

Left- overs

An Elegy to the
Foodhall Project



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Introduction to this reflection

Foodhall meant a lot to a lot of people. It's hard to say from any one perspective why Foodhall had to close, so many factors contributed to the rise and fall of the project. However, with so many similar groups out there carrying out work to support their community, we want to share our learnings from Foodhall to support others to be more long lived. This is what inspired a small group of us to write this reflection.

After a long process of clearing out the physical space that ended in early 2023, we hatched a plan to draw out what our community had learnt from our work together on the project. Though limited by recruiting through personal networks, around 20 people engaged with that process.

We are grateful to Hannah Lewis, who supported this processes with her elegant facilitation over the course of three sessions: two reflective sessions building a timeline of Foodhall's milestones and what contributed to them, and a third meeting which drew out the lessons that we'd now like to share with the world. This was a process of learning and evaluation, but also grieving and closure, for those of us for whom Foodhall became a community and an identity.

The four of us who've written this reflection are:

Charlie, who joined Foodhall as a volunteer in 2019, initially with the Foodhall Community Radio branch project (FCR), and later coordinating events and parties.

Selina, who joined as a volunteer in the kitchen in 2017, and during COVID took on the role of national coordinator for the national food service alongside batch cooking.

Bevan, who turned up at Foodhall in 2018 looking to cook and did a whole lot of that over the next 4 years, including as a paid staff member for 18 months from March 2020.

Emmott, who got involved in Foodhall during the lockdown delivering food parcels, then joined the staff team as volunteer coordinator.

With other contributions from Foodhall Heroes including Toby (editorial), Isaac (editorial), Nadia (quotes), amongst others.



Martin at the Eyre Street Garden

What's contained within is not a diagnosis of all Foodhall's successes and failures; we're not trying to assign blame for the closure of the project. Instead this reflection is a representation of things learnt by particular people who gave a lot of their time to, shaped, and were in turn shaped by it.

As writers we've brought a critical lens to this work, but also as people deeply embedded in Foodhall we will have brought some of our own perspectives too. We've collectively chosen not to focus on interpersonal dynamics, and rather pick out the structural lessons that we think others doing similar work could learn from which we maybe wish we'd thought about in hindsight.

We hope that what comes through in our writing here is respect, appreciation and joy for all the work we did together, and a deep desire to share what we have learned so that Foodhall's legacy can continue long after it is gone.

Generalising our learnings as applicable for others doing similar work, we've broken them into two parts:

Power + Structure and Funding.

As well as providing a material closure to the FH project, we want this to become a valuable document for others, something that can go out into the world to support others working radically with people and food.

Part 1: What is Foodhall?

Foodhall was first and foremost a space for anyone. And it was likely that you could meet (almost) anyone there. It was a microcosm of the city that gave you an opportunity to learn about all kinds of things, experiences and ideas.

When you walk into the space, you would be first hit by the chitter chatter of cafe day regulars, next would be wafts and smells of the classic foodhall curry stew, yorkshire tea and assorted pastries. You could help yourself to a plate and find a space on the assortment of mismatched furniture, get into a conversation or maybe stick your head into the kitchen to see if anyone wanted a hand with the washing up.

As you sat down, colours and textures of the space would catch your eye, largely random - and based on foraged and salvaged paints and materials. Art on the walls came and went as anyone from the community displayed their latest works, or stayed as part of the furniture long after someone forgot they left it there.

If you hung around for long enough into the evening, the space might evolve, in fits and starts, into an open dinner party hosted a member of the community. On a Friday night, a crew might come in to set up decks, and lights, and often completely change the lay-out of the space.

Eventually the night owls would flock in to dance the hours away. At the end of the night, anyone might stick around to help clear up the cans.

Foodhall was what we made it. Anything could happen at Foodhall, and a lot of things did. Most importantly, it was a utopian community space, apart from the increasingly consumerist society around us; a place to be ourselves.



