

Opening up the Secret Garden



A story of Asset Based Community Development, Co-opportunity and Covid casualty.

2018 →



In late 2018 the Emmaus Brighton & Hove launched Direction 2020, setting out the long term strategic ambition for the Community into the next decade and strategic projects needed to deliver on its vision.

A key part of this vision was developing the Emmaus site as a Hub – a place within the local Community that welcomes all and shares a broad integrated offer with local residents, schools, businesses, charities and volunteers. A place to bring the local community together to help people help themselves, learn something new or simply find a sense of belonging.

The unused gem of a 1.4 acre wooded 'secret' garden (accessible from the main site by a tunnel under the road) was the obvious space to explore such possibilities, away from the day to day business activities and mindful of the fact Emmaus is home to 50+ Companions at any given time.

This is the story of how the Secret Garden project grew and attracted new friends, skills and ideas to explore exciting activities in the valuable asset of uniquely tranquil urban green space.



A clear strategic vision

Direction 2020 Community dynamic

Our strategic vision
A Community that is a Hub.

Bringing the local community together.

Sharing a broad integrated offer with local residents, schools, businesses, charities and volunteers.

Connect. Diversity. Together.

A big idea

Our big idea was to curate a calendar of events and activities from forest schools to community gardening, pop ups, guest experts, performances and gatherings, workshops and projects, campaigns and more... all focused on reducing waste, recycling, upcycling and sharing... all in a special little green space at Emmaus.

Partnership building it's always better together

In the spirit of collaboration, we set about inviting new relationships to open up the project.

Culture Shift and Community 21 embraced the project in different ways, helping us start to build a community of interest and focus on a theme.

With Emmaus having such a strong ethos and heritage around re-use, repurposing and minimising waste, the theme of 'Waste Not' was chosen. University students began design projects around Emmaus waste streams and the search began to bring together other local movers, shakers and makers working in waste reduction, repurposing, upcycling and secondhand.



Open Space events: asset, theme, discuss...



Co-opportunity

Open Space is a process to support the development of participant-driven activity. Participants create and manage the agenda in parallel sessions around a theme and you watch the ideas and opportunities flow!

We also listened hard to their feelings of experiencing the Secret Garden.

We invited specialists with perspectives as varied as design, community engagement, green space, campaigning, arts, business, culture and education to Open Space events to respond to our original concept ideas.

What were the co-opportunities?

What might we think of doing together in the Secret Garden and how?

Test and learn: try things out and see what works

We took a 'test and learn' approach for 2020, to ensure we were developing ideas that might have long term appeal.

The decision was taken to curate a one day 'Festival of Waste Not' to trial activity ideas, gauge interest and monitor outcomes.

The festival would also include an 'Exhibition of Possibility' – an engaging public consultation piece about future use of the Secret Garden, designed to gather indicative evidence from regulars and locals.

Having secured seed funding to cover costs for the set up and delivery of the festival, we then asked our Open Space participants to submit proposals for festival activities. We were overwhelmed by the response and had the tough task of shortlisting to 11.

Everything was ready to go...

A one day festival: curated pilot event

The line up included:

- making bird boxes from reclaimed wood
- toy hacking from disfigured toys
- drawing machines made from old bike parts
- mirror walks through the trees
- wildlife drawing competition
- forest school craft and play
- recycled art sculpture trail
- planting installation in waste furniture
- school recycled art project and exhibition
- food waste talks and demonstrations
- bug hotels and nature exploration

...And then COVID-19 hit.

We had to cancel our plans for gathering, of course.

But the good news is that all the creative folk who contributed ideas are all still on board, as soon as it is safe to gather again.



**STAY AT HOME
DON'T HOLD
A FESTIVAL
SAVE LIVES**

|| June 2020

→ January 2019

→ May 2019

→ Early 2020

→ March 2020

The assets:

1. Magical green space

The Secret Garden is 1.4 acres of wall wooded garden with mature trees and a haven for wildlife. It has a very special, calming atmosphere.



2. An established community

The ex-convent and manor house provides accommodation for all 50+ Companions and attracts visitors who love spending time browsing in the 5 retail spaces, eating in the café and enjoying the grounds.



Starter concepts

To get the ball rolling, we put together some concept slides around the long term possibilities – but we labelled this as a 'space for ideas', to allow scope for what other people might bring to the space.



Agreed principles

After their first tour, our participants described the garden space as quite spiritual... an escape to a green oasis in the city... a secure, sensory and welcoming space with natural wildlife, history, stories and a sense of wildness.

Initial conversations also identified some key early indicators: Don't rush. Don't spoil. Build on the magic of the space.



