MarketPlace case study: Brandon Gallery Hub

What is the MarketPlace offer?

MarketPlace is about culture, community and creative conversation in Fenland and the Forest Heath area of West Suffolk. MarketPlace operates within and around the seven market towns of Wisbech, March, Mildenhall, Newmarket, Brandon, Whittlesey and Chatteris. MarketPlace utilises a delivery model of on the ground Creative Agents to provide in-person support and visibility. Through this, it connects and nurtures:

- partnership development,
- community advocates and leaders,
- project delivery,
- community research,
- new creative and artistic experiences,
- artists' ability to meet the needs of local audiences.

MarketPlace has always worked closely with groups in Brandon thanks to the founding of the Brandon Creative Forum; who are a group of local volunteers and community members that organise cultural events and creative happenings in and around Brandon. The Brandon Arts Society are a local arts and craft group that have previously exhibited at jointly programmed MarketPlace and Brandon Creative Forum Events.
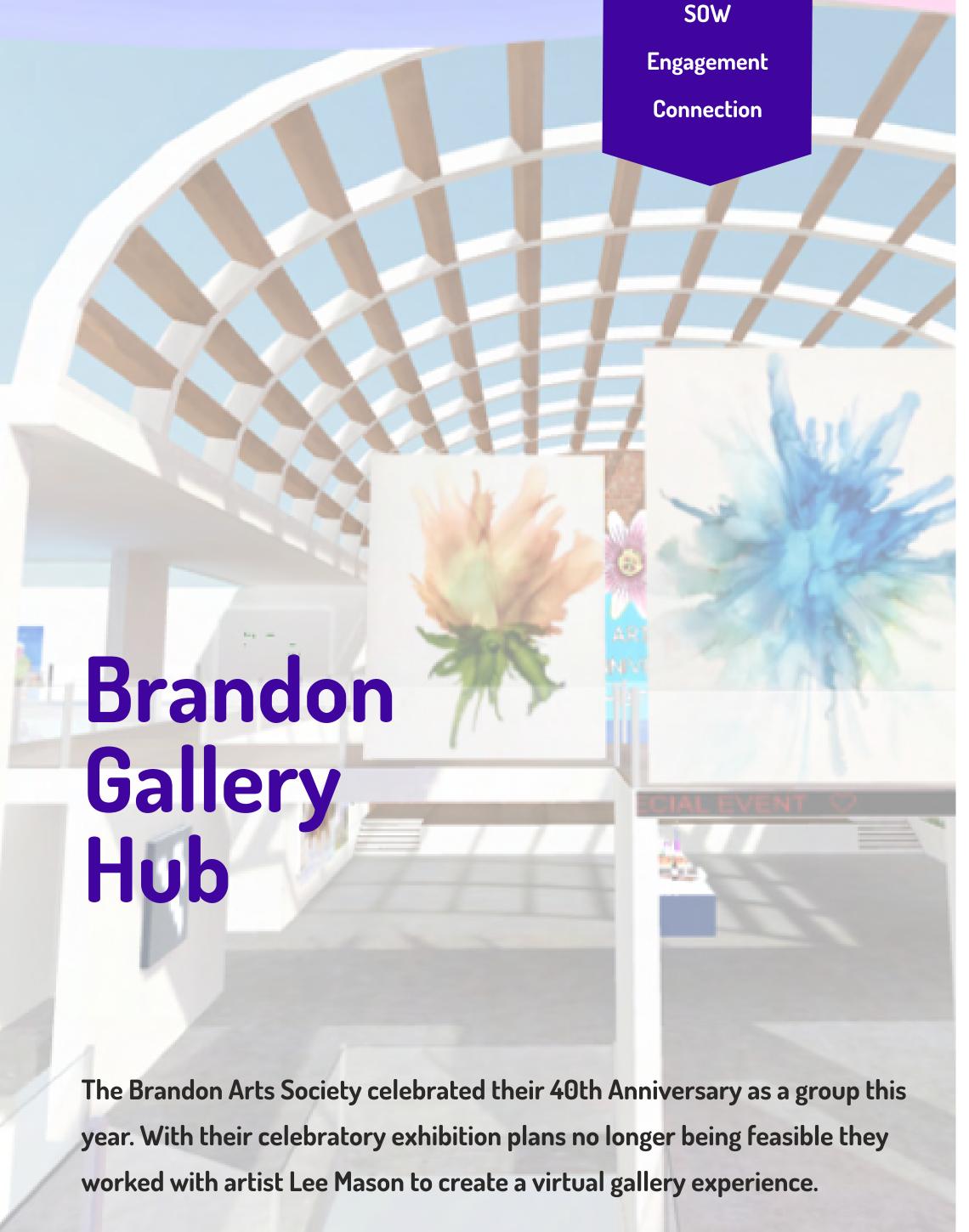
In 2020 the group celebrated their 40th Anniversary, however, due to the global pandemic they were not able to host the celebration and exhibition they had planned. This case study explores a new way to exhibit and experience art in a safe and socially distanced way.

