

Transforming Heritage Podcast Ep. 2 – Collective

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Hello, and welcome to the *Transforming Heritage* podcast. I'm Kelcey Wilson-Lee, Director of Programmes at the Architectural Heritage Fund.

Across the UK, the AHF is supporting many amazing heritage and community-led regeneration projects that are bringing new life to historic buildings in our towns, cities and villages.

In this short series, we'll be learning about five of these projects, giving you the chance to hear directly from the people involved in them.

Join us as we explore the history and significance of these historic sites, as we look back on the local communities' fond memories of them, and look ahead to their new futures as places that will be enjoyed by many more people for generations to come.

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Founded in 1984 as an artist-run initiative, Collective is a free-to-enter contemporary art gallery that now runs from its home at the restored City Observatory on top of Edinburgh's iconic Calton Hill.

Today, I am joined by Sarah Morton, Operations and Facilities Manager at Collective, to talk about this historic site and to learn how it has been made accessible as a space for the whole community to engage with art and observe the world around us.

We hope you enjoy the episode.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Sarah, one of the wonderful things I've always thought about the Collective gallery is how you've made accessible this important landmark on the Edinburgh skyline that is the observatory. And I wondered if you could tell us a little bit about the history of the observatory and particularly about the work that you have been engaged with at the Collective of bringing that history a little more into the public's knowledge and allowing the public to engage with that history.

Yeah, yeah, thanks for having me here.

The Observatory site dates back to the late 18th century. The oldest surviving part of our site, which is Observatory House, was built in the 1770s, and then the remaining historical buildings then were built in the 1820s, when the astronomical observatory was established as an active part of civic life in Edinburgh. And part of the driving force behind that was a real need for a timekeeping service, which was needed for the ships and sailors arriving in the Port of Leith, which we can see very clearly from our site looking north. So, it was providing a timekeeping service for them and also an opportunity to study the skies, and it has had a very close relationship with the university from its kind of early days.

So through the 19th century that was most of it. Its primary function was really that timekeeping and observational work. Then through the 20th century, as that service was kind of no longer needed in quite the same way, it was under the care of the Astronomical Society of Edinburgh, and it became a city observatory. Its core aim was really around entertainment and education of the people of Edinburgh.

So it's very much rooted in being part of civic life in the city and very much for the local community, as well as having this history as very much being part of the governmental and international kind of position of the United Kingdom.

And then in the early 2000s, it was then uninhabited for a number of years and in some disrepair. And then Collective became involved, moving up to the site here in 2013 from our previous home on Cockburn Street in Edinburgh, which was a small shopfront gallery. Collective was based up here from then, really taking time to understand the hill, the way that Calton Hill is used, the different groups of people and visitors that spend time up here and what that relationship is, and how that relates to the rest of the city.

And then over five years, the site was redeveloped to be kind of fully accessible. So the grounds around the number of buildings that we have have been landscaped to be accessible for wheelchairs and easy to walk around. And the buildings have been restored as close as possible to their original layouts. Then, also, two purpose-built spaces have been built.

So we have the Hillside Gallery, which is tucked underneath the main observatory building, which houses our shop and also the historic instruments. And then the Hillside is a kind of white cube gallery space, which is primarily for our Satellites programme, which is a development programme for early career artists in Scotland. And we have our Lookout Restaurant, which completes the four corners of our site.

So the site is made up- Is a walled kind of compound with the Playfair Observatory building in the centre, and then around the corners we have Observatory House, the original building; Playfair Monument, which is a monument to John Playfair, who was one of the founding members of the Astronomical Institute; the City Dome, which is a later addition in the late 19th century, which housed a larger telescope, but which is now one of our exhibition spaces; and then The Lookout Restaurant takes the final corner and is a contemporary building, but designed to complement the historic buildings. So the shapes, the form of it echo the kind of columns and symmetry of the historic neoclassical buildings.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Many of those listening might not be aware of the collective and what it is you do. If you could tell us a bit about your work and particularly as well, what drew the gallery to the utilisation of this particular space. And also, how you seek to kind of- You've talked about really sensitive adaptations and conservation of the buildings and the kind of the interplay between the buildings and the work that you're displaying.

SARAH MORTON

Yeah, so Collective has existed since the 1980s, and it started as an artist-run collective, literally, in a very small space in the old town. It has grown significantly since that time when it was based, as I said, in a gallery space on Cockburn Street for a number of years since the 90s, and now has a, has a staff team of about 20.

