




Research Fellow 

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In the Image of All of Us: Exploring  
new approaches to building and  
sustaining cultural infrastructure

# CONTENTS

1	<b>Summary</b>	2
2	<b>The Scholarship: Cultural Industries and the Inner City</b>	5
	Life-affirming infrastructures	5
	Economy... ecology... ecosystem?	6
	Regeneration and marketisation of public benefit	7
	Cultural opportunity?	10
3	<b>Cartographers of the Possible</b>	12
	Process and Methodology	12
	Kin Structures: This Is Your Home Too	15
	Freedom & Balance: An Art College for the Artist in Everyone	20
4	<b>MAIA: From Rehearsal to New Postures</b>	25
	<i>Abuelos</i> and ‘radical hospitality’	25
	Liberated to the Bone	29
5	<b>Conclusion: Cultural Infrastructure and CIRCE</b>	34
	<b>Bibliography</b>	36
	<b>Figures</b>	42
	<b>Appendix A</b>	44
	<b>Appendix B</b>	46

# pt 1

## Summary

The ‘creative industries’ discourse of UK cultural policy is increasingly under scrutiny from both practitioners and scholars. This critique argues that we need to expand the current framings of art and culture and align them with principles of social justice and ecological responsibility. While a number of scholars highlight that social justice is key to rethinking the cultural sector and predict that alternative visions will come ‘from below’, research is lacking on practical propositions from the intersection of social justice and culture (O’Connor, 2022, p. 28). The fact is, new models, methodologies and infrastructures are already present in the UK. These are grounded in the critical feminist, post-colonial, ecological and social enterprise thought that O’Connor writes about — a new set of voices stemming from the challenges voiced by women and people of colour (2022).

Across these islands there are entities growing from the social lives of its neighbourhoods. These entities are porous, deeply regenerative and polyvocal. They are interdependent... They don't have a name yet, but they won't be known as institutions. (Kafka 2023)<sup>1</sup>

Responding to the invitation of ‘abolition’, cultural practitioners are building alternative infrastructures as part of a wider movement towards ‘life-affirming social change’ (Gilmore, 2018, p. 31). This study focuses on the practices of MAIA in Birmingham and Kin Structures

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<sup>1</sup> Introduction to Them’s The Breaks (Appendix B): exhibition by Resolve Collective who hosted event Life-Affirming Infrastructures

and Freedom & Balance in London. These organisations have emerged in the precarity of post-industrial urban neighbourhoods, in the heart of some of the most underserved and unseen inner city areas, or ‘forgotten places’ (ibid.), where youth services and infrastructure have severely suffered under austerity measures and regeneration. Here, we are talking about the loss of community centres, youth clubs and local libraries among essential social and cultural infrastructures that provide cultural opportunity and safety for working-class youth (Thapar, 2021; Warren, 2023).

The task of transforming the city and making it just, equitable and abundant is multi-faceted, but it is in its under-used and under-loved spaces where the work can begin. It is here where there is space to breathe, imagine and meet others pursuing the same equitable visions. It is often here where the impact of austerity and state violence is most evident; it is often here where there is most need for transformation.  
(Kin Structures 2022)

As alternatives to ‘industry’, these emerging propositions pursue creativity in less circumscribed and less economically oriented ways. They are interested in the process of transformation that people go on *in the act of making* (Spence, Sound & Vision [SV], 2022).

Be honest.  
Be transparent.  
If it’s not heart-work,  
It’s not artwork

(Anderson, St Raphael’s Estate, 2015, p. 32)

In and of itself these are examples of people coming up with brilliant solutions in their communities for things which are needed - initiatives that address the exclusivity of the arts sector, lack of imaginative creative education and physical space for marginalised groups. But rather than being solely about participation, access, or even ‘community arts’, these are

practical solutions towards broader systems change in terms of strategy, operations and governance, showing a way towards a truly regenerative and non-extractive cultural landscape. It is a process of collective capacity building in everyday spaces of diaspora; spaces that have long been sites for remaking and reimagining the world (Ramsay, 2019). While the UK cultural sector's social justice discourse is looking for a break from 'industry', these localised propositions demonstrate differently built or repurposed cultural containers that, instead of GDP, nourish and grow capacity for lives worth living. They are articulations of collective cultural interests and political identifications that form a critique of extractive economic practices (Banks, 2020; Banks & O'Connor, 2017). And their goal is a new ecology of life-affirming infrastructures as types of public good (Kaur, Life-Affirming Infrastructures [LAI], 2023).

Our ecology is made up of an entangled network of organisations and practitioners exploring wealth distribution, transformative governance, healing justice, land stewardship, intergenerational learning, community-led development and much more, all of whom hold the compounding, complex crises of our times central while facing a shared horizon. (MAIA 2023)

This study explores only a few examples from within this interconnected group of collectives and organisations prototyping a new social contract *in the image of all of us* (LAI, 2023).

# pt 2

## The Scholarship: Cultural Industries and the Inner City

### **Life-affirming infrastructures**

The event Life-Affirming Infrastructures in June 2023 was one in a series to adopt the phrase ‘life-affirming’, originating in the work of American scholar Ruth Wilson Gilmore. Gilmore sees the process of prison abolition as a creation project; rather than absence, abolition is about building new life-affirming institutions as alternatives to carceral systems (2018; Davis et al., 2022). While the complex topic of abolition is beyond the scope of this study, the resonating takeaway is the need to invest in and reimagine public health, education and care in order to address social problems. Given the enormous disorder that ‘organised abandonment’ (Harvey, 1989, p. 303) both creates and exploits, Gilmore asks how people in ‘forgotten places’ can scale up their activism into organised movements (Gilmore, 2018, p. 33). Responding to the invitation of abolition, practitioners in the UK have adopted a propositional approach to rehearse alternatives towards a life-affirming cultural sector.

Grounded in the understanding of abolitionist organising as a creation project, our work is actively imagining and prototyping what the cultural landscape might look like if we were to orient towards a regenerative, liberatory horizon. (MAIA, 2022)

One of the arguments towards developing a new vision has focused on issues of social justice: a recognition that the cultural industries have structurally reinforced the deep-rooted

inequalities that have excluded and disadvantaged women, ethnic minorities, working-class people and other marginalised groups (Banks, 2017, 2020; Brook et al., 2020; Saha, 2018). And that diversity schemes, much like the social mobility discourse<sup>2</sup>, focus on lifting people out of their underprivileged states rather than addressing ‘how privilege is constructed and mis-recognised as legitimacy’ (Brook et al., 2020, pp. 193-195).

Across grassroots practices, leading arts institutions are often seen as ‘bastions of cultural power with extractive practices and linear relations’ (Kafka, 2023). They have become associated with top-down governance, punitive communications, exclusivity, structural racism and complicity with harmful economic practices (MAIA, 2022). So beyond the cultural realm, the life-affirming vision aims to dismantle systems of harm and punishment that sit at the base of the economic model (Spence, 2022). The adoption of the neutral and technical term ‘infrastructure’ evokes an everyday necessity across multiple social levels, because ‘change is as political as sociological, as it is about health and restoration’ (LAI, 2023).

