www.bespectactive.eu/storage/2019/09/Breaking-the-Fourth-Wall_publication.compressed.pdf
4. European Commission (2018), *A New European Agenda for Culture*, COM(2018) 267 final, Brussels; Council of the European Union (2018), Council conclusions on the Work Plan for Culture 2019–2022, 2018/C 460/10. The New Agenda introduced "cultural capability" as a guiding principle, emphasising opportunities for people not only to access culture but to participate actively and create. The subsequent Work Plan connected participation in cultural life with individual empowerment, civic engagement and social cohesion.
5. European Commission (2025), *A Culture Compass for Europe*, COM(2025) 785 final, Brussels. The Compass places cultural rights at the centre of its strategic vision, affirming the right of everyone to create and participate in culture and emphasising inclusive access to cultural life.
6. Wenger, E. (1998), *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. Although developed in the context of learning theory, Wenger's understanding of communities as evolving through shared practice has proved influential well beyond education and offers a valuable perspective for many community-based artistic processes.
7. Kester, G.H. (2004), *Conversation Pieces: Community and Communication in Modern Art*. Berkeley: University of California Press; see also Kester, G.H. (2011), The One and the Many: Contemporary Collaborative Art in a Global Context. Durham, NC: Duke University Press. Kester's work explores dialogue as an artistic medium and has become a key reference for collaborative and socially engaged artistic practice.
8. Neal, L. (2015), *Playing for Time: Making Art as if the World Mattered*. London: Oberon Books. Neal reflects on long-term, place-based artistic practice.
9. Oldenburg, R. (1989), *The Great Good Place*. New York: Paragon House. Oldenburg introduced the concept of „third places" as informal gathering spaces that support everyday social life and civic interaction beyond home and work. Available at: https://raggeduniversity.co.uk/wp-content/uploads/2025/01/1_x_ThegreatgoodplaceRayOldenburg2nded.-NewYork-compressed.pdf
10. Matarasso, F. (2019), *A Restless Art: How Participation Won, and Why It Matters*. London: Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation. One of the most influential reflections on participatory arts. Looking back at more than three decades of practice, Matarasso argues that participation is fundamentally about people's capacity to create culture, not simply access it. Available at www.arestlessart.com.
11. Maitland, H. (1997), *A Guide to Audience Development*. Arts Council of England, London. One of the early publications to formalise audience development as a field of practice in the UK, Maitland connected the development and broadening of audiences with approaches drawn from marketing, education and outreach.
12. Walmsley, B. (2019), *Audience Engagement in the Performing Arts: A Critical Analysis*. London: Palgrave Macmillan. Walmsley's work proposes an understanding of audience engagement based on dialogue, participation and cultural value, moving beyond attendance as the principal measure of attendance as indicator of success.
13. Bishop, C. (2012). *Artificial Hells: Participatory Art and the Politics of Spectatorship*. London: Verso. In this publication, Bishop offers a critical reading of participatory art, questioning approaches that value collaborative projects only for their social effects and calling for greater attention to their artistic dimensions.
14. https://www.artscouncil.org.uk/lets-create/strategy-2020-2030/introduction
15. https://www.gov.uk/government/publications/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge/arts-council-england-an-independent-review-by-baroness-margaret-hodge
16. A term used in an interview with Carla Andolina, Chrones SRL. Carla is one of the founders of CHRONES, an organisation that focuses on community building and audience engagement through SEPHIROT®, an interactive storytelling system designed to create participatory performances that blend theatre with live-action role-playing games.
17. More about Mia + Eric : https://miaanderic.ca/
18. More info on the PIP project: https://pitperform.eu/
19. For example, t in Ireland, Minding Creative Minds, an initiative supported by the Department of Culture, Communications and Sports, gives access to experienced team of trained counsellors and psychotherapists who can offer short-term intervention and advice covering practical, day-to-day issues that cause anxiety and stress: https://mindingcreativeminds.ie/

IETA