“It brings all different cultures together in one place, you know, as one people. And everybody's at ease, you know, for a few moments. It's amazing and, uh, and foods really nice.” - Captain

What Foodhall aimed to be | Foodhall was a social eating project which tackled social isolation, food waste and food poverty. From 2015 to 2022, the project hosted weekly shared meals on a ‘contribute-what-you-can’ basis. The kitchen was supplied using surplus food intercepted from local traders which would have otherwise become food waste. On the side, the space also acted as a hub for a range of radical branch projects, a base for kindred community groups and events and much more.

Why Foodhall did what it did as it did | Foodhall was centred on principles of Mutual Aid, where everyone can take what they need and that everyone has something they can give to the community. The project was an intervention in the mainstream emergency food provision system, where the transactional and depersonalising experiences can drive people deeper into social isolation and food poverty. *Foodhall tried to break down the walls between service-provider and service-user*, instead creating a space where all present made a meaningful contribution. This space was empowering and communitarian.

How Foodhall was organised | The initial core of the project revolved around regular weekly cafe days where a midday meal was served. Over the years, branch projects emerged based around the shared ideas, interests and capacities of anyone who wanted to take them forward: **LATES**, DIY parties; **TV Dinners**, an evening meal and film; **PLATES**, a themed evening meal; **BikeHall**, community bike repair

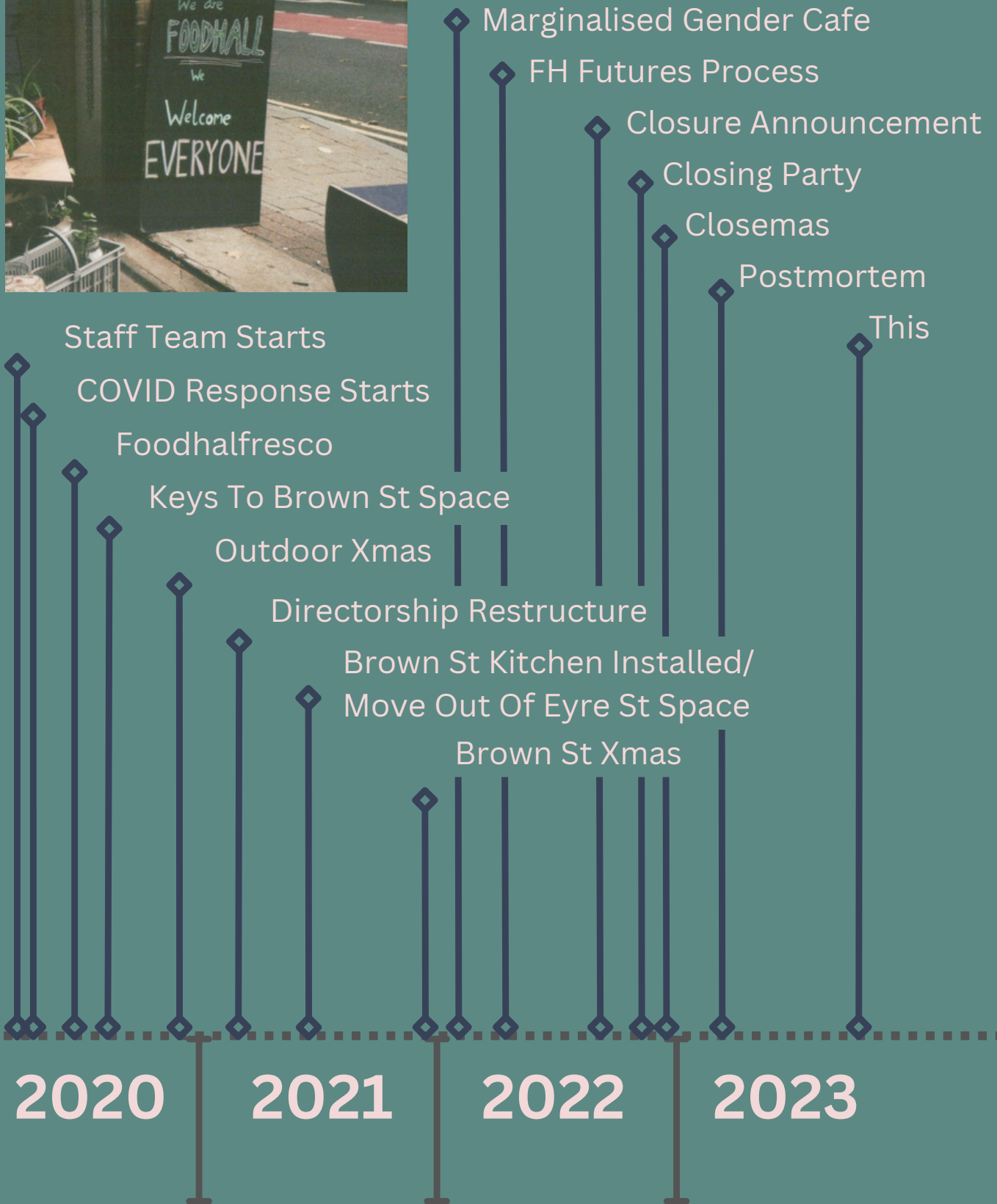
workshops; **ClayHall**, pottery playtimes; **ArtHall**, pop-up exhibitions, etc. Decision-making across these projects was supposed to be autonomous, taken in democratic meetings open-to-all. A lot of the time decisions actually fell to those with the capacity and information to make them: usually those with more access to education, employment and community integration outside of the space.

