



SpinDrift Dance Collective, ClayWalks. Photo: Suzie West.

From a project to a platform

The power of dancing in museums and heritage sites

Photo: Courtesy of artist



Katie Green is a choreographer, educator and Artistic Director, with a passion for the past. Here, she shares the short history – and hopefully long future – of The Imagination Museum, a creative exploration which became a national network for dance and heritage sector professionals interested in collaboration.



Top right: Nandita Shankardass, *Roots To Rise*, performers Anjana Bala, Tulani Kayani-Skeef, Vidya Patel. Photo: Pranita Choudhury.
Bottom right: Made By Katie Green, *A Gathering Place*, performers Amarnah Ufuoma, Cleopatra and Chloe Mead. Photo: DanMartin.

The seed of an idea

In 2013, I was working with a group of second year Dance in the Community students from University Campus Suffolk at Ipswich Museum, delivering a module exploring site-responsive practice. I could see that there was so much potential for choreographic work in this context, so many ways to take inspiration from the collection and the historic building itself. I decided to contact the team at Ipswich and a handful of other museums to see if they would support me to test a new 'dancing tour guide' promenade piece that could engage children, young people and families differently with the world of the museum.

That first piece I created was called *The Imagination Museum* – a danced museum tour led by three eccentric tour guides that we adapted specifically to each new site, uncovering new artefacts and stories in each place and bringing hidden histories to life through dance, story-telling and music.

Little did I know how deeply that seed of an idea would take root and how far those roots would spread! We have since toured that first work to more than 80 museums around the UK, and it inspired (and continues to inspire) many offshoot projects, including a promenade for caves and underground

spaces, bespoke works responding to the collections of the British Museum, BASTIAN Gallery and Dulwich Picture Gallery to name only a few, and my most recent *Gathering Place* project, which explores archaeological sites choreographically, including through VR360 technology.

In the early days, I was often invited to attend conferences about creative practice in museums, and it didn't take me long to realise I was one person in a growing community choosing to respond to history and heritage sites through dance. I was very interested in being part of a movement towards sharing great practice and perhaps making it easier for dance artists and organisations to take their first steps in this way of working. Through Strategic Touring funding that my company, Made By Katie Green, received in 2018, I had the opportunity to pilot a professional dance/heritage network that could provide opportunities for that community to come together, share practice, and grow further – a network which took the name of that first piece I made, and became *The Imagination Museum*.

What is The Imagination Museum?

The Imagination Museum (TIM) is now a national network for all dance and heritage sector professionals >>



Top: Corali, Dancing To Art, Paul Davidson, Sherifat King, Bethan Kendrick and Housni Hassan (DJ) and NadiraAmrani. Right: About Time Dance Company, Cotton, performers Lucy Starkey, Ellen Turner, Aimee Williamson. Photo: Andy Ford.

interested in collaboration. The network is managed by Made By Katie Green and a core team of consultants, with all activities overseen by an experienced Executive Committee from across dance, heritage and community contexts and supported by a growing cohort of advisory organisations.

With support from the National Lottery through Arts Council England last year, we were able to redevelop our website compiling case studies and helpful resources linked to dance/heritage practice. Through this online resource and our linked socials, online and in-person events, we aim to share knowledge and experiences, to inspire people and to make the case for the benefits of dancing in museums and heritage sites.

The power of dancing in museums

So, what are some of these benefits? Why should you think about working with dance and movement in museums?

You might find answers among the extensive Case Studies compiled on The Imagination Museum website. From a Curious Tea Party at The Horniman Museum and Gardens, to a dance under the hull of the Cutty Sark; from a promenade for a china clay works in Cornwall to an immersive performance for the coastline of Morecambe Bay at sunset; from a dance in a cave in Torquay to a silent disco bringing the rebellion of Owain Glyndwr, the legendary rebel Prince of Wales, to castles, fields and the steps of urban buildings. All demonstrate the range of ways dance can be used in

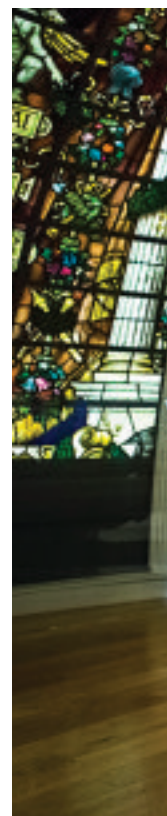
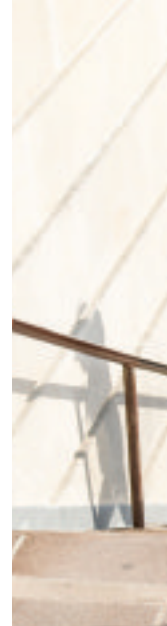


response to museums and heritage sites.

Each dance/heritage collaboration can look very different from another, and can result in a huge range of outcomes, using many different styles of dance – promenade performance, films, workshops, digital trails through a landscape, virtual and augmented reality experiences, dancing archives, folk dance, historical dance, silent discos, from mass community performances to intimate installations.

