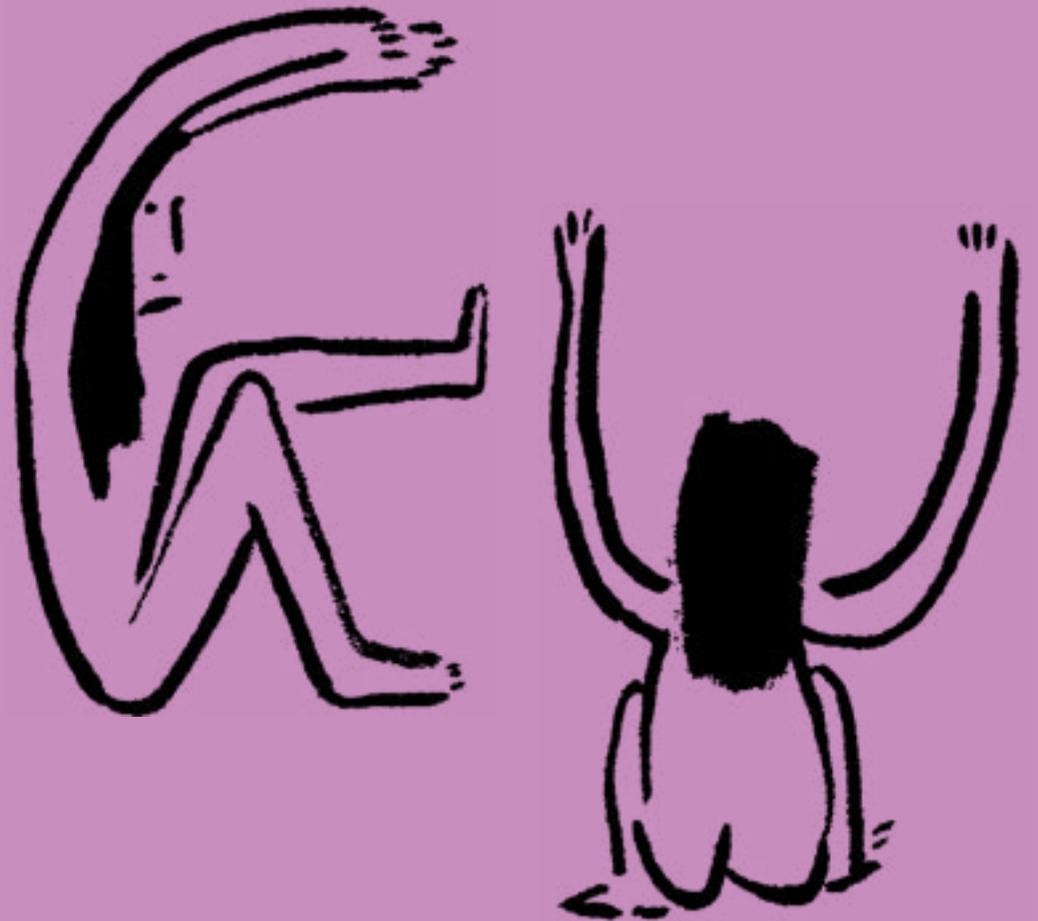


# Grand Union Business Plan Overview 2021-22



# Introduction

Grand Union is an ambitious organisation that delivers high-quality artistic work that is embedded locally and recognised nationally and internationally.

During a year responding to the challenges of Covid-19, we have taken the opportunity to reflect on the last 10 years of our activity, identify our core values and focus our energies on embedding the very best of our practice. Our staff team has articulated a set of value commitments that we will publish, making explicit the approach that permeates all of our work.

Our Collaborative Programme, introduced in 2019, has quickly become embedded in the heart of the organisation. As a result, we have thought carefully about how the different strands of our artistic programmes can be better aligned to explore different aspects of the same issues, connecting communities and organisations to jointly improve our locality.

