

WHY CULTURAL SPACES REALLY MATTER IN A CHANGING REGION



LOUISE BLACKWELL is a freelance creative producer and cultural leader with over 25 years' experience making extraordinary ideas happen in unexpected places. She is the founding Creative Director of **Creative Crawley**, Co-Director of Crawley's Creative Playground and Co-founder of LOOKOUT Brighton.

Passionate about collaboration, access and place-making, Louise works with artists, councils, communities and businesses to turn ideas into real experiences - whether in theatres, shopping centres, parks or 40ft trucks.

A long-time advocate for the role of culture in civic life, she has helped bring over £2 million of investment into Crawley's creative eco-system and sits on the South-East Area Council for Arts Council England.

Louise co-founded the pioneering producing company Fuel and continues to champion creative work that is generous, brave and rooted in people's lives.

THIS IS SOMETHING I'VE BEEN THINKING ABOUT A LOT - particularly as we start talking about devolution and regional identity, and what that actually means for towns like Crawley.

I was asked, what role do community and cultural spaces play in shaping civic identity and supporting cultural organising? And for me, the answer's clear: they play a *crucial* role. Not a nice-to-have. Not a cherry on the top. But fundamental.

Because, without space - physical space - it's very hard to build the kinds of conversations and collaborations we need. The kind where people listen to each other properly.

Over the past few years, I've been part of setting up two new cultural spaces in Crawley. One is *West Green Studios* - it's now home to five resident artists, all local, and it's used by others for events, workshops and meetings.

The other is a pop-up performance and exhibition space in the *County Mall* shopping centre right in the middle of town and very visible. They're both temporary, but they're also deeply purposeful. They've become places where different kinds of people come together; artists, local residents, councillors, businesses, young people and people passing by.

And when that happens - when people come into the same room, often from very different worlds - something really powerful can start to happen.

It's not always easy. We all speak different languages. Not just Greek or Urdu or Polish - though there's that too.

But the language of the arts, the language of policy and the language of lived experience. Sometimes we talk past each other. Sometimes we don't quite hear.

So we need spaces where people can *practice* listening. Not just performing. Where an artist and a council officer can talk about the same challenge and realise they're both trying to achieve something very similar - just in different ways.

And maybe these cultural spaces can be more than just fun palaces - though fun is important. Maybe they can also be places where policy gets shaped. Places where ideas get tested, gently. Places where trust builds over time.

As we look ahead to what devolution might mean to Sussex, I think this matters even more. Because civic identity doesn't come from the top down. It grows from lived experience. From pride in your place. From knowing you have a voice and a role.

Towns like Crawley need cultural spaces not just to showcase who we are, but to help *shape* who we want to be - locally, regionally, nationally.

It's not about shouting the loudest. It's about creating space to hear each other. That's what culture can do. And that's why it really matters.

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