They evidence a great variety of opportunities for dance and heritage organisations and practitioners to think differently about how people can experience culture and heritage right on their doorstep; engaging under-served populations and fostering more equitable ways of providing access to collections, sites and stories.

“There are local stories, stories within the museum, stories that people hold within the community that haven’t been explored and to have the opportunity to do that through dance is incredibly exciting.” – TIM partner.





Left top: Owain Glyndwr, Silent Disco, Light Ladd & Emberton. Left middle: Bethan Peters, We may be some time, Alicia Clarke. Bottom left: Made By KatieGreen, The Imagination Museum Mayflower. Photo: Roswitha Chesher.

Bringing dance into museums and heritage sites can:

1. Tell stories in dynamic ways to help people re-consider their history and heritage, often on a more personal level. It can help uncover stories that might not yet have been brought to life and to respond imaginatively to gaps left in written history.
2. Bring joy, fun and playfulness, challenging the more traditional ways things have been done in the past
3. Enable visitors, audiences, participants and makers to engage with museums and heritage sites in a tactile, experiential, multisensory way. Dance can respond to collections, sites and stories in a way that moves beyond spoken language; a more inclusive offer that can make everyone feel more welcome.
4. Engage new audiences (as well as appealing to existing audiences) with opportunities to involve them in co-creation processes:
"It was great to have something fresh for existing visitors, while attracting and making the museum accessible to a new audience." – TIM museum partner.
5. Support trust-building with local communities and partners that can lead to people developing a more long-standing relationship with their local heritage, a sense of custodianship of the local environment, and being more likely to attend again.
6. Challenge people to reconsider their assumptions of what dance can be and why it matters to them.
7. Open up heritage spaces, breaking down notions of who gets to access these spaces, who they're for, and their perceived boundaries by intervening in vibrant ways that can bring a fresh perspective. Dance can, therefore, contribute to the creation of safe spaces, where people feel welcome and heard:
"You were prepared to listen to me. Bless you for letting me have that opportunity, I sorely needed it!" – TIM project participant.
8. Add to a more equitable offer for audiences and participants, creating access to collections, sites, artefacts and stories from which people have previously felt excluded:
"I always found history a topic that was inaccessible. This project breaks that down, takes down the barriers and makes it accessible." – TIM project participant.
9. Strengthen existing and develop new collaborative relationships between different kinds of organisations, with dance, heritage and community expertise equally valued and celebrated as part of the process. This can lead to innovation of practice, exciting forms of co-creation and more sustainable, productive local partnerships.
10. Transform ways of working within organisations, building confidence in collaborative practice within

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New Adventures, Cinderella Museum Adventure. Photo: Alicia Clarke.

teams by bringing in new perspectives and approaches to interpretation.

"I think internally the beauty of this project is that it has spanned both our teams (engagement and contemporary art). It's been a collective ownership of the project at delivery level which has been invaluable"
– TIM museum partner.

Hopes for the future of the network

We know from existing members of our network that our core resource and guidance offer, as well as the opportunities we curate for people to come together online and in person have been highly valued and want to sustain these alongside plans for new projects and collaborations. These, we hope, will include exploring potential for The Imagination Museum to become a co-commissioner of new dance/heritage work in the future. We want to find out more about what the value of the network can be in initiating these collaborative projects, bringing in the additional capacity, expertise and the external momentum that might be needed to move them forward.

It is proving challenging to find the sustained support needed to take this step towards co-commissioning, but as we continue forwards with this, there are many ways that you can engage with our existing offer:

Be part of the imagination museum

The idea of using dance with communities to respond to local museums, heritage sites and stories may be something you've tried before, or completely new to you. Wherever you are coming from, we encourage you to:

- Explore our growing bank of Case Studies and other resources available online – you also might have your own that you would like to send over to us to publish on the website
- Check out our free download Essential Read: First steps for working with dance in museums and heritage sites

- Join our mailing list or follow us on social media which are the main channels we use to share opportunities
- Consult us! – In response to the volume of enquiries we receive asking for bespoke support, such as talking through ideas for a new project, advice on who to contact or reading through applications, we have decided to formalise the consultation offer we are able to provide, beginning with short 'chemistry chats' for freelance artists at the start of a new dance/heritage idea.

For many years, it has been my great pleasure to see at first hand the ways in which people can be moved by a sudden or slow-dawning sense of connection with their past and new understanding of how this impacts on their experience today. It feels more important than ever to be taking dance into new places and spaces; beginning new conversations and trying out different ideas with people of all ages and lived experiences, making connections, surprising participants and audiences, encouraging them to be curious, and maybe to see the world from a different perspective.

I look forward to hearing from you about your own work with dance and heritage and welcome your thoughts and questions.

Info

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www.imaginationmuseum.co.uk

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Film of original work - <https://madebykatiegreen.co.uk/performances/imagination-museum>

Free downloadable resource -

<https://imaginationmuseum.co.uk/resource/first-steps-for-working-with-dance-in-museums-and-heritage-sites/>

Instagram - @madebykg

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