In 2003, Eva Merz came to Huntly. Her project looked at the increasing numbers of shops around Huntly that had ceased to be. There were already many then, and her work came to focus on one shop in particular on Bogie Street that used to be a greengrocers*. Through performance acts and photography, she created a stirring icon of this shop – a shop to represent all empty shops, across towns, across regions, across countries.

Merz’s Empty Shop / Modern Monument sought out a new meaning for these buildings – what role could they now play in our civic culture? If we imagined these buildings as people with many karmic past lives, where would their future lives take them?

In the intervening years, the problem of empty shops got worse in Huntly, as it did in many towns across the UK. The vacant shops weren’t now just in the side streets; the problem had reached the Square. Something had gone wrong. Who or what could we turn to for insight? How to put it right?

Taking influence from holistic wellbeing philosophies of the East, revolutionary social thinker Patrick Geddes held that for a town to be happy and prosperous, all elements of civic and social life needed to be nurtured in balance with each other. Had the balance tipped? Did the Western economic model that had once allowed these shops to thrive in their community change so far and so extensively that their existence just wasn’t viable anymore? Meanwhile on the opposite side of this circle of change, in response to these closures, community spirit – the essence of the town as a family, or Geddes’ ‘Folk’ – has been on the rise in Huntly.

A new strategy, Room to Thrive, has seen fifteen community organisations working together to regenerate Huntly from the Town Square onwards. Both Deveron Projects and Huntly and District Development Trust have secured funds through the Scottish Land Fund, Aberdeenshire Council’s Town Centre Fund and other sources, to purchase iconic buildings on the Square and bring them back to life and to community use.

Ours is Square Deal, in the northwest corner of the Square. This shop’s various past lives provide a trail through the social history of Huntly. Once a tinsmiths in the 18th century, the site has seen a stove and hearth shop, a bank and a much-loved Huntly discount store over the years. Soon it will live again. To host artists, thinkers, creative workers and be a space for the community to call in and, over a bowl of spicy soup, shape the thinking of the next phase of what Huntly can become.**

* Merz’s ‘Empty Shop’ is enjoying its latest incarnation as a family home.
** If you would like to be involved in any way, please get in touch – through collaboration we are all stronger.
The power of partnership

By Alex Severn, Researcher, University of Aberdeen

In light of climate change and globalisation, the need for partnership and cooperative working has never been greater. In recognition of this I have begun a project that seeks to bring together the various community groups that exist here in Huntly in order to collaborate more effectively.

The United Nation’s Sustainable Development Goals name partnership working as a key step towards sustainability. Not only do partnerships build relationships, but they help contribute to the long-term resilience and sustainability of the projects they build.

The Huntly Climate Adaption Funding Network is a proposed opportunity for groups to get together and discuss the potential for a long-term collaboration on shared interests that might or may not already benefit themselves and the wider community. It will build on the close ties that already exist between the groups and present the chance to develop projects that may or may not already be in the pipeline.

By utilising the strengths and intellectual resources of each other’s groups it will allow projects to develop in ways that previously might not have been considered. By combining groups, the Network will also mean that projects are likely to live longer if not indefinitely, due to the invigorating input from multiple sources and the shared responsibility groups will have over them.

Inter-group relations should become even better, and an increase in collaboration between groups will hopefully have the added benefit of reducing competition for funding – important where many groups may be applying for the same pots from the same town.

I look forward to continuing my research here and hope to play a small part in helping Huntly to continue to develop and thrive.

Alex will be in residence in Huntly throughout the summer. If you would like to help shape the Huntly Climate Adaption Funding Network, get in touch via info@deveron-projects.com

Art in the rural

In June, Creative Scotland invited Deveron Projects to attend The Rural: Contemporary Art and Spaces of Connection, part of the East Contemporary Visual Arts Network’s project New Geographies. This was an opportunity to contribute to an international and transdisciplinary conversation and a chance to represent Scotland amongst our rural contemporaries.

The Rural Assembly brings together artists, organisations and practitioners who challenge assumptions about rural life and culture, thinking about a more-than-human approach to the countryside, grounded in everyday experience and critique of a perceived rural/urban binary.

Project Manager Robyn Wolsley attended the three-day conference, opened by Taiwanese artist and curator Wu Mali - leading practitioner in socially engaged art in rural Asia. Based in Whitechapel Gallery and Wysing Arts Centre, events ranged from panels to performances and a guided walk by White Wood artist, Caroline Wendling. Sharing ideas with our international partners encourages us to keep Geddes’ Local/Global practice alive.