## **Economy... ecology... ecosystem?**

While culture and the arts have mostly been viewed as benign activities in relation to the climate crisis, recent scholarship challenges the sector’s exploitation of human and non-human resources and unchecked economic growth (Banks & Oakley, 2020). This criticism rejects the unfounded myths that the CCIs are ‘good’ for all of us (Brook et al., 2020) or ecologically neutral (Maxwell & Miller, 2017). Scholars and cultural practitioners have

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<sup>2</sup> Social mobility refers to change in a person's socio-economic situation, either in relation to their parents (inter-generational mobility) or throughout their lifetime (intra-generational mobility) (OECD, n.d.)

proposed alternative versions of a ‘sharing economy’ that would prioritise community subsistence and mutual aid — cultural co-ops, community land trusts and non-profits (We Can Make, n.d.; Lawrence, Pendleton & Mahmoud, 2018). Justin O’Connor has argued for art and culture to be repositioned as part of the foundational economy, a model that would prioritise locally rooted policies instead of GDP growth (2023). Some go so far as to state that the ‘creative economy is dead’ and argue for a new ‘creative-social economies’ perspective to bring back the attention on the social and cultural value of CCIs (Comunian, Rickmers & Nanetti, 2020).

The language is in flux. The popularity of terms ‘cultural ecology’ and ‘ecosystem’ deliberately contrasts the consumer-focused ‘creative and cultural industries’ rhetoric. As O’Connor states: ‘the strident discord between the cultural sector’s social justice discourse and its self-presentation as “industry” is now deafening’ (2022, p. 44). For those who explicitly address the CCIs and the climate crisis, the language can be useful in building bridges with social, ethical and environmental justice movements (de Bernard, Comunian & Gross 2021, p. 348; Demos, Scott & Banerjee, 2021). Importantly for this study, ecological approaches hold potential for discussions around democratic approaches to governance: alternatives to top-down arts policy that sees the creative industries as a site of economic growth (Gross & Wilson 2017; 2020).

## **Regeneration and marketisation of public benefit**

Of particular importance to this study is the way in which the creative industry discourse has influenced trends in urban planning and faith in ‘creativity’ as a source of post-industrial



urban innovation (Banks & O'Connor, 2020). Culture-led regeneration became a legitimate tool for urban development across the the UK, supported by similar trends in Europe and most popularised by Charles Landry's *Creative City Toolkit* (2000) Richard Florida's *The Rise of the Creative Class* (2002). Both theorists argued that to 'regenerate' an area, it should be made attractive to people working in the creative and cultural industries. Their presence would naturally lead to local creativity and then positively affect regional economic growth. These theories have been criticised not only for generalised assumptions about human behaviour, but for avoiding entrenched social problems (e.g. residential inequality and racialised exclusion) in post-industrial urban areas (Storper & Scott, 2009; Peck, 2007). In culture-led redevelopment, 'culture' is understood as ticketed events and flagships, and the proposed strategy is to lever private-sector investment in the area (Hannigan, 2022; Miles, 2005).

In the borough of Lewisham where Kin Structures held their first residency, culture has become a mainstay in local council documents. Paradoxically, the authorities have disinvested in the very spaces that sustain grassroots activity (Hannigan, 2022). The loss of seven youth clubs between 2013-2018 and five libraries in 2011 aligns with the broader picture across the UK where 760 youth clubs closed between 2010-2020 (YMCA, 2020). These are the spaces that historically nurtured many of the rich cultural productions of Caribbean and African communities that Lewisham proudly promoted as London's Borough of Culture in 2022, a programme inspired by the area's 'history of activism and standing up for equality' (We Are Lewisham, n.d., Here & Now, 2022). The programme celebrated the same cultural figures and practices that were systematically censored by the state just decades ago (Anim-Addo, 1995). This is a consequence of culture-led regeneration, 'new areas of

consumption that trade on cultural identities—rather than a real regeneration of local cultures’, argues Miles (2005, pp. 895-896).

While it has been evidenced that creative capitals exhibit higher rates of socioeconomic inequality (Keith, 2005), ‘creative city’ ideas continue to be popular with authorities, perhaps for their appeal as a liberal fast policy ‘creative fix’ (Peck, 2007). In his explicit critique of Florida, Jamie Peck argues that creativity strategies have ultimately been crafted to co-exist with social problems, not to solve them (2007, p. 1). Rather than debating the economic merits of such theories further, this study aims to show instances in which regeneration causes harm in post-industrial urban neighbourhoods. Regeneration often leads to complete transformations of areas for private property development; demolitions of housing estates, relocated or dispersed communities and a severe lack of affordable and social housing. These issues have been further exacerbated by austerity measures that have severely tightened local council budgets. Evaluating the life chances of grassroots arts activity in such precarious conditions, Zain Dada shows how community centres, youth centres and libraries are increasingly sold off to developers and private enterprises (2020). These are the valuable infrastructures that facilitate the kind of ‘everyday creativity’ now being increasingly highlighted as something that policymakers should support. For example, Micklem and Hunter’s ‘64 Million Artists’ suggested that Arts Council should embrace the amateur and grassroots alongside the professional and institutional, to support ‘everyday creativity’ not as a ‘driver for audience development, but for its inherent value’ (2016, p. 21). The uplifting of everyday creative practices and cultural learning is part of renewed attention by scholars on cultural democracy, freedom, well-being and care (Gross & Wilson, 2018; Gross, 2020).

## Cultural opportunity?

The effects of regeneration are inseparable from discussions of cultural democracy and ‘cultural capability’: the freedom to (co)create culture, to give form and value to experiences of self, and self-in relation (Gross & Wilson 2017, p. 3). Unfortunately, across the country, working-class kids have been stripped of the traditional places where they once developed cultural capital: the youth club, town hall, local library and children’s centre (Cultural Learning Alliance, 2017, p. 6)<sup>3</sup>. Journalist Emma Warren argues that youth clubs have suffered ‘the erasure that often happens to culture made by and for people who are young, are of Global Majority ethnicity, are queer or poor or otherwise marginalised’ (2023). While these everyday infrastructures are often referred to as a sub-sector of charity, they are, in fact ‘culture machines’ (ibid., p. 127). They have often fostered whole new cultural productions and music genres that, given their social context, are inextricably bound into politics and economy, articulating counter-narratives to the dominant society (hooks, 2009; Gilroy, 1993).

Cieran Thapar shows how the dismantling of care and support systems by the state under austerity measures — youth services, clubs and community centres — has added to the precarity of the often racialised and most vulnerable members of our society (2021). Large inner-city housing estates are often painted as sites of violence and suffering from a ‘poverty of aspiration’ — a notion used to deny collective social responsibility for disadvantage and inequality, implying that deprivation is the fault of the deprived (Gross, 2019, pp. 6-7; Bennett, 2012).

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<sup>3</sup> Cultural Learning Alliance identifies ‘cultural learning’ as both formal and informal learning, which happens in homes, community and art spaces alongside schools and other educational settings (2017, 22).

André Anderson, a writer and resident of St Raphael's Estate in North-West London and the Headmaster of Freedom & Balance, sought to change the negative tropes about his home estate through an experiment to self-publish a collective 'passport' (St Raphael's Estate, 2015).

