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Reconfiguring dramaturgies of place
Local authority event management during the COVID-19 pandemic

in Adaptation and resilience in the performing arts
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When restrictions eased in the UK for outdoor gatherings and performances in the summer of 2020, and the UK government announced that it would act against the impacts of the unfolding coronavirus (COVID-19) pandemic to protect arts and culture, which the then Prime Minister described as 'the beating heart of the country' (Brown, 2020), many town centres and tourism destinations began to explore how to safely organise post-lockdown activities. For UK events managers working with or within local authorities to deliver events and programmes within their council areas, this posed unprecedented

challenges. When taking decisions regarding the use of public space for arts activities and having to deliver events and programmes in public spaces safely, local authority officers had to contend with the limits of their experience in programming work that involved dispersed audiences. As part of their effort to enable the local population to reconnect with their environment, some also had to deal with the challenge of reimagining sites and routes that had no prior history of use as performance spaces. These difficulties were compounded by the devolved geographies of governance across the UK for public health and for arts and culture. Drawing on the results of a survey and interviews with local authority event managers across the UK, this chapter sheds light on the difficulties faced by events managers at the time of the easing of pandemic mitigation measures and explores the range of practices and sites that were used, their relative success and the detailed practicability of taking the arts outdoors, especially into public spaces.

The various problems faced by UK events managers may in part stem from the origins of the event manager role: local authority events teams and manager roles were initially created simply to support civic events within their specific geographical areas. As one event manager we interviewed explained:

> The events team was primarily made to manage a travelling fun fair as well as the more civic angles of our events like the Lord Mayor's Gala, Christmas lights and things like that. Over time, it's developed very much into [a] tourism and economic drive function. (Interview 4)

Another interviewee adds detail about what such an 'economic drive function' boils down to:

> Traditionally, council funding is based on a certain volume of people that will come to the city centre to measure a certain amount of spend that will happen in the city centre. It's economically driven more than artistically driven from their perspective. It's about animating the city centre to bring footfall. (Interview 3)

An animated city contributes to the cultural capital that makes it a sought-after venue for events such as weddings, which in turn brings yet greater footfall and spend for businesses and the local authority: 'Our team focuses on outdoor events and weddings, anything that takes place on council land, or a highway, including heritage parks. Primarily, we are responsible for generating an income for the local authority through hiring council land for events' (Interview 5). As these comments show, local authority events teams were, before 2020, mostly in charge of the logistical implementation of events in their local area, a 'one-stop shop' for licensing and managing the event as well as ensuring the economic function of a town or city (Interview 4).

Recognising the original purpose of the event manager is key to understanding the changes to their roles and functions during the pandemic, as they had to adapt to support safer and, ultimately, better curated arts and culture programmes that included community art initiatives in outdoor spaces, such as those explored in the final chapter of this volume. Our research for 'Outside the Box: Open-Air Performance as a Pandemic Response' (April to August 2021) reveals that local authorities' approach to managing events before the pandemic shaped their response during the crisis and is also affecting how they plan their future events. An in-depth look at management styles and structures enables us to better understand how local authorities govern their local areas, how they think about place-making/geography, history and community, and how they might best serve communities through artistic and performance event programming as we emerge from the pandemic and face new environmental and social challenges.

Our project set out to map variations in approaches and examples of good and best practice across the UK. Informed by drama and management studies, we took an interdisciplinary approach and sought to harness changes brought about by the lockdown such as the revivified community engagement with green spaces and renewed desire for sustainable leisure. For the strand of our research project aimed at understanding how local authorities managed outdoor events before and during the coronavirus pandemic, we collected qualitative data at the cusp of the UK reopening from lockdown on 8 March 2021. We thus explored the views of events managers at the point when new practices and outdoor venues emerged, and as local authority event managers approached the possibility of a physically distanced autumn/winter season, potentially with shorter lead-in times, less economically viable audience capacities and the hazards associated with indoor working.

This chapter focuses on what we learned from the survey of event managers we created using Qualtrics, which contained 19 questions. These questions were divided into four categories:

1. Location, population and the nature of services;
2. Events prior to the pandemic, including frequency, locations and types of events;
3. Events since the pandemic was first declared in the UK in March 2020, including changes

to programming and the main challenges that event managers encountered;
4. Views on the pandemic and the future of outdoors events.

