

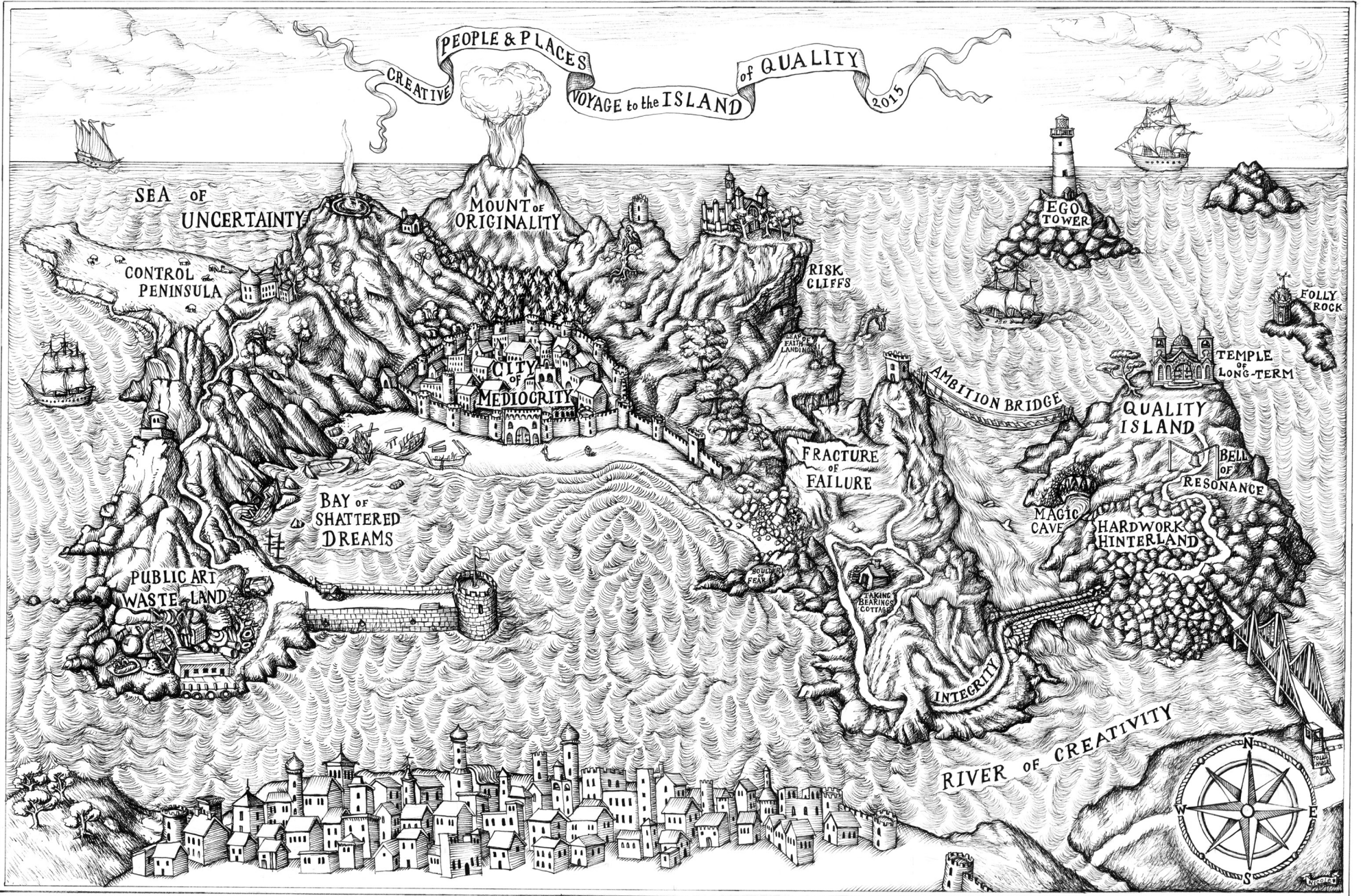
PEOPLE & PLACES

of QUALITY

CREATIVE

VOYAGE to the ISLAND

2015



# Taking Bearings

On 25th February 2015, producers, artists, project managers and funders from Creative People and Places met in the Rugby Club of St. Helens, Merseyside to explore how we nurture, test, assess and understand artistic quality in our work. Developed and funded by Arts Council England, Creative People and Places is a programme of projects in 21 areas across the country where people have previously had fewer opportunities to become directly involved with the arts.