We were labelled as those who had no aspiration, those who would never amount to much, those who could never get a word in...  
...then we started writing books. (ibid., pp. 6-7)

The following chapters delve deeper into such creative and infrastructural experiments that exercise and grow capacity to re-form and reorganise the order of things. These organisations place importance on the 'capability of narration' - storytelling as an essential component of justice, to narrate and render one's life valuable (Phelps, 2006; Eagleton, 2015). Such practices aim to not only reverse an 'erasure', but to create spaces in which diasporic people can thrive and be fully seen (Black Artistry and Space [BAS], 2021). It is a process of reclaiming a set of histories to collectively build a future in which to be protagonists; to build permanence against the persistent displacement and precarity produced by processes of capitalism that acquisition land, resources, social capital, and opportunities away from people (Ramsay, 2019).

# pt 3

## Cartographers of the Possible

### Process and Methodology

This action research is part of a wider body of inquiry at the intersection of cultural practice, infrastructure, creative activism, communication and social justice. With roots in liberation theology and community development, participatory action research is both emancipatory and about investigating the real and material practices of people and places (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005). This study is informed by a selection of events programmed by MAIA, Kin Structures and Freedom & Balance in collaboration with organisations Resolve Collective and Healing Justice in 2023 and relating events between 2021-2022 (Appendix A). It benefits from a range of ethnographic methods — drawing data from panel discussions, interviews and arts-based activity. As my interpretive frame of reference includes collaborative relationships with some of the interviewees, I am aware and explicit about my ‘action’ (Charmaz, 2005, p. 567). I would also argue that this long-term engagement allows me the characteristic of grounded theory, to develop new concepts from these emerging practices.

This report focuses on select collectives in the UK. In particular neighbourhoods that hold multiple cities and movements inside them; African and Caribbean communities descending from the Windrush generation and diasporas from across Asia and Eastern Europe. These are

continued relational geographies and linkages of people and places across national borders — and often people who wish to identify as part of several communities.

Similarly, in urban contexts across Europe, e.g. areas of Athens or Marseille that are home to communities from across the Mediterranean, street-level citizenship work often runs ahead of state-level ‘integration’ programmes. Citizen Sound Archive and The Syrian and Greek Youth Forum are such spaces of self-organisation and activist practice that view art and culture as tools with which to rewrite narratives. Through sonic practices, concerts and workshops, CSA develops methods of creative activism: to use culture as a tool of political participation and provide escape routes from media representation traps (Western, 2020). Common conclusions about the role of art and culture in relation to social justice are being drawn across Europe.

While the CIRCE network allowed for resonating perspectives from other European cities, it became clear that the inclusion of case studies outside of the UK would only be possible next to an analysis of their particular urban, political and socio-historical contexts. Considering the limited word count of this project I chose to focus on UK examples so as to not compromise its depth and coherence. However, the research is also informed by collective conversations with the CIRCE network on cultural infrastructure and democratic governance, recurring themes among fellows and Impact Fund initiatives. Exchanges about sustaining CIRCE itself as a long-term transnational infrastructure happened naturally, often incorporating arts-based methodologies.

Through attending several collective creative sessions, I partook in the kind of ‘exploratory action’ that has the principal purpose of learning from the experience itself (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005, p. 581). MAIA’s Arts School sessions fostered a playfulness and openness

about ‘action’ in which participants were aware that their ideas and practice would develop in the process (ibid.). In three separate occasions I witnessed and participated in a realm of expressive creative arts - visual art, music, dance, drama, play, poetry, and creative writing - as methods of healing, self-discovery, and participatory knowledge production (Fig. 1). This further rooted my belief in arts-based enquiry to permeate professional learning with imagination, feeling and sensory experiences in ways that intensify self-insight and social awareness (Carter, Mitchell & Mreiwed, 2021, p. 9). I hope that my first-person observation notes throughout the next chapters embody that feeling.

