

Case Study

Oldham Coliseum Theatre

Ageing, Objects and Wellbeing



Age-Friendly

Over a 10 week period, the Coliseum worked with The University of Manchester, New Charter Group and Housing and Care 21, delivering creative workshops with two Oldham based groups; a Pakistani Luncheon Club in Glodwick (inner Oldham) and residents from Charles Morris House in Failsworth (operated by Housing and Care 21, part of the New Charter social housing Group).

The creative sessions focused on objects, home, ageing and well-being, using storytelling, drawing and a good cup of tea, to explore participants' experiences. We paired a British Asian story teller/facilitator, the award winning Najma Khalid with the white British group from Charles Morris House and a white British facilitator Carly Henderson with the group from the Pakistani Community Centre.

A key aspect of the process was using material culture to draw out experiences and there was also emphasis placed on the sensory e.g. sound, smell, taste, touch to elicit memory. We worked with Professor Julie-Marie Strange of The University of Manchester to help us design our processes <http://www.manchester.ac.uk/research/julie-marie.strange/personaldetails> there was a strong through line of shared authority and co-curation.

Using the participants' stories, we produced a piece of theatre and accompanying exhibition which, word for word, braids their experiences of early memories of home, their homes now and their treasured objects. The performance and exhibition showcases the dynamism between how "home" made us and how, in later life, we make 'Home' matter. The exhibition and performance, as culmination events, took place on Thursday 6 July.

How did it aim to reach or have relevance to older audiences? What impact did you want it to have on the size or profile of your visitor base?

The project aimed to be directly relevant to older audiences by reflecting on their life experiences and involving them as co-curators. We aimed to bring different communities together working to a Coliseum overall strategic goal of helping to build better community cohesion in Oldham.

What tools did you use to measure this impact? What key indicator did you use to measure this impact?

Our research framework was one of Action Research. There was no formal evaluation; however, we used photography, exhibition / performance content, video to document and reflect on our process. Please find attached video – NOTE: this video is draft and an on brand version will follow – thank you.

What other objectives were you hoping to achieve?

We wanted to test inter-community working with older people. We wanted to test the factor of an arts worker from a different cultural background working with a group and the impact this

had on the sharing of cultural narratives and personal histories. We wanted to test an emphasis on material culture to stimulate memory and stories of experience. We wanted to test the use of sensory stimuli to draw out experience.

Were there opportunities for this activity to be intergenerational?

This project coincided with our Work Placement week where we had 20 young people of 15+ at the Coliseum. This was more happy accident than by design. However, this fortuitous 'accidental outcome' enriched the project considerably e.g. young people attended the exhibition and performance. They met with the elders and were fascinated by artefacts such as a series of letters from the period of World War II. This correspondence between a soldier and his girlfriend were so outside of the young people's life experience as digital natives far more at home with email / social media.

What worked well, what challenges did you face?

- By conducting the process stages of the project in two distinct settings, this helped to contextualise participants' experiences.
- The consistency of delivery and process – session times were consistent, for example – was a positive.
- The emphasis on material culture was a positive one.

The Partnership was a positive one – and each partner brought a particular expertise to the table. The social housing / community partners brought an insight and experience in working with older people. The University of Manchester through Professor Julie-Marie Strange brought a theoretical framework and introduced an interrogation of our processes. They helped the Coliseum to deliver and to group our themes and ideas.



1 Image cr. Chris Foster

The project was a rich and edifying one – the Pakistani community group remembered their childhood homes as warm (physically / emotionally) whereas the White British community remembered their childhoods as one of difficulty e.g. the war, poverty, poor living and material conditions. Conversely, their memories of the contemporary were reversed: living in supported housing, the Charles Morris House residents reflected their lives were warm and friendly whereas the elders from the Pakistani group found life colder, wetter, and damper.

Challenges and learning points:

- We assumed that elders would be more ready to supply objects. This was more difficult than we anticipated as people didn't have objects – objects may have been left behind in Pakistan, lost even during Partition or World War II, things were lost or given away, in the move to supported housing downsizing occurred.
- There was sometimes a difficulty in keeping people on subject.
- Sometimes people simply couldn't remember – memory loss.
- There was a difficulty in talking about the here and the now – the contemporary history. Is this due to the way history is framed culturally e.g. history is from the past rather than having a contemporaneous element.

What have been the most important things you have learned?

The difference in experiences of and attitudes to ageing between different cultures was made more explicit through the process.

There were some unexpected discoveries e.g. some British Asian elders living in their own homes felt lonely and relatively isolated from their families and friends. This runs contrary to the received narrative of greater familial cohesion in that community.

What will you do differently next time?

We were sensitive to the needs, experiences and ages of the participants. However, in terms of creative activity, we'd be bolder in our methods, still mindful of a 'safe' environment, but one which presented greater physical, intellectual and artistic challenges.

We found that sensory stimuli were hugely enriching during the process – we could have introduced this much earlier in the process.

Co-curation and shared authority in the 'product' and outcome event emerged later in the process – we could have designed this into the process earlier.

The project and its outcome were incredibly interesting – as demonstrated by the engagement of our Work Experience students. The project was opened up to the friends / family of participants and peer organisations; on reflection, this could have been opened up to a wider audience.

“Top Tips” for engaging older audiences:

- The sharing elicited a wonderful response from audiences – we could have programmed a post-show discussion to capture that energy and feedback.
- A sensory approach is incredibly enriching to the artistic process.
- We need to crack the nut of involving the present / the contemporary / the future in our work with this age-group so we’re lengthening their personal histories to encompass the ‘now’
- Building a strong rapport with the group, with participants and organisations pays dividends in the process and the culmination event.

Author

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