Who Foodhall was | The labour of maintaining Foodhall was carried out by an impressive number of volunteers giving varying amounts of time capacity and skills, with spontaneous contributions from anyone who came into the space. At different points there was a more or less core team of volunteers, often students or people recently graduated who hadn't grown up in Sheffield. Over time as the project gained some funding, it employed a small part-time staff team, mostly made up of people who'd previously volunteered. Those who came to the project for a warm meal and a chat were often, but most definitely not exclusively, older white working-class men from Sheffield.

Where Foodhall worked | Operating in the city centre was core to Foodhall's work, drawing people from across the city to eat on shared ground. Foodhall acquired meanwhile use of a space on Eyre Street in late 2015, briefly operating in the open air on the Moor while this space was fitted. During 2020 at the peak of Foodhall's funding, the project moved to a new home on Brown Street where we constructed our own kitchen, cafe, and warehouse.

A brief history of Foodhall





Right: Busy in the Eyre Street Kitchen



Left: Susan enjoying some food outside Eyre Street

Right: Nina working hard coordinating deliveries during lockdown



Part 2: Power + Structure

Power

noun

The ability or capacity to act or do something effectively

In the early years, power floated freely at Foodhall. This was the *power to do* *summat* - cook a meal, throw a party, whatever. Unlike most places, stepping into power didn't really require experience, competence, whatever. It *did* require the say so of one of the founding directors, meaning you had to have the persistence to put your idea in front of them. With little structure to guide this stage of the project, goodwill, radical energy, skill and perseverance gave it momentum which generated more attention and activity.

The space and time available to the project in this stage created the sense of an infinite “power to do”. An exhibition? We'll clear out the basement! A performance? Well why not. Another cafe day? What's the worst that could happen! This capacity allowed the expansion of the project, while people stepping into their power were not stepping on other people's toes.

As Foodhall grew to fill the entire universe*, there was less scope for the experimentally expansive activity of the early days. Resources (space, food, labour, money) became

**this may not be an accurate description*

scarce due to increased demand: using resources for one thing had knock on effects for other activities. Despite a defining advantage of Foodhall being the abundance which community can manifest, the situation was still constrained by scarcity - and scarcity generates conflict.

Lesson 1: Structures or agreed priorities for resource allocation reduce conflict. And having enough people with the intuitive skills and understanding to manage conflict before it gets out of hand is vital. Policies help a lot!

Conflict is not always a scary word. When visions and desires compete rather than complement, moments of generative tension can occur. The imperfect compromises forged of disagreement sometimes became the base of something better. It generally requires skill, generosity, patience and a shared understanding of how to navigate shit, so that conflict may be managed positively and sustainably.