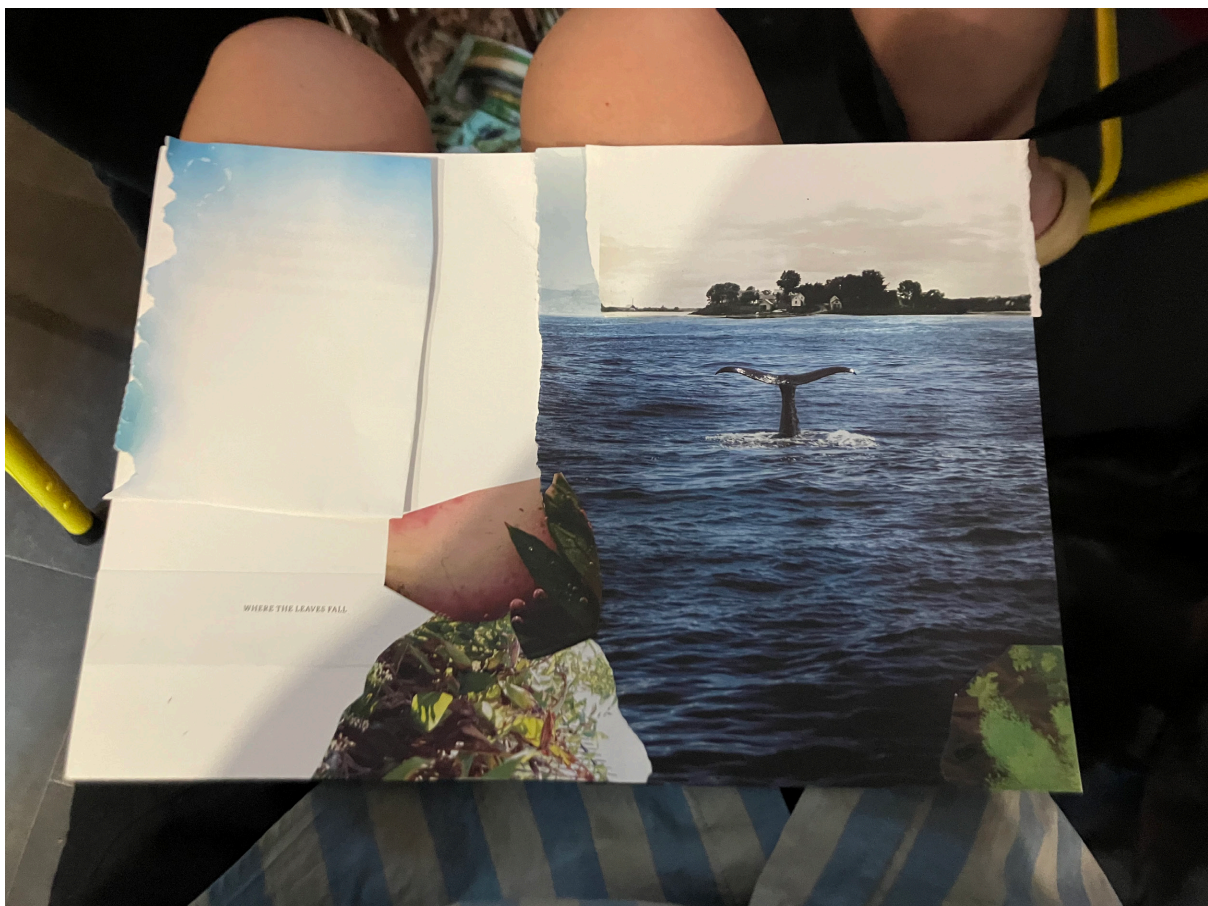


Figure 1. My collage in process at Creative Link Up by Freedom & Balance

## **Kin Structures: This is Your Home Too**

Kin Structures is the collaborative practice of Arman Nouri and Kwame Lowe. Referring to art and culture as ‘somatic medicine’, Nouri and Lowe view creativity beyond a narrow focus on aesthetics or taste (LAI, 2023). Their work explores the relationship between culture, place, community and healing as they develop approaches to build and sustain cultural infrastructure. By 2020 it was evident that community centres, the often unimpressive infrastructures of post-war housing estates, were at systemic risk, under-used or being sold to private developers (LAI, 2023; Dada, 2019). As a response, Kin Structures developed a strategy for reimagining such under-loved spaces. Chosen as an engagement partner by housing association Clarion who owns Orchard Gardens Estate, Lowe and Nouri trialled an arts-based activity model to reenergise the little used community centre on its grounds during a 9-month residency (LAI, 2023).

Beyond providing space for working-class residents, community centres are where members of the Windrush generation organised the social, cultural and political infrastructures that British society would not provide (Anim-Addo, 1995). While people of colour were barred from clubs and reggae was banned from the airwaves, soundsystems were alive in youth clubs. In the borough of Lewisham, these self-organised infrastructures were led by Lewisham’s Black community members, but inclusive of other working-class neighbours and immigrant groups beyond the Caribbean and West Africa (ibid.). This was a mode of affective community-making based on physical proximity rather than a common identity (Probyn, 1996; Antonsich, 2010). ‘People forge bonds in places that have healthy social infrastructures’, says Klinenberg, not because they set out to build community, but relationships inevitably grow during sustained, recurrent interaction while doing things they



enjoy (2018, p. 5). Kin Structures approach was to repair the fraught relationship between the community centre and residents, establish a relationship of trust on the estate and foster a welcoming space for everyday creativity and joy. Activities ranged from creating a communal cookbook with recipes collected across the estate, to photography and Tai Chi practice.



Figure 2. Kin Structures final exhibition at Orchard Gardens

When I arrived at Orchard Gardens community centre, I immediately noticed the flickering of photographs hung from the ceiling, taken by young residents of the estate. The mosaic letters on the wall read: 'Welcome, this is your home too' (Fig. 2). The kids had spent an afternoon exploring their home grounds with photographer Myah Jeffers, asking: how do you tell a story with a camera? (Fig. 4)

Post-war housing estates are often where tensions of state violence and neglect are felt strongest. Between 2014-2021, the Home Office conducted over 1300 immigration raids in Lewisham where eviction rates remain high. In 2020, its residents also reported the lowest trust in police in London (Cuffe, 2020), adding to the troubled historical account of the police

force in Lewisham, whose violations range from above-average stop and search rates, aiding and protecting the National Front in the 1970s and deaths in police custody (Anim-Addo, 1995). Such conditions contribute to a feeling of ‘fragmentation’ as opposed to life-affirming: a condition in which you are unable to be yourself fully and freely (Lowe, Life-Affirming Community Practice [LACP], 2023). These politics of being and belonging for marginalised people are evident across the cityscape (Ramsay, 2019). As Nouri put it:

If you're black, brown, queer, working class, disabled, you're navigating a city where there's not only a scarcity of infrastructure where you feel like you belong, but you're also having to navigate institutions, which constrain, fragment and traumatise you. (LAI, 2023)

In 2022, Lewisham celebrated its turn as the London Borough of Culture with a programme that, paradoxically, celebrated the area’s history of activism and grassroots culture, with large celebrations of grime, reggae and soundsystem culture (We Are Lewisham, n.d.). Kin Structures purposefully coincided their residency with this programme to illustrate the fragmentation behind public facade and to offer an alternative vision, one that prioritises the livelihoods of Lewisham’s diverse communities and the long-term sustainability of their cultural productions — beyond commercial events and culture-led regeneration projects (Here & Now, 2022; Kin Structures, n.d.). Lowe and Nouri both see the highest value in their work at Orchard Gardens in simply providing space for residents. Emphatically, they describe how on Saturdays, first thing, the kids would rain down on the centre with their scooters, games and footballs. As Lowe says: ‘There’s a purpose-built community centre that we literally just opened the doors to, for them to be in as children... to be in as children without being policed’ (interview 2023, Fig 3).



Figure 3: Outside Orchard Gardens Estate Community Centre



Figure 4: Taken by photography workshop participant Jason

The marketisation of public benefit has led to Lewisham trading on the very communities and cultures whose livelihoods are under threat (Miles, 2005). Across London, councils should advocate more for their citizens in regenerating areas, instead of caving to profiteering developers, argues Thapar (2021, p. 311). The concern is that while the area seemingly promotes and uplifts its diverse communities through public art and celebrations, the people who made Lewisham's culture so *worthy* of celebration — all the while surviving difficult circumstances — are being forgotten. Hannigan is right to ask: In 100 years time, what culture will there be left for Lewisham to celebrate? (2022).

Zain Dada's work in Brent highlights similar short-term thinking by local authorities; 'awards such as the Borough of Culture invest millions into programming instead of coupling this with investment into spaces that tangibly sustain culture for the long term' (2020). Kin Structures' sustainable approach to repurpose community space is compelling in light of growing economic and environmental challenges that point to a need to save, repurpose and redistribute public infrastructure.

## Freedom & Balance: An Art College for the Artist in Everyone

St Raphael's Estate is not 'terra incognita', an unknown land to one side of IKEA off the North Circular, into which you enter at your own peril. (Paul Boateng, St Raphael's Estate, 2015, p. 2)

In 2015, as St Raphael's Estate in North-West London was repeatedly depicted by outsiders as a site of violence, its young resident André Anderson floated the idea of writing and releasing a passport: 'to flip people's expectations and instead of chaos, cause creativity' (St Raphael's Estate, 2015, p. 15). The resulting publication, full of poetic storytelling by residents, was made 'to prove that the young person holding the pen is ten times more powerful than the one holding the knife' (Freedom & Balance [F&B], n.d.). The Kilburn Times published an article at the time citing 21-year-old Anderson: 'we are putting literature directly into the hands of those who need it the most' (Mcgrath, 2015). They did that literally, as all of the approximately 1000 flats on the estate received a copy of the book. These were the early days of what became the Art College Freedom & Balance, a new creative education infrastructure.

The two *Authors of the Estate* editions are examples of the act of writing as individual and collective self-narration (Eagleton, 2015, p. 52). These passports are both personal and communal, an example of people creating a 'guide to action through embodied political experimentation—to theorise or map or plan their way out of the margins', as Gilmore put it (2008, p. 50). The project was specifically advertised as one of language creation: 'With our art, let's create languages that give our city a new voice' (F&B, n.d.).





