Watershed Conversations

"It is a cultural producer which anticipates the future with generosity and engagement."

Watershed has gained a reputation in the UK and internationally as a leading cultural centre, creative hub and innovator. It is Bristol's internationally renowned film culture centre and the BFI Film Audience Network Hub for the South West developing film culture across the region. The Pervasive Media Studio at Watershed is a world leading centre for invention, innovation and incubation at the intersection of art, technology and the city. It develops talent and emergent practice in the cultural and creative economy.

Watershed has balanced excellence in its programming with adventurous and engaging approaches to audience development. It has been an active player in Bristol's innovation renaissance, while remaining mindful of and active in addressing the inequalities which still dog genuine transformation across the city. It has pioneered digital while nurturing a cultural building and associated hubs and networks which flourish through their sense of community and common purpose. And it has delivered all of this while continuing to grow, diversify and, critically, change.

In May 2016, Watershed commissioned Dr Tom Fleming[1] to undertake a set of 'Watershed conversations' to explore how Watershed is understood and valued, its core strengths and its potential role going forward. These conversations are part of an ongoing process of critical reflection for the organisation, a constant renewal necessary to remain relevant, to drive change and to deliver value to the culture and economy of Bristol.

Tom talked to 40 partners and associates of Watershed, balancing local Bristolian perspectives with those from across the country. The conversations were very illuminating for Watershed, revealing different views on how the organisation is understood and valued. They confirmed some of the core and perhaps familiar strengths of the organisation and introduced some fresh and valuable insights. Common threads include:

- the vital role Watershed plays as a facilitator and broker for the cultural and social life of the city, with a powerful convening power built on openness, trust and a passion for supporting creative talent.
- the ways Watershed operates as an enabler and catalyst for the development of new ideas, with a producer role that empowers boundary-crossing creative processes which contribute enormously to the cultural and economic energy of a transforming city.
- the commitment to new technology, cross-sector collaboration and playfulness as a way to nurture the creative and innovation ecosystem of Bristol. This is achieved by connecting different sectors, actively embracing new types of partnership (such as with technology businesses and universities), and linking local talent to collaborators across the UK and internationally. This recognition of the distinctive attributes of the local as being interdependent with flows of ideas and talent which are emphatically global, is understood as central to the way Watershed works.
- the passion for high quality, diverse and challenging art and culture, combined with a hunger for the new and an agitation for the next. These attributes are amplified by core functions of the organisation - such as the film programming, the social capital generated in the café, and via multiple networks in which Watershed plays an active role.

The conversations also showed how Watershed is understood differently when viewed from within Bristol or from outside the city. In Bristol, the café, cinema and Pervasive Media Studio are central to understanding what the organisation does and to an extent who it is for. Further away, Watershed becomes more and more a metaphor – for collaboration, experimentation, openness and digital leadership. From both local and national perspectives, the conversations suggested there is much driven by Watershed which goes unseen or for which only a partial picture has been formed.

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[1] www.tfconsultancy.co.uk

The conversations then have offered a provocative narrative which is already feeding into future thinking by the Watershed team as they reflect on future priorities, opportunities and challenges. The differing perspectives on what Watershed does, who it is for, and where it is going, raise valuable questions for the organisation and generate ideas for future development. Key here is how Watershed balances its role in delivering innovation for competitiveness and growth (i.e. the 'economic value') with its role for engaging audiences, reaching out to different communities, and attending to an 'impact agenda' (i.e. the social value'). The latter is perhaps less well understood – especially in terms of Watershed's role for community development, cohesion and interculturalism across Bristol.

Additionally, the conversations raise questions on how Watershed connects the local to the national and international. For example, can Watershed set out its goals for Bristol as the UK's leading creative/digital city outside London? Can it drive a network of core cities focused on creative/digital R&D, exchange and innovation? Can it be a facilitator of international exchange and partnership for the UK post-Brexit? Can it do more to bring international best and collaborative practice to the UK arts sector? What resource can it call upon to continue to play a leadership role for the sector and for Bristol?

