

Enabling Capabilities: Innovation and development in the Outer Hebrides

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Abstract

The existing challenges to non-profit heritage organisations are increasing in these volatile and austere climates. Particularly, existing organisational and strategic mission developments are needed to enable more resilient organisations. This paper explores the relationship between *Ionad Hiort* and the Glasgow School of Art's Institute of Design Innovation (INDI) as a six-month case study for understanding how design innovation can build creative capabilities within this unique partnership. In this case, the “building” of a new type of heritage centre on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis in Scotland. It focuses on the concept of innovation in approaching complex situations as an alternative to existing means of problem solving. Through a series of workshops and engaging informal sessions a new strategy was built, which focused the group's potential. The outcome being a new way to build confidence within communities and build new relationships, enabling new creative capabilities within a rural island community.

[Insert FIGURE 1 here]

Figure 1: View from Geodha Sgoilt towards the sea stacks, Uig, Isle of Lewis. Image Credit: George Jaramillo

Introduction

Over the cliffs of Mangerstadh on the west coast of the Isle of Lewis, is a small plot of land called Geodha Sgoilt that overlooks the North Atlantic Ocean (Figure 1). On the site is a small dirt gravel road and the remnants of a World War II listening station. Below, sea stacks rise from the waters, orange and green cliff sides stand in defiance to the crashing waves. An older gentleman began to tell me of what he believed could be located here on the site. A place where visitors could learn of the wonders of St. Kilda that contained all types of new storytelling technologies to inspire them. He pointed above the ruined buildings, mentioning that a new road for the visitors' vehicles and coaches would be built. With his explanations,

you could almost imagine such a place on these cliffs. Yet, before that new idea could even be built, this gentleman and his group of locals and incomers had to convince themselves and others that this new heritage centre was something desired, necessary and inevitable in the development of the Western Isles.

This article explores the developing relationships that come about through design innovation with community organisations. This was done through a partnership between an academic institution and a non-profit heritage community group as part of growing study in how higher education design research can play an active partner in community group development. It argues for the use of design thinking and innovation in improving strategy and organisational processes within non-profit organisations. In this case, it looks at what role it can play in building and enabling organisational confidence in its mission, as well as, building “beyond the museum”. The new approach to this unique relationship casts new light towards working with complexities and strategies rather than trying to resolve issues from the outset of a project. These enabling relationships are divided into three sections of this paper: First it explores the context of the island community group and “building” heritage, followed by a brief history of St Kilda and its current status and designation as a World Heritage site. Second, it seeks the value of developing strategy and the introduction of the Institute of Design Innovation (INDI). This is followed by a discussion of the six-month relationship and work that was done that elucidates various methods used and ending with its outcomes. The third section reflects upon the impacts at the relationship building between the two groups with some final thoughts on the partnership, where it can lead, and how this can represent new ways of working together within community groups.

Building Heritage

Current community research in Scotland has shown struggles in understanding issues within community capability and development (Barker 11; Cave 20; Jacuniak-Suda and Mose 23) though most focus on the land tenure and energy (McMorran 21) and not heritage groups. The need to maintain “resilient” (Steiner 17) communities has shown that economic resilience is of primary importance for these rural communities. Heritage as economic regenerator has had a long history in the United Kingdom. Some of these like the regeneration of Wirksworth in the Peak District (Gordon 20) have had great economic results with populations growing, as well as, development in the arts and design. These changes, though positive, have also adversely impacted the local community by estranging and forcing lower income townspeople to move away due to higher property values and lack of work. Furthermore, current trends in heritage tourism have managed to turn many rural regions into places of historic consumption (Ronström 7) termed “heritagisation” (Edensor 35). There is thus a need for critical reflection within a variety of heritage organisations with the increase in heritage tourism.