Figures 5-7. *Authors of the Estate: Chalkhill Estate*

Beyond authorship, the Chalkhill writers wish be authorities, asserting their voices into a conversation around regeneration (Fig. 5-7). While often depicted as empty vessels that lack imagination, major cultural moments have been crafted on social housing. *Authors of the*

*Estate* adds to the list of defiant resistance in the form of creativities born on housing estates, including whole music genres and their celebrated leaders from Dizzee Rascal's garage and bassline to rapper and grime artist Kano.

He used to kick ball in these fields, now Raheem Sterling plays regularly in stadiums packed with roaring supporters.

He used to make his way to local gatherings, now George the Poet casually strolls into the Royal Albert Hall to get his voice heard.

(Anderson, St. Raphael's Estate, 2015, p. 41)

Born from limitation and little resource, Anderson's pursuit to turn estates into publishing houses 'created a culture' on the estates, which led him to think further about the infrastructure that would support it (LACP, 2023). Having assumed responsibility for his own learning beyond what the education system had laid out for him, Anderson accepted the title of Headmaster of Freedom & Balance: 'I call myself Headmaster because I can't spend my life looking for permission. I can't raise my hand waiting to be picked. Sometimes you need to build your own lesson plan, and take every win and loss as learning' he says (F&B, n.d.).

Thapar highlights how the British education system is serving some people well, but failing others who do not fit its 'marketised model' (2021, p. 310). The authors of '64 Million Artists' also report an increasingly regulated teaching of arts subjects in the UK — rather than encouraging play or using imagination, children are being instructed to create identical pictures or structured forms of writing (Micklem & Hunter, 2016). School curricula do not always engage and offer a mirror reflection for certain demographics (Gross & Wilson, 2017). Additionally, issues of trust and self-confidence need to be considered for vulnerable

participants to even engage in art activities. These are often created by discourses of excellence or professionalism: there is a fear of doing things badly, or wrongly (ibid.).



Figure 8. Exercise from 'Try a TING'

Fundamentally responding to these issues are only a few ways in which Anderson's work is a reimagining and democratisation of pedagogy. As per the mission statement: 'We believe that art is not just an activity for the gifted few, but a way of thinking that can be applicable to the personal, professional and social lives of everyone' (F&B, n.d.). In a small space in Portobello, 6-week curricula respond to a theme or provocation, such as 'Learn how to be your most natural, creative self' and 'Build your own creative industry'. These directly



address the need to engage creativity beyond economic benefits, and to build a new vision for the cultural sector, from the perspective of those it has often excluded (ibid., Fig. 8-9).



Figure 9. Exercise from 'How to build your own creative industry'

# pt 4

## MAIA: From Rehearsal to New Postures

### ***Abuelos* and ‘radical hospitality’**

In 2013, Birmingham-based artist Amahra Spence was confronted with an exclusive and rigid arts sector: ‘I was about 22 years old and decided to start an organisation, because there was no other choice, because it was so impossible *just to survive*’ (LAI, 2023). Opportunities were either lacking or felt misaligned with Spence’s creative practice and a desire to take it beyond binaries (SV, 2022). So MAIA started with a very simple and ‘naive premise’: how to support artists to do what they love for a living, to be themselves and to survive from it (ibid.). The decision to create a new container, or the ‘infrastructure to support the creative practice’ mirrors other women of colour for whom starting their own organisation was the only way to proceed in the sector without constraint (Brook et al., 2020, p. 216).

The now 10-year-old organisation MAIA operates out of the Ladywood area where Spence herself grew up. One of the city’s largest post-war housing redevelopment areas built in the 1960s, Ladywood is a prime example of Birmingham’s tale of the ‘haves and the have nots’ - or the ‘tale of the two cities’ (Spence interview, 2023; Loftman, 1990). Some of the city’s boroughs struggle with extreme levels of poverty while its policy documents aspire to be ‘a leading international city, operating on a global stage, where prosperity is shared by all—happy, healthy and affordable’ (Our Future City, 2023, p. 25). The part of Ladywood

proximate to the city centre is home to the financial district and cultural organisations that receive most of the public funding. There is another Ladywood: an area that sees high levels of poverty — that tops the chart of every classic metric of deprivation, poor health and unemployment (Gulliver, 2016). It is also a district where over a hundred languages are spoken, but there is bare infrastructure to support diverse communities and newcomers for whom English is not the first language (interview, 2023; Carter, 2013). While unemployment, lack of affordable housing and environmental concerns grow, policy continues to concentrate power, heavy investment and dense building in the city centre, repeating the myth that economic benefit will trickle outwardly to peripheral areas (interview). Spence is clear that the needs of the people, or the challenges of our time, will not be met by building this way: ‘That value will never trickle outwardly’ she says.

For those that have been ‘failed by our country’... what does it mean to be an artist: to give form, nuance and materiality to ideas?

What are the types of life-affirming infrastructures that we can build? (ibid.)

Nearly eight years ago, contemplating the needs of her community, Spence started dreaming of an artist-led ‘hotel’ that would steer the cultural sector’s extensive accommodation budgets away from the many private hotel chains, investing these back into those Birmingham communities who receive the least of the public spend (Introducing *Abuelos*: with Intervention Architecture, 2022). It is a regenerative idea grounded in the very real economic conditions of Birmingham, known as an international conference centre. More than a traditional hotel, the space would incorporate a communal kitchen, artist residency, galleries and rest areas. Most importantly, it would lead from the spirit of Spence’s Grandad’s house:

The most convivial, joyful, loving space you could imagine. A house full of laughter, music, food, conversation, soul, Grandad's house was the neighbourhood's cultural infrastructure never included in city mapping projects. (MAIA, 2023)

'He didn't try to create radical cultural infrastructure, he didn't talk about what it is to life-affirm' says Spence, describing the oasis that, somehow, her grandparents managed to build on an industrial council estate, where 'the soil is literally toxic' (LAI, 2023). It was a house where you would have smelled love when walking in, that was 'full of art and culture in its own way' (ibid.). So rather than building another white cube gallery or a normative arts space, Grandad's house became the blueprint for imagining cultural infrastructure, alongside other spaces of joy in the community, such as their neighbourhood's youth centres (BAS, 2022).

The *Abuelos* infrastructure would be:

rooted in radical hospitality, more-than-human accountabilities, environmental responsibility (...) a critical relationship with our animal and plant kin, rooted in people who aren't considered human in our current paradigm: queer people, disabled people, black people, people of colour, migrants, the whole constellation of beings who are not allowed the freedoms of human in this time. (interview)

This provocation starts to give an idea of the expansive vision of *Abuelos*. When Spence first went public with the idea, developers started to offer one-year leases to test it. For a group of black creatives regularly used to dealing with precarity, disinvested in and 'othered' by the cultural sector, it was important to secure a 'forever' leasehold and offer permanence (BAS, 2021). Spence was also determined not to become complicit in the extractive practices of the creative industries, to not be used as a 'creative fix' (Peck 2007) for urban development: i.e. 'grassroots cultural organisation adds vibrancy, brings people together, there's a buzz', and then has to vacate for someone that can pay the increased rent in the gentrifying area (IAIA,

2022). Acknowledging that Black-led organisations are often the first to lose resources when funding tightens, *Abuelos* would have to stand on its own merit, be self-sustaining and purposeful for a number of community needs (BAS, 2022).

