

Derby Museums Trust and Re:Make at the Silk Mill

Our purpose is to inspire people of all backgrounds and interests to become part of a living story of world-class creativity, innovation and making.

Stuart Gillies, the former Director of Derby Museums, worked with Derby City Council's Executive Director for Culture to transfer the service into an independent trust. He shaped this purpose, placing participation and community at the heart of the new Trust and its museums. He also acknowledged that the service was unsustainable. He took the courageous step of closing the Silk Mill to create the opportunity to rethink; and to release resources to create the new Trust. He brought in new staff then left. Nick Dodd, as Interim Director, restructured the organisation and addressed behaviours which were blocking change.

Hannah Fox was brought in, initially as a consultant, to breathe life into the Trust's purpose and aims in rethinking the Silk Mill. She sought to engage staff with the new purpose and values: why are we doing this? How will we do it? She used the approach of human-centred design as a trusted framework to involve the whole community in what the Silk Mill might become; and to provide the methods and tools with which staff could get involved in prototype projects: 'living a structure'. Hannah produced the Human-Centred Design Handbook as a clear set of principles and method within which they could take risks. She became Silk Mill Project Manager in 2012 with ACE Strategic Funding and also became involved in projects across the museums. Tony Butler became Director of the Trust in 2014.

With a relatively small investment from the local authority, the Trust re-opened the Silk Mill as a test bed, maker space, event space and learning space: the Re:Make project. In 2015, the project was awarded funds from the Heritage Lottery Fund for redevelopment. All collections of making and social history will be included in the new museum when it opens.

The Trust thinks and works beyond what it describes as a 'transactional' sense of its responsibilities to its locality, city and community, in terms of 'service delivery'. It seeks to rethink itself as a civic institution and use its power and position to build mutually beneficial relationships over the longer term: these may take longer to deliver, and the costs and

'outputs' may be more uncertain; but they build community. These relationships are with geographical/ physical communities; intellectual, emotional communities of interest; and partners. They bring diversity: making; industries; nature; creative writing... Because the Trust has had very public successes, it is recognised as a significant 'player' in the city and holder of its collective memory.

The Trust's collections are from around the world; its purpose is 'to enable people to discover their place in the world' - so they believe that it is for others to explore and connect with these collections which are 'theirs', a public asset, without feeling judged. The Trust uses a range of ways to work with others: co-producing; empathy mapping; designing with empathy; open questions; continual dialogue.

In terms of its business model, the Trust sees itself as a people-based business, so its priority is to get relationships right, and to build social capital; then to generate revenues from these relationships. Many of its revenue streams rely on the quality of its relationships: hire, sales, money for talks and events, donations; commissioned work. Earned income has risen from 2% in 2014 to 20% in 2016.

The Trust and the Silk Mill project have excited much interest from trustees and staff in other museums. What do they see as distinctive about their approach?

The senior team has adopted project-based working to break down silos throughout the organisation. They are predisposed to a 'yes' mentality, 'which leads others to tailor their answer to "yes".' Managers encourage and support people across the organisation to be outward-looking: to participate in projects with partners; to present papers; to enrol in fellowship or leadership programmes. Staff were involved in developing the Heritage Lottery Fund project application and management, rather than using consultants, so building ownership and developing skills, increasing resilience and sustainability. Staff meetings are held every two months to share what's happening: everyone is invited and people who work part time are paid to come in. Contributions are invited from people across the organisation.

The Board has been expanded and refreshed with new members, partly selected around the Trust's sense of purpose. The senior team are drawing on this new expertise for the Silk Mill's project board.

Hannah sees these as key behaviours of her leadership:

- Always asking why? - not intending to be judgemental, but to explore assumptions and explore purpose. Then ideas will be prototyped to test assumptions with audiences. Asking why? also enables colleagues to fully understand why they are doing this: if people don't understand and don't feel empowered to ask, they may become disaffected.
- Being seen to be vulnerable herself: 'I'm willing to give it a go, it may not work, I am not going to apologise because it's all learning.'
- Responding rapidly when things go wrong.
- Trusting the expertise of others: framing outcomes around the experience for audiences and inviting people to come up with ideas.
- Reflecting and asking herself: how could I do this better? Giving credit, and also seeking to improve, learn and change.
- Asking herself: does my team feel good? If not, why not? 'Because if something is blocking us from talking to each other, how can we talk to our audiences properly? If something that I think is really important isn't happening, why?'

She has noticed that colleagues ask more questions and are much more willing to contribute to conversations than when she started. They smile more and make more eye contact. They think and work beyond the boundaries of their specific job roles, and these boundaries are themselves blurring. (Though sometimes as a manager she needs to pull people back so they don't get overstretched.)

Gaby Porter interviewed Hannah Fox, Silk Mill Project Manager and Tony Butler, Museum Director April 2016.