In particular, existing island heritage organisations face a variety of issues that they focus too much on the artefactual or are too focused to strive for anything beyond the remit of their

particular heritage (Jacuniak-Suda and Mose 33; Ronström 4). Though many factors including funding, space, volunteerism and community capability affect the way these groups function they have commonalities that include organisational methods, volunteer fatigue, and limited interest from community groups. It is within this context that the communities of the Outer Hebrides. Currently, projects within the Highlands and islands focus on particular “grassroots” development (Cave 26; Robertson 994) searching for innovative ways to attract, maintain, and sustain healthy levels of heritage and development—one such group is *Ionad Hiort*.

Ionad Hiort

Ionad Hiort is a community non-profit organisation founded in 2010 to assist in the development of a new type of heritage centre in the community of Uig on the Isle of Lewis (“Proposal-Ionad Hiort”). As stated in their website, the group strives to develop a centre on the history and contemporary views of St Kilda, as well as, encouraging a much needed year-round economic impetus for the region. The development of the group and the idea of a heritage centre came about through the creation of the *St. Kilda Opera*, a £1.5 million, five-country project held in 2007, led by Scotland's Gaelic Arts agency, *Proiseact nan Ealan* (Mckenzie). This opera, inspired by the cliffs, people, and history of St. Kilda used creative techniques to unite five countries in a live performance with cliff aerobatics and Gaelic singing to present the island narrative. From this initial interest, a commission from the Western Isles council (2010), developed by suggestions and commentary from earlier reports (Jura Report 2009; Rebanks 2009) encouraged a fiercely contentious competition, which saw Ionad Hiort receive the right to develop a remote-access heritage centre about the St. Kilda archipelago (Maclean). In 2013, the group received a plot of land from the local laird for the establishment of the centre (Urquhart) thereby bringing it closer to its goal of a heritage centre, but before moving onto this notion of remote-heritage, a brief history is needed on the archipelago.

[insert FIGURE 2 here]

Figure 2: Location map of Mangerstadh on the Isle of Lewis and St. Kilda to the west, with inset of Scotland. Image Credit: © Crown Copyright and Database Right 2017. Ordnance Survey (Digimap Licence).

St. Kilda

St. Kilda is an archipelago about 80 kilometres off the coast of the Outer Hebrides in the North Atlantic (Figure 2). Over 2000 years of habitation show an entanglement between humans and nature including harsh weather, limited resources, but a tenacity and growth to develop a way of living upon a small section of land in the middle of the Atlantic. St. Kilda has maintained a tenuous relationship between the sea, the cliffs and the people who have lived within its territory (Geddes and Gannon 18). Over a period of three centuries beginning in the eighteenth century an outside influence on the island begin to play a major role, with

the loss of a large portion of its small (180) population. This population would later decrease to 100 and finally to 34 in 1930, when it was decided to evacuate the final members of the village in what could best be called a forced eviction.

Since the evacuation, the island has maintained an important military presence as a listening station during the Second World War and in its modern form a radar station as part of the Hebridean Artillery (Rocket) Range (Geddes 14). The islands in the last thirty years have seen an increase in tourism with the ownership of the island by the National Trust of Scotland. The UNESCO World Heritage Organisation (UNESCO), who designated St. Kilda in 1986 and 2004 as having outstanding universal value, has seen its role evolve from not just protecting (or conserving) world heritage sites, but to strategically understand sustainable tourism of its sites (“St. Kilda”). In 2012, UNESCO selected St. Kilda as a case study for remote access heritage conservation and interpretation (Hebrides News Today; UNESCO 15). This was partly due to the efforts of 3D laser scanning of the islands by a collaboration between The Glasgow School of Art and Historic Environment Scotland called the Centre for Digital Documentation and Visualisation (CDDV) in 2009.

