



Whole society resilience: What's art got to do with it?

Stuart Andrews and **Patrick Duggan** explore a different, and likely essential, route to resilience

In recognising and calling for ‘whole of society’ approaches to resilience, the UK Government Resilience Framework (UKGRF) implicitly suggests both that whole society resilience is new and that it is not already being enacted. Simultaneously, while the move to a more holistic, broad-based approach to resilience is important and timely, there are risks in accidentally suggesting that resilience is only borne by communities and individuals looking after themselves. While we, of course, recognise this is not the explicit argument of the UKGRF, we also argue that there is a lot of

work to be done in understanding what we, as a society, mean by whole society resilience. This is critical if we are to avoid the pitfalls of suggesting or implying that people need to do more with less. The UKGRF offers a compelling opportunity to consider what whole society resilience might involve and how we might develop and maintain a robust whole society approach to resilience challenges. In this context, there are vital lessons to be learned from sectors of society that already leverage whole community understandings to mitigate and manage resilience challenges.



The Ashé Mural, co-ordinated by Douglas Redd

Photo: Stuart Andrews

Since 2017, we have collaborated with professionals in arts, emergency and resilience management in the UK and USA to identify shared concerns and generate productive collaborations. Through our research project, *Performing City Resilience*, we have demonstrated that arts and performance approaches to public engagement already address whole society or, more specifically, whole community approaches to resilience challenges. In this piece, we explore how arts organisations are already contributing to the whole society resilience and what we can learn from them.

One approach might be to explore how arts practices comprise means of communication in and across

communities as they prepare for, respond to, and recover from crises. We are at a critical point in the development of risk communications. In the UK, the government is: “Mak(ing) our communications on risk personalised, and more relevant, actionable and easily accessible” (UKGRF, p 15). However, it is not enough simply to personalise the dissemination of resilience and risk management messaging; rather, we need more nuanced and more active and engaged communication strategies.

The UKGRF argues that, for the UK to be resilient, all members of society need to engage actively in resilience practice. Such holistic understandings of resilience are widely understood internationally, notably the 2016 National Mitigation Framework from the US, which focuses on ‘whole community’ resilience (p1). However, how a whole society engages with, understands, and enacts non-extractive practices of resilience is less well understood. In the context of the UK, if we are genuinely to realise a whole society approach, then we need to recognise both that arts practices and approaches are critical societal practices and that they are already engaged in societal resilience, regularly at scale. This is often loosely organised and locally distinctive. We think of the ways in which people placed rainbows in their windows, clapped for the National Health Service (NHS), and, in Italy, sang from apartment balconies during Covid-19 lockdowns. Even when a crisis has cut off communities, such performative actions reconnect them.

Secret treasures?

Artists and arts and culture organisations are already engaged in local decision-making and the planning of places in ways that address local concerns and challenges among diverse communities. Sometimes this is achieved in a single artwork; more regularly, this involves the structural and strategic work of an institution over time. The latter case is powerful. Arts organisations have the skills and expertise to reach diverse, often hard-to-reach communities at speed and with impact during a crisis. In part, this is because such companies and their representatives are trusted members of these communities; in part, it is because they deploy creative and novel approaches to communication and engagement. Crucially, it is also because such organisations are embedded in, and actively part of, places and their communities in visible and ongoing ways. This may be harder to achieve for resilience professionals.

There is a risk that we might suggest resilience and emergency planning professionals use the arts, instrumentalising arts practice. This is not our argument. Rather, we argue for careful consideration of the strategic operation of existing arts practices. Such practices are already vital to innovative whole of society resilience, but they are not clearly identified in this way. Our work since 2017 evidences that artists and cultural practitioners across the UK and internationally are already engaged in addressing the challenges of those places; why then would we not explore the potential for that work to be valuable to the whole of society's resilience?

It is easy to argue that the arts need to be taken seriously in resilience and emergency planning contexts, but this needs to be exemplified if it is to be made more concrete. Below, we offer two examples of model practices of engagement that could be turned to face resilience

contexts, moving away from a 'warn and inform' focus to what we are calling an 'engage and activate' model. These case studies deploy performative practices that are actively engaged in placemaking processes that could seed the whole of society's resilience; they offer means of communication, connection and community building that engage and activate the societies represented.