The full survey was completed by 19 local authority event managers and an additional 24 answered it partially. Of the total of 43 responses, 18 were involved with commissioning work from artists. Just over half (22) of councils were involved in programming events. These 22 respondents said that their councils put on events in urban areas, with 19 utilising parks as venues predominantly for concerts and street theatre or other performance events. Such 'performance events', including rituals, music, live art, installations, interactive games, parades and guided/walking experiences, made up a fifth of the activities organised by local authorities during this period and these are the focus of this chapter.[1]

Our survey findings were fleshed out by the detailed responses we obtained through 30-minute interviews conducted through video calls on Zoom. Fourteen of those interviews with local authority event managers and producers across the UK took place in June–August 2021, the summer during which England began a phased exit from lockdown. In the following section, I draw on data from the interviews to discuss how councils managed performance events before the pandemic, how this changed in response to the pandemic and what has been learned from these experiences. I argue that the pandemic has led to a reflective period wherein events managers needed to update their working structures to accommodate not only the immediate responses to COVID-19 guidelines, but a sustainable and inclusive practice for the future.

Performance events before the pandemic

The festival circuit is one of largest events local authorities host, with some larger cities hosting several major festivals every year. For these, most of the content comes from external event organisers, with the council event team playing a facilitating role. One interviewee explained that the council only acted as organiser for winter holiday events, with the rest of the calendar of events managed by 'external organisations or through individual event producers': 'It's their responsibility and it's their events. We just make the land available to them if they need land from us or if they need permission from us, and then we facilitate that to allow their events go ahead. We don't programme as such' (Interview 8).

In most towns and cities, markets are also one of the biggest outdoor events local authorities manage and produce. In one city, the events manager saw markets as a potential area to grow arts audiences:

> the markets were a really big draw for a lot of people who maybe didn't see themselves as art attenders, but they come down for street food and they come down to the craft market and then see this amazing piece of contemporary dance even if they would never consider themselves to be a dance audience. That combination is something we pushed very hard. We collide these worlds and see what happens. It fits with our broader objective to try and increase people's exposure to culture and give them an experience that they may not have. They wouldn't go into a building that is a cultural venue, but they will come to the street and see something in the street because they like [a] particular churros stand. (Interview 3)

This chimes with the responses of several interviewees, who described similar pre-pandemic initiatives to use open-air spaces where people naturally enjoy gathering to develop new audiences for their arts and culture programming. However, they explained that a particular challenge to this approach was that some potential audience members, especially within lower income demographics, did not feel as though those open-air spaces were 'their' places.

One council made it their aim to remove barriers to participation that may stem from the spaces created by history, the cityscape, communities and from the architecture of the town or city. It has become a part of this council's remit to bridge gaps between areas to engage communities that would otherwise feel separated from local authority-run city centre events:

> This part of the city is an old part and was a nineteenth century trading warehouse area. It was gentrified through the 80s and 90s so now it's got a beautiful streetscape. But for a lot of people from poorer areas, that part of town is intimidating so we've started engagement work and outreach with communities that border this part of town. We're trying to find ways to create connections because there's almost like an invisible barrier, and people don't think that part of town is for them. Even if it's a free street festival and anyone can come in, for some people psychologically, they're not sure if that part of town is going to be [welcoming]. They might stand out or something.

(Interview 3)

Evidently, psychological and cultural barriers need to be tackled to encourage communities to cross geographical boundaries and enter the city centre. This is a good case study for understanding how built environments are experienced and perceived, and how event managers can participate actively in place-making. By understanding the effects of gentrification within a community, they created programmes that forged connections in cities that are perceived as culturally and economically divided. By paying attention to local audience behaviour, footfall and demographics, they developed strategies not only to drive the economy and tourism, but also to encourage residents to take ownership of their city. In this case, event managers have shown how cultural programming can impact community cohesion.

