



LUMIERE

Contingency planning to drive resilience

Overview

Interviewee:

Helen Marriage, artistic director, Artichoke, and curator, Lumiere

www.artichoke.uk.com, www.lumiere-festival.com

With thanks to Michelle Gorman, managing director, Visit County Durham.

This case study seeks to outline the impact of the pandemic on the Lumiere festival, which takes place biennially in Durham. Insights are drawn from an interview conducted in May 2022.

Lumiere, an initiative of the creative events company Artichoke, sees upwards of 30 international artists commissioned to create site-specific, large-scale public artworks around Durham city centre. With specific reference to the two festivals held in 2019 and 2021, this work examines a range of challenges in terms of contingency planning, highlighting opportunities for improved resilience.

About the Lumiere festival

Lumiere was founded in Durham by Helen Marriage in 2009. The festival draws on her expertise in curating and producing free-to-access large-scale public artworks and events though her role as artistic director of Artichoke, a company she founded in 2005 with Nicky Webb. Artichoke has extensive experience in delivering arts projects throughout the UK and describes its mission as bringing together the widest possible audience around unique public experiences.

The inaugural 2009 Lumiere festival took place around the city of Durham in November, supported by £60,000 of funding from the Council and a further £30,000 from a town centre development fund. To meet the overall project cost of £650,000, Artichoke sought additional funding from trusts and foundations, regional and local corporate bodies, and individual donors.

The first festival received approximately 75,000 visitors in a city of approximately 50,000 residents. It was deemed so successful by the local council that on its opening night Marriage was invited to host the event biennially from that point onwards.

In 2019 the estimated boost to the local economy was approximately £11.5 million, reported Durham City Council. As an indicator of the growth of the festival, the 2021 Lumiere festival attracted some 240,000 visitors over its four-day run, with a budget of approximately £2.4 million.

In its first year Lumiere showcased original work by seven international artists. It has since grown in scope and scale, and for the 2021 season 36 pieces were commissioned, including participatory works from local community schools.

Economic impact on the city of Durham

Figure for 2009 unknown; 2021 report pending

2011
£4.3 million¹

2013
£5.8 million²

2015
£9.6 million³

2017
£7.6 million⁴

2019
£11.5 million⁵

1. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-17674458

2. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-28223903>

3. www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-tyne-36476986

4. <https://www.lumiere-festival.com/>;

<https://democracy.durham.gov.uk/documents/s93522/11%20Lumiere%20Festival%202019%20final.pdf>

5. <https://democracy.durham.gov.uk/documents/s129325/Lumiere%202019%20Evaluation.pdf>

Event staging considerations

Marriage highlights some of the specific location-based challenges of staging the Lumiere festival in Durham.

- 1) The centre of Durham is located on a peninsula, which creates a range of logistical requirements in order to control crowd movement into and around the main public installations.
- 2) Close liaison with the city council is necessary in order to ensure public safety through security measures and road closures across the four nights of the festival.
- 3) While the festival is free to attend, visitors are ticketed during peak times between 4pm and 8pm to restrict excessive demand that might impact safety and enjoyment of the works.
- 4) The placement of specific artworks is decided according to anticipated dwell time, with the intention of restricting bottlenecks and ensuring continuous onward flow of visitors across all installation sites.
- 5) Both before and during the festival, organisers work closely with night-time economy businesses such as bars and restaurants to minimise disruption to trade.

Pandemic response

Marriage points to the biennial nature of Lumiere. Being scheduled for 2019 and 2021 was a key mitigating factor in reducing impact to the normal planning and delivery of the festival — the timing of which was just outside Covid-19 and lockdown restrictions. With regard to a hypothetical digital pivot had the event run in 2020, there would have been no move to deliver an online alternative to the in-person event. Marriage emphasised that Lumiere's purpose is the delivery of free, public, accessible and epic artworks.