The provocations and discussions throughout the day showed us that definitions of artistic quality are particularly contested within collaborative and participatory projects. Whilst the day did illustrate the subjective and quixotic nature of quality, it also proved useful in identifying the need for a common sense of purpose, for transparent processes of decision-making and assessment and for a commitment to learning through the exchange of expertise. Merging Francois Matarasso's five criteria of artistic quality<sup>1</sup> with guidelines developed by bait in South East Northumberland,<sup>2</sup> the elements of artistic quality were mapped in St. Helens through reflection on a range of

the participants' memories of particularly significant cultural experiences. What emerged was a tentative taxonomy of characteristics, which might loosely be termed our 'incomplete glossary of quality'. This glossary forms the background for *Taking Bearings*, a toolkit to be employed before, during and after a process of developing a collaborative and participatory art project.

We have devised these prompts collectively to be used for 'a meeting with oneself', or as a device to enable more open conversation with participants, stakeholders and collaborators.<sup>3</sup> Taking bearings at key points in a collaborative, participatory process of art making or producing allows for the intuitive nature of decision-making to be shared and challenged – potentially enabling those involved to reaffirm a commitment to quality – however that might be defined.

**Claire Doherty**

<sup>1</sup> Published in a revised text for the St. Helens event 'WEIGHING POETRY: Thinking about Artistic Quality' which was originally commissioned by The Arts Council Ireland / An Chomhairle Ealaíon (Dublin) in August 2000, and subsequently incorporated into that organisation's grant assessments.

<sup>2</sup> The bait quality framework, devised with Mark Robinson (Thinking Practice) is available at <http://baittime.to/review>

<sup>3</sup> Writer Sarah Butler and artist Nicole Mollett have been commissioned by Creative People and Places to creatively map and respond to its achievements, challenges and the questions it generates. They will be exploring this through their More Than 100 Stories project and here also contribute to Taking Bearings in the form of the map which forms the cover of this booklet (Nicole Mollett) and the short story overleaf (Sarah Butler).

# Journeying

She left on a Wednesday, with a bag stuffed full of prepositions she wasn't sure about. For. With. From. To. Towards. At. About. Through. They were heavy and awkward to carry, but she wasn't sure which she needed yet, so she packed the lot, shoved them in amongst her conditions – freedom, risk, ambition, permission, time; her questions; and all the things she knew and cared about.

At this point, she was on her own, but there would be others, there had to be – some would walk with her; some would stand in her way; some would follow her like shadows, off to one side. She had packed the questions for them.

It didn't take long to reach the edge of the forest, which was dark and tangled and full of whispers. There were a lot of words to be afraid of and she knew they liked to hide amongst the trees, waiting for people like her.

What she hadn't expected was the cliff: a sharp steep drop into what looked like nothing. Once she saw it, she knew that there was no option but to step off. She was glad of her heavy, bulging bag; glad of the people she had gathered along her way, who had answered her questions and asked her their own; glad to step out onto what might be a tightrope and might be nothing but air.

**Sarah Butler**

# Route Planning

To be used when you start to plot your route with your collaborators and stakeholders, alone or in group meetings, to navigate the path ahead.

N

Where are you headed and how would you define what the ultimate destination looks like?

W

What obstacles do you think you might meet and how will you overcome them together?



Why are you going (answer both individually and organisationally)?

E

What do you want from your collaborators, companions and participants and what do you think they might want from you?

S

# Packing

To be used before you embark, collaborate, invite in participants or start to plan your route. This is about what you are taking with you or the work you need to do before you start.