As this example suggests, the default open space for most events run by the council is the city centre, as well as any historic attractions around it. This is also often the case in most other towns and cities. This is how our first interviewee put it:

> The central point is the City Hall, a huge, beautiful building built in 1906. It's historic. That's where our Christmas market will be, and our Christmas tree … It's a key place for us since the city streets link all around it for parades etc. We've also got the harbour as it's become a hub for a lot of tourists, so we tend to concentrate on the quaysides. (Interview 1)

City centres and plazas have always been the heart of a municipality's public life. They are the hub for culture and commerce, if not also the seat of political and geographical power, and often the nucleus of a settlement's history. It is no surprise, then, that events programming would take place here. However, this is not without pitfalls, as exemplified by the earlier example of exclusionary experiences brought about by gentrification. For this event manager, too, the challenge lay in expanding arts and culture across the city by deliberately spreading cultural activity across the city's different geographical areas and social groups, through targeted outreach engagements:

> One of our main priorities is [to] reclaim public space and re-use public space to bring culture out of theatres and … cultural exhibition spaces and make it more public. It's a massive problem of access that people don't necessarily want to walk into a gallery. So, a big ambition in our cultural strategy is to ask artists to think about public space, and how they can be ambitious around what they can do. We need to geographically spread ourselves across the entire city, so we always divide it into city centre, north, south, east and west. What we're doing is that we're involving a community in each section or we're involving a venue in each section or involving an artist from each part of the city, focusing on inclusivity as well for disabled artists, LGBTQ+ artists, and migrant artists. We're looking at capacity building programmes for minority groups. (Interview 1)

This initiative points to a contemporary turn in civic events and cultural programming, one that is attuned and committed to accessibility and inclusivity. As these interviewees articulate, outdoor spaces have their own particular histories, and these mark the present in different ways for different communities. What the councils have discovered through an understanding of cultural geography is how to manage those associations to support the communities they serve. Sometimes they must work to break down 'invisible barriers', and sometimes they celebrate spaces that are historically important to the community. A council's awareness of their specific contexts and their roles within those contexts is key to beginning to revise their cultural strategies when thinking about public space in contemporary performance programming.

Public space often includes green spaces, which pose an additional challenge in that there are limitations in place to protect parks and gardens from overuse. Sometimes, too much footfall can damage the built or natural ecosystems that thrive in them: 'We've encouraged use of outdoor spaces but not green spaces because they are sensitive and can be overused. We've said no to any new events going on in green spaces and we've protected them' (Interview 8). This is not to say that such green zones are unusable, but that the way performance events are conceived needs to be attuned to these spaces, as was clear from the following comment:

> We've got limited spaces where people can put on events. We've got two reasonably large green spaces and those are usable but there are restrictions around the Abbey, which is currently limited to twenty-eight days a year for activity. So, we're going to look to see how we can adjust planning permissions on that moving forward. (Interview 7)

While there are regulations in place, such as specific numbers of days a green space can be used, arts programmers can consider the possibilities of how they are used and how planning permissions may be adapted.

As became apparent in our second interview, specific historical and cultural factors have also influenced how events have positioned themselves within the city's economic recovery. The wealth of some cities, as in the case of Interviewee 2, has historical roots in slavery and the cotton trade, but this wealth has not necessarily been maintained. Councils in poorer cities, like theirs, felt they needed to use events programming to capitalise on their cultural reputation and drive tourism towards economic revival (Interview 2). It was important to the interviewees that they understand, reflect on and maximise how the histories of their towns and cities shape cultural capital, as illustrated by Interview 6:

> Our city was very badly bombed. It was a medieval city but most of the urban fabric has been rebuilt since the Second World War, so it's quite an unusual geography. But we need to maximise that. We had a tightrope walk [between two structures that] couldn't really have been done anywhere else. (Interview 6)

A performance event can thus be a means of connecting a traumatic past with the present in a manner that tells a compelling story of bravery and resilience.

A story very different to such urban devastation and resilience can be told about the countryside communities that began to boom during the industrial revolution with the advent of steel and iron plants. The growth of this industry prompted migration as jobs were made and communities were built:

> We have a population of about a hundred and sixty thousand. We are a very new town. Almost everybody's family that lives here is probably less than four or five generations. We've always been a receiver of communities coming here, settling, and developing their own communities. We are very diverse and it's well-received. (Interview 10)

Performance events in such an environment will be angled very differently. This town had a purpose-built theatre erected after the Second World War. Having a specific place to host performances meant that alternative sites were not explored as much until the coronavirus pandemic. Necessity is the mother of invention, or in this case, innovation, as this community moved theatre outdoors with performances that were 'raved about by the public' (Interview 10). Utilising the farmlands surrounding their town, the community were able to produce theatre performances that were in line with the government guidelines, while also giving them the opportunity to contemplate the land that had welcomed and sustained them.