Brandon Gallery Hub

The Brandon Arts Society celebrated their 40th Anniversary as a group this year. With their celebratory exhibition plans no longer being feasible they worked with artist Lee Mason to create a virtual gallery experience.

Artist Lee Mason has worked as a participatory artist for many years and had been exploring virtual gallery spaces and the sale of digital art over the last few years. Lee applied to the Creative Conversations in Isolation programme with the idea of supporting local professional artists to exhibit digitally as a way to connect and raise the profile of individual artists. The MarketPlace team saw an opportunity to address a local community group need and commissioned Lee to build a 3D virtual gallery experience for Brandon Arts Society to host their annual exhibition.

As a commission, this met a local need for connection, routine and a way to reduce isolation in a group of older amateur artists. The digital nature of the project challenged the group to see and experience their work in a new way. Lee worked with Terry Kimpton, Brandon Arts Society, Brandon Creative Forum and Creative Collective member to liaise with the group's membership to collate and curate high-quality images and interpretation for all of their exhibition submissions.
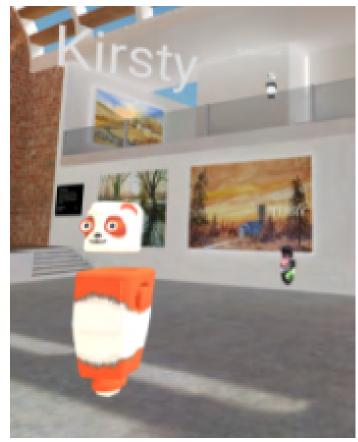
Lee built the virtual reality gallery in Mozilla Hubs after conversations with Creative Agent Ali and Art Society member Terry to discover more about the local area and the group, in order to inform the aesthetic of the space. This enabled the creation of a space filled with local references and events that could make this virtual space feel owned and relevant to the artists, who were embarking on a new digital experience together.

