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# Fanning the flame - a process-relational view on creative hub practices for rural development

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## ABSTRACT

While there is growing evidence of the possible socio-economic contributions of creative hubs, how these contributions are achieved is underresearched. The research question 'how can creative hubs become entrepreneurial anchor organisations for rural development' is answered through making visible the internal workings of a UK rural creative hub. Applying the conceptual lens of entrepreneurial placemaking, the research investigates the interplay of agency, places and contexts, drawing on socio-materiality to demonstrate how entrepreneurial activities are enacted in rural creative hubs and contribute to rural development. Our research applied ethnographic methods to capture entrepreneurial practices from the perspective of studio holders in a rural creative hub, *Artistheaven*. We identify four subsets of entrepreneurial practices – event making, exhibiting, shelving, crafting – that constitute 'rural creative hub-bing', the label for the complex set of practices realizing the becoming of the creative hub. The study extends the entrepreneurial placemaking literature by making visible the ways in which agents draw on socio-materiality to enact temporary entrepreneurial places in rural settings, thus, contributing to the rural entrepreneurship literature. Policy implications discuss the relevance of creative hub management and pro-active local and regional government action for rural development. The article contributes to rural entrepreneurship and entrepreneurship-as-practice conversations.

## ARTICLE HISTORY

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SDG 8: Decent work and economic growth; SDG 11: Sustainable cities and communities

## Introduction

While about 45% of the world's population lives in rural areas, their economic productivity and social activities are reported as lower than in urban and metropolitan areas (UNESCO 2021). Hence, rural rejuvenation has become a key policy goal. Despite many misconceptions, over 80% of the rural economy in European countries consists of businesses that are not land-based (i.e. farming, forestry, fishery, mining) and operate in a wide array of diverse sectors (House of Lords 2019; Ward and Phillipson 2021). However, successful bottom-up initiatives mostly occur in isolation, and we know too little about how to accelerate rural economic development as, unsurprisingly, one-size-fits-all solutions do not work, partially due to the diverse nature of rural areas, (agricultural land, deprived coastal communities, villages and urban-fringe zones) and their contexts (Gaddefors and Anderson 2019; Turner et al. 2021).

Rural areas are typically viewed through a lens of deprivation, particularly due to lower availability of infrastructure and services (including provision of banking and post office services, public transport) (Hill and Mole 2022). However, these conditions also affect

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entrepreneurial activity, leading to lower numbers of local and regional customers and competition, less pressure to innovate, limited provision of business support and workspaces and lower access to skilled workers (Bosworth and Turner 2018; Hill and Mole 2022; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). In response, recent insights into rural development have shifted from an economic focus towards a broader socio-economic perspective, acknowledging that economic and social relations in rural areas are deeply intertwined (McAreavey 2022; Tillmar et al. 2021).

Rural entrepreneurship research focuses on ventures in rural locations, embedded in the social and material reality of the rural (Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig 2015; Melin and Gaddefors 2023; Tillmar et al. 2021). In the context of the transition from the former growth to a sustainability and values focus, we need to make visible the existing sustainable strategies in rural communities that already enact the values and sustainable ways of operating to learn from these approaches (Kallis et al. 2018; Rockstroem 2015; Tillmar et al. 2021). In this discussion, the role of anchor organizations, which are traditionally larger organizations offering employment and supply chain coordination for the local population, is gaining attention. Some more recent studies identified smaller anchor organizations to deliver social and environmental benefits to their rural communities, shifting power and agency to local communities (McAreavey 2022). In rural areas, often several small organizations act in a strategically aligned way, but how they help achieve rural socio-economic development is not yet well understood (Guinan et al. 2020; McAreavey 2022).

The UK creative industries (comprising nine industry subsectors, including crafts, visual and performing arts, DCMS 2020) are a key growth sector for rural areas and contribute to socio-economic development and community revitalization (Bell and Jayne 2010; Mahon, McGrath, and Ó Laoire 2018; Prince 2017). However, we lack details of *how* this growth contribution is achieved. There is evidence that creative professionals and firms gain benefits from residing in rural clusters in physical buildings, offering small studios and shared spaces (Boix, Hervás-Oliver, and De Miguel-Molina 2015; Escalona-Orcao et al. 2016; Merrell et al. 2021; Pratt 2021; Pratt, Tarek, and Gill 2019; Velez-Ospina et al. 2023). Micro-cluster research on small concentrations of 50 or less creatives argues that greater proximity between professionals in hubs increases productivity and innovation, via knowledge exchange and reduced supply chains promoting co-location of creative professionals (Avdikos 2019; Bouncken, Kraus, and Martinez-Peres 2020; Merrell et al. 2022; Pratt 2021). However, many studies have overlooked the impact of creative hubs on local and regional development (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). As a consequence, the rural creative hub literature currently lacks a nuanced understanding of *how* studio holders experience co-location and *how* the dynamics of tenants, managers and customers create 'places' that work for income generation and socio-economic development (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). Re-framing rural creative hubs as 'anchor institutions' and 'place makers' (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; McAreavey 2022) we ask: How are creative hubs becoming entrepreneurial anchor organizations for rural development?

We adopt entrepreneurship-as-practice (EAP) theory to investigate rural entrepreneurship using rural creative hubs as context, focusing on the interplay of contexts, agency and places to extend insights into rural entrepreneurship as a sociomaterial activity (Gartner 2007; Gherardi 2022; Hill 2018; Hunt et al. 2021; Melin and Gaddefors 2023; Sklaviniti and Steyaert 2020; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020). The EAP theoretical approach, rooted in process-relational ontology, is most appropriate to examine micro-exchanges, the mundane daily doings and copings, to theorize the detail of less-observed iterative situated activities in SMEs (Gherardi 2019). Rural creative hubs, with their self-contained site with visible small spatial units and open areas, are ideally positioned to study the interplay of agency, places and contexts at the micro-level. By analysing the distributed agency for entrepreneurial placemaking between hub directors, resident artists with studio spaces (from now on subsumed as 'resident artists') and the material environment, we respond directly to the Special Issue Call to view rural entrepreneurship as activities that 'engage with rural spaces, communities, resources, values, histories and imageries' and offer suggestions for how to rejuvenate rural premises and locations (Tillmar et al. 2021).

Empirically, the research employed ethnographic methods (interviews, observations, website and social media content analysis) to capture the internal workings of the purposefully chosen exploratory case study of a UK rural creative hub *Artistheaven* (AH, a social enterprise) located in a building near the centre of Greenvillage (Stake 1995; Yin 2018). Our research takes the perspectives of resident artists, following existing EAP research (Hill 2021; Pratt 2021). We analyze deeply the artists' and online textual narratives and theorize these mundane discursive manifestations as practices to identify ways they enact this rural creative hub (Gartner 2007; Gherardi 2022; Hamilton 2011). The research illustrates indicatively the workings of rural creative hubs by detailing their daily 'doings and sayings'. In particular, we identify a complex set of practices we call 'rural creative hub-bing', consisting of four sub-practices ('event making', 'exhibiting', 'shelving' and 'crafting'). These practices enact the hub as a rural anchor organization creating 12 temporary entrepreneurial places. 'Fanning the flame' refers to the continuous enactment of these practices sustaining this hub as a rural anchor organization. These practices contribute to rural socio-economic development and create income for resident artists, the social enterprise and the wider rural community.

This article's research makes three contributions. First, acknowledging that rural entrepreneurship is entrepreneurship embedded within a rural area's networks (Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig 2015), our research contributes to the rural entrepreneurship literature by applying an entrepreneurship-as-practice approach (EAP) and explores the practices of 'rural creative hub-bing' as an example, adding the performative lens to the existing rural entrepreneurship research field (Teague et al. 2021). Using the example of a rural creative hub, we demonstrate how this hub's continuous enactment enriches local networks through a series of micro-exchanges, which 'fan the flame' of entrepreneurial activity. Conceptualizing rural entrepreneurship as a multifaceted socio-material activity, we contribute to the changing paradigm of entrepreneurship and rural development (Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig 2015; Melin and Gaddefors 2023; Tillmar et al. 2021). Our study provides insights into *how* pre-existing rural premises can be rejuvenated as multiple-purpose organizations that contribute in many ways to the local community and socio-economic development. Using practices as a conceptual lens allows us to make visible how embeddedness has to be enacted, and to demonstrate how to extend spatial limitations via entrepreneurial placemaking. Thus, the research hones in on the 'becoming' nature of *Artistheaven's* entrepreneuring, providing insights into how hubs could act as anchor organizations for rural development. In doing so, we are responding to the special issue's call for papers to reflect on the 'changing paradigm of entrepreneurship and rural development' (Hill 2018, 2022; Tillmar et al. 2021).

Second, we contribute to the rural development literature theoretically by investigating rural anchor organizations using a process-relational lens as *entrepreneurial* anchor organizations (McAreevey 2022; Phillipson et al. 2019). In doing so, we offer much needed fine-grained detail on how rural anchor organizations need to be researched and conceptualized as ongoing enactments of socio-material relations. This performative approach, via EAP theoretical framing, is helpful to show the workings of an organization becoming an anchor organization.

