

Making things happen – here

A public experience of imagining, collaborating and making-possible



hmm
Creative Partnerships



This booklet documents a series of ambitious projects involving artists, North London Schools and its children.

Our story begins with children being inspired by *The Sultan's Elephant* in our first film – *Friday Morning 8am*. In May 2006 twenty-one Creative Partnerships London North schools met a Sultan, a very big little girl and a time travelling elephant.

What would it mean if children and young people imagined something extraordinary coming to their communities and, even more, welcomed, taught and played with their imagined creatures? This was the ambition and beginning of a collaborative project, culminating with everyone participating in their own visionary meeting in July 2007 and documented in our second film – *It Can Happen Here*. This publication documents the journey from *The Sultan's Elephant* through to *It Can Happen Here* involving North London primary schools, students, teachers, parents, artists and the London Borough of Haringey.

It Can Happen Here stopped the traffic for a morning in Wood Green. It risked working in a new and unusual way. It demanded a suspension of disbelief, with dialogue and trust at the core of a creative process. The aim was to support the idea that extraordinary things can happen when and where you might least expect them and that cultural events can help to build and shape our communities.

Jocelyn Cunningham
Creative Partnerships London North

It Can Happen Here... would offer an opportunity for all those involved to cross cultural boundaries, form new relationships, solve problems together – and experience how ‘ordinary’, urban communities can become extraordinary.

➡ ➡ ➡ Making things happen here

‘Some things that don’t seem true might be true. Things can happen.’

With these words, David, aged 8, unwittingly captured the entire spirit of *It Can Happen Here*.

On his return journey from experiencing *The Sultan’s Elephant* spectacle in May 2006, he planted a seed in the imagination, for himself and others. The films presented here reflect the trajectory from that first little seed of an idea, through to a vision lived for real on Wood Green High Street on 19th July 2007. On that day *It Can Happen Here* came to fruition, the traffic stopped, and something magical happened. Schools, children and artists had used their collective imagination and trust to create something unique, evolving over 18 months and becoming greater than the event itself.

It was an unlikely setting for magic. A part of North London better known for its problems than its potential, Wood Green is often associated with deprivation, youth violence and gang culture. ‘It’s a lost place, like nobody really wants to be there’ is how one observer described it.

Against this backdrop, the *It Can Happen Here* ‘spectacle’ would take its inspiration from *The Sultan’s Elephant* event in central London, but the impulse behind it would be fundamentally different. It would be an ongoing participatory learning process, designed to bring together



people from across the community to experience a way of collaborative working that could leave a positive legacy for the future. Achieving this learning would require all partners, including Creative Partnerships London North (CPLN), to be prepared to work with the unknown and the unexpected. The legacy would come from each partner in the journey needing to trust the next person in the chain and being willing to experience an interdependent way of working and relating.

The vision was to use *It Can Happen Here* as a lever for change, for young people and their wider community. It would offer an opportunity for all those involved to cross cultural boundaries, form new relationships, solve problems together – and experience how ‘ordinary’ urban communities can become extraordinary.

‘Some things that don’t seem true might be true. Things can happen.’

➡ ➡ ➡ Beginning with the imagination: ‘What if...?’

Change, transformation, renewal... these all begin in the realm of the mind and the imagination. The breathtaking spectacle of *The Sultan’s Elephant* was a wonderful example of an event so out-of-the-ordinary that it could quite literally ‘change people’s minds’ – about how our streets can be used and how people from many diverse backgrounds can relate to one another, and feel a sense of unity, regardless of difference.

All who witnessed that magical event will never forget the experience, and for some it was the beginning of imagining ‘what if...?’ Questions began to form...

- How would it be if we could stop the traffic in an ‘ordinary’ North London neighbourhood, and use the streets for something magical to happen there too?
- What if the vision for it came from the collective imaginations of children, their schools and artists working and learning together? What if all age groups could work collaboratively, with children at the forefront of the process?



- Would it have to be an event that people only witness? How about it being a creative experience that people could actively participate in together, realising a vision by trusting in one another’s contribution?
- What legacy could be created as the foundation for a positive future for the area?
- What would it take to make it possible for a local community to have such an enlivening opportunity?

As these questions developed, and the concept of *It Can Happen Here* began to take form, much was being learned about how people can bring about change for the collective good. This brief text seeks to draw out some of most important learning that has emerged. In particular it explores the theme of ‘personal engagement’, and how this vital ingredient in making change possible can be modelled in practice. It then considers some of the factors that need to be built in when setting out on a community endeavour of this kind, and the potential for change that can be created.