We have set out five overarching goals and strategies that will provide a framework for our work during the next five years.

- \* **Support art-making**, keeping art and artists at the core of our activity and facilitating community-led programming.
- \* **Create welcoming artistic spaces**, working to improve the accessibility of all the spaces we present and make art in.
- \* **Be a good - considerate/welcoming/helpful - neighbour**, working with our local communities and landowners to improve the area socially and environmentally.
- \* **Create the best working culture**, ensuring it is supportive and nourishing for all who work with our organisation. This includes taking proactive steps to ensure the whole organisation, including board members, staff, freelancers, studio artists and collaborators, reflects the population of Birmingham.
- \* **Set firm our foundations**, creating a venue that is accessible, welcoming, income generating and gives the organisation a long term base.

# Vision and Mission

**Grand Union is a welcoming organisation, bringing people closer to art and artists.**

**Artistic research and collaboration are at the core of our work.**

**Working with and for our communities, we are committed to developing and supporting quality artistic activity beyond the gallery space.**

**We support learning and create numerous contexts for art and life to intersect, exploring new sites and contexts for the public to engage with art.**

**A multiplicity of voices contribute to, and participate in, our programmes and organisation. We believe that art can be a tool for social change, but only when embedded within communities, with and for them.**



The Growing Project 2021. Photo by Nina Bailie.

Grand Union is a gallery and artists' studios complex in Digbeth, Birmingham. Here we:

- \* Host a free programme of public exhibitions and events, with many opportunities for discussion and the sharing of ideas.
- \* Provide high quality, affordable studios for visual artists in the heart of a supportive creative community, with frequent opportunities for members of the public to visit behind the scenes.

## **Grand Union's Charitable Objects**

The promotion of the contemporary visual arts and the understanding and appreciation of the arts in general for the public benefit, by providing:

- (A) an arts centre and an exhibitions and arts events programme to enable the public to access, explore and enjoy high-quality artistic experiences;
- (B) arts education programmes and activities for the wider public and to build capacity in the arts sector.

# Value Commitments

\* Grand Union fosters art-making and supports the growth of new cultures. We weave through the personal, political and intellectual. We love to share the work of artists and art-making. We care and centre people, enabling new dreams, imaginations and possibilities. We believe that art has the power to connect and transform.

\* Grand Union values physical space to enable people to come together to make and to experience art. We are working to develop multiple, welcoming, artistic spaces that can function in response to the needs of different publics in our city and beyond.

\* Grand Union is human and vulnerable. We work between people and land. We listen with all of our senses and we are attentive to different points of view, identities and experiences.

\* Grand Union cares: about people, about the environment, about futures, about histories, about art. We work from a place of integrity, compassion, generosity and love.

\* We celebrate the people who have come before us, so often unrecognised for their work: women, people from LGBTQI+, Black and disabled communities, and all those who are marginalised and discriminated against. We support and collaborate with those who come after.

\* We are always learning. We take direct action. We are open to criticism. We are accountable to the communities and networks we work with. We are not neutral. We strive

to challenge systems of injustice and oppression. We do not tolerate sexism, homophobia, transphobia, racism, ableism, or classism.

\* We wish to build lasting and reciprocal relationships beyond the organisation. We acknowledge that we are not independent, but interdependent and can only grow with mutual support.

We take our work seriously. In order to ensure these value commitments permeate our work, we have developed the following policies and plans to set targets, measure progress and identify positive and negative impacts, which are reviewed by both staff and trustees on a regular basis, many of which can be accessed on our [website](#).



Hymns, 2019, by Joyce Treasure at Cornerblock.  
Photo by Jody Hartley.

# Our Goals and Strategies

## Support art-making

Art-making and artists are at the core of our activity.