Third, applying the EAP framing, we extend the concept of entrepreneurial placemaking beyond one individual's activities to collective sets of situated activities enacted simultaneously by multiple actors in rural contexts (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). Our research suggests a focus shift from processes, as Hill, Manning, and Frost (2021) discuss, to home in on entrepreneurial practices that happen within a field (seen as arenas of power, Bourdieu 1990). In this way, we demonstrate how rural development can be identified by the number of practices agents within a small field enact, in our research, with the example of a rural creative hub. In doing so, our findings contribute to existing EAP research on creative practices and answer calls for a more nuanced and detailed understanding of rural development with a more agentic focus (Hill, Manning and Frost 2021; McAreevey 2022; Munoz and Branzei 2021; Phillipson et al. 2019; Reid 2021; Tillmar et al. 2021). Thus, we identify entrepreneurial practices of and for rural development, adding to the body of EAP research. By extending the lens of entrepreneurial placemaking to entrepreneurial activities in creative hubs by applying an EAP perspective, we

direct attention to *how* places are co-created and maintained via entrepreneurial practices. Put simply, our research demonstrates how practical coping generates iterative sets of entrepreneurial activities due to the limitations of the spatial arrangements of the creative hub (Ge, Hamilton, and Haag 2023; Langley and Tsoukas 2017).

## Theoretical framing

### *Rural entrepreneurship and the contribution of entrepreneurship-as-practice theoretical framing*

Entrepreneurial success is arguably contingent upon the ability to acquire resources and exploit opportunities, and research has demonstrated that contexts (in our case, operating in a rural area) can significantly impact these processes (Gaddefors and Anderson 2019; Korsgaard et al. 2022). Contexts can be differentiated into various elements, such as social networks or institutional contexts (Welter 2011); the role of spatial context in establishing and sustaining entrepreneurial activity is under-researched, particularly for scholarship with a rural focus (Gaddefors and Anderson 2019; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015).

Applying the resource-based view, Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig (2015) distinguish between *entrepreneurship in the rural* and *rural entrepreneurship*, arguing that while the former implies a profit-oriented embeddedness in the rural location, such that economic factors could drive the entrepreneur to relocate elsewhere, the latter entails entrepreneurship founded on, and deeply embedded in local settings and resources, to the extent that even economic rationality would not drive a relocation. Rural entrepreneurship engages with the rural setting because the businesses draw on local resources, in a way that entrepreneurship in the rural does not.

While there is extant research on what is different for rural firms, their size and insights into their contexts and behaviours, we know less on the shared practices that lead to rural development (Phillipson et al. 2019; Ward and Phillipson 2021). A practice-theory approach, EAP, can address the question of *how* firms enact these elements (Ge, Hamilton, and Haag 2023; Hill 2018; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020). This detail is needed to develop insights into daily and mundane firm behaviours that contribute towards solutions for rural socio-economic development.

The rural business and rural entrepreneurship literature sees embeddedness (drawing on both local and regional networks, suppliers, staff and customers) as critical (Bosworth and Turner 2018; Kalantaridis and Bika 2006; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). This last conceptualization is helpful as it assists in categorizing creative hubs in rural areas as embedded organizations; hence, this article refers to 'rural creative hubs'. Recently, businesses have been increasingly relocating to rural areas with regional or even inter-/national contacts (Hill and Mole 2022; Kalantaridis and Bika 2006; Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). These in-migrant entrepreneurs are drawn to the location and may become attached to and feel responsible for it. This attachment can shape their approach to their business and lead them to 'engag[e] in forms of entrepreneurship that use the social relations and meanings of the place, for example through local volunteers, markets and networks, to create alternative forms of organising that serve local development purposes' (Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig 2015, 14). Drawing on local resources to create new ventures creates value, which can in turn enrich the location – a process named 'placial embeddedness' (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015). EAP provides the needed theoretical framing to make these internal workings visible in their situatedness and sociomateriality (Gherardi 2019; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020). The unit of analysis in this research is practices, hence, the practices we are interested in are conceptualized as entrepreneurial to make their contributions to socio-economic development visible.

### ***Rural development and anchor organisations***

Across Europe and beyond, economic austerity policies have resulted in the ‘hollowing out of the state’ with rural areas being depleted of key public services (Jessop 2013; May et al. 2020; Plunkett Foundation 2019). In this narrative, third-sector organizations are seen as critical for rural revitalization, supported by long standing knowledge that engagement in social structures is helpful for creating belonging and community cohesion (Calo-Blanco et al. 2017; Quinn et al. 2021; Uphoff 1993). Bottom-up community solutions with a ‘self-help’ approach include community run shops, which are often social enterprises, embedded in and run by community volunteers (Plunkett Foundation 2022; Richter 2019). In the urban regeneration literature, anchor organizations are often portrayed as large-scale organizations with a strong influence on local employment, regional strategic direction and infrastructure development (Smallbone, Kitching, and Blackburn 2015). However, in rural areas, ‘there are multiple, smaller scale place-based organizations that together make a strategic economic and social contribution to the locality known as “anchor institutions”’ (McAreavey 2022, 234). These anchor organisations have multiple roles, including service delivery and facility offers (tool borrowing, for example), and support each other through networks to bring about ‘social, economic and environmental benefits to their community’ (ibid. 230). Anchor institutions can play a role in shaping their local areas, and are seen as pivotal to contributing to place-based community development (Chris and Gordon 2018; Guinan et al. 2020). We regard rural creative hubs as potentially important anchor institutions that bring local people together, for social and economic purposes and to incubate further socio-economic activity. What the literature does not yet report on is *how* these smaller organizations work and create success to provide detailed insights into their activities, staffing and how they make social relations work. EAP provides the needed theoretical framing to make visible these internal workings in their situatedness and sociomateriality (Gherardi 2019; Thompson, Verduijn, and Gartner 2020).

Rural micro-settings, hence, are appropriate for investigating rural development for two reasons: First, they are easier to study because of the lower density of organizations and their community grounding and networks. Second, non-profit organizations in rural areas have a longer history of experimenting with how to run such an organization that has ‘anchoring effects’ (Jackson and McInroy 2017). Rooting our research in process-relational ontology, the rural hub setting becomes a site of resident and visitors’ interactions, enacting iterative sets of interlinked activities that make up the daily doings of what a creative hub does (Gherardi 2019). In our approach we apply the lens of ‘entrepreneurial placemaking’ to unpack the workings of a rural creative hub, as the next section explains.

### ***Sociomateriality, places, and entrepreneurial placemaking***

Sociomateriality is an approach for studying matter, to include everything beyond humans, their relationships, behaviours, emotions and cognitions (Barad 2003; Leonardi 2017; Melin and Gaddefors 2023; Moura and de Souza Bizpo 2020). Rooted in process-relational ontology (the relational understanding of the world), this approach emphasizes that human actions cannot be investigated and understood without understanding the role of matter or materials (Barad 2003; Scott and Orlikowski 2014). While not a theory in itself, sociomateriality can be seen as a group of theories that share philosophical assumptions helpful for researchers to reveal the understanding of organizational and shared group practices (Moura and de Souza Bizpo 2020). To identify practices and their meaning to agents in the field, capturing sociomateriality is an essential element of the research, as practices are inherently sociomaterial (Gherardi 2019). This means practices cannot be identified and understood without the material and immaterial resources they draw upon. Material resources include tangible and visible objects as much as invisible intangible elements, from the internet to ideas or software and electronic files. Researching with this approach is helpful to make visible sufficient detail of how the social reality of



entrepreneurship, entrepreneuring, is constructed and at which analytical levels entanglement of agency and materiality happens (micro-, meso- or macro-level). The most suitable methods for this kind of research are ethnographic methods, including observation and photographs, in addition to interviews and informal documentary analysis (Hill 2022; Moura and de Souza Bizpo 2020).

Place-based engagement has seen a renaissance in European policies and entrepreneurship studies (Alkon and Traugot 2008; Gaddefors and Anderson 2019; Korsgaard, Müller, and Welter 2021). Other disciplines, such as spatial planning, architecture, sociology, environment(al) psychology, geography, and organizational studies, have a longer history of engaging in the space/place debate, differentiating the conceptualization of 'space' (as a three-dimensional container or a point on a map) from process ontology-based conceptualizations of 'place' (as networks, social interactions of people and symbolic and emotional attachments to locations) (Cilliers and Timmermans 2014; Courage 2021; Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Massey 2005). Too often place is used interchangeably with location, the latter referring to the point on a map with longitude and latitude values. Space in its original meaning refers to the astronomical (relating to space exploration with astronauts) meaning of space, and is often used in policy and planning literature with the three-dimensional meaning of location, adding an imaginary height to the two-dimensional location on a map expressed with longitude and latitude.

The academic discussion on 'place' has many aspects, such as 'sense of place', 'place attachment' and 'place identity' (Cartel, Kibler, and Dacin 2022; Rae 2020; Readhead and Bika 2022). Especially relevant for this article is a recent re-conceptualization in the planning literature regarding a 'sense of place' with a focus on community-place-individual relations and the review on the links between creative development and place from a resource-based view (Afsari, Stupples, and Kiddle 2022; Erfani 2022). 'Creative placemaking' in the literature focuses on how creative activities more generally can improve the daily experiences of communities (Courage 2021).