N

What skills, knowledge and experiences will you take with you?

W

What pitfalls are you going to be looking out for based on previous experience and is there anyone you need to ask for advice before you embark?



What skills, knowledge and experience do you need to seek out?

E

Who might you rely on to be active collaborators and what are the limits of that collaboration?

S

# Re-routing

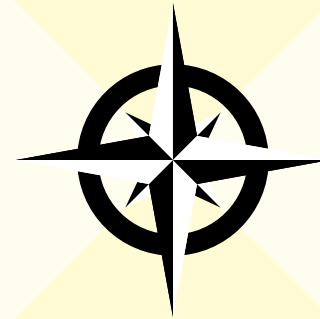
To be used when you hit an obstacle, go down a cul-de-sac or disagree with your collaborators on what route to take.

N

Is the obstacle due to a disagreement about where you are headed? Can you revisit what success might look like?

W

Anything else you might you do?  
Anything else? Repeat 10 times.



Have you looked at this from another direction?

E

Is there anyone who could help, or someone who has encountered this before?

S

# Arriving

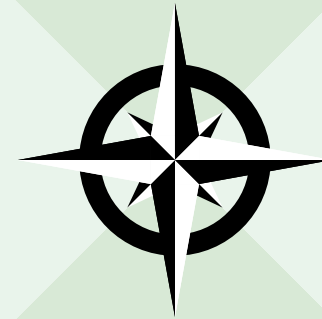
To be used on completion of the project or at the end of each phase.

N

Is this where you expected to be?

W

What will you leave behind?



What got lost on the way?

E

What will you take away?

S

# An Incomplete (and Contradictory) Glossary of the Qualities of Artistic Quality

**Integrity** is to be found in authentic encounters; it allows for connections to form; resonates; strikes a chord; is grounded; grows; rises from the ground up; allows space for the unplanned. Integrity builds ownership. Integrity feels secure; welcome; uncomfortable. Integrity is appreciated and remembered.

**Resonance** occurs through connection; it starts a conversation; it captures the spirit, the sound, the feel of a place. Resonance is of the land; opens eyes, drops jaws and induces tears; starts a story and catches you unaware; crosses boundaries and creates a shared space.

**Originality** is beyond innovation. It is the new and the playful. It reimagines and reinterprets; speculates and enquires. Originality means that the experience is individual, indefinable by what has been before.

**Technical proficiency** requires patience, time and labour. It is in the detail, the choreography, the craft, skill and demonstrable talent. Technical proficiency rises to its setting; is quietly confident; is brash and bold; is invisible and seamless.

**Ambition** is in the leap of faith taken by those who have the most to lose. It raises the game; takes you out of your comfort zone; achieves what we never thought possible. Ambition tests boundaries and intellect, budgets, expectations and tempers. Ambition feels unnerving, new, bold, and induces envy.

**Magic** is unnameable. Magic immerses you in the moment; induces curiosity; sets you on a new journey; sets a charge; distracts; frustrates; pleasures; transforms; catches your breath; plays havoc. Magic is mischievous; childish and childlike.

**Long-term impact** results from trust and faith in process; from passion, mischief and coming together. Long-term impact means it was worth all that effort - the talking, the time, the support, the patience, the nerve. It results from provoking thought, grows communities of interest, resists vandalism or encourages and antagonises. Long-term impact is to be found beyond the surveys and the data, in the reoccurring dream or unanswered question.



