Meet the first-time applicant using heritage to build

Exploring heritage has improved the organisation's resilience. Credit: Michael Sreenan.

Dance City shares how exploring dance heritage in the north east of England is driving organisational sustainability.

In 2024, we awarded arts charity Dance City £76,698 to bring heritage into the heart of what the organisation does.

Its project, Call and Response, investigated three regional and global dance traditions – breakdance, Northumbrian clog dance and Cecchetti ballet – and their shared characteristics, influences and histories.

Participants were also invited to document their own dance heritage in a digital archive mapping the movement of people and dance styles in and out of the north east.

We caught up with Dance Heritage Manager Laura Connolly and Senior Fundraising Manager Rachel Fenton to find out how the project has helped build resilience by bringing in new people, growing staff skills and shaping plans for the future.

What is organisational sustainability?

Organisational sustainability is one of our four investment principles. It's about strengthening heritage to be adaptive and financially sustainable, contributing to communities and economies.

Engaging wider audiences

Rachel says being adaptive and open to conversations is vital for organisational sustainability.

"Our immediate neighbourhood in the West End of Newcastle has a diverse, multicultural population. We want to be relevant to that community and build new, collaborative relationships with our audiences.

"So we moved away from being mainly about Western contemporary to having a varied programme of dance traditions from all over the world. That's when we started to see all this heritage that we hadn't yet explored.

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Dance City documented some sessions with live sketches rather than photographs to help remove barriers to participation. Credit: Rachel Faulkner.

Laura says the key to making it work was “having a co-led, co-operative mindset. We had to go in being open to the participants and their needs.

“We ended up creating a feeling of community and relaxation that really supported these open-ended conversations and we gained practical skills in being adaptive to different groups’ cultures or access needs.”

Building skills and partnerships

Developing these heritage and participatory working skills has helped Dance City create a more versatile and capable workforce.

Rachel says: “Widening the practice of dance educators in the region to include heritage skills was a really big part of making the organisation sustainable. We also worked with 80 students through career sessions and masterclasses, which broadened their notions of what you could do as a career in dance.

“The project's expanded our network and given us new skills in developing partnerships too. We worked with 11 partners – eight of whom were completely new to Dance City – and they’ve all expressed interest in continuing those relationships.”

Identifying gaps

Rachel thinks understanding and addressing the organisation’s limitations was essential: “We identified our strengths but we were also realistic about the gaps in our knowledge and found the right people to help us.

“None of us knew about archives so we worked with a specialist called Dr Dominic Smith who advised us on how to build one from scratch, how it needed to work and how to make sure it was sustainable in the long term after the funding had ended

“We also have an amazing volunteer who learned those archive skills from Dominic. The hope now is the archive can keep going with volunteer support.”

The project has helped capture the heritage of breakdancing in the region. Credit: Michael Sreenan.

Developing new strategies

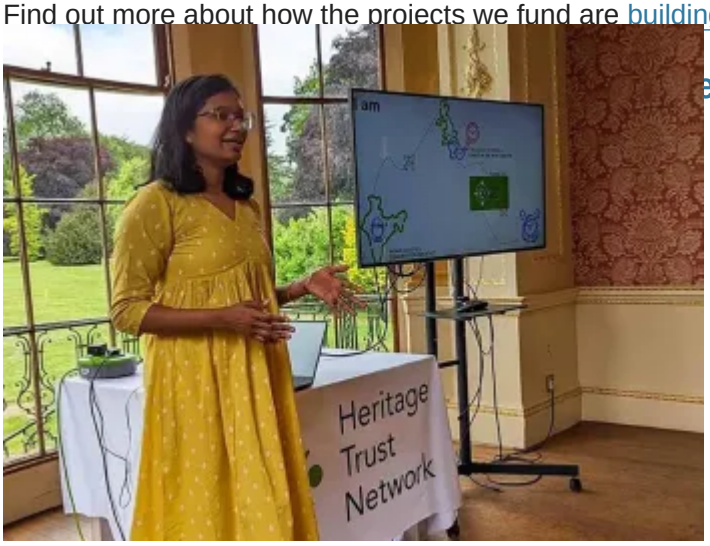
Now heritage work is laying the foundations for Dance City's long-term strategy.

"The project's shown there's an appetite for more heritage. The plan now is for the archive to be the backbone of our strategy going forward.

"In performing arts, people don't really have a reason to come through the door when there's not a performance on. So we're looking at how we use the archive, use heritage, to animate the whole building and make it more of an event to come here, whether that's for volunteering programmes, exhibitions or talks."

Need inspiration for your own project?

Find out more about how the projects we fund are building a more resilient heritage sector.



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Gopika Jayasree, who took part in Digital Heroes, talking at an event called Heritage Unleashed – Wider Engagement Through Digital.

r a more resilient heritage sector

The Mary Rose was built in 1510-11 at the start of Henry VIII's reign and was one of his favourite ships until it sank in 1545. Credit: Hufton and Crow.

Museum's resilience

Organisational sustainability and resilience good practice guidance