Our conceptualization of 'places', applying a process-relational lens, focuses on the relational enactment of elements of socio-materiality in entrepreneurial practices in a rural location, using the example of a rural creative hub. We conceptualize 'places' as socially constructed entities in a continuous organizing of becoming, using the plural of 'place' (Courage 2021; Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). Both, the plural and the organizing of 'becoming' indicate the nature of places as instantiations of ongoing socio-material relations that need enacting to gain temporary reality. Put simply, 'places' serve as a label for interactions between people and people and materiality. As part of meaning-making, humans attribute emotions to a physical or online location while interacting with other humans and materiality. Place-users enact 'places', acting as places co-creators (see Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). In other words, placemaking is an open process of 'becoming', socio-material in nature, that is drawing on assets (people, ideas, technology and other material elements).

A fine-grained analysis of how resident artists and management enact 'entrepreneurial placemaking' is facilitated when opening the mind to the socio-material quality of all practices (Cooren 2020; Gherardi 2019). Mundane tools, physical micro-locations in a building and simple relationships gain more significance in the deeper analysis of how hubs 'work'. The notion of 'becoming' in the ontology of becoming implies that participation in this placemaking process changes all participants, in line with a strong process-theoretical approach (Hill 2022; Langley and Tsoukas 2017).

This article regards entrepreneurial places (always in plural) as negotiated ongoing fields of interaction with fluid and fuzzy boundaries (Jevnaker and Hill 2024; Hill et al. 2021). Interaction within a field changes the field agents and their field positions or social positionings (Langley and Haridimos 2017). This means their enactment of the 'rules of the game' changes them, and they can change these rules dependent on their social positioning (Bourdieu 1990; Hill 2018). For rural creative hubs this means the social positionings and arenas of power of hub users (resident artists and directors) and visitors overlap and both influence place-making. Hence, we ask 'How can creative hubs become entrepreneurial anchor organizations for rural development?'



## Methods

### *Research design and case selection*

The study adopts a process-relational ontology` (Chia and Holt 2006) with a focus on identifying situated entrepreneurial activities (Pret, Shaw, and Drakopoulou Dodd 2016), conceptualizing practices as units of analysis. The research design strategy combines a number of ethnographic methods to capture entrepreneurial practices, including their sociomaterial nature (Gherardi 2019; Hill 2022; Moura and de Souza Bizpo 2020) in a purposefully selected revelatory exploratory case study, which is a particularly useful means of developing theory (Eisenhardt and Graebner 2007; Stake 1995; Yin 2018). This creative hub is a revelatory case study, as it has typical features of many creative hubs (open and closed studios, retail area, workshop space) and unique features – how these spatial units are used. These features made the hub a relevant case to demonstrate entrepreneurial placemaking with benefits for rural development. This hub initially reminded the lead author of the literature on rural creative hubs as discussed by Cowie, Thompson, and Rowe (2013); Merrell et al. (2021), and Hill, Manning, and Frost (2021) (Figure 1).

A wealth of data was produced that revealed insights into the interplay of agency, contexts and places, giving detailed and rich empirical accounts of human and material agency (Melin and Gaddefors 2023; Verduijn et al. 2022). The material set-up allows the study to identify how typical material features are enacted to create a creative hub setting. Put simply, there is a significant synergy between the business case and the data used for the research with the researched phenomenon of entrepreneurial practices as units of analysis. Despite these typical aspects, a hub's set-up is also a unique assemblage of site structures (in our case, material conditions of older buildings, with closed and open studios, see Figure 2), combined with a variety of craft products on offer (including visual art, textile, photography, printing, wood-work, jewellery making) and resident artists with different backgrounds (hobby artists, full-time artists with degrees in Fine Arts, and self-trained local people) infused with a – typical and unique at the same time – set-up of informal and formal social relations rooted in the rural village setting. Typical are the relationships that result from the co-location of creative professionals in a hub (Hill 2021; Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Merrell et al. 2021). Unique is the material set-up and how these relationships are enacted due to this set-up. Thus, the practices of



Figure 1. Artistheaven Room 1 from the entrance.

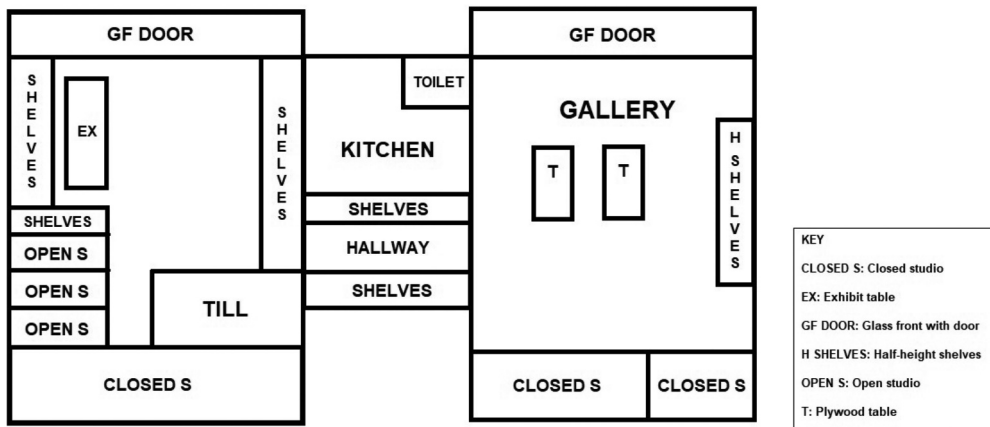


Figure 2. The creative hub building site *Artistheaven*.

maintaining the hub's activities and relationships make it suitable to study how the interplay of contexts, sociomateriality and hub arrangements create a contribution to rural development.

### **The case study site**

*Artistheaven* is located in *Greenvillage* (both pseudonyms), in a UK rural setting, and is a non-profit organization, a community interest company with three directors, who are also resident artists, founded by Kelly in 2019. Greenvillage came to the lead author's attention as a village, which surrounded *Artistheaven* and the way it struggled with integrating and interacting with the hub. Two of the directors left for studies and returned to the village, whereas one has always lived in the village (we do not explicitly analyse gender in this research). Kelly is the lead and most active director, and collaborates with Helene and Sonia as co-directors, all of whom are originally from the village. Resident artists' (7) contracts require them to take on till-duty on some weekdays and on a weekend once every 2 months. Two artists share a studio. AH's influential stakeholders are:

- An online artist network, called AWN, the directors joined and then led on, based on the advice of the lead author,
- The Parish Council,
- A recently founded social enterprise run by a recently migrated business consultant, the local Chamber of Commerce and the village residents.

The hub follows a business co-location model aimed to foster business-to-customer relationships that attract visitors to buy goods and experience art through workshops and visiting temporary exhibitions. Artists sell goods and exhibit their work, resident artists can break out of isolation from working at home, it has some 'honeypot' functions and many more offers (Cowie, Thompson, and Rowe 2013). Over time, the hub has developed multiple income streams through:

- Renting shelf-space to local and regional artists for a small monthly fee;
- Renting exhibition space in room 2 'gallery' for fortnightly fees;
- Taking 30% of all sales made in AH, including by exhibiting professionals;
- Room rental fee for creative skills workshops;

- One-off or monthly fee for using co-working space; daily usage fee for co-working outside of workshop times;
- Renting equipment by the hour.

### **Researcher positioning**

The lead author, as a researcher, gathered the data. Their explicit field positionality was as a researcher interested in creative industries and a hobby creative maker with an open mind for the challenges creative practitioners face (field as arena of power, Bourdieu 1990). This social positioning helped to address this power imbalance and create a partially shared perspective of making and crafting. Using participant observation during hub opening hours, the process-relational lens enabled the exploration of collaborations between creative professionals as unfolding in real-world entrepreneuring (Hill 2021; Jevnaker 2005; Langley and Tsoukas 2017). Multiple visits to the site (including involvement in hub activities) ensured the lead author was fully immersed in the field, primarily acting as a participant observer, shadowing the work of the hub managers and users during their working days and at events, foregrounding the benefits and activities of operating in a creative hub (Dumont 2022; Tummons 2017; Vásquez, Brummans, and Groleau 2012).

On occasions, the lead author was positioned as an 'observant participant', which involved helping with small tasks, including operating the till and overseeing the gift shop for short periods of time (Seim 2021). Honing in on mundane iterative entrepreneurial activities helped to reconstruct and openly reflect upon challenges and experiences as they emerged in open conversations between creative professionals and the lead author, supported by observations (Cunliffe and Scaratti 2017). The process-relational lens is applied to the narratives of creatives and the lead author's observations of their doing, saying and reflecting. The mutual trust in the relationships grew over time, and allowed for more informal and deeper exchanges with research participants.

### **Ethical considerations**

Approval from the Human Research Ethics Committee of the university where the lead author was based at the time was obtained before commencing the empirical research. Explicit informed written consent was gained by artists and hub directors to interview and quote them anonymously and to observe the hub activities, following the ethical standards of the Association of the Social Anthropologists (2021). They were advised that the interview would be recorded and transcribed, and that they would be required to agree to this in order for the recording to go ahead. Research participants knew at all times that they could withdraw from the study without giving any reasons. Outside of the interviews, observations made of artists and directors were recorded in note form in a research diary, in which vignettes were produced. Incidental visitors to the hubs or events observed were on request informed about the research. In these cases, observations were only recorded in the research diary and no personal information was obtained or recorded. These visitors have not been quoted nor have their words been paraphrased in any part of this manuscript, instead only helping to provide the lead researcher with further context (Association of the Social Anthropologists of the UK 2021; Bell, Harley, and Bryman 2019).