These questions and more are wrapped up with Watershed's role in a changing city. The history of Watershed can be plotted against Bristol's economic and cultural renaissance (and vice versa). But as the city grows and becomes more diverse, what does the future look like, and what is Watershed's role in this? Can Watershed continue to redefine what an arts organisation is and to sustain its innovation approach?

Watershed would like to thank you for your contribution to the conversations and for your insight, challenge and encouragement.

Tom's notes and quotes from the conversations are attached. The people that Tom conversed with were:

Adrian Woolard, Aisha Sanyang-Meek, Alex Gilkison, Andrew Prescott, Barra Mac Ruairi, Ben Shorrock ,Chloe Meineck, Dave Moutrey, Edson Burton, Emma Wakelin, Geraldine Collinge, Graham Hitchen, Ian Hargreaves, James Durie, Jasmine Thompson, John Bradford, John Holden, John Manley, John McGrath, John Newbigin, Jon Dovey, Kev Kirkland, Laura Pye, Laura Sillars, Nick Sturge, Nikesh Shukla, Nishan Canagarajah, Nona Hunter, Paul Appleby, Phil Gibby, Rebecca Ladbury , Rich Warren, Rosie Poebright, Scott Parsons, Seth Honnor, Sharon Clark, Simon Mellor, Stephen Hilton, Tim Senior, Tim Kindberg, Tom Inns plus from Watershed Clare Reddington, Dick Penny, Jo Lansdowne, Mark Cosgrove and Verity Mcintosh.

Skimming the Surface

Watershed Conversations 2016 / Headline Notes & Extensive Quotes

distilled from Tom Fleming's conversations with Watershed associates, collaborators, commentators, consultants and stakeholders to build an understanding of how Watershed is perceived and valued across the UK

Tom Fleming, September 2016

Headline Notes

- Watershed is recognised as a critical agency of connectivity and collaboration for Bristol's cultural and creative sector

- Watershed is recognised as a pioneer for the convergence of creative and technology sectors; as an open platform for experimentation and R&D which connects activities locally to flows of ideas and hubs of practice nationally and internationally

- Watershed is brilliantly positioned in a special building to the heart of a transformed city centre. Its role in the waterside regeneration should not be under-estimated. But it is also a vital hub and anchor for the city's creative economy – co-locating artists and creatives and operating as a social space anchored by a critical and diverse programme of cinema and events.

- Watershed is a key reference point in arts and cultural development across the UK and increasingly internationally. It is a go-to organisation to understand best and next practice – from audience development for film to R&D to cross-sector partnership

Watershed as facilitator and broker

"Watershed has a convening power…it is a facilitating brand"

"Watershed is Trusted – well-run, reliable, offering safety for others to take risks"

"It brings together the constellation of the city"

"It is a highly collaborative space with a 'can do' approach that draws lots of opportunities together to interface with different people from across the city"

"It's a place – one of the places in Bristol where people meet…intentionally without barriers to entry….somewhere between work and play"

"It engages creative thinkers and through RIFE the future creative workforce"

"Watershed positions itself well – with the cultural organisations, the creative industries, the LEP....but one of Bristol's biggest challenges is articulating its cultural offer. Watershed could play a big role here – as a kind of festival centre"

"The cross-over of creativity, culture and technology is powerful….but what does really happen there?"

"Like the Man from Uncle – do people really know what goes on behind the scenes?"

"Watershed is sometimes like a dating agency…"

"We have been lucky because we have had no constraints…we never knew where we were going when we started"

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Watershed as enabler and catalyst

"It has a summoning and gathering power – to be brave and magic together…it is interdisciplinary"

"It is a space to contest goals, to develop trust and with REACT to brig together and shake up institutions which struggle to collaborate and connect"

"It helps the city break out of the silos – it is not corporate, not a hotel, a venue de facto for public engagement"

"It creates an avenue for people to demonstrate their talent beyond their mates"

"The PMS is a huge multiplier, but it is quite tacit…we would love to emulate it but we would need to demonstrate value more clearly"

"If they can't do it, they will do it with someone else…they are generous"

"The cutting edge stuff is incredible…but has less profile than the bar and cinema – at least in Bristol"