Grand Union was founded by a group of entrepreneurial artists and curators, who pooled their resources to create a vibrant space for making and showing art. Our studios, designed and built by Queen and Crawford, in collaboration with the founders, have become a model for how to provide genuinely affordable and practical, usable studios within cheap-to-rent warehouse space with no heating or insulation. Establishing a gallery alongside for public events and exhibitions was a key part of this model, generating the route for many different people to flow in and out of our community, keeping our programme and learning fresh and varied.

We have been working on a capital project for the last four years, with the aim of creating an accessible building for Grand Union to inhabit. This will provide improved studio facilities for artists in the city, with lift access, kitchens and heating. We are building a model that allows us to keep these studio facilities affordable for artists.

Our welcoming and open approach has allowed many different and innovative collaborations to occur, creating new opportunities for artists to make and show work in the city, and new occasions for people to have positive, meaningful interactions with art.

Our artistic programmes are critically acclaimed, for example, artist Jamie Crewe received a Turner Prize Bursary in 2020 for their exhibitions [Love & Solidarity, Solidarity & Love](#), hosted by Grand Union and Humber Street Gallery. The project also received positive reviews in [Art Forum International](#), [Art Monthly](#), and was included in [Frieze's Top 10 shows in UK & Ireland 2020](#). [Cooking Sections](#), Jamie Crewe and Alberta Whittle are all part of British Art Show 9, bringing together the best practice in the UK every 5 years.

We will continue to work with artists who have rigorous and innovative practices, tackling ideas and subjects which are reflective of contemporary society. In the coming years we will take a long-term

approach to developing new work with artists, with a focus on new commissioning. We rarely show work that has already been produced and fabricated, preferring to work collaboratively with artists to present something context, time, and politically specific, especially in our gallery programme.

We aim to have an impact on the way art is perceived by people in our city - that it is not only something to go and look at in a gallery but that it also has the possibility to be a useful tool and catalyst for change in our everyday lives.

We will use our cultural capital to support and create visible platforms for critical thinking and to engage across sectors and disciplines, pro-actively responding to urgent issues surrounding social and ecological justice.

During the last three years we have developed a successful collaborative public programme that incorporates both gallery-based art exhibitions and projects located in the public realm. We now have extensive experience of working collaboratively in partnerships across private, public and charity sectors to develop and support artist commissions and meaningful participatory engagement projects, from conception through production to public presentation. This is demonstrated by both [The Growing Project](#) and our [Bruntwood Artist Residency](#) scheme.

These projects are just two examples of how Grand Union is finding new places for, and supporters of art-making. We are generating new opportunities for artists that are embedded in communities, creating the best conditions for socially engaged practices to thrive. We are creating space for people to have new encounters with art, as well as the chance to get involved in making it - often for those who might not usually have the opportunity.

Development of The Growing Project over 3 years, funded by National Lottery Communities Fund, and work on the next steps of [Forming a Resident's Association](#) with artist Ed Webb-Ingall, will give us the opportunity to forefront community-led programmes. Both projects focus on developing networks and connections across organisations and people working for social and environmental justice gaining support and further knowledge from business and community stakeholder positions.



Womanhood, 2020, by Jamie Crewe, printed by The Holodeck. Photo by Patrick Dandy.

## Create welcoming artistic spaces

We pride ourselves on providing a big welcome to all those who come to our space. However, we recognise that many do not come for various reasons and we have more work to do to create a fully inclusive and accessible venue.

Our gallery and studios are currently at Minerva Works, an industrial building once home to metal-working businesses. In 2009/10, we were the first public cultural organisation to set up space here, and have since been joined by many more, creating a vibrant cultural hub. Two fellow ACE NPOs inhabit spaces here, alongside other performing arts organisations, independent retail and several light-industrial fabricating businesses. An effective cluster and micro-ecology exists here, with each of the organisations using the services of others on the site.<sup>1</sup>

Our physical venue has served us well for a decade, however is becoming increasingly less suitable for our needs. Although our gallery and studios are currently on the first and second floor, we had access to service lifts when first moving in. Since then this facility has ceased working and because the building will be eventually demolished in a few years, the financial investment required to fix them is out of reach. This affects our accessibility to people, as well as the materials we can bring in and out of the space.