### **Data gathering**

The research design applies a combination of ethnographic research types (focused, eclectic, *ad hoc*, Hill 2022) and ethnographic data gathering methods. Research was conducted face-to-face and online with associated online research methods (Cyron 2022; Robert 2020). We answer the call by

Champenois, Lefebvre, and Ronteau (2019) to embrace creative methodologies to capture entrepreneurial practices:

- Transcripts of 1-2-1 interviews and small group interviews with two resident craft entrepreneurs, an exhibiting artist and stakeholders familiar with AH's offer (over 13 hours)
- Research notes by the lead author
- Observation notes from time spent in the hub and with hub-organized events, in the village hall (observations lasted 96 hours over an 18-month-period) by the lead author.
- Shadowing the AH director on duty in the shop (1 day)
- Informal documents (Facebook posts on the public Facebook page, photographs, website extracts)
- Photographs (40).

Interviews were carried out mostly in person and occasionally via zoom. Limitations of online research include the limited visibility of the whole body to take in body language and the presence of the interviewee and the actual physical site they are talking about (Hill 2022). However, the lead author had first met every research participant in person to gain a sense of their self-presentation before online interviews were conducted.

The lead author stayed for 2 weeks continuously in the valley where *Artistheaven* is located at the start of the ethnographic research, with nearly daily short visits to the hub and a full-day observing the daily activities on a Friday. This intensive fortnight was followed by eight subsequent site visits over 18 months to attend all creative industry-related events in and around AH. These visits always included time spent at the hub, adding up to further 12 days. The above mix of data sources meets EAP's need to study narratives as they materialize in various sources (Gartner 2007), from conversations to social media posts, images and websites to gather many possible facets of the socially constructed realities (Dawson and Hjorth 2011). Therefore, we treat these various accounts as distinctive sources that give us possibilities to get as close as possible to the life-world of these creative entrepreneurs (Champenois, Lefebvre, and Ronteau 2019), allowing us to study meaning making and agency in contexts (Maynes, Pierce, and Laslett 2012). These data sources meet the need to capture entrepreneurial practices, the units of analysis for this study. Interviews were recorded and transcribed. Research notes were spoken most of the time and then transcribed. Pictures were taken to supplement and contextualize the analysis (Hill 2022; Moura and de Souza Bizpo 2020).

### **Data analysis**

We adopted an abductive approach to thematic data analysis, which involved several steps (Sætre and Van de Ven 2021; Thompson 2022). To ensure rigour in data analysis, we organized our data via open coding in the first iteration, identifying first-order concepts, synthesized these into second-order themes and eventually abstracted them to aggregate dimensions, sub-practices, and finally to an overarching sets of practices, i.e. creative hub-bing. The first-level categories looked for identifying micro-activities that enabled the various business services to be successful and their socio-material elements (see Table 1, column 3, labelled sub-practices). To become conscious of the micro-activities and how they formed sub-practices, the lead author engaged in deep reflection on remembering details of interactions and observations, triggered by the research notes and the pictures taken.

Further second-level categories emerged from these findings focusing on shared or overlapping elements in these practices. These categories formed the basis for labelling iterative entrepreneurial activities, for example, addressing instances of temporary placemaking for conducting business to reach beyond the spatial location. Some of these iterative activities have been

**Table 1.** Creative hub-bing.

Practices	Description	Sub-practices
1. Event making	Sets of micro-practices enacted by resident studio entrepreneurs and hub management to bring events to AH; aimed at raising awareness of the hub, attracting the public and generating income for AH, shelf and resident artist. This event making practice can involve creating a separate event unique to the area and time of the year (eg. Xmas fair) or can refer to involvement in wider regional events as part of Open Studio days.	A – Workshop-ping – running workshops (Interaction between workshop participants; interaction between workshop participants and workshop leader; craft skills demonstrations; mentoring of workshop participants) in the gallery space; B – Event bringing – Open Studio weeks participation (attracting new customers and selling art) using both AH rooms; C – Indirect advertising of exhibitions during workshops via the workshop location in the gallery space (see <a href="#">Figure 1</a> ). D – AH taking a fee from each workshop place sale for their services and in return offering the room at a reduced fee.
2. Exhibiting	Sets of activities enacted to showcase an artist's work and to sell art.	A – Showcasing pieces on shelves and on walls by the artists; B – Exhibiting artist explaining pieces to visitors on request and communicating with visitors; exhibiting artists advertising the exhibition and hence AH through their networks attracting new visitors; C – Selling pieces of art via the AH till to customers; (Resident artist on till-duty supporting the sale: packaging the art and taking money); D – AH advertising the exhibition via social media. E – Resident artist on till-duty advertising the exhibition to visitors passing by the till; F – AH taking a fee from each sale.
3. Shelving	Sets of activities by non-resident artists visitors to engage with visitors who are seeing the exhibiting goods, touching and buying products from shelves.	A – Non-resident artists putting up products for sale; B – Making available a business card and an auto-biographical flyer to take; communicating with visitors via a small explanatory sheet. C – Selling products via the AH till. D – AH taking a fee from each sale. E – AH answering visitor questions re the goods on sale and associated artists.
4. Crafting	Sets of activities aimed at producing art and products in the building of AH.	A – Working on creative objects for production and not demonstration for customers; B – Being observed by customers incidentally; C – Working with other resident artists for community events; D – Co-producing art during co-working hours in the gallery space to network, get inspired and overcome isolation. E – AH taking a fee from each co-working space use and fees from studio renting.

Note: In the manuscript, where we have used quotes to demonstrate practices, we indicate the specific type of practice in the label of the quote. Thus, labels for event making practice quotes begin with 'E', labels for exhibition quotes begin with 'Ex', labels for shelving quotes begin with 'S' and labels for crafting and co-working quotes begin with 'C'.

combined and identified as practices relevant for rural creative hub-bing. Constructing these practices was not a linear process, rather, an iterative process of going back into interview transcripts and reflection while acknowledging the socio-material requirements. The practices are constructed from the viewpoints of resident artists and hub management, as called for in prior studies (Pratt 2021; Pratt, Tarek, and Gill 2019). By circulating between literature and data, focusing on identifying practices, we honed in on services of a creative hub previous literature had only named and not detailed (Cowie, Thompson, and Rowe 2013; Merrell et al. 2021). We aimed to theorize the themes in light of the literature and then identified the literature gaps with the rich findings. For example, initially nine practice sets were identified at different levels of detail, interlinked only partially. Another round of coding then helped to identify that event making was the aggregated code and that workshop-ping was one of several event making sub-practices (See [Table 1](#)).

Eventually, after three rounds of coding, we derived four sets of practices, which the findings section discusses in detail. In our presentation of extracts from research participants' narratives we indicate the specific type of practice being demonstrated in the label of the quote. Thus, labels for event making practices quotes begin with 'E', labels for exhibition quotes with 'Ex', labels for shelving quotes with 'S' and labels for crafting and co-working quotes begin with 'C'. Table 1 presents the data structure and lists detailed sub-practices. Figure 3 shows the emerging simplified model that combines revelatory insights with scientific concepts (Corley and Gioia 2011). In line with our ontological stance, we demonstrate the relationships between the themes and aggregate practices using the arrows to visualize dynamic multifaceted interlinked relationships (Chia and Holt 2006).

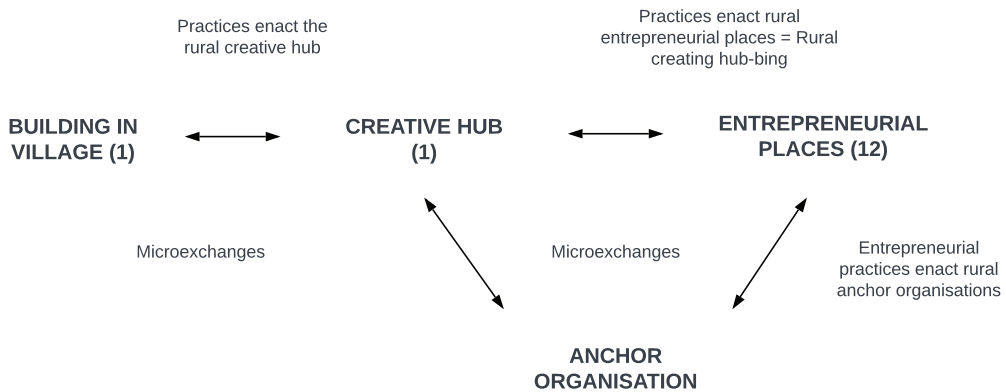


Figure 3. Simple model of the links between the core concepts.

## Findings and analysis

### Introduction

In this section, we first make explicit how the creative hub *Artistheaven* (AH) enacts rural embeddedness, before discussing four practices that comprise 'rural creative hub-bing' - event making, shelving-retailing, crafting and exhibiting. We then discuss how these practices enact 'places'. All practices take the resident artists' and hub management viewpoints, which most research takes for granted (Hill 2021; Pratt 2021).