## **Liberated to the Bone**

MAIA's first new *typology of infrastructure* came to existence through a long-term tenancy of a Ladywood townhouse. Repurposed into part community hub, residency and work space, this first 'rehearsal room' was lovingly named YARD, meaning 'home' in Jamaica: 'If you say you're going Yard, you're going home', says Spence (interview). It is here where the *Abuelos* vision is rehearsed.

MAIA's programming draws upon 'Black scholarship and community practice to explore the role of art(ists) in growing public consciousness, mobilising for change and rehearsing freedom' (MAIA, 2022). The Arts School aims 'to craft, mould, dance and rehearse liberation into being' (Spence, Twitter 2023, Fig 10). These collective creative sessions are inspired by Imarisha's idea of 'organising as science fiction' — fantastical art that helps understand existing power structures and imagine ways to build more just futures (2020). The 2023 curriculum, designed together with long-time collaborator André Anderson, was inspired by Susan Raffo's *Liberated to the Bone* (2022), a publication addressing the relationship between physical bodies, intergenerational trauma and social justice. The curriculum asked the central question: 'How can movement infrastructure centre the deep connections between our bodies, lands and histories, to support our capacities for healing?' (MAIA, n.d.).



Figure 10. Visit to Arts School

I travelled to Birmingham on a sunny Friday. As I observed the high rise developments from the car, my driver told me he's considering moving away from the city due to rising prices. We stopped by an open townhouse door and a chalkboard that read: Arts School, 10-4 pm, Liberated to the Bone.

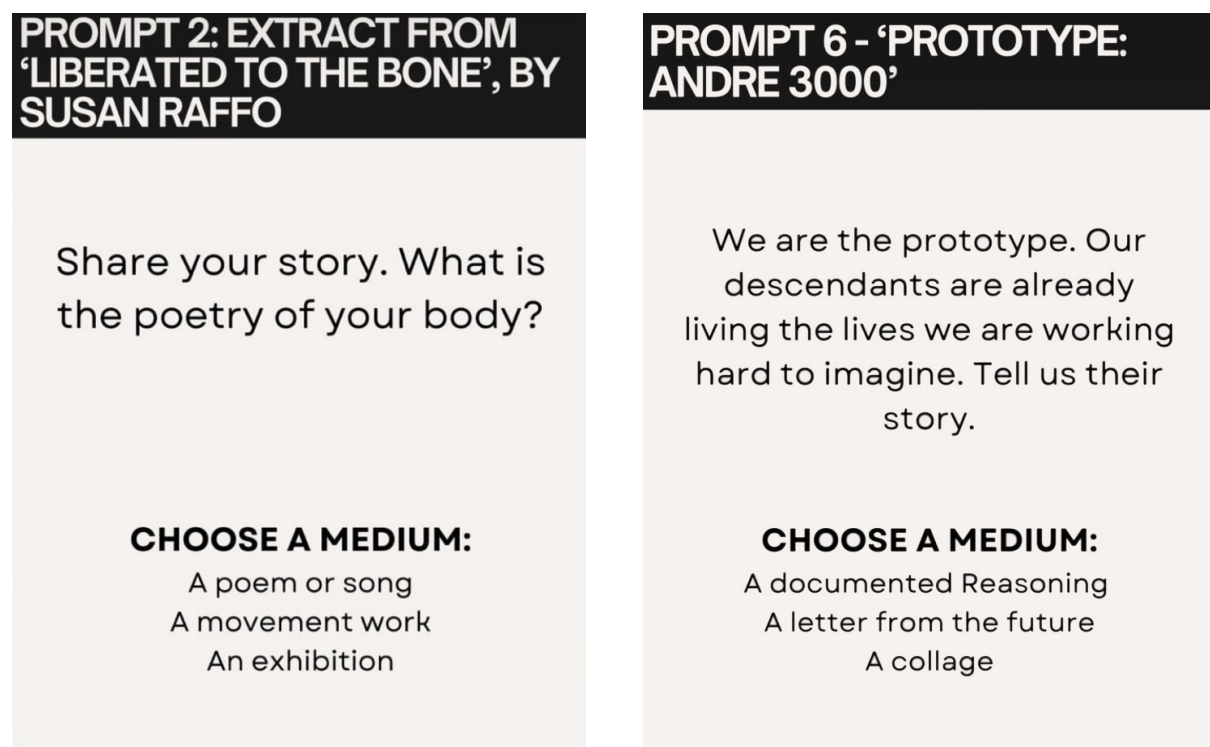
Amahra welcomed me into a cosy and light space with a hug. The morning Arts School prompt was inspired by the *Lovers' Rock* episode of Steve McQueen's *Small Axe* series, asking us to share a day in the life of a place that feeds our souls. We were encouraged to respond with a script, performance, sound, a documented Reasoning, or an illustration. I drew a whole page full of blue sea... and I was joined by the youngest 3-year-old artist who filled it with sea dragons and illustrated all of the women in her family onto the beach.

We spent the afternoon in the upstairs music studio as part of an exercise to record the sounds of our sanctuary. With muffled bass, steel pan sounds and soulful melodies, the result sounded like the Notting Hill carnival from a distance until it slowly transcended into a soulful meditation. I realised just how vital music was to this space. Throughout the day I sensed a longing for something. And a vision of something that I hope will one day exist outside of the radically welcoming, safe and life-affirming space called YARD.

On my way to catch the train to London, my driver had trouble accessing Moor St station. He told me a park was being removed to make way for HS2 rail.

The Arts School prompts are stretched to reach further and deeper. For Spence’s personal artistic journey, the *intention* of transdisciplinarity was a commitment to eliminate structural barriers and to explore ideas through whatever medium feels right (SV, 2022).

Transdisciplinarity is about interconnectedness and explorations that happen through engaging the depth of an idea rather than developing niche skill sets: keeping strictly to a medium or discipline limits knowing the generative offerings adjacent to all the things we have already been affirmed in (ibid.). As Gilmore writes, rather than asking a community, ‘Why do you want *this* development project?’ one should ask, ‘What *is* development?’ (2018, pp. 37-38; Fig. 11-12).



Figures 11-12. Arts School prompts

Wounds have been portals for many of us. I think wounds made Capoeira. Wounds birthed hip-hop. I think that wounds have created Dumplin (...) Wounds have been deeply transformative spaces. And I think that we need more infrastructure that can support how we tend to those wounds. (Spence, LAI, 2023)



Spence suggests that creativities born from limitations of infrastructure and society are in themselves radical acts of creativity (ibid.). Here, she cautions against a tendency to romanticise situations of harm and violence: ‘I don't want to romanticise the ways that we have broken and I don't want to romanticise who has to break in order to build generative things’, says Spence, but ‘how do we *actually* build the infrastructure for all of us to be well... for that reimagining?’ (ibid.).