Realising the project: an overview

This ambitious project was achieved over many months, with the co-operation and involvement of many different individuals and organisations. This is a brief overview, showing the process involved in making it happen.

NANTES

Spring 2005 – LIFT and Artichoke invite London security services, London Transport, Westminster Council & CPLN to witness Royal de Luxe's *The Sultan's Elephant* in Nantes

CPLN take a teacher, a student and an artist to Nantes. They ask:

How would this work in London?

How would the school engage with an event like this?

'I approached the Council and asked them what were the chances of closing Wood Green High Street. They said about 0.5%! But we got permission... it's trust that powers the process.'

– *It Can Happen Here*, Project Manager

within Local Authorities or between neighbourhoods. Never was it more important to understand how engagement works in practical terms.

What does engagement look like?

An important feature of *It Can Happen Here* was that while CPLN kept a clear focus on the ultimate vision, no single individual or organisation was controlling all aspects of the process. This made it possible to achieve so much more than 'organising an event' would allow. In this approach, ideas that emerged in one part of the community would then be passed on and developed elsewhere. Each part of the process relied on another part for its input – in other words, people were working interdependently. In this model of working, the risks were greater, the path was not neatly laid out and thus more was demanded personally of individuals.

Much can be learned from the experience of those involved. The principle message from participants was that actively, and repeatedly, choosing to sustain their personal engagement was what kept the momentum going. Where engagement waned, working interdependently became more problematic. Where people were able and willing to keep their engagement high, the process could flow more easily.



The art of making possible

'I approached the Council and asked them what were the chances of closing Wood Green High Street. They said about 0.5%! But we got permission... it's trust that powers the process.'

– *It Can Happen Here*, Project Manager

People often talk of having a vision, but in practical terms it is so easy to lose momentum along the way as the process inevitably becomes more complex or sometimes problematic. So what is it that helps people move from an idea – a possibility – to a realised vision? Throughout this story, one common theme stands out clearly: personal engagement, and its capacity to make even the most unlikely things possible. Whether the vision is on the scale of the Olympic Games, or a local community endeavour, the way in which people engage with an idea, with themselves, and with one another is a powerful catalyst for overcoming obstacles and getting things done.

There is important learning here. Nationally there is growing concern about the social fragmentation that can undermine our communities. Government policy as reflected in the Every Child Matters arena – is focused on enabling diverse facets of the community to work together to combat this fragmentation, drawing our attention to its impact on children and young people. 'Working together' is easier said than done, be it at national policy level,

WHAT IF?

4 CPLN schools embarked on the 'what if' project – to create a film that looked at what would happen if something extraordinary happened in your school

CPLN schools invited to think about how they interpret intervention

Summer term 2005 – Four *what if* films made by students, staff and creative partners

Learn that *The Sultan's Elephant* date has been confirmed for May 2006

INVITATION

All CPLN schools invited to a 'secret' intervention in Central London; 'they don't know what it is!'

Participating schools asked to prepare to meet a foreign diplomat

Schools project to prepare their time capsule

21 schools send small groups of students, parents, Governors and teachers

Friday Morning 8am film commissioned by CPLN

THE SULTAN'S ELEPHANT

The Sultan's Elephant trip!

Students present their time capsules to the Sultan (who speaks an unknown tongue) and get sprayed by a gigantic elephant!

In summary, what participants revealed about engagement was that its hallmarks are:

- Willingness to stay committed to the process when the path ahead is not clear, and outcomes are not guaranteed
- Trust in oneself and others to find solutions
- Active openness – to try something unknown, to be touched by an experience – resisting the temptation to say 'no' just out of habit
- Ownership for what happens – taking personal responsibility positively affects everyone else
- Generosity to share ownership of ideas with others
- Regarding differences and problems as a natural and sometimes necessary part of the process, not an interruption to it
- Care, concern and goodwill – showing interest in the wellbeing of others by tending to things that matter to them, even when it is easier not to
- The ability to remind oneself of the longer-term purpose behind the endeavour when mundane tasks threaten to overwhelm – picturing the legacy of one's actions.

When the magic of the 'event' has died down, the extent to which these characteristics have been present will determine the legacy. At whatever scale you apply them, from grand Olympic vision to a collaborative project at local Borough level, they matter in a very grounded way and contribute to practically changing people's lives for the better.