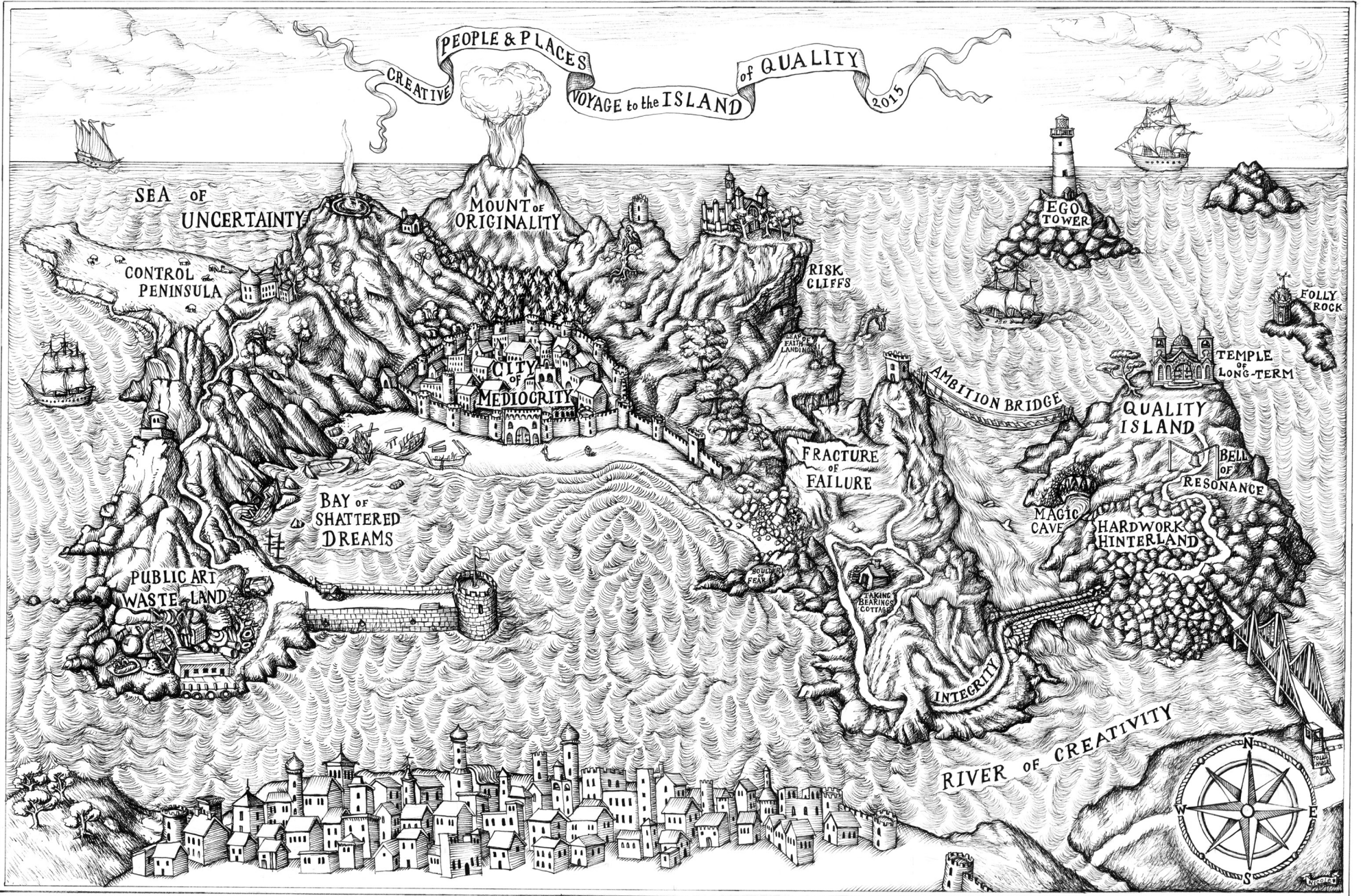
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SEA OF UNCERTAINTY

MOUNT OF ORIGINALITY

EGO TOWER

CONTROL PENINSULA

RISK CLIFFS

FOLLY ROCK

CITY OF MEDIOCRITY

TEMPLE OF LONG-TERM

AMBITION BRIDGE

QUALITY ISLAND

FRACTURE OF FAILURE

BELL OF RESONANCE

BAY OF SHATTERED DREAMS

MAGIC CAVE

HARDWORK HINTERLAND

PUBLIC ART WASTE LAND

INTEGRITY

RIVER OF CREATIVITY