The gallery space had a rooftop garden to reflect the Gold Award the area had received from Britain in Bloom. As well as this, images of Brandon Creative Forum member Jill in her Easter Bunny costume were hidden as easter eggs to find in the space.
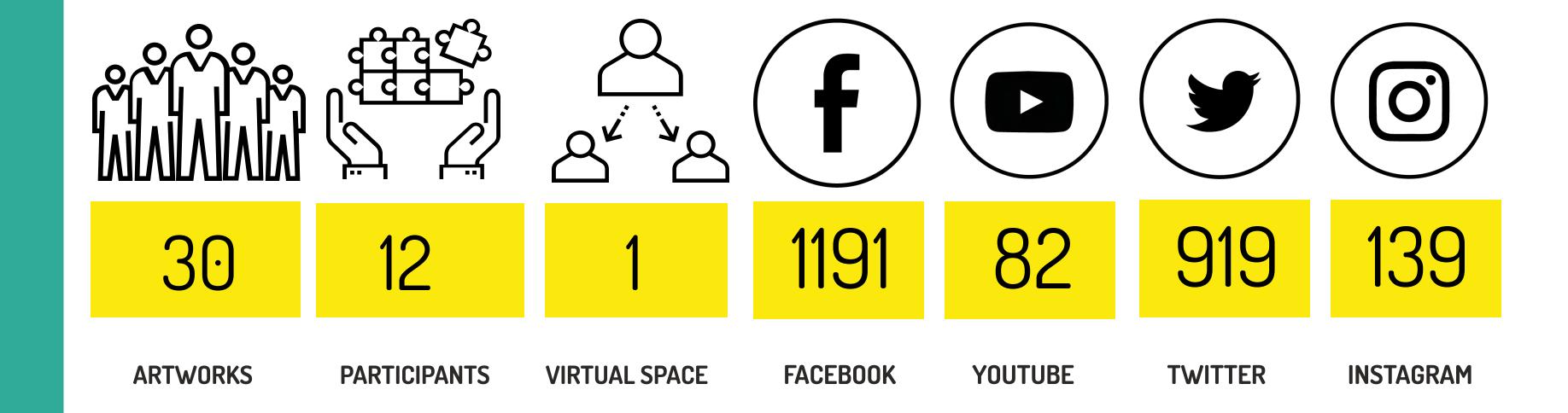

The 3D gallery was built using the free virtual reality space Mozilla Hubs. This platform provides no visitor insight data or length of engagement time in the space. The engagement with the gallery has been tracked through the level of reach and interaction with content on MarketPlace social platforms, as visitors to the gallery can happen at any time.

This space was user tested with the Brandon Creative Forum before introducing the Brandon Arts Society and the wider public was invited to explore and tour the virtual gallery. A private view tour of the exhibition was held and Terry has since led others through the experience of touring the exhibition virtually.

The private view was an open drop-in Zoom and tour to support the exhibiting artists in accessing and using the Mozilla Hub space so that they would be confident to share and show others around it. The experience became a piece of performance art as older amateur artists narrated and shared in a new virtual experience together, creating a cacophony of chaos, laughter and surprise. Digital accessibility and access by members of the group meant that not all could visit and experience the gallery. A video tour was made to ensure everyone could experience the 3D environment that was created.

"I wasn't able to access the gallery but I was able to watch the video, which I thought was wonderful. The layout and the way the paintings looked so big but had not lost any of their quality."
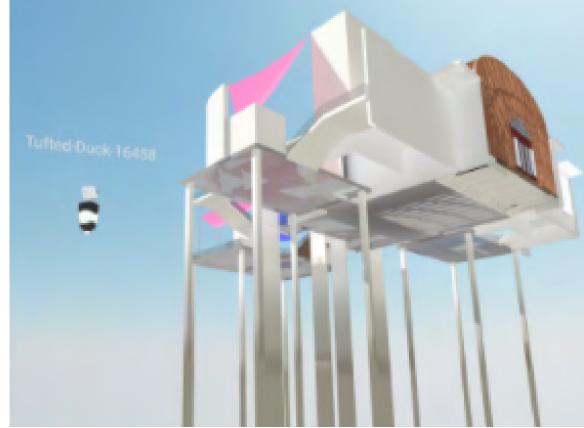
– Andrea Sinclair, Brandon Arts Society

ARTWORKS	PARTICIPANTS	VIRTUAL SPACE	FACEBOOK	YOUTUBE	TWITTER	INSTAGRAM
30	12	1	1191	82	919	139

"Loved it! Not only the 'WOW' factor of seeing my pictures BIG but also enormous fun playing with the gallery!"

– Kath, Brandon Arts Society member and exhibitor in the space

Joining instructions to access the space and navigate it were sent in advance along with the link. Additionally, instructions to navigate the space were included as a welcome board within the gallery itself at a universal landing site upon entry into the hub. Ensuring digital confidence in embracing new technology was a priority.