By thus reflecting on their respective locations' contexts and histories, events managers and artists discovered how the dramaturgy of space can affect the style and aesthetics of arts, theatre and performance in their local outdoor spaces. In sum, before 2020 events teams were concerned with a sense of place to:

1. Celebrate or rebrand the city's architecture and maximise cultural capital;
2. Understand the origins and heritages of their community and civic life;
3. Use the arts to reclaim public space for inclusivity and accessibility;
4. Respect the environment as ecosystems that support more than human life forms.

These four primary drivers for programming in turn changed the way performance events were structured. Events managers considered new relationships that occur in public space where the divide between audience and performer is blurred. As becomes apparent in a comment by our third interviewee, when this divide is blurred, the site becomes a part of the performance: 'Responding to the fluidness and democracy of outdoor space when you close a road and just let people wander through a closed road, there's a different set of relationships between the artist, between the performer, and audience' (Interview 3).

Such potential for site-specificity, in turn, influenced how this event manager conceived of theatre and performance in outdoor public space: 'A lot of outdoor work tends not to be very text-based or verbal. It's much more about the visual. If it's too wordy, it just doesn't work in the outdoor context. Sometimes, it's basically indoor work that they've just kind of got a bit of a roof over' (Interview 3). Text-based work, this event manager suggests, is not best served outdoors, where the words and sounds risk being lost in the city centre's hustle and bustle; whereas visual-arts-led events which intersect with interdisciplinary modes of creation fare better. Further, the attention to site-specificity within local authority event management puts place-making at the centre of their work, which recognises the limitations of replicating events in various venues: 'I think it's important for [the] events team to consider place-making when thinking about locations because some events can happen in the same format anywhere, but others can't' (Interview 6). Outdoor programming thus ended up being about much more than just matching up an artist or event with a specific site: it became a means of connecting communities, opening up access to arts and culture, increasing footfall in city centres, connecting the present with the location's past and about place-making in a manner that went far beyond economic

imperatives.

The pandemic situation

When the pandemic happened, it brewed the perfect storm to set these ideas in motion. The pandemic, as Mary Breunig reminds us, uncloaked a 'further bifurcation of haves and have nots in a capitalist-driven and culturally divided society. Post-pandemic, the opportunity for individuals to put their lives back together will be culture, race, gender, age and geography-dependent' (Breunig, 2022: 644). During the pandemic, one way of beginning to counter this bifurcation was therefore to make public space accessible for marginalised populations. Considerations of contexts, histories, site-specificity and place-making within performance events and other civic events began to flourish amidst the need to stimulate local economies.

While in several towns and cities the pandemic put a stop to all planned events, other councils shifted their focus towards 'supporting local businesses and trying to help them and push them towards the government funding opportunities available to all the people that were suddenly out of work' (Interview 9). Suddenly, events were no longer a priority. It was all about keeping people safe and supporting them through the economic downturn caused by lockdowns and closing borders all over the world, and events teams were drastically reduced in size because of staff being reassigned to other duties or furloughed.

The entire supply chain for events was impacted by the pandemic mitigation measures:

> I've seen the hardship that some people have and are on the brink of collapse. Even a two-week delay could cost around half a billion pounds to the event sector. And I don't think that's an exaggeration because it's just wiped out a lot of the summer. It's not just the big players in that business, it's the whole supply chain – all the people who supply events and all the artists who rely on those festivals happening as well. (Interview 2)

Events teams needed to act quickly and respond to changes in government guidelines as they came: 'an awful lot of planning needs to be done but every time it would just about come to fruition, we'd get a new stage in the lockdown' (Interview 4). As most events teams agreed, the top two challenges with event programming at that time were the changing government advice and interpreting government guidance, which meant that a lot of logistical recalibrations needed to be put in place.

Despite these challenges, some interviewees explained that they had attempted and managed to organise events during stages of lockdown with varying degrees of success. Previous templates for producing events could no longer be applied, so councils which may previously have functioned on 'autopilot' had to work harder to marry form with content and deeply think through the dramaturgy of the work they managed and commissioned. As a result, their team structures and roles changed, as they became more active producers themselves and/or hired producers to become a part of their team to ensure that events were not only safe but functioned for the communities they served.

Our interviewees described employing the following distinctive tactics in organising events during the pandemic.