Clarity over where power lies and the source of that power is hugely helpful in developing this understanding. The skill of artfully navigating conflict isn't one that people are born with, it has to be cultivated in its context. For a project that was kept barreling forward by disparate scraps of capacity from dozens of people, both of these things were serious challenges.

Foodhall always asserted the essential equality in the place, junking the 'service user' vs 'volunteer/staff/service

provider' binary and being an altogether different place to the day centre, the soup kitchen or the coffee morning. Power was taken up through genuinely unorthodox and innovative means. However, what built up over time was a kind of **tyranny of the available** where those who had the time and capacity acquired knowledge, responsibility, social capital and, to be blunt, **power**.

The social mechanics of this worked informally, more or less like a clique. The people who accrued power usually came to Foodhall already socially connected, or they were present in multiple branch projects, going to meetings, being fun at the parties and generally making themselves important. They became part of what we might call 'The Glue': an identifiable social group that kept Foodhall together for its energetic, brash and productive middle age (roughly 2018-2021).

Crafting in the Brown Street courtyard

"I can't put it into words...it means a lot to me and it means a lot to lots of other people. Um, it's a good sign of a healthy community, people, the people that turn up." - Olushala



Like a clique, membership of The Glue was not formally awarded and many people we saw as members in hindsight may not have felt sure they were at the time. The Glue became the most effective communication network at Foodhall, shortcutting formal communication tools such as our Slack channel. The knowledge transmitted among its members made them the most informed on happenings across the wider project. This group was necessary, inevitable and invaluable to the project running successfully. It was also hierarchical, exclusionary and sowed some of the seeds for Foodhall's future dysfunction.

The Glue era flowed directly into the Staff Team era, with many of the paid roles funded by a big grant Foodhall was awarded in 2019 being filled by 'Glue' members when recruitment was completed in early 2020.

The Staff Team era was also the Covid era; Foodhall's activity and a lot of decisions made at this time came down to operating in a once-a-century global pandemic with a state public health response that bordered on the sociopathic. Nonetheless, there are things to pick over regardless of this context.

The problem with Staff Teams for a project that professes a non-hierarchical outlook is that they hold a lot of power and will inevitably use it. They are a structure unto themselves. Discussions about how this power was to operate had not been had prior to the Staff Team coming

into existence. This was high on the agenda for once they were fully in post in spring of 2020. Ah yeah, spring 2020. The Covid pandemic. So that important introspective work was put on the back burner and the project completely changed its orientation and delivered over 120 years worth of meals to people across Sheffield over the course of 2020, for a few months supplying 1 in every 500 households across Sheffield with food each week.

Lesson 2: Moving from a voluntary mutual aid model to employing staff had fundamental implications for the project, it's values and how we worked. These should have been better debated, digested and decided collectively, in advance.



Left: Serving hot drinks from our takeaway cafe during lockdown.

Right: Packing food parcels to be delivered across the city.



Lesson 3: Foodhall proclaimed non-hierarchical values. Yet both its legal structure and operational structure embodied forms of hierarchy.

The existence of paid staff made our Covid response possible. But the work on who should hold power and how they should use it was deferred. As Foodhall transformed into a food factory, warehouse and distributor, the community, previously very solidly built around equal access to a physical space, were literally excluded from that space in the name of public health.

When Foodhall opened up again in the midst of a pandemic, people returned to find a group of people being paid to impose rules and restrictions for their own health and wellbeing. Covid risk and legal responsibilities forced a divide between those enforcing the rules and those abiding by them. It also reinforced the tendency to rely heavily on staff members to keep things running.

Gradually, and without any formal recognition, the 'Glue' group disbanded; the challenge of working for Foodhall being so great that only 2 of 11 people employed in March 2020 were still there 18 months later. As a result, some well-worn channels of communication were severed, channels that would in retrospect prove vital. This placed further pressure on a staff team progressively losing the experience of Foodhall that the Glue represented.

The dissolution of The Glue left our staff team and new directors with a legacy that was hard to live up to without the experience, relationships and social capital that had driven the project forward in earlier years. Bequeathed a funding crunch in an organisation that had been extremely reliant for the past 2 years on paid staff, there was little option in 2022 but to close the project down.