Figure 13. A speculative *Abuelos*

For MAIA, it is about hosting expansive interventions and community meet-ups to reimagine operations and governance beyond known precedents in the cultural sector (MAIA, 2022).

Working with Intervention Architecture has led to fruitful conversations on the design intention behind a potential physical *Abuelos*: a porous pavilion-layout design, full of light and green spaces, a structure that is one with its community and environment (Fig. 13).

‘When we say we are accountable to more than the ‘human’, we’d acknowledge the new



postures, practices and commitments required for our ecological and environmental responsibility’ writes Spence (MAIA, 2023).

It is about responding to problems as they surface in real time. To be truly mission-led, the governance should be regenerative; a model that isn’t top down, or bottom-up, or flat (because it’s never truly flat), but a solar-system with the sun as the mission (interview; Fig. 14). Such evolving systems of governance are appropriate for co-produced knowledge and pluralist shared decision-making processes (Gross & Wilson, 2020).

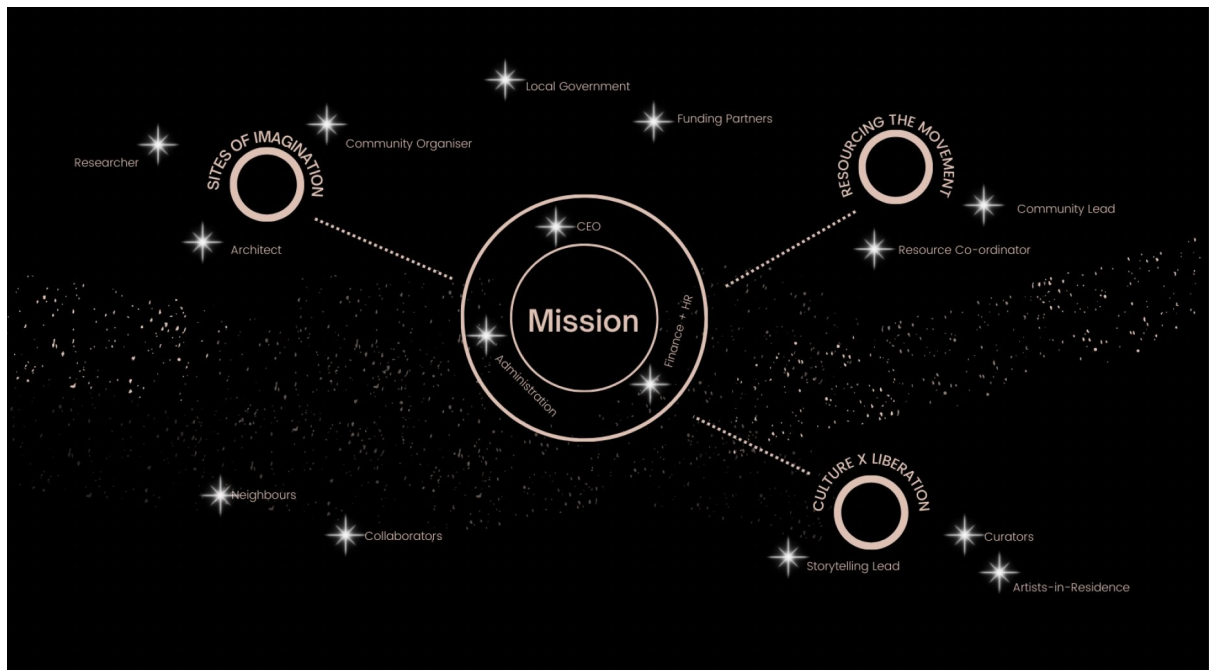


Figure 14. Governance model draft

While the future of *Abuelos* is yet to emerge, this in-depth process is a challenge to short-term economic sustainability, usually prioritised over equal pay or environmental care (Banks & Oakley, 2020). It is a concern for intra- and intergenerational justice, a more equitable allocation of resources across existing social populations, and recognition of the need to

impart socially-just arrangements for future and (where possible) past generations (ibid.; Cosme et al., 2015). It is this long-standing commitment to place, communities and the environment that Spence wishes to see from local authorities and institutions (interview).

As Spence visions:

Maybe these cultural infrastructures would be committed and adequately resourced at the earliest stages of development, instead of retrofit 'solutions' to 'placemaking'. Maybe these infrastructures wouldn't apply short-term 'solutionism' approaches to the climate crisis while constantly falling behind in their own environmental responsibilities. (MAIA, 2023)

# pt 5

## Conclusion: Cultural Infrastructure and CIRCE

‘Now is the time for the new ideas that are out there to enter culture’ wrote O’Connor in 2022. As calls increase for a reorientation of the value of culture and a ‘reset’ of policy, this report proposes real-life examples to inform and root an alternative approach.

There are signs that the practices of MAIA, Freedom & Balance and Kin Structures are resonating beyond their localised efforts, which brings equal amounts of tension and opportunity. As of early 2023, MAIA was named as an Arts Council National Portfolio Organisation and will receive a grant of almost £280,000 for three years. Spence recognises a shift happening; a loose strategic commitment from the state’s funding body to invest in organisations doing transformative work (interview). While the mission of the previous decade was to deliver ‘Great Art and Culture for Everyone’, the recent ‘Let’s Create’ brief seems to place more importance on creative practice and community-driven value (ibid.). For grassroots collectives who are often explicit in their critique of state policies, the idea of becoming ‘legitimate’ as a state-funded organisation poses understandable discomforts. The NPO brief articulated questions that have long been at the core of MAIA’s mission: the importance of good governance, equity and environmental responsibility beyond short-term social affordances (ibid.). Despite funding seemingly catching up with people responding to real-time problems at the intersection of culture, public health and education, this support needs to be systemic and consistent to match the scale of the problem. Caution is echoed as the Covid-19 pandemic further exposed the government’s strategy to save the biggest and

richest ‘jewel’ institutions first while smaller organisations were left to compete for remains, a vision in which cash gets found for opera houses and not for youth clubs (Nouri, LAI, 2023; Banks & O’Connor, 2020).

Building precedents for a systemic approach, the Joseph Rowntree Foundation has invested in a cohort of 22 organisations as part of their 10-year Emerging Futures programme, including all those featured in this study (JRF, n.d.). In recent years, many progressive funders across Europe have given more attention to organisations that are able to marry the creative and social agenda (Comunian, Rickmers & Nanetti, 2020). The Creative Impact Research Centre Europe itself is one that focuses on sustainable and just solutions in the cultural sector. A variety of projects within the CIRCE network are responding to issues that resonate with my study, from infrastructures of care, community-led impact, democratic governance and non-human accountabilities. Many of these are addressing specific gaps in state policies and issues often unseen by structures of power. There is an explicitness about the kinds of social relations and cultural expressions we choose to support and the worlds we want people to inhabit. For example, Aiwen Yin has developed the Wetlands theory to community sustainability, exploring how artist collectives can transit to self-sustained structures. Antonia Rohwetter has done a deep dive into the idea and ethical considerations of ‘care’ that increasingly surfaces as a radical alternative to extraction, social isolation and inequality in the arts. The music and nightlife initiative Club Coop in Marseille is testing a democratic governance model and a solidarity-driven charter that aims to challenge the precarity of space and sustainable opportunity for marginalised artists in a stratified music sector. Finally, a range of inspiring arts-based methodologies are being explored across the network, tapping into the power of non-verbal forms of meaning and sensorial experiences to advance research.