Test and trace

Contact tracing was a system implemented during the height of the coronavirus pandemic, using a smartphone-based app that informed people if they had been in close contact with someone who had subsequently reported a positive test result. Events managers used this system for ticketed events in fenced-in outdoor spaces:

> We knew exactly who was coming and we could track and trace them. They were there for a specific length of time and then they left the site, which was completely different to how we used to do it. (Interview 3)

Pop-up

The element of surprise in pop-up events plays with the idea that shared space and time with an audience need not be planned, ticketed or fenced-in and that attendance numbers in a space would be minimal without putting a stop to the performance event. The pop-up format radically alters the way performance events are marketed and advertised, as is evident from these comments:

> We're just trying to keep it open and fresh, pocket entertainment, pop-up and move on.

> That's the plan. When I say pop-up events, what I mean by that is we will host an event, but it won't be the singing and dancing quayside entertainment. It will be moving and roving and pop-up. You might see something for five to seven minutes and it'll disappear, whereas previously you may have had a twenty-minute showpiece performance or someone performing in a marquee for two and half hours on a guitar. (Interview 1)

> We really wanted to encourage people to come back to the city and go for a drink, go for lunch, go for dinner or whatever in these places so we did have some walkabout performances in closed roads that [were] not ticketed. Performers just appeared and we didn't tell anyone. We said they're paid between 12 noon and 5pm, but we didn't give specific times because we didn't want the audience to gather in the street. If you book into a restaurant or a café or a bar, you might see something passing. It was a weird thing to explain and sell and I'm not entirely sure it worked, but we thought it was a kind of compromise. (Interview 3)

> All [these events] were unannounced. In general, those that were not connected with the event didn't have any insider information … Nobody was told any of the locations in advance of where things were happening just because it was seen as such a risk that an audience might gather. If a crowd is gathering of more than 30 people and it's not socially distant then that show has to stop happening in order that people aren't put at risk by gathering to watch. It was really an event that was designed to work within restrictions that still works on a big scale with lots of different forms of performers. (Interview 6)

Window installations

Window dressing was a common visually-led idea used in several town and cities to animate the high street as it was suffering from economic loss:

> We did a … programme of window dressing based on fairy tales all the way down the high street. It was lovely and helped the situation of vacant units where shops closed down. (Interview 1)

Window dressing was also envisioned as a festive winter event that people could enjoy. Despite some of these events having to be cancelled amidst recurring lockdowns, the idea was so good that, after the height of the lockdown, at least one local authority carried on its window-dressing project later in the year:

> In the lead up to Christmas, as most cities, we've had an issue with vacant retail units. So, we worked with arts organisations to bring some beautiful animations for those shop windows. We did have plans to have an arts trail in vacant units. This was going to be indoor not outdoor but it's something that made use of our event planning abilities in this particular situation. We were going to do an arts trail through the city centre with various stakeholders but unfortunately, we went into the third lockdown, and it just became impossible. But we fostered a good relationship with the University and eventually worked on a project located in a very big retail unit after the lockdown and it was a successful project. (Interview 5)

This experience reveals how pandemic solutions can be applied to post-pandemic event planning as well.

Installations and parades

Strategising events in terms of scale also helped to animate a city without drawing a large crowd needing to be in a certain place or a certain time. One event manager recalled how they 'brought in big inflatable monsters that sit on top of buildings. It was something people could engage with' (Interview 6). This could enable engagement from afar and allowed people to share an experience without needing to be within proximity.

Socially distant, minimal parades were also reconstructed to be less crowded. This also shows how large numbers are not always necessary to draw attention and create a festive environment:

> It was incredible how just a group of six people who were all at least two metres apart, [could be] full of colours, light, animation, and sound. There was no singing, so we had drumming. We had one [parade] each weekend over that period where the Christmas

market would have been taking place. (Interview 5)

Stretching space

Events managers also utilised spaces within their areas or jurisdiction in new and creative ways. They expanded arts and culture to the whole city, using traditional indoor spatial behaviour as a point of departure. By curating parts of the city as they would galleries and museums, they invited the local population to see their town or city in a new light. Gardens and parks were transformed into gallery or museum-like spaces where people could wander freely within their allocated ticket time (Interview 3). In one city, they had a specific time frame to limit the numbers of people within the space at any one time (Interview 1). Stretching space also allowed for green spaces to be used while also regulating traffic flow so that the environment was not harmed or disturbed.