This brings us to another, vital, dimension of engagement – political will. Individuals and entities with the authority to approve or veto decisions will always be in the difficult position of managing multiple strategic priorities. What has been affirmed through the *It Can Happen Here* experience is that when there is sufficient political will, expressed as personal engagement in an endeavour, progress can be made on these priorities in ways that have an even wider impact.

Within Haringey Borough Council, for example, the Assistant Chief Executive (Strategy) was clear that



this work could support their vision for regeneration of the area:

'We were interested in doing something exciting here that would help create a buzz to a place that is often perceived as just a dull outer suburb shopping centre. We were already consulting for the future and saw this as a great way to reach more young people, to hear about their vision for Wood Green.'

The active support of Haringey's Mayor was also key:

'We all know that children are our future – but to have a positive future, we have to create for them a positive present. That's why *It Can Happen Here* represents something extremely important: the opportunity for children to have an educational experience they will never forget, to enjoy the streets. This is vital for community cooperation and cohesion, helping children learn about participation, leading by example.'

SHARING

Reflection of visit to
The Sultan's Elephant
– artists in schools explore
with all witnesses to *The
Sultan's Elephant* how to
share this experience with
someone who wasn't there

July 2006 – Sharing day
of workshops with all
schools and teachers,
parents & Governors
culminates in decision
for something to happen
in the local area

CPLN begin process
of commissioning for
a project

Autumn 2006 – Emergency
Exit Arts and London
Bubble Theatre Company
confirmed as partners

Project open to all partner
schools for application.
8 schools selected for
the next stage

A mysterious crate arrives.
It looks like something has
recently escaped from it!

CRATE

January 2007 –
Steering group created of
adults and students from
the schools to help
manage the project
and communication and
make some decisions

Emergency Exit Arts
provide the first term of
intervention – building and
delivering a crate to each
school. A steering group
decides where it should
go and who should visit it

Empty crate is
accompanied by a
scientist, a vet and a
detective, all needing
ideas from the students
as to the needs of
the 'escapee'



ENQUIRY

What creature was in the crate? Where has it escaped to? What will it want to eat? Where will it sleep? How will we look after it if we find it? Is it scared?

Material, stories and possibilities from the students fed back to artist partners

London Bubble takes on next part of the story and team expands as making groups are confirmed (Emergency Exit Arts, Pif Paf & Thingumajig Theatre)

April 2007 – Bubble facilitate an 'enquiry' about what makes a healthy school through workshops with the students – these responses provide the brief for the makers

May 2007 – London Bubble liaise between makers and students to help realise the creatures identities; rumours abound!

Schools work with an artist to develop an offering to help the creature feel 'at home' in North London and safe

June 2007 – Reports of 'sightings' of the creatures start to come through to the school!

July 2007 – The creatures are reported as found in Waltham Cross! Footprints are discovered in a farmer's field



Making things happen – a model of engagement

If these are the hallmarks of engagement, what actually enables people to bring their personal engagement to bear? CPLN knew from the outset that if *It Can Happen Here* was to leave its intended legacy for Wood Green then it needed to demand something extraordinary from everyone concerned.

The core principles it was based on were:

- **Interruption** – for example, stopping the traffic, or intervening in the curriculum
- **Imagination** – having the 'theme' of the project unfold as a story or narrative which would build over time and be directly influenced by children, rather than being predetermined
- **Interdependence** – collaboration between schools, between artists and between the different 'care-takers' and influencers in the Borough – to create together what could never be achieved by one single grouping.

Throughout the experience of *It Can Happen Here*, consistently acting from these principles helped organisers, participants and collaborators to keep engaged with the process.

It is important to mention that to work effectively with these principles requires particular skill. The design and delivery had to satisfy fundamental criteria; to be of high artistic quality, whilst by their very nature demanding children's and adult's direct involvement and influence. Two key organisations chosen by CPLN were London Bubble Theatre Company and Emergency Exit Arts. Both have long standing practice with co-designing and co-creating with children and young people, developing strong models of participation. In this way, CPLN attempted to reconcile what can sometimes be perceived as mutually exclusive elements: high calibre artistic practice delivered in partnership with and influenced directly by children and schools, that actively invited participation rather than being a witnessed 'spectacle'.