Following Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors (2015), AH is conceptualized as an organization that enables and facilitates rural entrepreneurship with associated belonging and engagement (as opposed to entrepreneurship in the rural) as a multifaceted socio-material activity (Melin and Gaddefors 2023). We use three examples to demonstrate this embeddedness. First, our lens of practices illuminates that this belonging and integration (placial embeddedness, Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015) needs to be continuously enacted to exist. Our study confirms the importance of close-knit and overlapping networks and interlinked enmeshment of personal and business life (Malet and Bagley 2023): In rural locations like Greenvillage, there is usually only one organization or network of each kind (e.g. sports clubs, churches, social clubs, associations), due to the lower population, institutional and infrastructure density compared to urban areas. Creative professionals and other entrepreneurs have multiple roles beyond their creative jobs; all three AH directors are part of many networks (e.g. the online artist network AWN), but are also parents of school children, employees in other part-time jobs and members of other groups and associations (e.g. Churches, Chamber of Commerce). Through these engagements AH's work is well-known in the village community. These multiple cross-over relationships enact one aspect of

AH being a community anchor and demonstrate that relationships are precious and need to be carefully managed as the same people will be part of other multiple networks (McAreevey 2022). AH's key stakeholders constitute their arena of power, that is the field of power relations they are positioned within and which enable and limit their actions (Bourdieu 1990; Hill 2018). Second, the directors' process of selecting resident artists and those offering goods on shelves, workshops and membership in the co-working club demonstrates rural entrepreneurship and embeddedness: As a stipulation, the exhibiting and selling artists have to live locally – either in one of the three linked villages or close by. This requirement ensures the local population can widen their reach to sell products and feel part of AH. Third, AH mainly advertises on local Facebook groups (no paid advertising), and via word-of-mouth, via the directors' and AH's hub stakeholders' networks.

### 'Creative hub-bing'

All practices view the enacted activities from the perspective of the artists' or creative hub directors' viewpoints, as the aim is to give voice to these actors in creative hubs (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Pratt 2021). The overarching set of practices we call 'rural creative hub-bing' is conceptualized as an 'entity', that is in a continuous process of becoming and hence in flux (Nicolini 2017; Tsoukas and Chia 2002). 'Rural creative hub-bing' is accomplished when stakeholders enact these four practices, demonstrating processes of ongoing becoming, as these multiple practices unfold over time. The four sub-practice sets are not independent but constitute assemblages of interlinked activities, often enacted simultaneously with overlapping activities and related practices drawing at different times on different aspects of the socio-material environment. Table 1 shows the architecture of the four entrepreneurial practices and their sub-practices. This table summarizes the main entrepreneurial practices. As noted above, where we present quotes, we indicate the specific type of practice being demonstrated in the label of each quote. Quotes with a label beginning 'with E' relate to event making, those with a label beginning with 'Ex' relate to exhibiting, those with a label beginning 'S' relate to shelving and those with a label beginning 'C' relate to crafting.

### Event making (practice 1)

'Event making' comprises at least four sets of sub-practices (See Table 2). Firstly, as demonstrated in quotes E1 and E2 (see page 26), *Artistheaven* offers a variety of craft workshops (Sub-practice 1A), including jewellery making and pottery, located in the exhibition space called 'gallery'. The offer varies from one-off, full-day or half-day workshops to evening classes or morning 'clubs' running at least five times.

The simple plywood tables in the centre of the room (See Figure 4, covered by a cloth) become temporary work surfaces for teachers and participants during workshops. This Figure 4 reminded the lead author particularly of the multiple uses of these tables observed during visits (coffee and cake, felt workshop, exhibitions). In a workshop, the knowledge and information of the teacher is communicated verbally to workshop participants. 'Craft doings' are demonstrated with relevant materials (felt, silver etc.) and materialize in the workshop leader's articulations of their quality and how to use them (Cooren 2020). Workshop participants acquire and transform this new knowledge into actions, creating tangible outputs, such as pieces of art or objects they can use for their daily lives (e.g. pottery items).

Textile Club meets every Tuesday for a relaxed creative session. Coming up with **community and individual projects**, we help inspire, learn off each other and build up skills whilst learning. (From the website of *Artistheaven*, 2023; highlights by the authors)

This above website quote demonstrates how the particular 'community projects' (offered in the 'social places' consisting of these interactions of 'inspire, learn off each other and build up skills whilst learning') are meant to result from co-creation. The 'arena of power' for community projects





**Figure 4.** Artistheaven hotdesking.

temporarily creates social positionings that enable creating together for a shared goal (Bourdieu 1990; Hill 2018). For example, for the Queen’s Diamond jubilee, the community came together to create decorations for street parties in AH’s gallery (see Figure 2). Local stakeholders (CIC *Artistheaven*, the Parish Council and the local Chamber) sponsored the event to offer reduced-cost materials and enable wide community participation. The set of practices ‘co-creation for community events’, a street party, is socio-material in nature (needing people and materials), and the cost of materials for decorations was sponsored by those in social positionings with more resources (Parish Council, Chamber) to create as many ‘equal’ social positionings on the day of the event as possible to allow for many to participate. Field agents in these sub-practices are the workshop leaders, workshop participants and material elements (Bourdieu 1990; Hill 2018, 2022; Melin and Gaddefors 2023).

Quote E1: We’ve got one [idea] that’s about offering at least six or seven workshops each month at a cheaper price. So potentially that somehow the **Artistheaven pays for the artists to come and do those workshops. So we’re only having to charge the customer the materials so we need to find some type of grant money to then offer those workshops out, which makes it a bit more appealing to the community.** (Kelly, CEO of AH and resident artist; highlights by the authors).

Quote E2: We found this [building for AH] [...] was a bit of an ‘in-between’. Yes, it’s off the beaten track slightly, hence, the branding, but you’ve also [got] the locals that means that they can come up St. A. road, [...] So yes, the idea was basically a bit of catering for the tourism, as well as **surviving the winter months by having more locals coming in and out to utilise the space for workshops, exhibitions.** (AH Director 2, Sonia)

Workshop-ping practices use the gallery, thus building bridges to the ongoing exhibition in this room, generating spill-over benefits through indirect exhibition advertising (sub-practice 1C) during workshops, as participants have time to browse the walls visually. The activities in which workshop

**Table 2.** Fanning Artist Heaven's flame with entrepreneurial places.

Building – materiality	Creative hub – first level of interpretation and sociomateriality	Entrepreneurial places (EPs)(12)	Practices
Two large rooms: Room 1 and Gallery; Sink and cupboards for use as 'kitchen'; Two entrances; Toilet; Two small closed rooms – one at the end of each large room; Direct light coming in through the glass fronts going across the building;	Open studios created in large room 1*: Moveable walls and shelves to create open studios; Two small closed rooms used as studios: Room 2 used as gallery with plywood tables in the centre (See <a href="#">Figure 3</a> ); Shelves as dividers – private area for resident artists only around sink (See <a href="#">Figure 4</a> and <a href="#">Figure 1</a> ) *Furniture (table, chairs, shelves), cloth as wall decoration, tools, artistic goods, images, statues, till, partitions, doors, lights, price tags, flyers from artists.	Workshoping – four EPs – selling of the workshop service as the marketplace of buying/selling – on the day or before the workshop (1); mentoring/tuition by the workshop leader and exchanges with participants paid for with the workshop fee (2); income generation for AH taking a share of the workshop fee and/or room renting fee (3); peer support during the workshop is calculated for and happens anyway (4). Open Studio participation – three EPs – artists are paying a fee to be registered in the programme and appearing on the map with the AH (1); visitors coming to AH and buying goods and engaging with the artists (2); visitors buying other goods from non-participating artists in the Open Studio event in AH (3). Two EPs – marketplace buying/selling of exhibited goods by the artist (1), fee paying to AH (2); learning and knowledge exchange place between artists and visitors are creating learning places that are not directly linked to making money. Two EPs – the AH is 'exhibiting' a great variety of goods to attracts customers, many buy something on a visit; AH takes a percentage from each product sale – a market place – the artists gaining sales is included here - (1); AH takes money for the shelf use (EP 2). As no money is exchanged, the learning of customers about artists' work and taking the business cards is creating information exchange places, but they are not yet entrepreneurial. One EP – a marketplace, when artists temporarily use the gallery space as co-working area to produce craft goods and work on their businesses they pay AH a usage fee; the interaction between customers and crafting artists in an open studio is only an EP if customers buy inspired by the demonstration (and then the EP would be a marketplace, possibly accompanied by exchange of information on the crafting passing on knowledge).	Event making Exhibiting Shelving Crafting

participants are engaging with the exhibition, or artists' artefacts, constitute socio-material sub-practices. In this example, the exhibited objects are enacted by workshop participants when looking at them. These artefacts then gain temporary agency, as they have an effect on the onlookers' 'doings and sayings' (Gherardi 2019). If the walls were empty, these engagements would not happen. 'Sayings' denotes questions onlookers might raise with the resident artist-on-duty about the exhibiting artist or conversations they might have with other workshop participants that enact the relevance of the exhibited pieces. Moreover, the temporariness of the practices continues beyond the actual workshop, when workshop participants (most likely) talk about the exhibition to their contacts and family. Thus, the artist artefacts are communicatively enacted, which might attract more visitors to AH (Cooren 2020).

The Open Studio event (sub-practice 1A) is enacted for two to three weeks in AH bi-annually, thus enacting another type of place. Artists pay to be listed on the programme and maps given to visitors, to advertise their location and art offer. Resident artists in AH regularly take part and pay fees, to gain sales and raise awareness of their work.