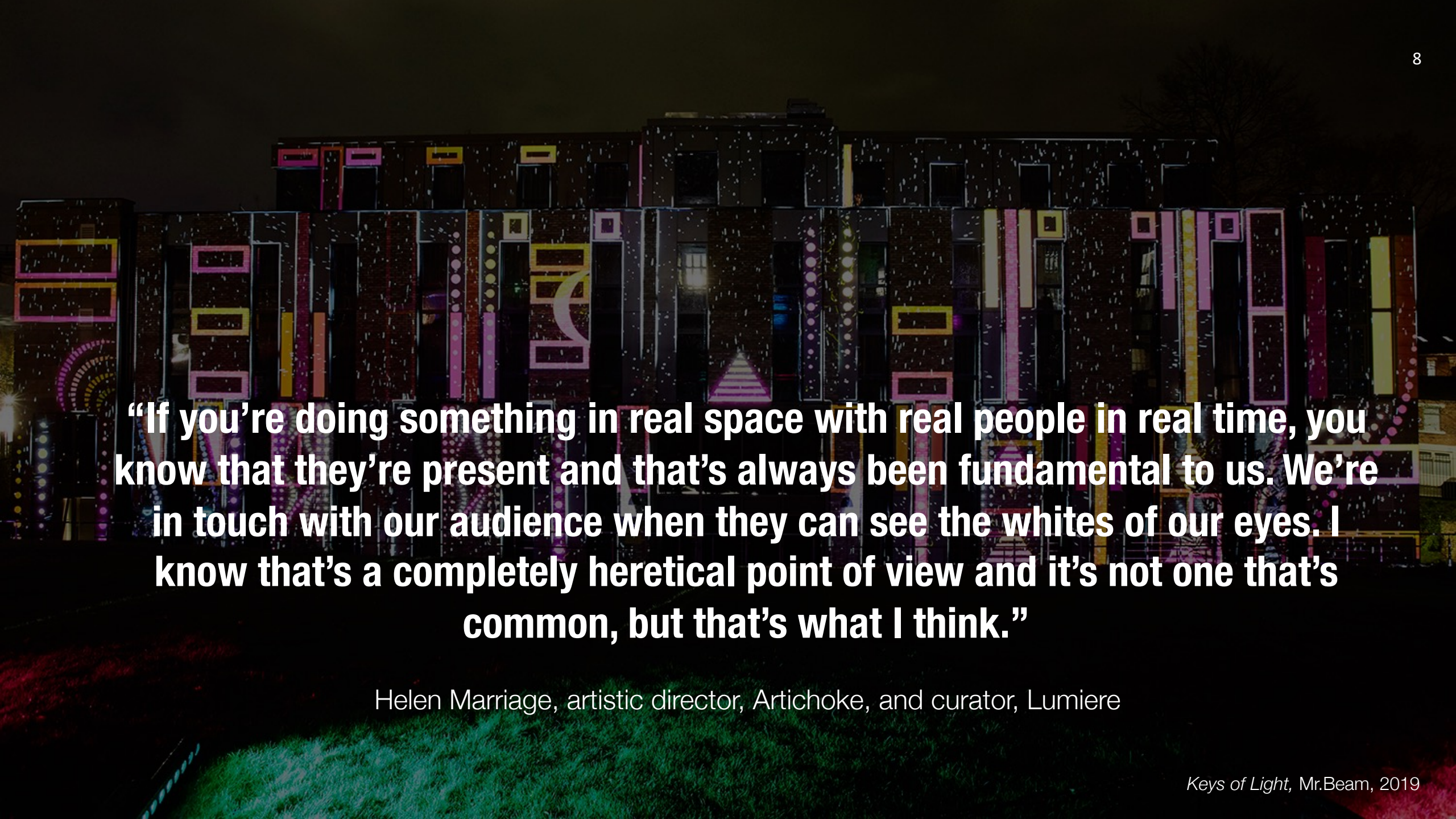
With other Experience Economy providers making a switch to digital provision, Marriage comments that she had some initial concerns that normal ways of working as an organisation would not survive the pandemic. She acknowledges a degree of scepticism regarding the substitution of digital for physical events, also questioning the depth and quality of audience engagement in digital spaces and whether digital can truly recreate or replicate the nature of in-person experiences.

She further proposes that the fundamental human desire to gather together cannot be satisfied through digital-only experiences. In terms of audience communication and retention, Marriage suggests that the Lumiere festival intrinsically requires face-to-face interaction, although it does have a strong online presence through its website and social channels.

Post-pandemic impact

Marriage points to a number of key post-pandemic adjustments in planning the 2021 festival.

- 1) With significant numbers of council staff continuing to work from home and observing heightened safety measures, approvals processes were hampered by reduced site visits and in-person meetings.
- 2) The interior of Durham Cathedral was removed as a location for the festival, as restricted entry and access points would have created a potential bottleneck; the increased likelihood of social contact was deemed an unnecessary risk.
- 3) With international artists unable to conduct in-person site reviews, greater emphasis was placed on close liaison with technical and production staff to sense-check and guide artists' responses regarding the location and placement of their commissioned works.
- 4) Lumiere received additional support from the DCMS Culture Recovery Fund. This funding was used to create six new works around the county at sites of cultural and natural significance, increasing accessibility to communities outside of the city centre and broadening audience reach.



“If you’re doing something in real space with real people in real time, you know that they’re present and that’s always been fundamental to us. We’re in touch with our audience when they can see the whites of our eyes. I know that’s a completely heretical point of view and it’s not one that’s common, but that’s what I think.”

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