



### A New Year Message from Matt (CEO POP)

The cold start to the year brings with it financial concerns as we all try to keep warm. For many people there are difficult choices to be made regarding the cost of basic essentials, such as, food, shelter, clothing and transport.

It's almost a given that there will be a general election this year and, potentially, a rerun of the Biden versus Trump Presidential Election in the States. Meanwhile, the climate crisis will continue to bring devastation along with the continuation of the horrors of war, not least in Ukraine, Israel & Palestine.

It feels quite 'dark' but I think this is the age we're living in. The biggest issues (for example, migration, housing & homelessness, financial inequality, climate crisis, trauma, health & wellbeing) are increasing in scale while, at the same time, we have fewer resources with which to tackle them. And yet – globally – although we have all we 'need', we face a geographic and cultural problem with some areas of the world being more affluent – in money & resources – than others. We need to make better use of all that we have.

And this is why POP does what it does. We believe that by working together, and by making use of each individual's unique strengths and powers we will find the solutions we need. And this is exactly what's happened with Vacancy Atlas, an amazing 'retail' initiative that set out – and succeeded – to do things differently. It is yet another example, in Plymouth, of people and projects trying a different approach - testing, taking time and slowing things down - to try and discover what might better serve us.

So please continue to connect with POP and each other to support this wonderful grassroots movement that we are all so proud of here in Plymouth. Here's to 2024; a new year and a better way ahead.



## Vacancy Atlas: positive change makers, social engineers, architects, designers, urban activists and creatives.

### Why one shop in the City Centre has proved to be more than pretty vacant.

Imagine a shop which transforms itself from one day to the next. One day it's a blank page for story tellers; the next a mini-brewery before the tide turns and it's a safe harbour for shanty singers. Such a place exists, right here in Plymouth. It's called Vacancy Atlas and it has one purpose, to never be vacant.

It began more than four years ago as an academic project by architectural students, Jason Skelton and Elise Wilkes-Brand who wished to find new ways to make use of our empty civic spaces. During two years of learning, talking and collaborating, they explored how they might connect landlords and spaces with people and activities and found artists and creative people wanting to sell their work; test their ideas and engage with the general public.

"We wanted to find a new way to accommodate those people who had the ideas, in the places they needed to be in, in the city, without the financial risk", says Jason.

After graduating, Jason and Ellie continued to look for ways to simplify the process for landlords and leaseholders. This led them to set up their own initiative, Vacancy Atlas, which then became one of the delivery partners for the innovative Meanwhile Use project. Run by Plymouth Culture, it enabled seventeen different projects to take up temporary residence in ten different empty buildings in the city centre.



The Meanwhile Use project was a success and, as part of its legacy, Jason and Elise were handed the keys to 107 Cornwall Street and Vacancy Atlas set up shop. The property, says Jason, was ideal:

**"It was Council-owned; had been empty for three years and had the potential to be different things to different people."**

Since September 2021, it has been repurposed more than fifty times with the 'shopkeepers' paying for the space they need by-the-day. As Jason explains, Vacancy Atlas allows people to test their ideas and come to market without any of the traditional – and significant – risks involved: "A big part of what we do is to listen to what people want and find ways to help them make it work. It doesn't always work, but that's part of the appeal. We enable people to take their own risks, test them and come back and try again."

Now, in an exciting new development the keys are being handed over to Alice, one of the resident temporary artists (see column). Meanwhile, Jason and Elise, having learnt a shed-load of stuff about civic spaces are now collaborating with their original partners as well as urban strategists, Incremental Urbanism, to explore a radical new economic model in the hope that our city centres can be more than pretty vacant. Watch this space!

Here at POP we're really excited about the changes we are starting to see across the city, in the way decisions are being made; those who are consulted and the provision of services. We believe there is a genuine change in the way people – service providers and service users – are starting to engage with each other about what might be best for those receiving support. We are proud to feel that POP's work – our commitment to trust and collaboration and our willingness to encourage innovation – may have contributed to this new approach.

### Moving on Up – how Alice became a shopkeeper.

2024 is going to be an exciting year for Alice Crawford. For the last fifteen years Alice has been quietly creating beautiful bags and other goods (by Alice Wood) out of surplus fabrics, such as, leather offcuts and old military tents. Her work led her to move to Plymouth five years ago from Totnes as she "felt there were more opportunities as a maker in Plymouth".

For the last couple of years Alice has been renting occasional space in Vacancy Atlas. It has been such a good experience that Alice is now moving her bags in for good. Having set up a community interest company – Plymouth Make Space – she is now taking on responsibility for the day-to-day running of the building from Vacancy Atlas (who are also evolving). It is, she says, perfect for her:

**"I've got a workshop at home but I'm on my own and it's quite lonely. You don't have the interaction of other artists and members of the**

**public. And this building has so much potential to do just that."**

Number 107 isn't just a shop floor; there is enough space upstairs to accommodate five artists with affordable workshops and teaching areas.

**"You don't get many shops like this where you get so much space," says Alice. "We can have machinery here that others can rent. We can have a kiln for potters and we can use the space to provide evening classes to teach making and mending skills. It'll bring a new lease of life to the building."**

Most importantly, says Alice, the CIC will enable smaller businesses to be involved without the responsibility of managing the building themselves. Having been inspired by Hannah

Sloggett at Nudge Community Builders and encouraged by those at Plymouth Scrapstore, Alice decided to go for it:

**"I've always done it," she says. "If I can't find what I'm looking for then I just make it happen."**

And that's how Alice has ended up with the very thing she needed:

**"I wanted to create a supportive community where you could help each other. This is the perfect spot."**

It is hoped that other individuals and organisations inspired by Jason, Ellie and Alice, will seek out more-creative uses for empty premises and that, with the concerted support of landlords and the City Council, they might make these vacant spaces, as with number 107, vibrant and viable.

## Free workshops & events from POP & POP ideas! Register at [bit.ly/POPEvents](https://bit.ly/POPEvents)

### Scheduling for Success

Tuesday 6 February from 10am

Learn how to save time on social media with scheduling platforms and a monthly plan.

### Contracts & Commissions

Monday 19 February from 2pm

Find tenders & contracts to earn unrestricted income and develop your organisation.

### POP Ernesettle Drop-in

Tuesday 20 February from 10:30am

Come to St Aidan's Church to meet the team and get some free support & advice.