PG TIPS:

Dear Patrick. I love living in Huntly but I feel like I’m forever working. My children seem to be growing up before I know it. Time is running away from me. Please help!

Aye Chavvin, Huntly

Dear Aye Chavvin,

It’s clear to me that your life is out of balance. Whilst Place is sitting well, Work dominates. Make more time for your family and friends (Folk) and harmony will be restored.

Patrick

Dear Billy

I understand that you want to hold onto the precious culture that helped to make Huntly such an excellent town. Your strong sense of Local is to be commended. However, we all have to roll with the times and anticipate the new waves of culture that will further enhance our towns. Like Doric was to earlier forms of expression, so might new languages arriving with more recent Huntly citizens be a refreshing influence in the constant flux that is human culture and placemaking. Try a pinch of Thinking Global, Billy. Why not try learning, say, Arabic alongside your wonderful work promoting the rich local Doric language and culture?

Yours aye, Patrick

Dear Billy

I am having awful difficulty with my roses. The aphids seem to treat them like a personal buffet and I am at my wits’ end. What must I do to reclaim ownership?

Rattled Rose

Dear Rose,

I fear you may have missed the point of this advice column. Although I am a Biologist, primarily I consider myself a Sociologist, and that was the intended focus here. Allow me to proffer some advice that may serve on both fronts… Try not to battle with nature. Just as in a town we must all get along, so must it be in your garden. Perhaps companion-plant some carrots with your roses. And give weeds a space - the pollinators will thank you, as the Town is their Garden too. For anything else, please consult your friendly Town Gardener.

Yours faithfully, Patrick Geddes, Holistic Sociologist and Father of Modern Town Planning
Connecting with Scotland’s Towns

Still on the theme of civic regeneration, Deveron Project’s Art & Community Worker Petra Pennington spoke about the social-regenerative value of the Town is the Venue / Town is the Garden at the midsummer tea party AGM of Scotland’s Towns Partnership.

Funded by the Scottish Government, the organisation promotes creative and collaborative thinking in supporting Scotland as a nation of towns. Other presentations included Creative Stirling, and #Team Hamish, winner of the 2018 Future Town Design competition which will see Nairn revitalised through a rainbow of civic play.

Flax

Artist Christine Borland has been literally planting the seeds for a project that will touch on Huntly’s past connection to the flax plant through its historic linen industry. Working with a group of community growers, test patches of the strain of blue flax grown for linen production have been planted with a view towards a larger project in 2020.

The plant takes 100 days to mature, with its first harvest due to take place in July alongside an exploration of the echoes that agricultural and craft processes might leave on the body and psyche of its community.

Huntly Lies Within

April’s Slow Marathon saw a circular and cyclic return to the route of Ethiopian artist Mihret Kibede’s original event in 2012. The route took in all four hills of Huntly, based on the poem ‘The Ba’hill, the Battlehill, the Clashmach and the Bin, they all form a circle and Huntly lies within’.

Artist Norma Hunter co-curated the event, tying each hill’s elemental symbolism with a strand of land ownership, neatly encapsulated in a set of Doric haiku poems, specially written by writers from the Huntly Doric Classes. Around 60 walkers considered our common Right to Roam in our local lands through activities relating to the poems in their own Poetical Pathmaking journal as they walked.

Geddes’ Thinking Machines use arrow-led pathways to explore many interlinking ideas within their holistic whole. Geddes was inspired by Eastern philosophies; this particular thinking machine (c. 1880s) features a swastika in its cyclic, directional structure.
A few ideas to add to your own - cut out and colour in

- Fitness
- e-bike check point
- Music hall
- Pub
- Bar
- Wi-fi point
- CAFE
- Post office
- Shop
- Pub
- Museum
- Chat
- Cinema

Draw your ideal town square...

Don't forget: every square needs its ecology!

Idea illustrations: Midori Dobashi
Huntly civic illustrations: Alix Rothnie
Conversation between Deveron Projects Director, Claudia Zeiske and researcher, Heather Fulton.

HF: I've been looking through The Town Collection art trail, it acts as a record of past projects that have taken place across Huntly over the years. Can you talk about how Deveron Projects, and the Town is the Venue approach was developed?

CZ: Well the idea of the Town is the Venue started organically. When we first started Deveron Projects it was a very traditional rural arts organisation that brought in touring theatre and the Travelling Gallery and that kind of thing. Until we decided it was more interesting to work with artists, to have them in residence and work with the community through politically and socially engaged activities.