There is no in-built heating in our spaces. The studios were designed to overcome this, creating insulated closable spaces that can be easily heated, however our main gallery is cold, uninsulated and difficult to heat. This has a negative impact on our activity, restricting what we can reasonably programme in this space. Our short lease leaves us in a position where we cannot raise funds to make capital improvements and the site is earmarked for redevelopment in the near future.

Despite these limitations, we continue to create spaces that bring people together to experience art. During the past two years, we have instigated a green-sensing of the city, beginning with improving sites across Birmingham by growing food and creating green space in collaboration with people living in hostels. Together we have been designing, tending and nurturing these spaces, improving the living conditions at the hostels and developing new skills. Grand Union is introducing into these spaces artists and communities whose practice engages with ecology and sustainable growing projects, particularly within an urban environment, to offer solutions for our post-industrial landscape.

During 2020-21, whilst Covid has closed our gallery space, we have focused on developing more growing sites. In 2021-22 we will be working to develop more publicly accessible space with the same approach, working in collaboration with many partners in the local community to develop more green space together, designed in collaboration with artists and grown and tended in partnership.

Grand Union is working on an ambitious capital project, to develop a new cultural venue in Digbeth. We firmly believe that a strong artistic community is an essential part of an integrated city and that publicly accessible spaces dedicated to culture are crucial for both residents and visitors. Securing a new home aims to ensure that the cultural offer in Digbeth is retained, improved and embedded in its future. The aim for this venue will be to create an open and fully accessible cultural space that welcomes all to experience art through viewing gallery exhibitions, taking part in workshops, sharing food and enjoying green space outdoors. We will provide high quality, fully accessible, affordable artist studios, with opportunity for members of the public to visit behind the scenes. We aim to generate a socially responsible and sustainable business model that can also assist artists and people in vulnerable housing situations to make a living.

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<sup>1</sup> *Impact and Resilience of the Visual Arts sector in Digbeth, A report for Arts Council England* by Fourth Street, November 2019.



The Growing Project Harvest Dinner, 2019. Photo by Nina Bailie.

## Be a good - considerate/welcoming/ helpful - neighbour

Digbeth, just a few minutes walk from the main city train stations, is still an area filled with light industry, alongside creative communities and many social enterprises. It is labelled as a Digbeth Creative Cluster, in Greater Birmingham & Solihull Local Enterprise Partnership's Social Enterprise Zone and is also home to many charities, such as those providing vital services to people who have experienced homelessness and currently vulnerably housed people.

Grand Union is well embedded in this unique area of Birmingham, being based here for ten years and working with many different organisations close by. Grand Union was the first cultural organisation to move into Minerva Works, now a thriving hub for the arts.

We are well aware of our role in the regeneration of this area, however do not want to contribute to an unthoughtful approach that ends with rents rising and the displacement of the vibrant diverse community that makes this area what it is today. We are learning lessons from cities such as London, where this has been done to the detriment of artists and culture, and making steps to ensure that we, and the established communities around us, are valued by the city, the landowners and developers who will in the end be responsible for the way the area is regenerated.

Grand Union will continue to build key relationships with stakeholders. In the past four years, we have developed relationships with Homes England, Birmingham City Council's Planning Department, Stoford Development, Savills, Oval and Bruntwood who all have a stake in the way Digbeth will be formed. We have trustees who are key players in this sector and who help to give Grand Union's voice more traction and demonstrate the value that organisations like ours can really have. Our aim is to find ways to develop partnerships between the property sector and the communities here - including the cultural and social justice sectors - in order to create places that enable everyone to flourish. For example, we are a key member of Digbeth Future Access Group, initiated by Birmingham City Council, including local landowners, business owners and third sector organisations. We recently led on a proposal for a new lighting and way-finding scheme to improve street infrastructure in the area.

