

THIS IS CROYDON

OUR STORIES



Photo: Chris O'Donovan for Croydon Council.

B ATHERTON, NATALIE MITCHELL, PHOEBE & ROGER WAGNER

DESIRE PATHS

Flagship *This is Croydon* project, [Desire Paths](#), saw [Turf Projects](#) commission nine local artists to work with Croydon communities to explore the borough's underused and disused spaces. Sparking conversations about how art and creativity can reimagine public space, it helped put culture firmly on the agenda as part of the council's regeneration plans.

IN NUMBERS

Desire Paths

Turf Projects

9 local artists

850 participants

4,000 residents engaged

One of the commissions, (Pub)lic House by poet and community artist **Phoebe Wagner** and her father **Roger Wagner**, focused on Croydon's abandoned pubs, creating a film that toured the borough. Joined by Turf co-founder **B Atherton** as well as producer **Natalie Mitchell**, they reflect on the London Borough of Culture project and on the role pubs play in building community.

What was the journey to creating this project?

PHOEBE: Really, the start of the project was when I was born. I grew up in pubs – my dad is a musician, so he's gigged in pubs all my life. When I left home, a lot of the pubs I grew up in were closing down.

I had this project at the back of my head... then the Desire Paths commission came up. As part of the application process, they gave us a list of buildings they were thinking about - including empty pubs. So, I was like, "this is perfect".

ROGER: Phoebe involved me from the start because I'm part of a campaign group that's been trying to save a pub called the Glamorgan since 2017. All these pubs are made derelict by their owners deliberately, because they want to knock them down and build something else that will make them more money.



What was the aim of the project?

PHOEBE: The main goal was to involve the community in conversations around pubs - to reactivate one of the spaces and think about what 'pub' could mean in the future. The idea was to create a manifesto that gets sent to landlords, council members and anyone with influence - to create a dialogue about what local people want for the area, and how they might listen to those voices when considering what they do with their property.

What did the project look like?

PHOEBE: We created a short film and held a screening. Alongside that, I ran a workshop that allowed people to imagine their own pub.

There was also a poetry workshop at Turf that fed into the film and we ran a zine-making workshop with Zindabad, to encourage people to think about the history of India Pale Ale, its connection to Croydon, and their own experiences of going to pubs, or not going, as people from the diaspora. We ran that in the back room of the Crown and Pepper in South End - that's an example of a space we activated, using creativity to invite the community in.

NATALIE: I was proud of how you handled the India Pale Ale project - looking at Desi heritage to run the workshop. Phoebe knows and understands who holds the space for those conversations.

It sounds like you had a wide reach. How did you approach that?

ROGER: We put up posters on some of the derelict pubs to say, 'Was this your local pub?' A lot of people wanted to be involved, and many came along to the film presentation at Turf. Unfortunately, there was no response from any pub owners, even though it would have been an ideal opportunity to connect with the community about their buildings.

PHOEBE: I also wanted to invite people who didn't really feel the pub was for them - to think about what they were for people, and how we could recontextualize that now.

What was the significance of place to Desire Paths more broadly?

B: Through Turf, and as a local, I've become invested in how spaces and places are used in the borough. I'm interested in how that relates to power and to connection and community - how disconnect in your built environment can create a disconnect from your feeling of belonging.

NATALIE: I'm interested in cooperative living and thinking about how we can live differently. That's why this project excited me.



Were there any challenges?

PHOEBE: The original pitch was to go into the abandoned pubs. I wanted to film the insides, but that was difficult because contacting landlords was difficult. So, things evolved to focus on the externals of the buildings and their architecture.

B: There is something poignant about the fact that you are outside, looking in at all these spaces that used to be community places.

Another challenge was that the funding agreement requested we run the project in predominantly publicly-owned spaces. But, when it came down to it, we weren't offered any, so, the spaces we ended up using were all privately owned. It was a good learning exercise and justified the need for the project. It was so hard to get access to space, even spaces that we, the community, own ourselves.

Also, concerns about reputational risk from funders and partners can restrict the potential of projects at times. If they were independent, they could push things further.

How did the project resonate with people?

PHOEBE: Something that kept coming up in conversation was that these spaces are people's second living room. I spoke to someone who said they went to the pub because they couldn't afford heating back in the 80s. There's that idea of: what do we lose when we lose a space? How can we reactivate spaces in a way that actually helps the community?

ROGER: I was struck by how creativity drew more out of people, helping them talk about their experiences in these now derelict spaces. It brought out a much richer and more varied response than if we'd approached it as a kind of protest group with a single-minded objective of resurrecting the pubs of yore.

What's next? Has anything come out of the project?

PHOEBE: To date, over 600 people have engaged with (Pub)lic House through 2 workshops and 11 screenings in pubs and venues across Croydon. I've been taking a break from the film this year and hope to submit it to film festivals when I have more time. Since its release, I've completed a pub-poetry residency at The Royal Standard (one of the pubs I screened the film at). Funded by *This is Croydon* over two months, I had the opportunity to use the pub as a writing studio, collaborating with patrons through chatting, writing workshops and making a zine. I released a free collection of writing and poems, 'we're all poets + we don't know it', available to read in the pub now. I plan to host another pub-poetry residency in Croydon very soon!

ROGER: Out of trying to save the Glamorgan and pubs like it in Croydon, I would like to see a change in the way that we look at our heritage in this country – so that community spaces are seen as intrinsic to having a community at all.

PHOEBE: The thing with heritage is that it's defined by what a few people think heritage is. Like, a little memory that my mum has of being in the pub – you can't put that on a plaque. This project has really shown me the ability we have to archive our own heritage.

B: It's about consolidating shared memory into something tangible and insisting that it is heritage – and using creativity as a vehicle for understanding it as such.



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