"It feels like the watering hole in the desert with animals all gathered around it…the mix means strange things happen as a consequence…it is practical and conceptual…people know about stuff"

"Watershed is very active, very visible, with a lot of personality…it makes things happen"

"It is layered and multiplicitous"

"It is playful and exploratory – with the PMS vital in generating a range of engagements"

"It goes back to the '90s…to cloud computing…they are good at making the complex accessible"

Watershed as Early Adopter / Pathfinder

"It takes the initiative – looks long term to the city's future…a hub for creative technology"

"It gets digital – opening up and extending the offer"

"It has track record…as an incubator and change-maker which is very forward thinking, strongly embedded…"

"It allows me to risk heavily without expecting me to return on the investment…it has actually changed my practice altogether…it is a 'massive mattress' where people can catch me"

"It is adapting and delivering change, channelling new ideas and becoming a learning process in itself….it is a PROCESS"

"Through a generation of radical programming, Watershed has grown an audience for cultural film"

"RIFE and the PMS were in their own ways radical and disruptive…by bringing them in-house they feel more organic"

"RIFE is trying to show this is a 'place for you' – and driving home the need to refresh the cultural workforce"

"The International Futures Forum work helped to reconcile what was possible – asking 'what is the next horizon' – which opened up activities that became core business – e.g. the PMS".

"There is a danger of being blinkered to other pathfinders – perhaps the organisation needs more humility here…with examples of interesting practice all over the place".

Watershed as Early Adopter / Pathfinder

"Watershed has always been radical, pushing boundaries"

"The first of the early adopters"

"It has constantly changed and projected itself well nationally to stay ahead of the curve"

"It is absolutely ground-breaking – from a university perspective – to witness the cross-connections in the PMS…they are great at bringing disparate elements together and building new alliances"

"The provocateurs of art ad digital…connecting artists and technologists – so a lot of the best people have a good connection with Watershed"

"It is the heart of an ecosystem – the UK-lead of virtual reality and augmented reality working alongside other key players such as BBC, Aardman and the universities"

"The studio and the café together are incredibly inspiring – seeing people working on ambitious stuff has made me more ambitious….and the cross-fertilisation of fields in a space where you can talk to people"

"It encourages the diversity of human ideas"

"It is future-defining"

"There is a desire to be first to everything"

"They are good at place and place-making – without this lacking adventure and innovation"

Watershed as hub and anchor

"The city was smart in giving them the building"

"It is adaptable – built on firm foundations"

"It brings together digital and place"

"A real strength is the informality of the organisation – driving energetic conversation…but the value of this is sometimes harder to pin down for policy-makers"

"It is a meeting place…feels neutral"

"A semi-civic space…it's sticky"

"It has a human scale – like the city- and is built on personal relationships and trust"

"It's a hub – it brings people together"

"It says 'you are in a creative place…a creative city"

"It's about the place and the people…more than just a node on a network"

"It brings the international to the city and the city to the international….but it needs to describe the international more in what it does for the city"

"The concentration of creative talent is very strong in Bristol – the 'un-square mile'…it is less blue collar than other cities…and Watershed plays a big role here. But we need to make sure this part of the city is not a creative ghetto"

Watershed as hub and anchor

"It is an anchor point – we use them internationally to tell the story of a very connected city"

"It has a sense of belonging – like school which you then lose…it is challenging, it opens you up"

"It is personal….and has been a great place to have personal discussions – like on diversity before the buzz words"

"I feels like one of the more inclusive spaces"

"Imagine a Bristol without Watershed – it would be a very different place…it is supporting a massive ecosystem and it is great it is in Bristol"

"It's the best neighbour – it listens, it's collegiate and not competitive"

"RIFE is changing the terms of engagement for the city – exposing talent to the workplace, giving people genuine backing"

"In the rabbit hole, you can see the amazing things that it does"

"A social space where a lot of decisions are made on the cultural elements of the city – a place where hands are shaken"

"Does Bristol really do collaboration?"

"Watershed can generate a good meeting ground for the development of civic data"

"I always feel incredibly welcomed…and have missed lots of trains trying to get through the café bar"

"The serendipity of the PMS and café bar gives variety so they can go beyond an audience venue model"

"It is an innovative place – technologically and socially – one of the first waterside developments in the UK…a beautiful building but needs refreshing".