Student engagement

3D, Graphic and Product Design students from University of Brighton toured the site in preparation for a 'live' design project around Emmaus waste streams.

It was a joy to see them getting excited rummaging through the bizarre array of waste objects that don't make it into Emmaus stores for one reason or another.

Their brief to devise products and proposals utilising waste continues despite the pandemic.

Student Hannah Peers was inspired by the garden area at Emmaus. She reconstituted plastic toys and old storage boxes & moulded them in an old bean can to create the body of this watering can. The spout and rose are also made from old extruded plastic.



Why we took part...

Nick Sayers Science-inspired artist and maker

From the flint-walled tunnel entrance, via the nuns' cemetery to the glade clearing, the magical Secret Garden at Emmaus feels full of natural potential and fascinating history. I was hoping to bring my drawing machines, made from recycled bicycles, to the Waste Not festival, to add to the country fête feeling of the event.

I hope we can reconvene in the future. The pandemic is part of the bigger global climate crisis, so building community, sustainability and environmental awareness are more important now than ever.

Nick Gant Principal Lecturer/Founder Community21 University of Brighton

At The University of Brighton we have been at the forefront of exploring the values of reuse and recycling what would otherwise be waste. For design students the power and value in working alongside and within Emmaus as a context is that the organisation really confronts both social and material issues and turns them into positive opportunities. By working together we can see the clear link between better use and management of finite resources in our community and the benefits that come as a result to both people and planet. We have greatly enjoyed sharing in the vision that the team have developed and looking at how the use of 'waste' materials can benefit the community and the students development in a creative mutual.

Caroline Fleming Schools Without Walls

We were very much looking forward to working with pupils from Peter Gladwin school on the Waste Not project, using nature as an inspiration to create art installations from junk that would have formed an interactive art trail around the Un-Secret Garden.

This exciting opportunity would have offered pupils a chance to work with artists whilst discovering and exploring their local wild places and engaging with nature.

Hopefully we can support Emmaus in future projects.

Helen Starr-Keddie Development Officer, Brighton & Hove Food Partnership

We loved the idea of having a 'Waste Not' festival together with partners at the (Un)secret garden at Emmaus. We have been working on 'food use' not food waste for years with the Surplus Food Network – a partnership of organisations helping to redistribute surplus food in the city.

We were and still are, particularly keen to see the garden used for food growing to supply locally grown vegetables and the installation of a community composting scheme.

Bee In The Woods Forest School

At Bee in the Woods Forest School & Kindergarten we are passionate about connecting families with local nature and teaching children about the environment and our relationship with it. We were excited about becoming a part of this project and bringing our playful approach to a project so close to our hearts. This event inspired many important connections - connection with local artists, charities and groups; connections with local community and connection to nature - we hope these connections can be re-kindled again in the not-so-distant future.

Martin Lundgren Lundgren Outdoor Design

The proposed festival was a great opportunity to bring together creative talents and bring home the overwhelming need to engage with our natural environment and protect our native resources. I was excited to explore issues of human intervention with landscape, as well as hoping to create installations and frames that would allow the public to watch plant growth unfold with or without any human 'footprint'.

I sincerely hope the valuable outdoor space of the 'Unsecret Garden' will one day provide a refuge in Nature, now more than ever.

Charis Williams Salvage Sister- Artist, Designer Fabricator specialising in the reuse of salvaged materials.

I am so excited to work with Emmaus on the Secret Garden Project. I look forward to this little forgotten patch of land being used by community, bringing local people together to learn, socialise and be creative in a variety of ways. Emmaus will make sure it is done in a sustainable way that encourages wildlife and doesn't have a negative impact.

I can't wait to create the Secret Garden's first metal sculpture from scrap metal parts, to start its very own sculpture trail with a difference.

David Allistone Exploring Senses

The Waste Not project is a wonderful idea. The Exploring Senses crew were really excited about the prospect of providing Toy Hacking activities during the festival. We love encouraging people to learn how to reuse materials such as old toys destined for landfill to make new hybrid creations in our cut, stick and sew workshop.

We look forward to the future and hope there will be an opportunity to participate in a Waste Not festival at Emmaus post pandemic.

Helen Dewhurst Artist

This was a wonderful opportunity to reflect collectively and creatively on what was truly valuable about this unspoilt natural resource. In considering the natural inhabitants - both the trees and also the Emmaus residents - my focus was to build relationships between the visiting local community and the existing trees of the site, through a series of 'mirror walks', introducing a process of 'looking upwards'.

In the longer term, I hope we can work with the space to enable visitors to reflect on the idea of 'longevity', how their lifespans and trees relate, via a site-specific sound composition.