"It was easier than I thought it was gonna be on the day, I underestimated that with them being older that everyone has tablets. There was a couple of women in the 70s running off around the museum on their own and I thought there was gonna be a lot of hand–holding. It was very smooth and enjoyable."
– Lee Mason, artist

When receiving digital images of all of the work Lee had no interpretation as to the scale of the work. When curating the space Lee made artistic choices about the position and scale of pieces, and this further challenged the experience of viewing and engaging with the artworks.

The high resolution of the images meant that visitors were able to see and experience each other's artwork in new ways. It was possible to see details otherwise not visible in the works before being placed in this environment. It challenges their perspectives of how their work could be viewed and the potential of what they could create in real life.

"Lots of nice reactions throughout and seeing their artwork. What's cool is there was someone's artwork was quite a small acrylic painting had been blown up 6ft tall and seeing the technique and the brushstroke, it adds to the experience of looking at a painting compared to a Facebook page which was the alternative at that point."– Lee Mason, artist

"It was a different way that our work was viewed. Normally our paintings are 14 x 11" maximum but in the gallery, they looked 4ft x 6ft, which made them look more impressive."
– Terry Kimpton, Brandon Arts Society

Creating a shared experience for the group to connect was a key outcome for the project. This happened through the experience of both creating and visiting the gallery.

"It kept us connected as I was updating the group via email, conversations between the members continued which helped us get through the first lockdown."
– Terry Kimpton, Brandon Arts Society

Recognising that communities need to work in new ways to stay connected is something that group member Terry is aware of and this opportunity has enabled them to explore the potential of what could be achieved and the challenges with it.

"It showed us that as a club we may have to show our work in new ways."
– Terry Kimpton Brandon Arts Society

The greatest challenge for the group was accessibility and the bandwidth to engage with the gallery space. Digital accessibility will continue to be an issue for digital content creation and dissemination across the MarketPlace geographical area. The demands on digital infrastructure given the volumes of people working from home for education and employment has impacted the effectiveness of home broadband connections.

"I could not join the others in the gallery as my internet is so poor where I live, so was disappointed I could not have viewed the gallery. I have seen the video which Terry sent. If we had the chance to do it again I'd say yes!"
– Lynsey Powell, Brandon Arts Society

This lack of access has not deterred the group for wanting to explore this further. Five out of the six members that provided feedback on their experience stated they would all participate in such opportunities again.

Action learning and next steps

As a digital artist, Lee Mason has developed an explosive career in selling original digital art in VR. This means that Lee has reduced the amount of community-driven commissions he will be working on.

Utilising this built gallery space in the future for sustainable virtual exhibitions has the potential to increase awareness and access to the group's work and other local art groups.

"If anything I chose the right platform, that gallery is still there for them to visit whenever they want. I could hand over a log in details and replace the pictures and have a new exhibition."– Lee Mason, artist

"All the instructions are already there, would happily work with them again if there is value there but its not the work I'm looking for at the moment. It's extremely easy and would happily guide some people do what we did before and build something together over a few hours and hand over the keys – really it's just a case of placing things in space." – Lee Mason, artist

Mozilla Hubs is a free platform that can be used to build virtual spaces. This opens up the potential for any community group or project to have an accessible virtual art experience with global attendance. Exploring this as an intergenerational and community project could see young people build virtual spaces and develop VR skills to rebuild the places they live in as new creative and cultural spaces people can interact with each other in whilst in isolation.

This would develop and inspire future skills and confidence in an exploding technology area of VR real estate and living.

Lee Mason already sells digital art in the wider VR landscape where art is bought with bitcoin. Exploring the potential of bringing older amateur artists into the commercial digital VR art world could have implications for supporting the sustainability of the group.