As the Artistic Director of London Bubble observed:

'It Can Happen Here was conceived primarily to be a lived experience. It was based on relationships being made with children publicly, beyond the school railings, and children enjoying a different kind of relationship with Wood Green High Street, so that afterwards the place itself felt a little bit more theirs, a part of their personal history. And we wanted to offer an experience that could be replicated; something people could believe was achievable elsewhere, because they had lived it.'

We can now look at the model of engagement in more depth.

PARK

Park intervention planned. Creatures are observed by scientists and park keepers

Can the children help to find them and invite them to Wood Green for July 19th?

STREET

July 19th – Wood Green High Street! The street is closed. The creatures arrive surrounded by security

Students welcome the creatures with games, dance and the food they have grown and help them to feel safe and happy

The Creatures say goodbye, students return to school and the summer holiday begins!

MESSAGE FROM CREATURES

September 2007 – Students receive a telegram from the creatures. They are in a wood in the centre of England. They are running a small school where their friends learn how to play games, tell stories and use their imagination.

Looking at the model of engagement in more depth

Interruption

‘Why can’t we just have an event in a park?’

This is a pivotal question and one which troubled many people at first – ‘you don’t shut a main arterial road at the drop of a hat,’ as one councillor commented.

Stopping the traffic in Wood Green, as with any intervention intended to consciously put something in a place where it ‘shouldn’t be’, helps to momentarily suspend everyday thinking. It wakes us up, shakes us up, and makes an impact, in a way that an event within the safe boundaries of a park could never achieve.

‘I think these things are incredibly important for the life of a city especially in London, when even the youngest children are exposed to the harsher realities of life, like gun crime. Their life backdrop is edgy, so seeing them enjoying the fantasy, really being children and experiencing the street as something that’s fun and not threatening – that makes positive memories for them.’

– *Film maker*

Stopping the traffic is a very visible statement that boundaries may actually be in our beliefs and perceptions, and not ‘real’ at all. This understanding is vital if change is to be made possible. When we speak of ‘community cohesion’, just think how many boundaries this simple term actually requires us to cross. Interruption, then, makes us alert – a precondition for making something different actually happen.

‘Yes it caused us problems as does any road closure, but I would never object because it’s for the community. We stop the traffic for Spurs, so why not for this? It would be hypocritical to not support it, to do our bit.’

– *Senior manager, Transport for London*

Imagination

Possibility exists only because we first imagine it

A vital ingredient in the process was the use of a central ‘story’ for *It Can Happen Here*. This was created and directed by a theatre company and actors, just as in the narrative of a play, with park keepers, police and ‘mad scientists’ interacting with students along the way. The mysterious arrival of creatures to Wood Green, their escape, and their subsequent safe return thanks to the nurturing gifts of children and their schools – these formed a simple series of storytelling reference points.

Care was taken to deliberately leave parts of the story undetermined. This left the way clear for children and adults to create their own meaning and fantasy, and involve themselves directly in the unfolding fairytale. Drawing on their own imaginations helped to mobilise participants’ engagement in a way that purely witnessing an event never could.

For example, the fact that an empty crate should appear overnight gave rise to enthrallment and colourful questions and answers amongst the children, which translated into imaginative classroom activity.



For ‘things to happen here’... imagine that change is possible, by breaking habitual ways of defining what is ‘true’.

‘It was amazing to see the kids’ reaction after the crate arrived, they couldn’t wait to do work, even the ones who aren’t normally bothered.’

– *Teaching Assistant*

‘We had to imagine what had been in the crate, and what the creature would like about our school. We did lots of writing about happiness and friendship because that’s what helps us play nicely.’

– *Child, Year 6*

The fact that artists then worked from a lack of a detailed brief, guided principally by the children’s imaginations, gave rise to new ways of working for them. This absence of a directive force is what called people together to share their resources to address what was needed along the way.

For ‘things to happen here’ one first has to be able to imagine that change is possible, by breaking habitual ways of defining what is ‘true’. As the Artistic Director of London Bubble expressed it:

‘The whole process required a suspension of disbelief, buying into a central story. Imagination seems like such a big abstract word – but it is essential in creating even the most concrete thing. Once you can visualise something, and you get emotionally invested in it, then you commit your energy and resources to making it real... we should all [schools, town planners] be charged with imagination.’

‘This is a very abstract sense of ownership, it’s very demanding because there are layers of removal, and lots of voices to accommodate. We don’t have a full grasp of the parameters, normally we would be shaping the overall project... but following the narrative has given us something to keep coming back to.’