This is timely as the City Council embark on public consultation for their Future City Plan, the results of which will set the agenda for regeneration in the city centre and surrounding neighbourhoods. Grand Union has been well represented throughout Birmingham City Council's consultation process for their Future City Plan Birmingham 2024. Our Collaborative Programme Curator spoke at their recent panel discussion about the Cultural strand [City of Layers](#).

We recognise our interdependence on other organisations and communities and, through our programmes, will continue to weave connections between people - artists, communities, and businesses - in order to create more opportunities for people to feel the impact of art, whether through seeing, feeling or making. A good example of this work is the Harvest Dinner that took place in September 2019. The dinner was the culmination of The Growing Project at St. Anne's Hostel that year, bringing together residents of the hostel, local landowners, members of Crisis, artists, and the WMCA Mayor. Together we shared a three-course dinner, prepared from vegetables grown at St. Anne's, on tableware produced by members of Crisis at Modern Clay. Many rich conversations took place between people who might not normally ever meet, let alone share food together.

We work with artists who are politically and socially engaged and have focussed on those most under-represented. After having done this for a number of years, we have updated and formalised this in our equity and inclusion policy, as well as our organisational commitments due to be published later this year.

Environment is something that connects us all and forms a key part of our approach to programming. Grand Union has been using its cultural capital to support and create visible platforms for critically thinking and engaging across sectors and disciplines, pro-actively responding to urgent issues surrounding social and ecological justice both locally and globally. We have developed a new environmental policy and action plan to help ensure that we work towards making our impact upon our environment sustainable and friendly to all parts of our surrounding ecology.



The Growing Project, St. Anne's Hostel, 2019. Photo by Nina Bailie.

Part of our work over the next year will be thinking through how we effectively measure the impact our work has in different ways, to different people. It is important to understand the value for money our work has on the public purse, but there are numerous ways to assess and interpret that. We will work through what is most important to our organisation and aligned with our core values, asking ourselves if, for example:

- \* We can find a way to measure how much enrichment people take from our work?
- \* Did they enjoy it?
- \* What connections did they make that will influence their life and work going forward?
- \* How does our organisation work in collaboration to genuinely change the quality of life for local communities?

Our work is not a one-way relationship.

We will ask ourselves:

- \* What was the impact of our relationship with audiences or partners on us?
- \* How does the way we work impact the lives of the artists/freelancers we work with?
- \* How do their practice and working practices influence ours?
- \* How does everything we do then have an impact on environmental or social justice?

## Create the best working culture

2020 was Grand Union's 10th Anniversary, providing a perfect point to reflect on our work during the past decade. As an organisation, we often look at what makes Grand Union a good place to work, figuring out where there is room for improvement to inform our forward action plans. Whilst being a small, agile and responsive organisation, it is important that we take seriously our responsibilities when working with others so that no one is exploited.

During the last two years, the staff team has spent some dedicated time with a facilitator, discussing this in more detail to get to the heart of our values and enable us to articulate them publicly. Now articulated, our aim is to ensure these values permeate through all areas of our work and are recognised publicly. We aim to publish our values and commitments publicly in an artistic format later in 2021. This then clearly becomes the reference point for the way we develop and deliver our artistic programmes, our approach to partnerships and collaborations and how we administer and operate our organisation day-to-day. Most importantly it sets out our overall approach to working with people and our commitment to creating a safe and enjoyable working culture for all. We believe that Grand Union's trustees, staff team, studio holders, freelancers and volunteers being treated well is the key to ensuring this is continued for visitors and participants in our programmes. We aim for every relationship we enter into to be reciprocal in nature; this helps to identify the best partnerships and collaborations.

Our governing board of trustees is made up of ten professionals from different sectors and backgrounds. Together they use their expertise and experience to help guide and support the organisation to achieve its aims whilst ensuring - in collaboration with the staff team - that it runs smoothly, legally and ethically. Each quarter, the staff team reports to the trustees on the organisation's activity, including artistic programme, equality and inclusivity activity, financial management and topical issues as they arise. This gives the trustees an opportunity to interrogate, support and inform our activity, bringing much valued perspective and objectivity to our activities to make them the best they can be.

