

this place [of mine]

#thisplaceofmine

**GREATER
MANCHESTER**
DOING THINGS DIFFERENTLY

How can we create an accessible online space for young people in Greater Manchester to explore the future of their high streets, using digital tools, creative storytelling and collaborative methodologies with an aim to inspire change in their Place?

The Challenge

The role and function of town centres is once again shifting, with high streets across Greater Manchester (GM) now the focus of renewed investment towards the rediscovery of placemaking, socialising and learning. Art and creativity have a crucial role to play in innovative place-based strategies through different schemes such as the Future High Street Fund and Heritage Action Zones.

Linking to other local priorities, the GM Digital Strategy sets out to facilitate a region "with a difference and drive real change together... geographically, socially and economically." For young people in particular, the strategy aims to build digital engagement and skills, and demonstrate the role of digital arts in priority areas across the region.

How can we enhance the role of young people across GM in placemaking and create a pandemic-proof opportunity, using digital art, that places the future of their towns at its centre and influence decisions made about their high street?

"Young people are the future of this town and we need to listen to them and hear what their views are because they're going to be the people here in the future making decisions."

Town Councillor, Tameside MBC



The Childwise Report 2016 confirmed that this generation of young people, often described as digital natives, are:

- Defined by their relationship to digital technology, with connectivity permeating their lives and transforming how they interact and socialise
- Aware of social issues and campaigns and, seeing themselves as global citizens, are more likely than previous generations to undertake social action for specific issues
- Prone to digital exclusion that can occur due to economic, access, behavioural or educational factors

"The past few months have changed the way we think about the public realm for good, so if there was ever a moment to rethink and act about the future, it is now. Young, creative minds can help us see the future through a different lens, so this is a brilliant opportunity to offer them space to act, co-create, and share their vision"

FutureEverything

Our Approach

Working with GMCA, award-winning cultural organisation FutureEverything developed **this place [of mine]** - a digital action research project giving young people in GM an opportunity to explore the future of their high streets. The project aimed to make a difference by:

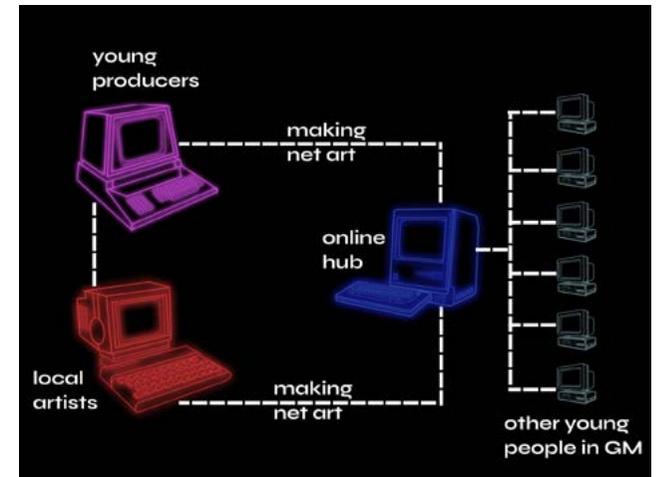
- Amplifying youth voices and providing a digital platform for their visions of the future high street
- Creating opportunities for young people to develop digital skills and collaborate with local, national and international artists
- Exploring the role of digital arts as an approach to transforming high streets into places for cultural programming

Following an R&D phase that included a detailed scoping of GM localities, stakeholders, and youth provision, the five districts of **Beswick, Leigh, Oldham, Rochdale, and Stalybridge** were confirmed as the partners for the project.

In September 2020, the **Young Producers** scheme launched for 10 young creatives from the five partner districts. The Young Producers explored place, heritage, and the future high street to create new digital artworks and co-design an immersive online experience, and were mentored by the **Citizen Futurists**, five emerging GM artists, also commissioned to create digital artworks. To tackle obstacles to digital inclusion we partnered with Manchester Tech Fund to supply laptops and tablets to participants.

In February 2021, we launched [this place \[of mine\]](#) Hub - an interactive online world and virtual gallery. Developed by digital designers [Studio Treble](#), in collaboration with the Young Producers, the Hub is a virtual playground where visitors can discover digital artworks, unearth local stories, and answer questions about their own future visions.

- 5 local authorities
- 10 Young Producers (aged 13-21)
- 12 artists, designers, and creative technologists
- 6 online workshops
- 20 newly commissioned pieces of digital artwork
- 1 online immersive digital Hub
- 2,400 visitors to the Hub
- 4 prestigious CSS Awards for the Hub including Website of the Day, Best UI Design, Best UX Design, and Best Innovation



“Against the backdrop of the pandemic, we harnessed the power of digital tools to reach out across networked space and build a new community of young creatives. Working alongside professionals to create quality artworks, the Young Producers are testament to what can happen when you provide young people with a voice and a platform.”