## Exhibiting (practice 2)

'Exhibiting' is a multi-layered multi-actor set of simultaneous practices. Agents are the exhibiting artist, visitors and buyers, the resident artist on duty, and AH. The 'gallery' (See [Figure 2](#)) is the space offered for temporary 2–4 week exhibitions by a single artist or two sharing the space (sub-practice 2A). For a small fee, anybody can hire the space, accessible during the hub's opening hours (10.00–15.00). AH takes 30% of every exhibition sale (sub-practice 2F).

Exhibiting artists do not have to be there all the time and can still gain sales. The resident artist on till-duty always directs visitors to the 'gallery', answers questions and transacts sales (sub-practice 2C).

The artists display their work and set prices. Additionally, they may enact workshops or guided exhibition tours. They might enact artist-presence and chat with visitors about their inspirations and methods for creating the art (sub-practice 2B) and might sell a piece of art. The resident artists on duty provide their knowledge and answer any questions on behalf of the exhibiting artist (sub-practice 2E).

AH enacts their presence by taking the fee for the room hire and taking a percentage of each sale for the hub (Sub-practice 2E). These practices are enacted communicatively only between AH and the exhibiting artist, excluding visitors and buyers and materialise in monetary form and physically as the till gains an entry and money for a sale (Cooren 2020).

Quote Ex1: There wasn't an area [exhibition space] within the village area for you to go, there isn't even a gallery in W [nearest town]. That way [in AH] people can hire a new space to show their artwork off. So for me, I felt that actually [Greenvillage] is quite a big tourist area not to have a gallery in the village. (AH CEO Kelly)

Quote Ex2: And the last exhibition I did, I didn't really have a body of paintings, I just, I put up a few. And there were one or two that I could have sold several times, and I need to do more. So that was really the aim of hiring the [gallery] space that the goal was to create a body of work, which is what you saw, I've finally done it. And I exhibited a few weeks ago, so yeah, that was in July. But I do find that I do get a lot of joy for painting. It's very freeing. So when you sit you exhibited, that doesn't mean you had your two weeks. Yeah, in the gallery. The footfall isn't enormous. [. . .] My friends came to the opening, [. . .] but it was a good opportunity. [. . .] So I did sell one big painting to somebody local. So that was a step forward for me, because I'm still fairly early in trying to sell out really. (Resident artist after exhibiting)

'Event making' and 'exhibiting' are impossible without the physical location of the building and the gallery space (See [Table 1](#)) for AH (even though during COVID-19 practices were created delivering workshops online, see Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). These two sets of practices alone create several entrepreneurial places (see [Table 2](#)), as both sets require the participants to pay a participation fee, be that a workshop fee or price for hiring the gallery. Both sets of practices enact *entrepreneurial* placemaking, as money exchanges are part of the placemaking practices (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). This finding demonstrates that entrepreneurial placemaking is indeed a set of socio-material practices with multiple actors, and temporary in nature.

These two sets of practices are enacted contemporaneously, as they use the same physical space in the building – the gallery. The exhibition continues, while the workshoping is enacted, and the exhibiting artist might or might not be present. When the artist is present and interacts with participants and those browsing the exhibition, these two sets of practices are deeply intertwined. Browsers, then, see a workshop live and might be inspired to join one in the future. Both practices are temporary, workshoping for the time it lasts, and exhibiting for 2–4 weeks maximum. In contrast to shelving (discussed next), which does not need the artists' presence at all, these two practices of exhibiting and workshoping are enacted by humans and non-humans in an interconnected manner.

The gallery is usually booked out and hence, at all times, the sets of practices of workshoping and exhibiting are interlinked, enacting two entrepreneurial places at these times. As [Table 1](#) illustrates, these practices contribute to the overall 'creative hub-bing', the continuous enacting of the creative hub – they are 'fanning the flame' of 'creative hub-bing'.

### **Shelving – ‘retailing via shelving’ (practice 3)**

The set of sub-practices labelled ‘shelving’ provides an important income stream for AH, as AH takes a small rental weekly fee from over 30 artists and 30% of every sale made (sub-practice 3D). This set of practices involves as agents the material objects on sale by artists, business cards and a possible auto-biographical note by artists (sub-practices 3A and B, see [Figure 5](#)), the resident artist on till-duty, visitors/buyers and AH as an organization. As a side-effect of the above Open Studio events, AH gains from sales made with products on the shelves. One visit to AH triggered deep insights on how materiality in itself can generate artists’ ‘presences’ (see vignette 1).

From the artists’ viewpoints, ‘shelving’ is a nearly solely material set of practices, as the artists and makers’ presence or any actions are not required to sell their products; the only required action is to bring priced products into AH. Browsers become buyers and enact selling in collaboration with the artist on till-duty that day. As demonstrated in quote S2 below, this offer increases artists’ reach to gain customers, raises awareness of their work and possibly gains visitors to their own studios (for those who have one), expanding their physical location (working from home, in the garden). AH’s practices involve taking the money, and registering the purchase via the till. The resident artist on till-duty might answer questions regarding the goods on sale (sub-practice 3E). [Figure 5](#) demonstrates



**Figure 5.** Artistheaven Shelving.

#### **Box 1.** Vignette ‘Shelving’.

On one of my many short visits to AH I came after an Open Studio event took place. I had followed who was involved in exhibiting via AH’s Facebook page. Knowing Kelly took part, I ask her how the event went and if she was able to sell much. I noted her frustrated answer without at the time understanding what was happening. ‘The event went well in some way. We had lots more people coming through who followed the Open Studio map. And AH made some money, from artists not participating in the Open Studio. And I made no money, nothing’. I expressed my sympathy, slightly taken back by the deep frustration coming through her sentences. She continued and reminded me that she and the other four participating artists had to pay a fee of £60 each, significant to them, to be listed and take part. In other words, the artists exhibiting on shelves did not pay an entrance fee, but quite a few of them sold several pieces and gained an income. (Lead author’s research notes)

how shelves look, and illustrates that sometimes short explanations or a business card replace the artists' presence. Quotes S1 and S2 make explicit that the shelving practices are a means to develop the community (See also [Figure 1](#)), alongside the other AH offers.

Quote S1: I think that for us it's getting that balance as independent artists, for myself anyway, is developing Greenvillage, my art and making money from my art. Yeah. As well as going out to carry on we're running this building and I am managing director in the building. (AH Director 2, Sonia)

Quote S2: But the village feedback we've had is that this is brilliant. The idea and the concept behind what I wanted was, it was bringing creativity to the community. So you had an outlet for creative people to be able to express themselves. And also have a go at doing something. So we have a variety of different options on our shelves. So we have an up and coming [studio space] so that you can have three months for free. (AH CEO Kelly)

### ***Crafting (and craft co-working) (practice 4)***

Crafting denotes a set of practices seen from the (resident) artists' viewpoints. It involves live working by artists, during co-working hours or by the three artists in the open studio spaces, working on the table in plain view for all visitors.

These live crafting practices by resident artists are never advertised or arranged, but happen simply when the resident artists are inside of AH (sub-practice 4A). The crafting activities are enacted in situ, making the best possible use of the small space consisting of a table, building walls and temporary movable boards and hip-high shelves. These practices are not show-events, but constitute part of the making and crafting practices. Crafting is then combining the making and the visitor engagement, which might involve selling on that day or later.

The lead researcher has seen visitors watch from a distance, fascinated, in silence, when Kelly worked on a large felt picture. Some visitors come closer and start a conversation with the artist, and may be inspired to buy an existing piece, or arrange to buy the piece the artist is working on at a later stage (sub-practice 4B).

The entrepreneurial placemaking practices enacted via crafting include employing tools, materials, and possible verbal communication between artist and visitor. Silent and verbal exchanges constitute entrepreneurial placemaking, even if on the day of the interaction no sales are made. Raising awareness of the work and skills is part of entrepreneurial placemaking.

The co-working initiative, enacted via a monthly membership fee or as a one-off at higher rates, allows artists to leave the isolation of their homes, and use the tables in the exhibition space when no regular classes are running during AH opening hours (sub-practice 4D, see [Figure 4](#)). These crafting practices aim to produce goods for the artists' own use or for sale. Again, another entrepreneurial place is created, a third one, in the gallery space, that allows placemakers to enact crafting (see [Figure 4](#) above). Quote C1 inspired the lead author to construct the practices of crafting combined with observing when she saw Kelly as an artist interacting with customers.

Quote C1: So one of the main reasons [...] I decided to come up with the concept was mainly things like I had no studio space at home, [...] I have to wait for my daughter to go to bed. And then I was working. So difficult for me to develop as an artist, I needed space. [...] I do believe that [one of] many artists issues is having that creative area for development and concepts. And we just made this [building] this way [to create studios]. (AH CEO Kelly)

Crafting in itself is communicating via materials the skill and craft of felt making or drawing (Bell et al. 2019), for example, even if no verbal communication happens. Crafting is 'fanning the flame' of continuous creative hub-bing enacted in the studio and the 'gallery'. The gallery turns into another entrepreneurial place, temporarily, simultaneously, during co-working time.

What all practices have demonstrated is their contributions to the enactment of multiple interlinked simultaneous places in limited physical locations (see [Table 2](#)), which the next section details further. Adopting a practice-theory lens has illuminated how 12 entrepreneurial places unfold, and further creative places as micro-exchange performances are enacted, fanning the flame of 'creative hub-bing'.