At the very beginning we wanted to have an arts centre, we had a feasibility study done and the study said, well, it's not feasible!

I guess the Town is the Venue slogan emerged at some point because we didn't give up. There was an opportunity where we could of said "If we don't get this art centre then we just won't do it" but because we worked with artists, it gave us much more flexibility. In a rural area, where we would have struggled to get enough people coming into an arts centre, it gave us the opportunity to go where people already are.

You can almost picture Huntly as a venue because in size it takes you 10 minutes to walk from one end of the Tate Modern to the other, and with Huntly I think if you walk briskly 10 minutes also takes you from one end to the other. When you look at the Town Collection you might have the same sort of experience as if you spent the whole day in a big sized gallery like the Tate Modern.

HF: Over the years what has changed? And how does that affect your work at Deveron Projects?

CZ: Our organisation has grown over the years. We started 24 years ago being three people just doing something as a pasttime, to being six and eight workers and there are more coming! So as the organisation grew, we needed more housing for the artists and interns.

But the other very important change happened to our town. Huntly is an old market town; it was a real shopkeeper’s town at the time that we started living here. Slowly more and more of those shops have closed and in recent years more services have closed. One of the banks closed recently, another bank reduced its services to part-time, the post office moved, the tourist information closed and a lot of the old-fashioned department stores on the Square have closed. It was a question of 'would they ever come back?'

Our Square looked really desolate and a bit sad. When I think back to when we moved to Huntly it just looked lovely! It had all these old-fashioned shops. You know there was a craft shop - a really well stocked craft shop, a paint shop, a bicycle shop, an underpants shop! But these have slowly closed.

I am very aware that this is not solely a Huntly problem; this is a global problem.

Particularly the Town Square looks run down. There were community consultations with a group called Ice Cream Architecture and one recommendation was that the town should look into community ownership of the Square. We felt that we must assist the town, because we have the possibilities in accessing these funds and we have staff that can do this.

HF: And this has led Deveron Projects to buying a house on The Square?

CZ: Deveron Projects and the Huntly Development Trust have both embraced advice from the consultations quite quickly and have gone for such funds and been successful.

The one we have is a former chemists shop called "Square Deal". Initially it started as a tinsmith and has been various shops over the years; there was a bank in it at some point. The main motivation of taking it on is really to help the regeneration of the Square.

We will use the upstairs as a flat for housing artists and interns, and the shop and workshop spaces will host projects. We wanted to kick-off with something like a family kitchen for the community; through projects like the Al Nofara Café (2017/18) we have created ones which have been welcomed in the past. Because the town lost one of its bakeries too this year, we are also very interested in looking into the idea of a heritage bakery and how cooking can work as an art form there.

We have the Town is the Garden programme, and they will join us in this new building, its outhouses and garden. But of course they also have a whole raft of activities which are happening all over town.

Our other programmes will also continue to bring key events and workshops to audiences in Huntly's streets, pubs, schools and other venues. The Town is the Venue definitely lives on.

So this new place is not an arts venue as such, or how you would imagine an arts centre to be, but the continuation of the town as the venue, as a place from where we can run our food and growing programmes. Sharing food can be a good leveller to bring different people together. I hope this will become a flexible space, where food and people meet.

HF: What do you think people get out of the Town is the Venue projects?

CZ: Well I guess the question of how to bring people together has been at the centre of all of the work we do. In a place like Huntly, we all share the same school, the same health services and so on. It gives you an appreciation for how we must always work together to nurture and stimulate our community, that really is our aim. People understanding each other and helping each other at the end of the day.

Having a building like this, with its open face and door in the heart of the town on the Square simply gives another opportunity where people can come together.

Square Deal illustration Alix Rothnie; signpost adapted from Jacques Coetzee, Room to Reinvent (2017)
Future Fruit – rethinking Huntly from a Geddesian perspective

Jonathan Baxter and Sarah Gittins recently became a family, adding Benjamin Baxter-Gittins to their collaborative practice. Ben is Scots for mountain peak. So when thinking about their responsibilities to Ben and how they might approach their residency with Deveron Projects this August, they asked themselves the question: what does it mean to think like a mountain? This question, derived from Aldo Leopold’s book, *A Sand County Almanac* (1949), asks us to think from the perspective of an ecosystem, not just as individuals. It’s with this ecocentric perspective in mind that Jonathan, Sarah and Ben will consider how an existing orchard can be rethought in response to our current ecological and climate emergency.