Expanding even more, some events occurred in local neighbourhoods and scenic pedestrian-friendly trails. As one events manager recalls, '[walkabouts] were a great way to get a sense of place and connect with audiences but in a new and different way. We didn't need to be in a massive space' (Interview 11). Another local authority created a sense of adventure by exploring a mile-long road where several pop-up performances and interactive experiences occurred in a family-friendly manner (Interview 1).

Stretching time

Because most people were working from home and longer commutes were no longer a large part of people's lives, time seemed to stretch and events were no longer limited to the daytime. Part of making space for various demographics meant that they could extend events to evenings that were now a space of leisure: 'If people can come in the evenings, we can have a bit of a programme in the evening.' (Interview 1).

Identifying alternative outdoor spaces

Finally, the pandemic prompted events teams to look for alternative venues that would allow participants to observe social distancing rules. They had to consider how to spread people out, not just in the performance venue, but also in their use of facilities as well: 'Toilets are going to have to be set and spread out further. They're going to have to be cleaned more regularly than we would have before' (Interview 9). As demand grew for outdoor performances that would allow for air circulation and larger groups congregating, many of the solutions involved the discovery of new suitable sites such a farms and courtyards (as in Interview 10), and even car parks:

> Our producers know the city and what's permissible. Some of them have come up with additional sites by themselves that they've identified so we had one taking place in a car park that we've never used before. They're using it as an outdoor venue whereas normally they would have been in lots of small rooms around the city. (Interview 8)

In his article 'COVID, Resilience, and the Built Environment', sustainability scholar Jesse Keenan reflects on how the 'intimacy of social isolation afforded us the luxury of seeing and experiencing out built environment in a very different way' (2021: 159). In these cases, identifying alternative venues was a collaborative endeavour between artists and producers, offering a new perspective to a previously indoor-oriented events circuit.

All these tactical responses to the challenges posed by the pandemic and the UK government's mitigation measures were informed by the way these councils had previously approached the planning of events and the development of new strategies. The tactics they adopted directly align with their prior desire to develop a sense of place and acted to accelerate pre-existing strategic priorities:

1. They started using the city's landscape and architecture beyond city centres and town halls, thus maximising their cultural capital.
2. They reclaimed public space and jumpstarted their plans for inclusivity and accessibility.
3. They were prompted to better understand the needs of the community and the event manager's role in civic life.
4. They considered the environmental impact of their events.

Whereas, before 2020, the focus of events teams had been on the numbers of visitors generated by tourism and city-centre consumer footfall, the pandemic gave events organisers leeway to focus more explicitly on the needs of their local communities and a way to test new ideas and formats quickly, which has, in turn, instigated reflection on how events function within their respective jurisdictions.

Lessons learned and the future

The interviews we carried out allowed producers and event managers the space to reflect on what they had learned from adapting their work to the changing circumstances of lockdowns and the easing of restrictions. One aspect they reflected on, which is explored in greater detail in the final chapter of this volume, concerns an adjustment in how to measure success. Instead of thinking about success in terms of size, scale or footfall, events managers recognised the value of small-scale interventions and thinking about 'bite-sized multiples' when it comes to safe event programming in a pandemic and post-pandemic environment (Interview 4).

Another crucial lesson involved rethinking the way their departments are structured, so as to transform the local authority into a more collaborative system:

> [The structure is such that] the arm does not know what the leg is doing, what the head is doing … we've now understood the disconnect between the funder and the council authority on the creative sectors, so we've spent the last three years trying to bridge those gaps and working with the events team. Now we can see how we can work together. (Interview 1)

> In general, the council are not that interested in the content. They're not bothered. They want to know that it's going to be safe. They want to see risk assessments. In terms of actual content, there's very little conversation about that. I'm a producer within [one department]. There's a separate department that is the event management department. I team up with them and they do all the logistics, street plans, licensing, liaising with the council for closing roads, giving people parking etc. (Interview 3)

This also aligns with what a few local authorities have discovered, namely the value of an in-house creative producer who is experienced in the arts and culture sector of the town or city:

> I've worked in theatre and visual arts and event management in the cultural sector, and I work in the council so I'm kind of filling that [producer] gap. I work closely with the events team and they're very much about the practical side of delivery. I come up with creative solutions and they come up with practical solutions. (Interview 1)

Having a conduit between artists and the council allows artists to stay local and the council to 'make use of the creative talent in the city' (Interview 1). On top of being able to programme the creative content, producers are also better able to support new or emerging artists: 'If I'm bringing in artists that are quite new, they do struggle a bit with the paperwork. We will try to help them a little bit, so we have a bit of a nurturing role in that' (Interview 3). This new way of working thus benefits both established and emerging artists as well as the local community.