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Watershed as influencer and leader

"It is an endlessly relevant organisation"

"Watershed smartly aligns itself with Bristol's identity and to some extent embodies that. The two leverage each other's brand"

"It is the cement of Bristol's cultural sector and a beacon for the South West"

"It showed me that you can get a great job in a rich creative environment outside London"

"It us not clear when you go there what else the organisation does – e.g. PMS, events, commissions. Do the average café users know about it"?

"Watershed promotes Bristol internationally on a number of fronts….without a mandate…this could be done more formally with a stakeholder group which pays them for this role"

"They are natural decision-makers for the city…proactively exploring potential…"

"They sometimes get marginalised – by opening up opportunities for others but not themselves"

"They need to be better at communicating what they do and why they are doing it…maybe it's time to evaluate and describe it"

"It plays a regional development role in film – the model everyone looks up to"

"It is an international leader for the UK built on professional and personal links"

"It shows that arts organisations can be civic as well as cultural leaders"

"Its conferences – Playable Cities and No Boundaries – have been incredible….the ideas….a wonderful thing"

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Watershed as influencer and leader

"Most of the top tier local authorities in the South West want a Watershed"

"It needs to demonstrate through KPIs – e.g. as an R&D Platform – with a consistent story from the local to the global"

"The market is getting more crowded…people are catching up and learning to do things in different ways"

"It draws in and sustains a support base"

"They mobilise their social community – e.g. at the Old Fire Station – because they are generous, people want to be generous to them"

"They did fantastically well in working with universities – playing a leadership role for the cultural sector…universities are maddening beasts…but it did have to adapt and re-balance the mix of its skills"

"There is so much scope to extend a leadership role into knowledge creation – and ensure this isn't hijacked by computer scientists….and can Watershed play more of a structured leadership role in relation to global challenges…and impact agenda…"

"They have really built a strong brand – as a kind of journey"

"They extend notions of what creative industries are…e.g. via Playable City they resonate across sectors and across the world"

"The old cinema arts network model is re-emerging – to join together digital services. Might Watershed play a leadership role here?"

Watershed and values

"It is a cultural producer…which anticipates the future better than others with generosity and engagement"

"It is an ecosystem, not a farm"

"It gives a better life to the city….need to take care because can quality of life be commercialised"?

"It takes a point of neutrality – with its only prejudice being to champion and celebrate Bristol"

"I have never asked Watershed to do anything – it needs to follow its nose and by being instinctive, it does some incredible things"

"It helps to address the 'balloons, brides and festivals' stereotype for Bristol – showing there is serious industry alongside serious culture"

"It is synergistic to place…if it is there, it will be creative"

"The messaging is consistent – it is open, friendly, quietly assured"

"It has been reasonably good at killing stuff off and moving on"

"So much has happened there – could it be better at archiving its content and making this more available"?

"They have a very good sense of who will be a good partner"

"The articulation of value needs to be more pronounced…when it comes to access"

Watershed and values

"It is comfortable in its own skin…crossing boundaries and building trust"

"It is better than others at seeming open"

"They throw their heart and soul into all they do and will not pay lip service to anything"

"A challenge is how can Watershed make more of a contribution to the wider city – the communities and villages…to develop a talent pipeline for the creative ecosystem"

"It makes meaning meaningful"

"It is imbued with a sense of fun and of seriousness – developing conversations"

"It is not just creating content but also the conversations around it"

"I am proud of what it does but it needs a big push to show what it does"

"How rooted are their values or how whimsical might they be"?

"It does lots without a consistent or joined-up narrative…but do they need one?"

"No KPIs is a strength and a five year view rather than a one year view"

"Inquisitiveness, humility, hospitality…they seem able to sit down and talk things through"

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Watershed and its people

"It has bags of personality….it is sometimes difficult to separate the brand of the people from the brand of the organisation"

"It is well run – the imaginative prudence of its finances"

"It is in fact a wider Bristol team"

"Watershed is particularly associated with Dick and Clare…incredible assets who bring very different qualities to the organisation and the city"

"What would succession planning look like"?