Creative Associate, FutureEverything

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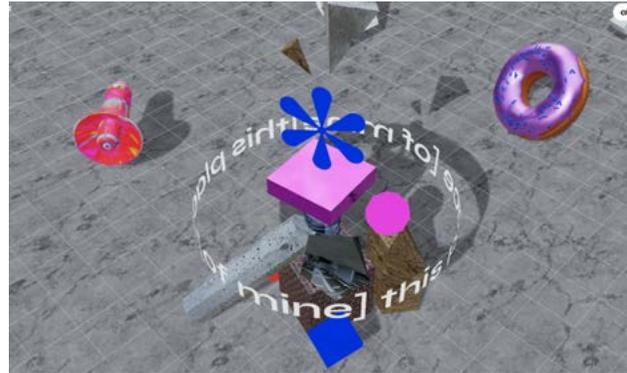
The Impact

this place [of mine] was a welcome gateway for young people to join the conversation about Place. The Young Producers embraced the opportunity to collaborate with professional artists, and develop digital skills, to articulate their visions through the lens of collective ownership, urban green space, climate activism, and architectural design. By connecting with peers from across GM, they increased their awareness of other localities, fostering a wider identity as a GM citizen.

The Young Producers expressed pride in how creative and proactive they had been during lockdown, and how they felt part of an online community. Their digital skills were used to share visions for the future of their towns and they took on the role of ambassadors to promote and increase levels of engagement with the Hub.

The partner organisations felt the impact of the project most acutely in their approach to working with young people. It strengthened their desire to engage with young ambassadors in placemaking, and partners incorporated the learning and resources from **this place [of mine]** into their Heritage Actions Zones programmes.

The Hub has presented innovative approaches to public consultations and alternative methods of working cross-departmentally towards town planning.



Visitors to the **this place [of mine]** Hub expressed their opinions relating to the future of the high street:

- 58% said they wanted to completely rebuild their high street
- 50% chose 'nature and trees' as what they most wanted to see on the future high street
- 56% said that 'making art' is what they most want to do on the future high street

"Taking part in this project provided the space for deeper discussions, not only on the appearance of public spaces, but the politics of their rules and use. It allowed me the opportunity to meet professional artists who have developed my interest in the power structures of public space."

Young Producer



"We know Greater Manchester's high streets still face an uncertain time as a result of the pandemic so it's important that we use creative and innovative methods to look at what their future looks like and explore what people want from them. this place [of mine] will help to do just this, allowing young people to explore and contribute to a vision for the future of our high streets."

Andy Burnham, Mayor of Greater Manchester

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What We Learned

Whilst the pandemic posed challenges for the project, it also presented an opportunity to develop new and innovative methods of delivery. As a cross-sector collaboration it used art and creativity as the key methodology to successfully address the seemingly disparate themes of the future high street and digital inclusion.

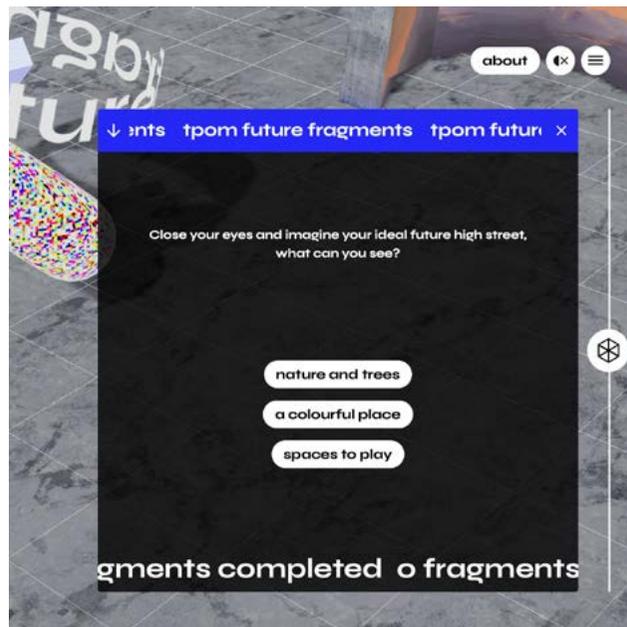
We can work across a digital realm, with individuals who have limited digital experience, to create a genuine place for young people to meet and build an online community. The platform for young people's views gave rise to unexpected and insightful voices that conventional consultation tools may not have inspired.

The inclusivity of the digital space, and the use of a diverse range of platforms, nurtured the wellbeing of participants and we learnt to adapt to an inclusive communication strategy which offered choices to turn off cameras, type replies instead of speaking, and feedback through collaborative, co-design software. Digital tools can be used to foster an inclusive and healthy environment for participants whilst also responding to the diversity of their learning styles and the demands of their lives. Digital access can be a level playing field and online engagement has equity with in-person engagement.

Several of the Young Producers have progressed with their new found interest in Place with one joining the Town Youth Council and another starting a degree in architecture.

"FutureEverything were amazing in the way they adapted the project to the unprecedented circumstances faced as a result of the pandemic. As a result of the project we are in a much stronger position to advocate to our planning colleagues the benefits of engaging young people in thinking about place, with a toolkit to support future projects, meaning that our young people will have more opportunities to inform and shape the places where they live."

Business Manager Culture, Arts & Heritage,
Wigan Council



"this place [of mine] feels very much like a project for our time. Working with multiple partners across Greater Manchester we feel that it is incredibly important to give a voice to young people, to have a creative, social, and political say on the future of their high street."

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Great Place GM

Great Place GM was a 3 year action research programme led by Greater Manchester Combined Authority and part of the national Great Place scheme funded by National Lottery Heritage Fund and Arts Council England.

Its aim was to demonstrate the powerful role of culture and its contribution to place-based issues. This was achieved through the development of imaginative partnerships and innovative ways of working across geographical and thematic boundaries including health and wellbeing, ageing well, place shaping and diversity and inclusion.

GM Culture: Bringing life to GM and GM to life