Additionally, if there was anything positive that came out of the pandemic, some event managers noticed that it became a way for politicians to believe in what they do: 'The arts and culture sector is not just a nice thing to do but it's all linked into our hospitality cultural sector and how it's important to the local economy' (Interview 2). Seeing the success of pandemic events also signalled changes in values and the use of urban retail space: 'We're hoping we'll have a unit in the city centre that we can turn into a cultural space and show the city that culture can be the new retail' (Interview 1). The sizeable shift from a retail-oriented city centre to one that champions the city's arts and culture aligns with the well-documented decline of the department store across UK town and cities in the years leading up to 2020 (Simpson, 2021). Thus, the coronavirus pandemic has galvanised events managers to consider alternative ways in which such spaces can be reimagined.

Events teams furthermore realised that green spaces could be explored more fully than had hitherto been the case. Although local authorities often focused on city centre events due to the imperative to boost rapid economic recovery, there is room for expansion when looking to the future:

> One of [the artists we core funded] is specifically looking at green space in the city and how you … democratise and decentralise that and allow people to take it over again because people are being quite nervous about what they can and can't do. We'd love to see him experiment with that over a year and hopefully by 2023 we can work with him on a large-scale park project that is looking at what we can do for culture and parks. (Interview 1)

Such work, in turn, connects communities with the natural environment in ways that align with the ecological turn that is a consequence of the accelerating climate emergency. Environmental

anthropologist Keith Tidball argues that when humans are faced with disaster, they seek engagement with nature, hence the drive to spend time outdoors in public green space (2012). One positive result of the lockdown was that limiting movement across the country also limited CO_2 emissions, aligning with Dutheil *et al.*'s finding that that the decrease in air pollution as an effect of quarantine improved the air quality in China (2020). This makes a case for considering how events teams can help shape a social system and built environment that is attuned to the wellbeing of its local dwellers.

Much of what has been learned since the pandemic involved restructuring how events function within society. They became much more community-driven instead of relying on the external footfall that had previously come from tourism. The pandemic then urged local events teams into taking ownership of the creative life and spirit of their respective areas. Arguably, this period has also shed light on the value of the creative producer as someone intimately acquainted with a town or city's creative spirit and therefore able to be a key force in delivering creative solutions tailor-made for that locality.

By taking ownership of their town and cities, councils and event managers who worked together with creative producers have reviewed their unique geographies, histories and strengths, and moved from the previously primarily economically driven approach towards thinking more carefully about the needs of the communities they serve. This, in turn, made them reflect on their role and on what is at the heart of the activities they set up, distinguishing them from the digital arts events explored in the first part of this volume: 'To me, an event is all about people coming together and sharing experience, talking, laughing, joking with friends, with new people' (Interview 2).

Events managers thus increasingly function to support such community-focused in-person gatherings instead of just putting on more anonymous large-scale events that can be replicated in every town and city:

> People used to expect to be entertained, but now more street groups are starting to do their own street parties and things like that. Instead of thinking we deserve to be entertained, we're looking at what we can do for ourselves and certainly the community groups that came together to do things like the food banks. … There'll always be a place for Glastonbury-scale events, but I think it's nice that people have a little bit more ownership back as well. (Interview 4)

When a town or city's identity is created collaboratively with their residents, their resilience and capacity to solve pandemic-related issues can take them beyond the imperatives of survival and economic prosperity. This is what Troy Glover describes as a kind of 'tactical urbanism' that lets inhabitants not only live within a space, but 'produce it to meet their needs and those of their neighbours' too (2022). What the coronavirus pandemic has done is to reconnect local event managers to their communities, fast-tracking strategies and testing plans for a more inclusive, community driven and ecologically sensitive arts and culture programme:

> If one good thing came from this pandemic, it's that people, groups and organisations have very much started to work with each other. Maybe we have gotten complacent. Maybe we need a gentle reminder. (Interview 4)

Note

1 Performance events foster interaction, are unique and unrepeatable, are not completely controlled by one individual and create a very specific experience that draws a spectator into what might be described as a 'liminal space' (Fischer-Lichte, 2014: 41–42), a transitional gap that transports the audience into the world of the performance.

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