"There is an issue of 'single point failure' – with such association with one person"

"There are under-acknowledged people – it is a team"

"The fluid structure of the organisation is a real strength"

"Whatever your talents, they are pushed…to experiment in a safe environment…I always feel supported and totally integrated into the creative team"

"It is a special place – I feel highly regarded"

"Dick is an actor manager"

"Sometimes their objectives can be quite illusive, but that can be quite attractive…"

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Watershed and its people

"They have recruited really well…and created a strong sense of responsibility and trust"

"It has incredible leadership – just look at the leadership point when PMS and HP-Labs converged"

"There is a big dependency on individuals…good people are a magnet for other good people…is there a sustainable HR plan?"

"Clare and Dick are inspiring…"

"They are open to rewarding new experiences"

"Can they do corporate? Is it part of their value system or skillsets?"

"The team is great but they have limited capacity…could they commit to growing pains or make a value judgement that they want to stay as they are"?

"Dick is the essential embodiment in human form of Watershed…the 'essential figure'"

"They have imaginative and maverick personalities…but also back this up with real activity"

"They are a wonderful team to work with – very respectful and open…loyal"

"If you cut Dick in half, you will see Bristol written throughout him…ambitious and passionate…a life's work"

"How often does an organisation which is leading in its field continue to innovate and re-invent itself? Leadership and succession are key".

Watershed and growth

"Watershed could play a leading role in developing a 'West of England Industrial Strategy' – the 4th Industrial Revolution'".

"Can Watershed drive the commercial value of their products harder…taking it to market and sustaining it in a market…?"

"Should it even go for growth….what would that even mean"?

"The indeterminacy of the organisation is a strength"

"Watershed could generate some pioneering content of their own"

"The Everyman will be a competitor, but it will be OK"

"What would succession planning look like"?

"They need to prioritise – can they continue to do everything"?

"Watershed needs to tell people what they do – simplify the message and set out the value"

"Ambiguity is an asset – push something too hard and it might lose its edge or feel"

"Bristol is Open project – Watershed can drive that because it has trust and credibility"

"It is constrained by size…and as the city develops, there is loads more they could shape up and develop"

"Devolution: how can major arts organisations work together to build capacity and drive value across the economy?"

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Watershed and growth

"The proposition is for Bristol to be the national centre for creative and digital and for Watershed to be the national organisation that drives this"

"How clear is their narrative? Do people understand what is going on? Can there be mission creep? What is the overall value proposition? Are they banking on a short-medium term set of circumstances"?

"The landscape is becoming more challenging…so ca it develop a more persuasive narrative especially on inclusion?"

"The physical expansion is a must…can it be more a space of criticality and can it retain more IP"

"Relations with the universities will be vital – for Bristol as the go-to place outside London with a rich creative environment"

"It could do more to bring the world to Bristol – like MIF does in Manchester"

"As the leading digital creative organisation in the leading digital creative city can it work nationally – to stitch together the curved spine of hubs outside London – linking to agendas in the BBC and Cultural White Papers…their national profile could grow from this…they are still little-known in the media world"

"Concerned there is no clear follow-on to success – e.g. post REACT….need to take it to the next level"

"The relationship between publically funded culture and the commercial creative industries is mission critical for arts organisations and funders".

Watershed and growth

"They may need an alternative kind of thinking – of thinking bigger if they are to get bigger"

"I'm not sure how they would scale it up…it is a beacon of good practice with a fantastic reputation but as a building this is difficult to scale"

"There's something homespun about them…but they may need to be more explicitly strategy based and strategy-driven…"

"The digital is key – building audiences and markets internationally – there is a limit to the human bandwidth in Bristol"

"What do they want to be recognised for? Spotting talent and nurturing ideas? A space? Do they need to evaluate? Or an opinion piece on why R&D is so crucial?"

"The future will require Watershed (with Bristol) to develop the right platform which allows anyone in the city to be creative"

"The next step is to make Bristol a world-leading smart city…inter-connectedness is key…"

"The private sector has been a huge driver in Bristol…Watershed can play in both public and private sector camps, so it can pull off some great new collaborations".