Phil Allen & Jude Martin Landscape Architect & Organic Gardener

The site is a peaceful and quiet place - a rare thing to find given its' urban context. What excited me about it is the sense of discovery and intimacy it offers, and this led to the idea of creating a garden that would engage the local community and visitors in a journey of imagination and discovery.

Working to enhance the character of the site rather than detract from it, we loved the idea of creating a garden that was planted by the community, specifically tailored to wildlife and using native and ornamental plant species.

Holding the space were...

Christine Squire Project host Chief Executive, Emmaus Brighton & Hove

I'm very grateful for having the opportunity to work in collaboration with 7 Creative and Culture Shift to explore and shape a vision of how our secret garden might engage new audiences and partnerships. They helped bring together some amazingly talented organisations and individuals from across the city and facilitated uplifting and inspiring workshops to connect participants around identifying and scoping opportunities that could benefit everyone.

Being able to share the buzz of ideas and to witness such commitment from creative minds was extremely exciting, enabling Emmaus to conceive and (almost!) deliver an event we couldn't have done on our own. It is sad that we had to hit pause but, when people can gather again, the ideas are all ready to go...

Simon Bottrell Project facilitator Creative Director, 7creative Strategic Project Development, Emmaus Brighton & Hove

I have always loved the Secret Garden, often taking a solitary stroll around after meetings as a treat to myself. This project was a joy on so many levels, but my favourite moment was taking the Open Space participants through the tunnel for the first time. We asked them to enter the space in silence, to make the most of the experience. Oh the looks of amazement and bliss on the faces! And the feeling of reverence for nature.

That kickstarted a process that wasn't just about 'waste not', it was about people's relationship with the space, the trees, the wildlife. All of which we value even more in a Covid 2020.

It changed the whole group dynamic and how they imagined others entering via the tunnel and enjoying whatever they found there. That magic won't go away. We'll be back.

Julia Roberts Project facilitator Co-Director, Culture Shift

Culture Shift was delighted to become a key partner and 'critical friend' of Emmaus in this project, brokering relationships with University of Brighton and other community partners and supporting a structured and creative process of community engagement and co-design. We were also successful in achieving funding from the National Lottery to support the initial planning of the event.

The opportunities and ambitions of this project may have been thwarted by the COVID pandemic but we are confident that the Community of Interest that was built around it will re-group when circumstances allow.

Conditions for success

The Approach - ABCD

This project was built on a foundation of Asset-Based Community Development, whereby a diverse cross-section of community organisations and individuals with a known interest in art and nature, environmental issues and waste management were invited to come together, share ideas and participate in making something happen.

This was pro-active, authentic community engagement. The basic principle was to complement and develop activity that was already existing in the local community.

The Balancing Act

By targeting liked-minded organisations and individuals, many shared values quickly emerged- environment, art and design, learning, community, for example.

The challenge was to accommodate differing agendas and priorities whilst creating a clear project plan.

Gradually, the idea of an event emerged which celebrated sustainability and creativity in balance; A Festival of Waste Not.

The Art Of Letting Go

Building a Community of Interest takes time and care and compromise. Elements of the initial Emmaus vision for the Secret Garden needed to be 'let go' along the way in order for a stronger, clearer sense of purpose and vision to form.

It should be acknowledged that this is not always easy, but in the long run a sense of collective ownership and authentic co-production is the result.

Report compiled and written by
Julia Roberts and Simon Bottrell
Design: 7creative

Project funded by



The Active Ingredients

space

... was first and foremost – this project benefited from the asset of an inspiring outdoor space and the starting point was for all partners to experience the garden for themselves. This project was fuelled by 'thinking space', by creating opportunities for thinking and conversations which led to new ideas, collaborations and happy coincidences.

communication

... was a key factor in the success of this project. Meetings and other communication with project partners were short and purposeful, always mindful of the demands on and limitations of capacity within the community sector.

engagement

... within the community of Emmaus itself was essential. It was not feasible for this project to develop without active input from the people who live, work and volunteer within the community and this was embedded throughout.

purpose

... is not always obvious. This project explored the simple invitation to open up a garden space to the community and discovered a sense of underlying purpose. The theme of sustainability and waste reduction gave this project a focus and brought a Community of Interest together around what otherwise might have been a one-off, one day event.



Strong ideas survive beyond a pandemic

2020 did not go to plan and the groundwork that was laid for an event in the Secret Garden of Emmaus did not come to fruition.

The garden remains a secret from much of the wider community. But the seeds of an idea have been planted. The garden waits for a time when community partners can re-group and re-schedule and the ideas can at last be realised and shared.

Watch this space.

www.emmausbrighton.co.uk

Emmaus Brighton & Hove would like to thank everyone who took part in this project and hope we can meet together in the Secret Garden before too soon.