## Places and placemaking

Within the creative hub several entrepreneurial places often unfold simultaneously and interlink with each other. The limitations of the building's materiality are transcended in many creative ways through the agency of hub directors and artists (and customers/clients who engage with them). This research found 12 entrepreneurial places, as column 3 in [Table 2](#) details. All of these places consist of practices of exchanges between either hub directors, resident artists, non-resident artists, and the non-human environment; one element of the exchanges is related to money. Sorting the entrepreneurial places by practices reveals that event making has the largest potential for income generation through the wide range of possible economic exchanges. Shelving offers entrepreneurial places that can materialize economically much later, when visitors and browsers become buyers after a browsing visit.

While [Table 1](#) shows the architecture of the four entrepreneurial practices and their sub-practices, in contrast, [Table 2](#) illustrates how entrepreneurial places are enacted through the socio-material practices within the physicality of the building.

## Discussion and conclusions

### Overview

This investigation aimed to explore how creative hubs can become anchor organizations for rural socio-economic development using the lens of entrepreneurial placemaking practices.

This section now discusses the dynamic relationships between individual agents and material resources identified in the findings that enact creative hubs as contributors to rural development, leading to the theoretical framework of how a simple building can become an anchor institution ([Figure 3](#)). We demonstrate how rural entrepreneurship is constituted by enactment of situated sets of socio-material practices ([Melin and Gaddefors 2023](#); [Tillmar et al. 2021](#)).

To summarize, rooted in process – relational ontology, EAP as theoretical framing allows us to conceptualize activities as practices (sociomaterial in nature). Within this theoretical approach, agency is foregrounded, and due to the sociomaterial nature of practices, contexts are addressed as default ([Gherardi 2019](#); [Hill, 2018](#)). Finally, EAP is applied to entrepreneurial placemaking processes, conceptualizing related entrepreneurial activities as practices and how these practices create places. Places in our research are conceptualized as process-relational phenomena that need continuous enacting and are not fixed entities, hence, 'fanning the flame' as our manuscript title.

In the chosen example of a rural creative hub *Artistheaven Hill*, [Manning and Frost, 2021](#), we labelled a set of practices 'rural creative hub-bing' to represent sets of entrepreneurial practices that transcend the material limitations of the building, rural settings and 'normal' offers of a creative hub. These entrepreneurial practices are unique temporal and spatial arrangements combined with multiple social enactments in line with a domain-specific practice theory EAP ([Gherardi 2022](#)). Practices by creative and craft practitioners have been previously used as examples for demonstrating entrepreneurial practices ([Hill 2021](#); [Reid 2021](#)). In our creative hub case, we found that many mundane everyday practices that unfold in running a hub, have positive effects on bringing the local community together and developing new and additional socio-economic activities over time. In a sense, these creative hubs (and particularly the role of the hub manager) enact form of amateurship, in that the activities 'stimulate, motivate and inspire others' ([McElwee, Smith, and Somerville 2018, 173](#)). This notion needs further consideration in future research.

The four subsets of practices – event making, exhibiting, shelving, crafting – that constitute 'rural creative hub-bing' are part of the ontological view of 'becoming'. 'Becoming' represents an understanding of the world in a continuous state of flux and change ([Gherardi 2019](#); [Langley and Tsoukas 2017](#)). Practical daily coping is achieved by the ongoing local adaptation and re-interpretation of the world. Becoming ontology implies that social reality is produced by practices, and with an inevitable enmeshment of agency and socio-material environment constituting each other, they are not separate entities ([Bourdieu 1990](#); [Gherardi 2019](#); [Langley and Tsoukas 2017](#); [Schatzki 2005](#)). Applying this



ontology of becoming means that agents in power arenas, or fields, enact practices and draw on socio-material elements in their environment as they see fit to enact relevant practices due to their social field positionings and available assets (Bourdieu 1990; Hill 2018). Figure 3, (in combination with Table 2 for details), illustrates the components of practices, human and non-human, and the dynamic relations between them enabling a creative hub's continuous becoming and 'anchor organising'. In other words, materiality, infrastructure and people exist, however, that is not sufficient; they need to be brought relationally into micro-exchanges, be enacted, to create value and enact anchoring. This overarching set of 'rural creative hub-bing' practices contributes to a proposed blueprint of enacting a creative hub with interlinked sets of practices. Realizing such a blueprint depends not only on the materiality of the infrastructure but also on the actual doings and sayings of the agents enacting the creative hub and their goals and local connections and social positionings. In doing so, our research demonstrates how we realize aspects of practice philosophy (Chia and Holt 2006).

This research offers needed detail on *how* the interplay of agency, contexts and places unfolds, using a rural creative hub as an example. This detailed insight is only alluded to elsewhere (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Merrell et al. 2021). The article's research makes visible the agency of humans (resident artists, co-working artists and hub management) and non-humans (building, furniture etc.) for entrepreneurial placemaking in creative hubs to demonstrate the internal workings of a thriving creative hub. Since making money for all individual artists, resident or not, and the hub is the overarching goal next to developing the community, the article hones in on micro-exchanges that include monetary exchanges extending the application and understanding of what *entrepreneurial* placemaking entails. We demonstrate that this detail is also needed to provide actionable findings of value to wider stakeholders, as we will illustrate below in our implications.

We demonstrated that not all practices lead to entrepreneurial places. Clearly, the hub is not a museum used for admiring goods 'free of charge' and, hence, is focused on making sales, increasing the overall market share for crafted goods, raising awareness of artists' work and, as intended by the founder, to develop the community.

The research suggests *how* rural socio-economic development can be strengthened if only more rural anchor organizations were developed and managed entrepreneurially (McAreavey 2022). The practices enacted within *Artistheaven* give visible presence to members of the online artist network AWN and the remote living artists that shelve their goods in AH (over 30 at any given point in time, see also Figure 2). Hence, they offer in a literal sense a physical 'anchor' in the social world for these artists.

In the following section, we discuss our theoretical contributions to rural entrepreneurship, rural development and EAP research.

### ***Placemaking and the ontology of becoming for researching rural development***

The first contribution develops further the concept of 'rural entrepreneurship' – adding a performative lens to rural entrepreneurship (entrepreneurship that is embedded in a location's networks that helps to make visible *how* rural places and premises are rejuvenated through new resource combinations with a focus on (rural) agency (Korsgaard, Ferguson, and Gaddefors 2015, Korsgaard et al. 2022). This contribution directly addresses the special issue's topic of addressing the changing paradigm of entrepreneurship and rural development (Tillmar et al. 2021). AH's directors highlighted the traditional rural values of serving local people and being run by local people, which is enacted via resident artist selection for renting studio and exhibition space. This decision is only one aspect of enacting rural belonging. In the findings' first section, we explored analytically the focus on 'rural', *how* entrepreneurial activities draw on and enact 'the rural' as multifaceted sets of contingent socio-material activities. We conceptualized 'rural embeddedness' with a focus on overlapping relations due to the multiple roles of all rural village residents and the thinness of networks, businesses and associations. Here, we need to theorize further how rural belonging is enacted through the overlapping roles leading to often involuntary 'memberships' in social groups as



parents, church goers, sports club members, and members of Chambers and other business associations.

The performative lens adds needed detail on how this belonging is continuously enacted via micro-exchanges. The need to perform belonging and network integration is crucial here. Starting to conceptualize the rural via EAP, we were able to demonstrate rural entrepreneuring through the lens of practices as multi-faceted interlinked socio-material activities (Korsgaard, Müller, and Wittorff-Tanvig 2015; Tillmar et al. 2021). Conceptualising these rural situated activities as practices, making visible they are in constant flux and contingent to their rural locations and networks, opened insights into *how* these practices were enacted, and the constraints and enablers the selected agents (hub directors, resident artists and their works faced).

While there is one location and one building, the research demonstrates how resident artists, material elements inside of the hub and external stakeholders simultaneously enact multiple entrepreneurial places. Put simply, the continuous enactment of the membership of these formal and informal networks makes an organization 'rural', whereas just a paid membership or a logo on a website does not. This means the existence of associations and businesses in rural locations and being a registered member is not sufficient, they need to be relationally enacted to be impactful. Hence, rural entrepreneuring has to be a continuous enactment of this belonging to make a contribution to rural development. Our title 'fanning the flame' illuminates this need visually and metaphorically.

Our research highlighted how we as researchers can make a contribution when we make visible the detailed workings of organizations when enacting entrepreneuring. The thinness of networks and people makes it even more important to carefully manage these relations to enable relational enactment of rural development. Rural entrepreneuring is an outcome and a beginning of an ongoing process of continuous becoming that never stops.

If these creative hubs were managed in entrepreneurial ways as outlined with the lens of 'entrepreneurial places', they could be anchors for rural socio-economic development and contribute to rejuvenating existing premises and locations (McAreavey 2022). This research found that the complex multi-level practices of 'rural creative hub-bing' are constituted by four sets of sub-practices of 'event making', 'exhibiting', 'shelving' and 'crafting'. These interlinked sets of activities enact rural development in several ways as the previous section outlined. Most importantly, we demonstrated how the thinness of networks, people and businesses is an important feature of rural entrepreneuring more generally and 'rural creative hub-bing' in particular. The directors and some resident artists are parents and, hence, by default, part of many overlapping networks in their roles as parents, artists, hub directors, AWN committee members, and living in the village.