"Brandon is the easy free version of what I want to use in the future– it's crazy how much people are spending, the real estate costs more as you get genuine footfall in certain locations and as everyone is in lockdown around the world, everyone is moving in and using VR for escapism. The industry has blown up – in a positive but dystopian way." – Lee Mason, artist

Bringing an amateur older artist group to commercial digital art world would be an interesting and innovative next step in the journey of the group into a new exploding arts scene.

"The best thing about this scene is that it is empowering for anybody. You can create artwork on your phone, tokenise it and in two minutes money could be in your account.

Imagine introducing the Brandon Arts Society in this space. This is a group of pensioners from England – give them a welcome. It's all about the story always ...people would love the story and could actually be quite interested in who they are and their journey from making art in real life to becoming digital creators"
– Lee Mason Artist

MARKETPLACE
creative people & places
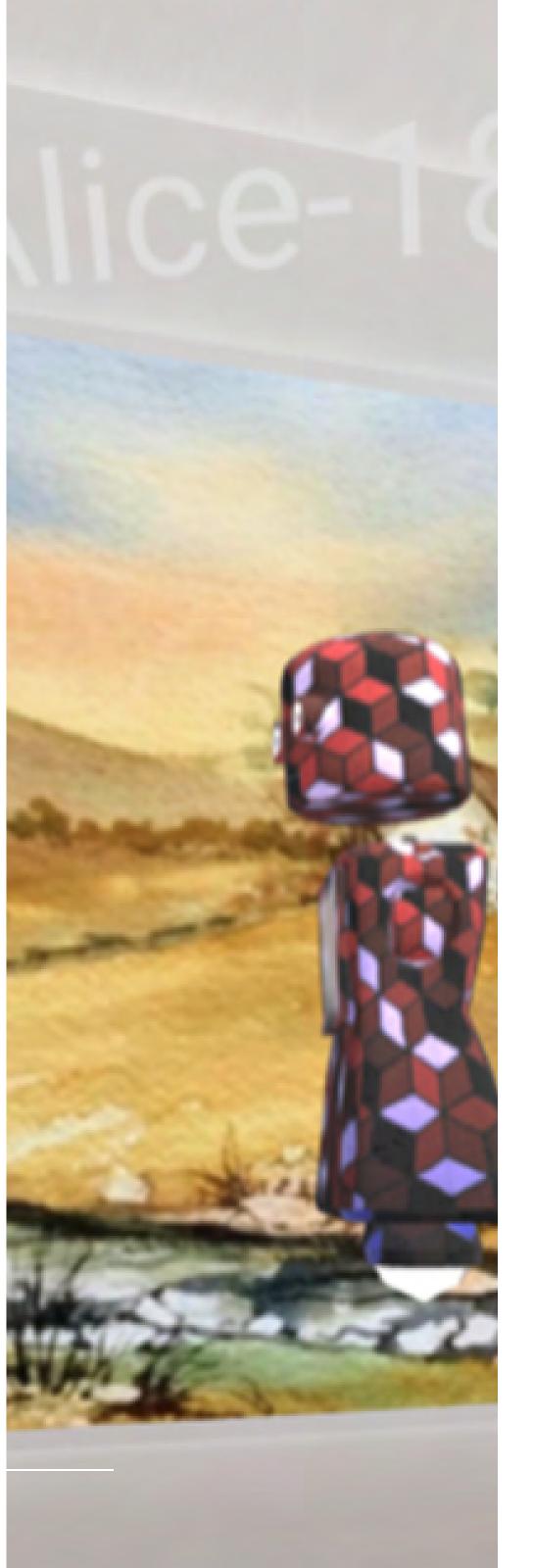
Photography credits to:

- Colin Stevens
- Ali Atkins
- Participants and artists from the projects

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We Are Frilly is founded on the principles of process-driven participatory practices that extend from co-designing on a project level, strategic planning and cultural accountability through creative evaluation.

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E: Kirsty@wearefrilly.com