Grand Union's policies and action plans are reviewed by the board at



least annually, with input outside of board meetings with trustee and staff working groups. Over the next year we will continue to update our policies and action plans in line with new business planning and in response to the rapidly changing world around us during - and post - the Covid-19 pandemic.

Our staff team is made up of six people with different sets of expertise and experiences. We value every team member and aim to provide an open and reciprocal culture where everyone feels comfortable and respected to express their opinions, contribute ideas and ask for support. Each member of staff has the opportunity to develop elements of our artistic programme, with support where needed. As mentioned, over the last two years we have been working internally to identify and rethink how we operate in the world, both at Grand Union and externally. During the last 12 months we have been working with Jerwood Weston to look at how we develop our recruitment policies and procedures to be more inclusive. This has been an invaluable process and is continuing through an overhaul of our HR strategies, policies and procedures. We are also thinking through practically how we take steps to make our organisation much more accessible and inclusive to all of the people we work with, especially artists, freelancers, and participants, and how we measure this progress. This includes taking proactive steps to ensure the whole organisation, including board members, staff, freelancers, studio artists and collaborators, better reflects the population of Birmingham.

## Set firm our foundations

Grand Union has worked hard over the last decade to develop from a small, project funded voluntary-run organisation to an Arts Council England National Portfolio Organisation with a relatively steady financial base. Our income comes from a range of sources and therefore enables our business model to be flexible and responsive to different situations, including weathering the Covid-19 pandemic without having to make redundancies.

However, we are currently based in a building that is no longer suitable for our needs and which has a short term lease. In order to create a safe and enjoyable environment for our artistic programmes, for artists, for staff, collaborators and audiences, we need to find a suitable venue. We have spent the last four years working towards the redevelopment of Junction Works for this purpose - a beautiful Grade II listed building just a couple of hundred yards from Minerva Works. This project is currently in the balance and the board and staff team are exploring different options should it not come forward.

We feel confident in our abilities to develop a successful capital project and have identified the things that are important to us to be able to include in a venue. We have learned so much during the period, for example we have:

- \* Developed a brilliant set of relationships with local public bodies, developers, architects, construction firms and the communities around us.
- \* Successfully gained funding and built good relationships with funders.
- \* Developed our board's and staff team's skills and knowledge in this area.
- \* Identified other property opportunities and a range of models that could meet Grand Union's needs.
- \* Identified and developed partnerships with relevant artists that can work through the design process with us, ensuring a level of critical support and relevance.

Once settled on the best capital option, the next five year period will see us continue to develop our business model within it to be more financially and environmentally sustainable. We do not want to grow our business for the sake of growth, but stabilise it so that we can be flexible and responsive, expanding and contracting as needed and finding the best ways to support better those we work with. The venue will become an important asset in this business model, however we will seriously consider the impact of Covid-19 on arts organisations with similar models during the last twelve months and how we might insulate ourselves from a similar scenario.

We will continue to forefront our artistic programme in this process and within the new business model, to challenge conventional arts venue capital projects and ensure we create a useful space for our local community. We want to further develop our partnership with Spring Housing Association, working together to find pathways into employment and training for the local vulnerably housed communities we jointly support.



Light Works, The Empire Remains Shop - Birmingham, 2019, by Cooking Sections.  
Photo: Handover Agency.



IN A HOSTILE  
ENVIRONMENT,  
RESPECTABILITY  
WILL NOT SAVE YOU

**Grand Union**

Grand Union Arts CIO  
Reg. no. 1184473

[www.grand-union.org.uk](http://www.grand-union.org.uk)

No Mudder Country Here, 2020, by Alberta Whittle. Photo: David Rowan.