Responding to the Covid-19 pandemic, Citizen's Theatre in Glasgow launched the Through My Window (TMW) project. Using applied performance practices, theatre improvisation techniques, and creative activity instructions, the project engaged women experiencing isolation and loneliness during lockdown. Born of necessity, the work went into community settings to interact with women through their windows or doorways, offering opportunities to dance, talk, play, and reflect. Building on their embedded position within the community, this project developed a physically distanced performance of social connection that 'reimagined' the organisation's regular community practices. In doing this, the work revealed that creative connectivity played an essential role in helping people across the community feel less invisible and overlooked in an unfolding crisis.

In going out to sections of society and activating them to reflect on their personal situation and the wider social context within which that situation was unfolding, the work offered a model of activated engagement that used performance practice to address resilience challenges. Reflecting on the project, but applicable to building whole of society resilience, Community Drama Artist Elly Goodman suggests that: "You need to be on the ground and you need to be listening to your community." TMW goes to people in their contexts and deploys modes of engagement and reflection that are active, creative and fun, while necessarily addressing the challenge at hand. Such work cuts across community divides and invites citizens to become participants in performances of resilience that do more than warn and inform.

Where TMW sought to engage with individuals' lived

experience of a specific challenge, mural practice in New Orleans is concerned with a set of global challenges for the city that can be experienced individually, collectively, and as part of the fabric of the place. Murals have become a familiar sight in New Orleans. For instance, on the end wall of a building in the Central Business District, the artist Brandon 'BMike' Odums, working with young people from the city, painted a black man

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standing chest-deep in water, smiling, holding his son aloft. Another mural in Mid-City shows people singing, playing music, and dancing against a painted backdrop of brightly coloured buildings and a blue-green sky. On the exterior of BMike's StudioBE gallery and workspace, a black girl looks over the surrounding land, a circle of light, halo-like, behind her. BMike's murals bring joyful images of people of colour to the walls of buildings in New Orleans, celebrating black lives in a city that has been so marked by racism.

For Arts New Orleans (ANO), which has supported the development of several murals in the city: "Public art adds enormous value to the cultural and economic vitality of a community." As ANO recognises, the process of developing public artworks needs to address the place to which each new artwork will contribute: "In a culturally diverse city like New Orleans, public art must reflect a plurality of influences and interests and be fully integrated into our shared environments."

'Survive'
collaborative
mural by Young
Artist Movement
and Brandon
'BMike' Odums

Photo: Stuart
Andrews





Murals are not messages. Their work is more subtle; contributing to an existing sense of place, murals inform practices of a place and change it physically and conceptually. While murals may exist in isolation, they can also operate within broader strategic endeavours. StudioBE reflects that its work: “Serves to promote the advancement of artists and engage in society’s most urgent questions.” They run a leadership programme for young artists of colour to create: “A more just and equitable world.” In this work, StudioBE directly addresses concerns of equity, equality, and empowerment.

By attending to established, locally focused mural projects, we can read existing local understandings of resilience challenges and address some of the ways that they are being addressed. We would not advocate that muralists necessarily be employed to directly depict resilience messages. However, in seeking to develop whole society resilience, the situated nature of murals should be valued as an opportunity to think about resilience from interesting and oblique perspectives that speak to communities across a whole society.

The projects here demonstrate that one of the challenges of developing whole society resilience is that it risks framing society as a singular ‘whole.’ The reality is that existing and established ideas, strategies, and practices of societal resilience are far more complex, multiple, and nuanced. As John Law (2004) has reflected, the world is messy, and it can be unproductive to suggest otherwise. A critical element of the work ahead is to broker productive connections between local and whole society resilience strategies. This will be challenging but vital if we are to meaningfully engage with and learn from existing activities that already implement the new national strategy. The work will be ongoing, an iterative process of dialogue and reflection as the strategy beds in. Yet, building new models to connect local and national strategies will generate a powerful new structure for working together nationally to meet the challenges now and in the future. Indeed, the more we can enable locally

situated practices as a part of the whole of society’s resilience in the UK, the more we can contribute to discussions on how, together, we meet pressing challenges that transcend national borders.

In seeking to inculcate whole of society resilience in meaningful ways, we need to engage practices and critical approaches that stretch beyond the familiar. Indeed, too often, the bringing in of artists is instrumental or incidental rather than fundamental or strategic. The arts are going to be ever more vital in this ever-more challenging world, especially in terms of a changing climate. If we are serious about engaging in whole society resilience, then we need urgently to find productive ways to engage with arts and culture as critical elements of society. **C+R**

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Sources

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