– *Artist/creature maker*

Interdependence – Being in it together

One of the common challenges of a sustained community endeavour is that if we cannot visualise how our individual contribution could possibly make a difference, or we believe we have no influence overall, it can be hard to see what ‘all this’ has got to do with us. When interviewing participants, it became clear that each person felt they were ‘in it’ without the security of control over it and without knowing for sure how their contribution would be seen or valued. Regardless of role, ‘status’, or level of perceived authority, many believed that the true power lay with someone else and not with them.

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– *Artist/creature maker*

Participating in *It Can Happen Here* was a tough call for everybody concerned, because working interdependently asks of everybody that they dig deeper with their time and talents, perhaps relinquishing a cherished piece of control or handing over an idea to others, to then see it being re-interpreted elsewhere.

By its very nature, this endeavour had to negotiate its way through the many forces at play in any city or Borough – cultural differences, politics, legal and health and safety considerations, financial restrictions, permissions and protocols, environmental health, building control, public licensing, statutory and emergency services requirements, transport, parking, rubbish collection, sanitation...

Some had a more obvious role in working with these forces, yet visible contributions were only one part of the story. In schools, Council offices and artists' workshops, there were countless everyday conversations and tiny interventions that could make a difference to something working well or not. When we think about 'making something happen' from an interdependent point of view, each small contribution – even if unseen – influences the overall outcome. Hence choosing to stay engaged even when only holding a fragment of the story is so important.

'The week up to the crate arriving was stressful for me as I was really busy with other things and I was one of only four people who were in on it. Even then, I wasn't entirely clear, it was difficult for me to see where it was all going. But looking back it wasn't a complicated pipe dream at all, it was a simple idea and we pulled it off.'

– *Parent Governor*

'It was clear that thinking on our feet and flexibility were two features of this project, and I personally thrive in this environment, with active problem solving and an element of surprise. I think this way of working is very bonding for participants.'

– *Artist/creature maker*

Experiences such as *It Can Happen Here* create the conditions in which children can be centre-stage, as part of a strategy which offers people the opportunity to join together in ways that impact on deeply-ingrained problems in our communities.

Legacy

The *It Can Happen Here* experience illustrated that when habitual thinking is interrupted and people have the chance to work together in a very different context, they can create the conditions in which positive change is possible. In an unlikely location, with a complex series of new challenges to negotiate, people were willing enough to imagine that, yes, this could happen in Wood Green – a belief, a legacy, with the potential to transform people, relationships and places.

Looking more broadly, a recent DEMOS publication, *The Biggest Learning Opportunity on Earth* (2007) urges people to recognise the need for imaginative approaches to achieving sustainable benefits – for young people in particular – from the 2012 Olympic Games.

'The value in the Olympics will not be in celebrating the magic of the Games, but in using this magic as a catalyst for new kinds of work that connects with new audiences... new types of creative practitioners, and new forms of learning.'

'All the indications point to a world in the future where personal creative expression will become more important for finding a sense of place in this world and more important for finding jobs and starting new businesses, enterprises and communities.'

So we return to 8 year-old David's observation, that extraordinary things can come true. Although speaking from two very different vantage points, the national

think-tank and the little boy are touching on the same issue – that using one’s imagination to believe something different might be possible is the first step in making it so.

All communities and local governments have tough targets to meet on areas as complex as widening participation, youth disenfranchisement, social breakdown and teenage violence. Experiences such as *It Can Happen Here* create the conditions in which children can be centre-stage, as part of a strategy which offers people the opportunity to join together in ways that impact on deeply-ingrained problems in our communities. *It Can Happen Here* was, therefore, an exercise in developing collective engagement; a concept which is more important than ever, because it delivers real results on issues that are notoriously difficult to address.

Artistic practice alone cannot directly resolve issues of social fragmentation and regeneration, just as the celebration of the forthcoming Olympic Games cannot magically transform the harder realities of everyday life in our capital city. What does make a difference in the pursuit of a vision for change is the cumulative effect of enough people, enough of the time, sustaining their engagement – with one another and with the belief that, yes, it can happen here.

Amanda Dale February 2008

It Can Happen Here Credits

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Pif-Paf
Thingumajig Theatre

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Rachel Singer
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Police Constable Paul Coppin and Sergeant Willmott

Carole Kennedy Wood Green Town Centre Manager
Len Ray Area Manager (East) London Buses
Network Operations

And all the passers-by who were there on July 19th.

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