

**Hong Kong Arts Development Council
International Arts Leadership Roundtable 2017**

Plenary 1: Connecting the Arts with Audiences

Edinburgh's Festivals: A Collaborative Story

**Full transcript of speech by
Dr. Sorcha CAREY, Chair of Festivals Edinburgh [UK]**

Good afternoon and thank you, Ms. Tisa Ho (Executive Director of Hong Kong Arts Festival), for such a warm introduction and huge thanks to Dr. Wilfred Wong and the Hong Kong Arts Development Council for this wonderful invitation to come and speak today. It's amazing to have the chance to share Edinburgh's story and to hear from experts from all around the world talking about connecting arts and audiences.

Edinburgh is a small city, very small city compared to Hong Kong, of half a million people, but we're very lucky to be the historic capital of Scotland and to host the world-renowned Edinburgh's festivals, which each year attract four and a half million attendances, second only to the Olympic Games, and of course we happen every year, taking place against the beautiful backdrop of a UNESCO World Heritage site. Over the course of 70 years our festivals have been shaped by the landscape which contains them, and it's not too dramatic to say that the festivals also reflect and shape the identities of our citizens.

The city's own surveys show that every year nearly two-thirds of households take part and 80% of them agree that the festivals make the city a better place to live. We're very proud of our city and this high level support and engagement that we enjoy from citizens, but of course there are still too many people who think the festivals are not for them and the question of the relevance of the festivals to the more disadvantaged citizens and to artists who are based in our communities is of growing importance in our civic and national debates.

So today I want to share with you two recent examples of how Edinburgh's festivals have been working collaboratively to engage local, cultural communities and citizens, city officials and independent organisations in both designing and delivering new opportunities together.

Firstly, I want to give some brief context about the unique festival eco-system that has been developed in our city and I think which has given birth to a really fundamentally collaborative way of working across the city. Dr. Wong referenced the importance of collaboration and I think in Edinburgh, in a very face-to-face personal way, we have been really championing collaboration.

So, to represent the kind of more analogue historic approach, our festivals date back 70 years with the very first festival founded in 1947. You can see here a timeline of the

growth of festival culture in our city. The very first festival, the Edinburgh International Festival, was conceived in a quite revolutionary idea for the day as a response to the global conflict of World War II, seeing in art and culture the means to bring people and nations back together, in dialogue through showcasing world leading performing arts.

In the same year Edinburgh Festival Fringe was founded by a group of eight theatre companies that weren't invited to the official festival (the Edinburgh International Festival). It's now, and remains an uncurated open access festival, the largest performing arts festival in the world. The first Edinburgh International Film Festival also took place in 1947 and makes it now the longest continually running film festival in the world.

So as these three festivals grew and reinvented themselves over the decades to react and to influence changes in British society, a wide range of different creative communities across the city saw how they provided a space for focus, energy and experiment and also decided to adopt this festival approach, and you can see the range of those festivals there, culminating in the foundation, most recently in 2004, of the Edinburgh Art Festival, which is dedicated to presenting visual art in the month of August.

So there are now 11 major festivals and this slide shows what a diverse cluster we form both in terms of audience numbers, so you have a sort of a scale of numbers going up the side, but also in terms of the times of year in which they're held, and this extraordinary phenomenon in August where we have five festivals all happening in the city at the same time, and the population of the city literally doubling over the course of four weeks.

We think this unique range and diverse scale and specialism of our festivals is a really critical factor in our ability to connect local, national and international opportunities and to engage with local audiences, because by working together as a year-round cluster festivals with very different missions and specialisms, can support each other to develop and to reach new audiences in complimentary ways.

The importance of this collaborative cluster approach was formally recognised in 2006 with the creation of Festivals Edinburgh, the collective development body for Edinburgh's major festivals which I have the privilege to chair. And firstly, I must stress that Festivals Edinburgh is not an organisation that oversees the festivals. I think it would be hard to oversee 11 fiercely independent festival directors. Instead, each of the festivals, my own (Edinburgh Art Festival) included, is their own fully-independent organisation, raising their own funding, taking their own creative and business decisions.

Instead, Festivals Edinburgh is the umbrella body that the festivals themselves decided to create as a vehicle to foster collaboration in agreed areas of shared priority and to represent a collective voice for the festivals with city leaders and national government. One of the most successful outcomes of working in this way is how we've been able to bring together different city and national stake holders, so we've created a stakeholder board – you can see in our jigsaw – called the "Festivals Forum" which takes a strategic overview of the future success of the festival city. It involves the city and national

governments as well as our economic development and terrorism agencies, the arts council and business representatives.

So I think this slide (below) is sort of intended to give you a sense of some of the overlaps I guess in where we are working with these strategic stakeholders.

Strategic Collaboration



By joining forces, the impact that we can achieve as a collective makes us far more relevant to the different agendas of each of those main stakeholders and it allows us to engage in conversations that they wouldn't have had with us necessarily as individual organisations. Because we are working as a collective they're willing to strategically invest in our cluster as a key local and national asset. So in 2015, we asked the stakeholders to work with us to produce a new shared ten-year vision looking at the opportunities and threats up to 2025 and this slide summarises some of the key themes that came out of that strategy.

But today I really want to focus on the work that we've been doing in relation to the theme of deep and wide engagement. This was a key theme of the 2015 strategy, and highlighting how the festivals could support educational aims and greater social equity through participation and learning.

So the first of those projects was looking at how we could work with the creative community in our city. A key concern for many of Edinburgh's artists and creatives is whether the city as it becomes wealthier is becoming unbalanced as a place of more cultural consumption than production and it led to a city-wide ground grassroots initiative called "Desire Lines" to talk about how we can improve access to and roots through culture.

Festivals Edinburgh has been a key facilitator and leader in this debate and as part of that we have undertaken a mapping exercise. The Festivals Edinburgh are interjecting with the local infrastructure and eco-system and we found that in one year we engaged with more than 500 independent artists across the city, 100 local arts organisations, offering opportunities through networking, advice and mentoring, as well as directly profiling artists in our own programmes.

We've calculated that the value of this support was at least half a million pounds, which in a city of half a million people I think shows a strong evidence of the interdependencies in our systems. We've shown how a very vibrant local arts community is stronger thanks to at the international opportunities the festival can bring. My second example shows a more recent initiative from Festivals Edinburgh to connect diverse communities from across the city and I want to preface that by saying that each of our festivals have long traditions of working individually with our communities, our own festival – and I'm showing an example of a big public art project we did last year – we've also worked with individual, with community schools, intergenerational projects around this commission to reach communities in one of the more deprived areas of our city. But we realise that through working together as 11 festivals, we can significantly increase the impact across the city. And one of the ways in which we have piloted doing this is by working to build a citizen champion body. In the 70th anniversary we developed a new project that engages with new local community volunteers, in our peak festival season, and gives them the skills training to share their enthusiasm with visitors to the city.

We were originally inspired by the volunteering programme of the London Olympic Games in 2012. But we realised that we have an even better opportunity to build cumulative impact with these kinds of projects because we happen every year in our city.

So I'm going to finish there but look forward to discussing more in the discussion.

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