Adding another layer to their residency, the trio will also consider the relevance of Patrick Geddes (1854-1932) – ecologist, educator and visual thinker – to Huntly. How do the visual tools Geddes used to aid his thinking relate to the many interests and needs of all age groups, cultures, demographics, and species in Huntly? For example, Geddes’s ‘nine-squared thinking machine’ (otherwise known as ‘The Notation of Life’, see page 3) or Geddes’ Outlook Tower, a real building in Edinburgh (the Camera Obscura) and a tool for reimagining our relationship with the past, present and future through the evolution of cities.

Hence the project title, *Future Fruit – rethinking Huntly from a Geddesian perspective*. A synthesis in thought that tends towards collective action.*

Following a site visit in February, the artists will return in August to engage with local residents, spend time in the orchard, and develop a series of public engagement tools that respond to their brief. The artists are particularly keen to meet with anyone who has an interest in orchards, has a fruit tree growing in their own back garden, or wants to take action in response to the current climate and ecological emergency.

Get in touch to find out more!
townisthegarden@deveron-projects.com
Check out the website for events
www.deveron-projects.com/events

*This last sentence appropriates Geddes. The full quotation reads: ‘Not every thought takes a form in action; but the psychologist is ever more assured that it at least points thither. With increasing clearness and interests, with increasing synthesis with other thoughts, ideas become emotionalised towards action. Synthesis in thought thus tends to collective action – to Synergy in deed: and Imagination concentrates itself to prefigure, for the Etho-Polity in Synergy, the corresponding Achievement which it may realise.’

Text: Jonathan Baxter and Sarah Gittins.
Events Calendar

/ July

Tuesday 2, New Moon

Friday 5, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Dr. Lucia Ruggerone: Working with New Scots: Tales of emotional labour

Saturday 6, 9am-1pm, Huntly Farmers Market
Drinks from local plants

Friday 12, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Jane Freer: Artist's Talk: From the exodus of Palestine in 1948 to the exit of Britain from the EU

/ August

Thursday 1, New Moon

Thursday 1, 7pm, 8 Castle St.
Film screening, Jonah Who Will Be 25 in the Year 2000 (1976), Dir. Alain Tanner

Friday 2, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Mikaela Zotos: Art in economically challenged countries: Greece

Saturday 3, 9am-1pm, Huntly Farmers Market
Seasonal Café - a space to sit and enjoy the market

Wednesday 7, 7pm, 8 Castle St.
Reading Towards Action entangles FN-SF: A special edition of the Town is the Garden FN-SF reading group, considering Geddes' The Sociology of Autumn, and a complementary lesson plan, Designing a Multispecies Commons, in relation to one of Huntly's existing orchards.

Friday 9, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Cllr John Latham: Being a local Councillor

/ September

Friday 6, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Sally Thomson: Grampian Hospitals Art Trust

Friday 6, 7.30pm, 8 Castle St.

/ Regular events explained

Friday Lunch
Every Friday, 1pm, Brander Kitchen
Lunch followed by a short talk by a different speaker each week. (Suggested £2 donation)

Food Chain
Last Monday of the month, 6-8pm, Brander Kitchen
A group cookalong to learn someone else's recipes of home. Together we'll cook, learn about each others' culture and share a delicious meal.

Gardener's Lunch dates

Wednesday 10, 24 July; 7, 21 Aug; 4, 18 Sept
12:30pm, The Brander Garden
Join Town Gardener Lindy Young for practical advice. Topics given on website. Lunch provided.

Sunday 14, Full Moon

Friday 13, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Zoy Anastassakis: Co-design, ecology and revitalising a design school in Rio, Brazil

Friday 20, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Theresa Lee: Huntly Neighbours: A community companionship scheme for the price of a pizza

Friday 27, 1pm, Friday Lunch, Brander Kitchen
Andrea Chappell: The interpretive kilt: representation of identity in traditional dress

Monday 30, 6-8pm, Brander Kitchen
Japanese Sushi Rolls with Midori Dobashi
Booking essential / £5

Food Chain cookery workshop
Mongolian Buuz (steamed beef dumplings) with Undra Astbury. Booking essential / £5

Food Chain cookery workshop
Kalam Polo (Iranian Cabbage, Rice and Meatballs) with Najmeh Doostdar. Booking essential / £5

Illustrations Midori Dobashi
Deveron Projects is based in the rural market town of Huntly, Scotland. We connect artists, communities and places through creative research and engagement. The town is the venue describes the framework in which we work and contribute to the social wellbeing of our town. We have engaged with local people, and their clubs, choirs, shops, schools, churches, bars and discos since 1995.