The second contribution is to the rural entrepreneurship and rural development literature, with an exploration of the practices of 'rural creative hub-bing' and detailing the micro-exchanges unfolding, demonstrating what it means to enact a rural creative hub (see Table 1). This contribution is exploring the practices of 'rural creative hub-bing' as a vehicle for creating and maintaining rural anchor organizations. The conceptualization of micro-organizations as rural anchor organizations is a very recent development, as we outlined (McAreavey 2022). What McAreavey (2022) only touched upon is *how* a micro-organization can achieve the role of a rural anchor organization. This is the point where our contribution starts, in suggesting that process-relational ontology and the ontology of becoming combined with conceptualizing the mundane iterative activities of organizations as practices can add value, as we detailed for the example of a creative hub. We demonstrated how honing in on practices unpacks the functional use of a building enacted as a creative hub and re-conceptualizes 'creative hub' enactment as multiple socio-material practices enacting entrepreneurial places. We contend that more organizations could be considered as anchor organizations that are not providing services traditionally seen as 'essential', including creative hubs. These kinds of organizations would benefit from acting more entrepreneurially, generating income through trading so that the service offered to beneficiaries could be offered at no or lower cost. Here, training could add value. While not all anchor organizations need to be enacted as entrepreneurial places in all their

activities, some of their practices need to generate an income for the owners of the anchor organization, in particular, when they are run by the local community as a non-profit organization, to be able to generate income that allows paying rent and utility bills, for example. This contribution addresses the special issue's theme of addressing the changing paradigm and development of rural development (Tillmar et al. 2021).

The third contribution is theoretical, extending the concept of 'entrepreneurial placemaking' from one individual to collective sets of activities enacted simultaneously, contributing to the entrepreneurship-as-practice (EAP) literature (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021). Our research suggests a focus shift from just processes, as Hill, Manning, and Frost (2021) discuss, to home in on entrepreneurial practices that happen within a field (seen as arenas of power, Bourdieu 1990). In this way, we demonstrate how rural development can be identified by the number of practices agents within a small field enact, in our research, with the example of a rural creative hub. In doing so, our findings contribute to existing EAP research on creative practices (Hill 2021; Reid 2021) and answer calls for a more nuanced detail and understanding of rural development (McAreavey 2022; Phillipson et al. 2019; Tillmar et al. 2021). With these conceptualisations, we demonstrate how an organization extends the limitations of a resource constraint limited material environment, a building.

We offered a framework and demonstrated in detail how one building with two big and two small rooms in a rural location is enacted as 12 entrepreneurial places (see Figure 3 and Table 2). These entrepreneurial places are conceptualized as temporary fuzzy instantiations of socio-material relations. We illuminated how these entrepreneurial places interlink and draw on overlapping socio-material resources. These insights helped us to make visible the simultaneous multiplicity of places as outcomes of continuous socio-material micro-exchanges, demonstrating the agency of human and non-human actors and their contingencies, in our example of rural settings (Gherardi 2019; Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Verduijn et al. 2022). Moreover, we illustrated agency's contingency, and limitations, on the one hand, and creativity in selecting elements of the socio-material environment as relevant, on the other hand, selecting some elements temporarily, to enact practices of a temporary nature to create an outcome, not output. Notably, we demonstrated how hub directors and resident artists' agencies re-imagined the same sets of material elements several times to enact multiple places, driven by resource constraints and the rural locations of limited availability of alternative locations to enact the same activities, such as co-working or exhibiting.

The gallery room was the example that illustrated how four entrepreneurial places were enacted simultaneously as socio-material practices. Put simply, entrepreneurial places are made up of socio-material practices, and are more than just that, they are micro-exchanges of a monetary nature (and can be the 'traditional' exchanges of goods/services with money or goods for services). Figures 1, 4 and 5 tell the story of how simple material elements are re-imagined and re-used at different times in different ways and in interlinked ways: gallery, co-working space, workshop location, social meeting hub, and sometimes all four places are enacted at the same time. We revealed how the continuous enactment of these practices keeps the creative hub alive, which needs to happen, to keep 'fanning the flame' of creative hub-bing. Entrepreneurial places (EPs) are, thus, temporary places, with permeable boundaries, contingent on socio-spatial conditions (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021).

The research demonstrated 12 partially interlinked entrepreneurial places, giving evidence for how multiple use of rooms and facilities can go beyond limited physical space in a building. While these insights partially constitute empirical findings, they were only possible by applying the lens of entrepreneurial placemaking, including the money and goods exchanges, going beyond existing purely social exchanges for placemaking in the literature (see for example Courage 2021). In this way, we shed new light on placemaking within buildings, an aspect, which has been overlooked in the literature of EAP and placemaking (Courage 2021). Thus, we contribute to solutions for how existing premises can be rejuvenated (Tillmar et al. 2021)

Excluding the directors, there is no intention by individual resident artists to create more than an income for themselves. The active hub directors, however, always consider how the CIC hub can generate an income to pay the bills (rent, utility bills, membership fees, advertising) etc. to create

eventually also an income for the directors for the hours of 'voluntary' work to 'fan the flame' of running an active business. Added value is that adopting the lens of entrepreneurial practices means rural anchor organizations (McAreavey 2022) can now be illuminated with detail; researchers can demonstrate *how* communities collectively and individually create rural anchors via non-profit organizations, and ultimately increase activity and well-being for their members (Clift and Paul 2015). This impact is created via the various entrepreneurial placemaking activities rooted in creativity, skills development and 'creating space for arts' in social enterprise run anchor institutions, increasing belonging for local residents (Calo-Blanco et al. 2017; Jackson and McInroy 2017; McAreavey 2022; Quinn et al. 2021).

### ***Implications for policy***

The creative industries have the potential to help spur economic activity and rejuvenation of rural areas (Korsgaard, Müller, and Welter 2021; Velez-Ospina et al. 2023). However, creative practitioners are most successful and resilient when acting as part of a creative cluster rather than individually (Siepel et al. 2020). Therefore, operating in a rural creative hub (a micro-cluster) can be highly beneficial. Policy makers would benefit from supporting the creation of such an agglomeration of creatives by identifying rural creative clusters and supporting network building amongst and for rural creative entrepreneurs' clustering (Hill, Manning, and Frost 2021; Velez-Ospina et al. 2023). Asset transfer of unused public buildings or reduced rent in underused public buildings will deliver physical locations for clusters to develop and help to access the 'untapped potential of rural creative industries' for rural economic development more widely (Hill et al. 2023) helping them realize their potential role as anchor organizations for community and socio-economic development and contribute to rejuvenation of locations (McAreavey 2022).

As this article has demonstrated, the understanding of entrepreneurial placemaking is beneficial for local and regional policymakers to imagine the liveliness of creative hubs (and other buildings and sites) and their potential role as anchor organizations for community and socio-economic development (McAreavey 2022).

### ***Implications for practice***

Our research suggests several practice implications for hub management and resident artist development. Regular tenant meetings may help to foster a sense of collective purpose towards developing the market as an organization, to attract customers and encourage the co-opetition and collaborations creative industries are known for (Hill 2021). Training in understanding and enabling hub directors and tenants to integrate entrepreneurial placemaking into their daily doings, as our research highlights, may also be relevant. Signposting may encourage stakeholder participation in competitions and collaborative initiatives, such as co-creation of seasonal and special occasion events for the public (eg. Xmas, Halloween).

Our research has demonstrated four distinct but interrelated entrepreneurial practices that create unique socio-material and temporal assemblages. When designing interior spaces, rural creative hub managers might consider how their buildings can become entrepreneurial places and where, how and when the four practices can be enacted. To help create entrepreneurial places, which in turn will attract customers and users of the hub, could be integral to designing interior spaces. Collective events and marketing activities can raise the hub's profile, and in turn those of individual practitioners. 'Fanning the flame', rural creative hub-bing, requires a multi-actor approach to become and remain successful.

### ***Limitations***

Unsurprisingly, this investigation has some limitations. While it used multiple data sources and offers rich data with thick descriptions, the research is based on a single-case study of one rural creative hub. While the findings may be applicable to other similar settings, further research will need to ascertain whether they are generalizable more broadly to other creative hubs, in other rural or urban

settings, and settings in other countries. Yet, the aim of this research was not to generate generalizable insights, but to give deep insights into the workings of a creative hub to allow for theory development.

Furthermore, although all authors collaborated to explore and derive insights from the data, we acknowledge the lead researcher's role as a research participant in generating these raw data and the implications this may have for the triangulation of findings. We have mitigated these limitations by using thick descriptions of the research situations and vignettes and being fully transparent about the methods for data gathering and analysis.

Further research could compare creative hubs in different spatial environments, remote rural or urban fringe rural, and identify the drivers and limitations of making this hub-approach work. And further investigations could add deeper insights into what social conditions in the community could make this kind of hub work to enact continuous becoming of an anchor organization (McAreevey 2022). Some of the workings of this article's hub would apply to creative hubs in urban environments, such as the income streams in principle, and the use of the materiality of the building, which research in more locations would need to demonstrate. The role of the hub managers could be helpfully conceptualized as 'animateurship', in that the activities 'stimulate, motivate and inspire others' (McElwee, Smith, and Somerville 2018, 173), which needs further consideration in future research.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author(s).

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