The idea of a remote access heritage is an important aspect as to what *Ionad Hiort* could do with creating a centre at their site away from St. Kilda. Remote access heritage is useful in allowing for sites and monuments to be conserved and monitored “from afar”. It allows for 3D visualisations of sites and provides new creative engagements with a variety of different places (Remondino and Rizzi 86), however, *Ionad Hiort* was not yet at a point to even imagine how to use the remote access technology. They first needed a strategy and direction, as after many years of moving towards recognition of proposing the centre at their site in Uig, they had lost a bit of that initial drive. This is where INDI was asked to assist by the Highlands and Islands Enterprise, the regional development organisation for most of rura Scotland.

Building Confidence

INDI is a research institute at The Glasgow School of Art. It is a distributed, creative collective of researchers, lecturers and students specialising in design innovation, where design innovation means enabling creative capabilities within communities, groups and individuals. Together, they address complex issues through new design practices and bespoke community engagement to co-produce “preferable futures” (Henchley 25). Preferable futures are a type of future casting that seeks to strive not just for the probable or possible future of a place or idea, but for the most preferred and collectively reached option for a society (McAra-McWilliam 9). INDI researches the design processes that are needed to co-create contexts in which people can flourish: at work, in organisations and businesses, as well as, in public services and government.

The task of innovation as an interactive process is an example of the design process. Innovation is defined as “a co-creation process within social and technological networks in which actors integrate their resources to create mutual value” (Russo-Spena and Mele 528). Therefore, innovation works outside of standard consultancy practices; rather it engenders a sense of mutual co-created practices that strive to resolve particular problems. Examples include the work that has looked at creating cultures of innovation within small and medium-sized enterprises (Lockwood 4) where the design process was used to alter organisational support (Figure 3). These enterprises tend to emulate larger firms and corporations and though useful in places where economies of scale are present, smaller business need adaptable, resilient and integrated networks of innovation within their organisational models. In this way, innovation functioned as a catalyst for altering the existing organisational methods. These innovations are thus a useful alternative to existing means of approaching problems and building resilience within any organisation. Therefore, these ideas of innovation could be transferred and play a role in enabling new ways of approaching non-profit organisational structures, particularly those within heritage.

[insert FIGURE 3 here]

Figure 3: Design Council Double Diamond model of the design process. Image Credit: Lockwood 2012.

Developing the work

Ionad Hiort with INDI’s assistance has worked together to develop a heritage centre that tries to towards a new definition of heritage and identity through this island centre. Much of this work has been done through local community investigations revolving around workshops and one-on-one talks where narratives and ideas are held in “negative capability” (McAra-McWilliam 2) to seek many alternatives that would be able to work for the community. The initial aims of the partnership were to assist the Uig community realise the potential of the St Kilda Centre. Primarily, it would assist in enabling the capabilities of two themes. The first would be, strategy, for *Ionad Hiort*’s existing multi-page mission brief. The second would be storytelling the narrative of St. Kilda as a complex and entangled, however, its common views are limited to the ‘fall from grace’ or ‘noble savage’ story (Macdonald 168).

Over the course of six months, the relationship involved two workshops and three site visits of varying degrees of interaction. An initial gathering had InDI staff meet members of *Ionad Hiort* to introduce members to each other. Afterwards, INDI ran two workshops over two months in Uig to understand, reflect and challenge *Ionad Hiort*’s focus on what the group desired. The first workshop focused on the group’s strategy statement. In a relaxed and facilitated space in the Uig Community Hall, the groups used pens, markers, and self-adhesive notes to engage in an open dialogue about the group’s desires. This session included reflecting on what their heritage centre could look like, as well as what their strategy needed to get there. These resulted in a series of drawings of their ‘preferred’ centre, with some ideas showing a centre sitting over the edge of the cliffs or one that had the centre be an integral

component of the community. In discussing that session, one of members of the group recalled:

I remember his [one of INDI's staff] interrogation of the project was actually pretty – initially – fairly brutal, right? The first formal session we had talking about strategy and so on. To the extent that I think it would be fair to say he pissed everybody off, right? So much so that he actually prompted us to come back with some fairly hard hitting ripostes, which, after a moment's silence he then said, 'That's it, you've convinced me', and at that point we kind of realised that that's what he'd been trying to do; he'd been trying to really push us to go further in our articulation of what we were doing and ... why we were doing it in this particular way than we had done before. (Participant A, 2016).