We're a contemporary art organisation and our mission is to bring people together around new art. So, we show primarily new commissions, which have not been seen anywhere else before, and are often very specific to our setting and our context, or work by an artist who has not previously had a major show in Scotland. So, it's really about bringing new art to new audiences.

The link to the to our site is really key. I would say most of our artists, we work with them in a very open ended way, but they often find connections to elements of the complex history of the City Observatory and how that connects to very many themes and important topics. So, for example, it's absolutely tied to the history of empire and transatlantic slave trade. And the way that the original site was funded is absolutely tied up in that and the service that it provided.

And we are a meridian line, which connects to meridian lines around the world, and different kind of ways of thinking about timekeeping, for example. So it's really a kind of jumping off point for inviting both artists and our visitors to think about different ideas through the lens of contemporary art.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

That's really interesting. You've kind of turned the City Observatory, built for observing stars, into an observatory where the community can come and engage with art and kind of observe things about, I suppose, about human history.

SARAH MORTON

Exactly, yeah. It was absolutely kind of conceived as- We often talk about it as being a new kind of city observatory. So it's still very, very much kind of true to its roots as being a city observatory, which is for the public, not for exclusive use of academics or professionals. But that is still really core. And it is about inviting people to just view the world through different lenses.

So, the way that our landscaping is designed, for example, really invites people to both sit together in groups and look kind of internally, but also really encourages people to look out. You know, we're on the top of a hill, which has really stunning views across Edinburgh, and you can see the shape of the city and the landscape, and it invites people to consider that and consider their relationship to it.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Can you, you know, share some of the reflections that members of the public have had in engaging with the gallery and in this space.

SARAH MORTON

We have a frequently shifting programme of exhibitions and events. And so, with every show comes a kind of new interaction.

Our current show in the Hillside, for example, is an exhibition by an artist called Rabindranath X Bhowse, who is part of our Satellites programme.

It's about bogs and the fact that they are very much tied up in spiritual associations in many, many cultures - both ancient and contemporary - around the world. And really thinking about that kind of nature of liminal space and being between states.

And that's been a really interesting exhibition to see visitors' response to it. There's been a lot of very personal responses, people spending a lot of time in that space and being really encouraged to think about their relationship with the land, I think.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

That's fascinating. Well, I have been to the collective several times. On every trip I've gone to Edinburgh, I've made my way up the hill, and I can highly recommend it to anyone who might be visiting.

There are some extraordinary views from the building, but also the work inside the building and the very sensitive restoration of the buildings themselves and indeed the interplay.

I wonder, Sarah, if you can kind of give us a sense of- Imagine ten years from now. So the Collective has been going at the site in Calton Hill now for five years. Imagine another ten years. Can you tell us kind of your vision for what the role of the gallery in that space will be for the community in Edinburgh?

SARAH MORTON

Yeah, so I think we are at a really pivotal point in that we are just coming up to our five year anniversary. Obviously globally it's been quite an eventful few years, but we really feel settled in our new home now, and it's a point for us to reflect on our learnings from the last few years and really understanding what the site is asking of us, what we are asking of it, or who our visitors are, who we're reaching.

And we have a really diverse- Yeah, really diverse visitors that include local people who regularly come up the hill, who live nearby, and families who participate in our play programme, as well as many, many tourists who maybe might not be expecting to come across a contemporary art gallery on the top of a hill. So, yes, we've really come to kind of understand who they are and their different ways of responding to what we offer.

And I think, yeah, now we're thinking about, now we have that knowledge, where we go next, how we use the space creatively, what our relationship with the historic buildings is, how we use them, how we make our mark on them, I suppose. We're a functioning site and we have to find ways to exist within buildings that were built for a different purpose. So, we're giving a lot of thought to how we, how we use our exhibition spaces and how we use all the buildings and where there's kind of fluidity between those as well and how buildings and outdoor space can be quite flexible in how we use it.

And yeah, we hope we'll continue to build really strong relationships, particularly with our immediate community and the postcodes immediately around us, and that we can be really a kind of resource for them that, that they use regularly - whether that's to use the outdoor space, to come to our events, to visit the different art that we present. All of those ways of being, I suppose.

KELCEY WILSON-LEE

Thanks for listening to this episode of the Architectural Heritage Fund's *Transforming Heritage Podcast*. Join us again next time as we hear more interesting stories about some of the historic buildings and sites that are being transformed by communities across the UK.