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## Figures

Figure 1. My collage in process at Creative Link Up by Freedom & Balance, June 2023, personal image from fieldwork

Figure 2. Final exhibition at Orchard Gardens, Kin Structures n.d. <https://kinstructures.com/Reimagining-Orchard-Gardens-Community-Centre>

Figure 3. Outside Orchard Gardens Estate Community Centre. 2022. Kin Structures. Credit: Eric Aydin-Barberini

Figure 4. Photo by photography workshop participant Jason. 2022. Kin Structures, <https://kinstructures.com/orchard-gardens-photos>

Figures 5-7. Authors of the Estate: Chalkhill Edition. Freedom & Balance n.d. <https://www.freedomandbalance.com/authorsoftheestate>

Figure 8. Exercise from 'Try a TING', Freedom & Balance Instagram, September 28th, 2022

Figure 9. Exercise from 'How to build your own creative industry' Freedom & Balance Instagram, December 4th, 2020

Figure 10. Visit to MAIA's Arts School, June 2023, personal image from fieldwork

Figure 11-12. Arts School prompts, MAIA, Instagram, June 2023

Figure 13. A speculative '*ABUELOS*'. Intervention Architecture, 2021. <https://maia-group.medium.com/culture-as-strategy-in-apocalyptic-times-e68e2eb52835>

Figure 14. Governance model draft, credit: Hannah Thomas and Align Consulting. Amahra Spence's Twitter, November 19th, 2022

## APPENDIX A: FIELDWORK INFORMATION

### INTERVIEWS

8.06.2023. Kwame Lowe and Arman Nouri, Kin Structures. Soanes Centre. London

3.07.2023. Amahra Spence. MAIA. Zoom

5.07.2023. A representative of the Greater London Authority. London

### PARTICIPATORY ARTS EVENTS

Arts School. MAIA. 13-24 June 2023:

1. 16.06.2023. Arts School, YARD, Ladywood, Birmingham

2. 22.06.2023. Arts School, online

Freedom & Balance

17.06.2023. Creative link-up. FerArts

### PUBLIC PROGRAMME EVENTS

Programme: Life-affirming Infrastructures. MAIA. May-July 2022:

1. Introducing Abuelos with Intervention Architecture (IAIA), online

2. Building Ecologies, Not Hierarchies (BENH), online

### Events 2021-2022:

Programme: The Spacial Imagination. MAIA, May 2021:

1. Black Artistry and Space (BAS), online
2. Space + Place: Visions for the Future, online
3. 'In a Liberated Future, I imagine...', online

Space in the Black Imagination Lab, MAIA. 24th May - 15th July 2023:

6.06.2023. (Re)Writers Room with Tony Patrick. Online workshop

Resolve Collective's public programme at the Barbican:

7.06.2023. Life-affirming Infrastructures (LAI)

Healing Justice Ldn x Kin Structures summer 2023 events:

1. 7.07.2023. Life-affirming Community Practice (LACP). Whitechapel Gallery
2. 13.07.2023. Rehearsing Futures: Experiments in Imagination

SOAS Festival of Ideas:

24.11. 2022. Sound & Vision (SV), SOAS

Kin Structures at Orchard Gardens, 2022:

17.09.2022. Final exhibition

## APPENDIX B: UNPUBLISHED DOCUMENTS

Text for Resolve Collective's exhibition at the Barbican's Curve Gallery 2023

### In Which You Will Thrive

The institution of the twentieth century was an object: an isolated node of cultural power amongst, but separate from, other nodes. These nodes dotted our field of vision; appeared monolithic and introspective behind thick walls. They have sustained themselves as bastions of cultural power with extractive practices and linear relations.

Against the odds, there is a new cultural landscape emerging.

Across these islands there are entities growing from the social lives of its neighbourhoods. These entities are porous, deeply regenerative and polyvocal. They are interdependent. They are concerned with building and perpetuating social and environmental prosperity; with redistributing resources such as time, energy and knowledge, as well as bricks; with enriching the threads that tie their members to each other across networks of connection in which you will thrive.

They don't have a name yet, but they won't be known as institutions.

*George Kafka thinking through Andres Jacque, Tim Ingold, Rosario Talevi, Gilly Karjevsky, Benjamin Seroussi, Immy Kaur, Holly Herndon, Mat Dryhurst, Kate Raworth, Edouard Glissant etc*

Commented [1]: ok it's a vibe...too serious? too formal? too short?

Commented [2]: "you want me to sound like Julie London?"

"No, sound like Dinah Washington."  
<https://youtu.be/bx6MQ7tmgSc>

Commented [3]: ♥

Commented [4]: by this i mean the relationship between the cultural institutions and their audiences/visitors/other actors. to me it reads as consumptive and one-directional, rather than expansive/productive

Commented [5]: As in pertaining to a 'line'. What is the bottom line of these types of relationships? What line are subordinates of institutionality expected to tow? And what lines must we cross in order flip reverse the ting?

Commented [6]: cacophonous

Commented [7]: Tension, contradiction, exception, and refusal are the rites and rasp of many voices not speaking as one but together.

Commented [8]: does it sound like i'm talking about ££? i dont mean it to

Commented [9]: reappropriating 'value' in environmental thinking. We're talking about ££\*

Commented [10]: Addressing the reader – this is happening and it's for you

Commented [11]: this could work as a title? We named the first 'break' after your quote 'In Which You Will Thrive'. Could repeat that? I do like the 'untitled' nature of the text out of pure hipster delight but I'm wondering if it might help define this from the sound text below?

Commented [12]: Infrastructure just isn't exciting enough as a word imo

Commented [13]: it might be our job to make it irresistible

Commented [14]: These could be a footnote, but seems important to recognise the ecosystem of thought (probably many names missing so add some!)

Commented [15]: Amahra Spence, Dorothy E. Smith, adrienne maree brown, Stuart Hall, Rosa-Johan Uddoh, Andre Anderson, Tschabalala Self, Angela Y. Davis, Thandi Loewenson, David Roberts, Lola Olufemi, Yazan Khalili, Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung...

### Conversations on Conservations / How to Practice

The sounds in the gallery space are vocal fragments from RESOLVE Collective's unpublished 'Conversations on Conservations' series and a sequence of voicenote "chainmail" conversations initiated for their article 'How to Practice: Collective Imagination', published in issue 1496 of The Architectural Review. Interspersed with the sounds of Croydon North End, these resonant cacophonies are the many voices of *Rose Nordin, Sana Badri, Arman Nouri & Kwame Lowe <KIN Structures>, Zain Dada, Halima Ali <RAADI Zine>, Jana Dardouk, Pelin Tamay & Selin Öktem <1115 Labs>, Maia Ardalla, Shawn Adams & Larry Botchway <POoR Collective>, Joel De Mowbray & Morgan Da Silva <Yes Make!>, and Lela Sujani <Patch Collective>.*