The group through this session found out that their strategy could be refined into a short mission statement giving a clear focus as to what they wanted and how they wanted to go about doing it. In the end, drawings, charts, stories (Figure 4) were drawn to reflect on what the community had discussed. These artefacts became a key role-player in the following months of the development of the group.

[insert FIGURE 4 here]

Figure 4: View of group working through their strategy workshop session. Image Credit: Fergus Fullarton-Pegg 2014.

The second set of workshops and visits involved informal discussion with individual members of the group and community. This included a visit to St Kilda with members from INDI, Ionad Hiort and the Digital Design Studio, which allowed for everyone to understand the immensity of the project and its significance to World Heritage values. The initial aims thus evolved into understanding the context of self-governance for distributed communities and how to develop the infrastructure of development. As discussed earlier, existing development processes are useful, though limited to only particular types of projects, and as exemplified in the Highlands and Islands Enterprise and Western Isles Council commission, it tends to put communities against each other for limited pots of money. This existing system can be innovated upon by becoming creative liaisons, sharing and co-creating from existing studies to help develop more effective processes for the future of *Ionad Hiort* and their 'preferable future'.

Building Relationships

What the relationship with GSA has done, as a dialogue with the team of people that have been involved, has been to consolidate and clarify our own thinking and to get us to question our own thinking across several different aspects of the whole project. (Participant A, 2016)

As the quote states the main notion of using design thinking has allowed *Ionad Hiort* to question their thinking and challenge preconceptions of what a “heritage centre” is, by being a critical sounding board that is different from what is provided by consultants and other stakeholders. Prior to meeting INDI, *Ionad Hiort* may have been able to reach their goal of a strategy, however, it would have taken a few more years. The work, which involved structured and unstructured workshops, meetings, planning events, and gatherings, gave them a structured focus to move ahead with their prospectus planning and bidding. INDI enabled the compression and focus of their strategy making and mission strategy statement over the course of six months into a one-page statement that gave direction to the group and provided the impetus for the development of the prospectus briefs. Furthermore, INDI contributed a sense of contemporary content to the historic story, as well as, enable the community to see that this centre would not just become another gallery with café.

The most important outcome has been an effective measure in building relationships in the Outer Hebrides, which shows the changing roles between academic and third sector partnerships. Two key points can be deemed from these developing relationships: The first has been to build a research infrastructure in and across the region that engages with local communities about working with the GSA, including groups in North Uist, Barra and South Uist. Of note is a comment made by one of the participants saying: “It's exciting now, there's a buzz about it and getting you [INDI] involved, adding a dimension – we've got people who have got an artistic bent here but I think your enthusiasm, your skills, very much complement what we've got here.” (Participant B, 2016). Second, the academic/non-profit partnership has encouraged younger people to work and study in the area through a developing programme of student research activity. This includes placing taught masters students with local community members on the South Uist, as well as, PhD research being done on Stornoway. These two outcomes then have given rise to interest in not only how heritage is re-developed in a community, but also, encourages future interest, by staff and students to continue the debate and fashion further developments in the region (GSAmidiacentre).

Today, the cliffs of Mangerstadh continue to receive the pounding of waves, the blowing wind and the ever-present rain on its rocky granite surface. The iterative stages of work that the two groups have done showcase the way that simple actions can carve, change and evolve into innovative outcomes. The research outcomes show that through this new approach to working with communities we move beyond the consultant and towards an ability of generating a preferable future for the community. In this way, the work that has been created together showcases a case study for further island community development. We do not know what the future holds for the group, but with continued support and maintaining an open mind to creative opportunities we will see that the community will develop a space that moves “beyond the museum”.

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