

Save the Forest – a search for new roots continues

by Ken O'Neill

☒ Eleven years ago, around a dozen friends saw the need for a non-commercially motivated creative space in Edinburgh. The friends were a mixture of young artists, creative thinkers, DIYers and scientists. They wanted to create a place for artistic experimentation and community growth. Thus the Forest was born, then a small arts and hang-out space in West Port, in August 2000. Like-minded people came and enjoyed the space.

At first it was only open for a month but it soon reopened and has continued ever since! In 2004, Edinburgh University Settlement (EUS) gave the Forest the opportunity to grow and develop into a much larger organisation at 3 Bristo Place. Last year saw both a high and a low for the open-access multi-arts and community space. In August it celebrated its tenth anniversary, an achievement that many small businesses would long to reach. In October EUS, who owned 3 Bristo Place, were declared bankrupt and forced into administration. A campaign was launched to raise funds to buy the building, but sadly that wasn't to be.

The Forest is now on the move again and looking for a new home, leaving its current premises at the end of August.

For those who don't know the Forest, it is a registered charity for a volunteer-run, collectively-owned, free arts/events space, which also runs a vegetarian café. To some it is a den of beatniks and drop-outs, to some it is a place where they feel comfortable. To others it is just a good place to eat, drink BYOB and enjoy whatever free show is on. Personally, I think the Forest is all of things and more, in a

good way.

I know most of this from first-hand experience. I first visited the Forest in its current home sometime in 2005 – the temptation of nachos while waiting for a bus proved too much for me. I might have popped into the first location one night, but the old memory is a bit fuzzy. You know what these August nights can be like. Last year I started volunteering in the café, enjoying a regular Saturday shift in addition to my job. Since then I've met people from across Scotland and around the world. I've also learned how to use what was a daunting espresso machine and how to make a vegan burrito. I have scrubbed lots of dishes while watching a cross-section of people go by and enjoy the café's atmosphere.

Over the last two months I've helped to search for new premises, learning new skills in the process – the intricacies of the planning system and negotiating with landlords, for instance. At the moment the search has yet to result in a new home for the Forest but with luck we will have somewhere to go very soon. We're exploring different possibilities, not just leasing but buying a property as well to ensure the Forest's future is in its own hands. If you know of a suitable place or think you can help in some way, please get in contact info@theforest.org.uk. One of the most frustrating aspects of the search is knowing that there are suitable unused buildings in the Old Town that the owners choose not to use. While, of course, that is their choice, it is still disappointing. However, I'd rather focus on the positives and know that 'what's for you won't go by you'.

In the meantime, the Forest has great plans ahead for its final Fringe in Bristo Place, filling the building's three floors with free performances from world-class acts and local talent. Highlights include the award-winning Forest Fringe, performances from the Free Belarus Theatre, international poetry stars, plus sights and sounds from around the world. [The Forest Fringe's programme](#) includes Gary McNair's one-man

show “Crunch”, a workshop from Complicite and contributions from Tim Etchells of Forced Entertainment. The Forest Fringe also includes a day-long programme of events focusing on this year’s radical and revolutionary movements including non zero one’s new interactive experience “The Time Out.”

The Forest will also host a festival of spoken word organised by Inky Fingers, including international slam stars Harry Baker and Sergio Garau. There’s also innovative events from publishers Bloodaxe, Salt and Cargo. August will also see the last ever Golden Hour, Edinburgh’s ever-popular literary cabaret, plus band-nights curated by tenttracks.co.uk. Of course, there’s also a good-bye party to a wonderful building and various surprises along the way.

So, if you’re at a loose end and want something different to comedians, medical students and revue shows, come along to the Forest and enjoy what we have on offer throughout August. Not only do we offer a great choice of food and drinks, the shows are free entry or by donation. You never know, you might end up staying and helping the continuation of this valuable Edinburgh venue.

If you want to help support the Forest, you can set up a monthly standing order (<http://theforest.org.uk/soform.pdf>). This is the most effective way of supporting Forest. You provide a regular, guaranteed income, allowing us to keep doing what we’re doing and put the Forest in a stronger position when approaching other funders and the banks.

Please give what you can afford and help ensure the future for an Edinburgh institution.

For more information on the Forest and the campaign to save it, please see <http://blog.theforest.org.uk/savetheforest> or contact fundraising@theforest.org.uk.

This video also gives you more information on the Forest if

this campaign has passed you by