



Reimagined Futures

What would a performing arts venue open to everyone look like? Lucy Osborne set and costume designer and theatre consultant introduces a new project set up to look at just that.

Join us in imagining a dream performing arts venue where everyone feels welcome and cared for from the moment they come through the door.

In fact, let's pause right there, and begin by considering the door.

Because the entrance to the dream performing arts venue we are designing has 15 different doors so far, and we are only just getting started. There is a door that slides open and leads directly into a quiet, calm space which enables people to lie down and rest to gather their thoughts and energy before they brave the busy foyer. There is a door where someone greets you as soon as you enter to show you where to go and make you feel at home. There are ramps up to some doors and steps up to

others. Several doors are transparent so you can see inside the building and know what to expect as you approach, but one door is solid because once you are inside the light levels are low and consistent regardless of the time of day or night.

Reimagined Futures began in June 2020 when the dancer and disabled activist Dan Daw brought together a group of designers and theatre-makers and asked "Have you ever wondered what a universally accessible arts venue would look like?" In that moment I think Dan did something extraordinary, which was to bravely challenge us as a community of architects, theatre owners, consultants, building managers, artists, educators and designers to set aside everything we think we know about how to design these buildings.

As a disabled performer, Dan vividly describes the anxieties he experiences around the venues he works in. He wonders whether his journeys will be step-free and whether the seating rake will be too steep. He worries he won't be able to navigate the auditorium and sit wherever he

needs to, and that his routes around the wider building will be populated by physical barriers and obstacles to overcome. Dan is asking us to imagine a performing arts centre where he no longer has to worry about any of those things. He wants to create a building where everyone has the door they need.

The first step will be to listen to the experiences of audiences and theatre-makers across the UK and consult with a broad range of people about the physical and attitudinal barriers they face when they navigate our performing arts buildings.

We launched Reimagined Futures at the London Festival of Architecture in 2021, and at the beginning of April 2022 South East Dance in Brighton offered us the opportunity to carry out a pilot consultation session with a group of participants from their dance community. We spent time as a group in their new building. We talked about how all bodies are different and how buildings can signal that difference is ok and provide options accordingly. We discussed signage and toilets, and the ways in which buildings can tell us they are safe spaces. We heard that white walls are overwhelming and can feel institutionalised and threatening. We celebrated their new dance studios which open directly onto the street and are designed with a porous threshold that warmly invites people inside.

We are hoping to run many more consultations in the future, and we'll use these to explore, design, and develop ideas with the architects Adjaye Associates. We'll use the information we gather to create a virtual building; a 'Disneyland' of accessibility, which says yes to everything our participants have asked for.

We'll also document our findings in collaboration with the Association of British Theatre Technicians and distil our ideas to create guidance that will extend far beyond the statutory minimums, providing a framework that all venues and organisations in the UK can use to improve their accessibility offer.

The pandemic has energised conversations about how excluded from venues local communities feel. The step up to co-creation and curation of these spaces and an understanding from those in power that this needs to become the new norm is vital.

It's an incredibly ambitious project, but it has to be because it needs to include everything and everyone, in the best way possible. We will need radical solutions and we hope in the process to become better designers and architects, with a greater understanding of a wider range of experience. Please do get in touch if you would like to hear more and join in the conversation.

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Our pilot consultation session at South East Dance.

Sketch: Lucy Osborne

"Difference must not be merely tolerated but seen as a fund of necessary polarities between which our creativity can spark like a dialectic. It is learning how to make common cause with those others identified as outside the structures in order to define and seek a world in which we can all flourish. It is learning how to take our differences and make them strengths."

The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle The Master's House
by Audre Lorde

Dancers at Parable Dance

Photo: DF Photography



South East Dance, the arts charity behind Brighton & Hove's first purpose-built dance house, is one of the organisations participating in the Reimagined Futures project. They have been consulting with and listening to the voices of local people and artists from different backgrounds to ensure The Dance Space is as welcoming and accessible as possible - from the fabric of the building to the staff's awareness of different access needs.

Photo: Summer Dean