"It will be interesting to see how Watershed balances its role in presenting Bristol to the world with a local focus on fairness, social justice and inclusion"

"It feels like they are trying to do a lot of things at the same time…from sandboxes to schools…a very big agenda….can they identify the top one or two things more clearly? Or is everything equally important? Is it enough to be a platform and facilitator? A couple of clear, well-articulated pubic priorities would be a helpful narrowing of scope…can they OWN 2-3 things?"

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Watershed and growth

"How to future proof Watershed? What is the optimum scale? How to demonstrate long-term ambition and purpose"?

"REACT has been a game-changer for Watershed. It has a very different model of collaboration (to an HEI)…co-creation via a genuine coming together to create something new. It has redefined collaboration for HEIs which traditionally would use a cultural partner to exhibit and disseminate their work. In the future, Watershed can drive this"

"Need to go from REACT to the practical application of IP and knowledge – these are weaknesses in universities. Can they get some equity and commercialise the work they enable to happen"?

"Bristol is a city with enormous potential and character…there is something brewing in the city – an interdisciplinarity and innovation. Without Watershed it would not be possible. But the city does seem to under-perform culturally and Watershed punches above the weight of Bristol. Also, Watershed can be an irritant to Bristol – so a big question for Bristol is 'who is going to fund something which is irritating'?"

"There is an incredibly powerful educational model in Watershed and this could be a good revenue stream. What is the intellectual plan for Watershed? This should drive the business plan".

"It is clear that on an ongoing basis they are committed to doing lots of interesting projects, but what is the vision?"

"The HEI sector provides big opportunities here – to scale both locally and internationally. Can it develop hubs in other cities internationally?"

"The brand has grown tacitly but not in a corporate sense. Could it?"

"How much do they provide a platform for he creativity of the people in Bristol? They need to embrace this more and more"

"The whole place could do with a refresh".

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Watershed and growth

"Watershed feels constrained…so there is a capital development opportunity…the city would benefit from this and in the local government world there is more likely to be capital development investment"

"What is the role of PMS in relation to the economic growth of the city? The Engine Shed and Enterprise Zone will take most resources here – so it needs to be positioned as vital to this"

"Can Watershed develop products and services beyond the blue sky stuff…a delivery arm?"

"Managing risk into your business model is much easier and more effective than managing it out – and Watershed does this pretty well"

"Watershed could own more….it has centralised the playful/producing elements into the organisation…with producers to their core…there is huge value here in not really making their own work but making experiences or enabling others to make their work…"

"There is a lot of scope for legacy linked to REACT…a new regional programme?"

"Is there an evergreen model for the PMS"?

"The challenge is retaining their instinctive qualities…Watershed is an unusually human system…a very human organisation…very complex and layered. Some funders will recognise this; others won't get it. If they over-define the value, they may as well give up….they need to stay human and not be over-defined…but this isn't to say there aren't opportunities to grow".

"The relationship with HEIs is vital – Watershed's work is exemplary in building links to the skills needs the arts sector has to navigate through in the digital economy…Watershed can play a leading role here".

"Need to spot and develop the leadership talent of the future…need to talk up their international connections in the UK…and test themselves with the very best in the world"

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The people that Tom conversed with were academics, artists, business support agencies, company leaders, consultants, funders etc… from a range of places and contexts:

- Cardiff: University of Cardiff, Creative Cardiff

- Exeter: Kaleider

- Glasgow: Glasgow School of Art, University of Glasgow

- London: Arts Council England, Creative England, Demos, Directional Thinking, Ladbury PR, Royal College of Art (and AHRC)

- Manchester: BBC North, Manchester International Festival (and NTW)

- Sheffield: Site Gallery

- Stratford: Royal Shakespeare Company

- And of course Bristol : Arts Council England South West, Bristol City Council, Bristol Media, Business West, Encounters, Engine Shed, High Tech Bristol & Bath, Invest Bristol & Bath, Pervasive Media Studio residents, Rife Magazine, TechSpark, University of Bristol, University of the West of England Bristol, and members of the Watershed team.

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