Different ways of organising, as well as different particular decisions made at certain points, may have given the project more longevity. It certainly could have made a difference to individual burnout levels and a smoother transition of power as the project transformed. Most of all, for a project with loudly proclaimed values of openness and equality, a transparent structure and clear distribution of power would have put Foodhall much closer to living out those values.



Matt cooking up a storm

“Oh, this place, it's quite good, yeah. And then they provide the, you know, the meal, the food. The starter, you know, like a proper restaurant! Yeah, I feel good here, yeah. Feeding the people, yeah. Let the people be happy. Including me.” -

Anon



Left:
Foodhall
Christmas at
Eyre Street

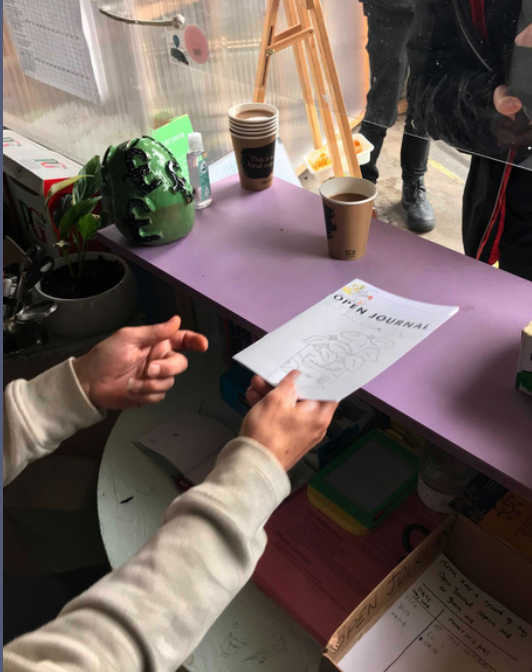


Right: The
day we
moved
the oven
to Brown
Street



Left: Toby
and Holly
delivering
from the
Brown
Street
warehouse

Open Journal copies
flying off the shelf



The final Foodhall
PLATES



*The best lack all conviction, while the worst
Are full of passionate intensity*

from W.B Yeats, The Second Coming



Jenny on the sewing
machine



Giant sandwiches from a
foraging PLATES



Above: Selina repurposing that food surplus in the Brown Street kitchen



Left: Ant and Sensei in the Eyre Street garden

Below: A LAB gig in front of the hay bales at Eyre Street



Part 3: Funding

One of the things that drew people to Foodhall was a sense that the project proved that things could be done differently. The 'contribute what you can' front-end financial model was an example of this. Every Friday, tea, coffee, and a freshly cooked meal were served in a basic but cosy cafe space to anybody who wanted it, with donations accepted, but not expected, from attendees.

Similar formats were used across the spectrum of Foodhall's activities - Foodhall **Lates** and **Plates** suggested a donation on entry, usually between £5-£10. Groups could also hire of the Foodhall space for private use, with discounted rates for other community-orientated groups. This model gave weight to a sense that Foodhall offered an anti-capitalist, anti-establishment alternative for community food provision and organising.

On the back-end, how was this model afforded? A volunteer labour force supporting the project was of course crucial. The quality and quantity of hourly work required to make Foodhall happen each week would have been a prohibitive cost if waged at market rates. With limited sources of income, Foodhall successfully deployed a huge amount of voluntary labour, with a core committed group of people responsible for a lot of that work.

But not everything at Foodhall could be achieved through voluntary labour; rent, amongst other things, costs money. Foodhall's substantial streams of funding before 2019 were grants and donations from crowdfunding efforts, which supported costs such as rent, utilities, staff wages, and any ingredients or tools for the kitchen which could not be attained for free. Donations received each week at the cafe, from events and from other use of the space were insignificant compared to the sums needed to cover costs each month; this always posed a fundamental challenge for the project.

In 2019, Foodhall succeeded in a couple of major grant applications to fund several new paid, part time staff positions and the Foodhall Delivery Project (FDP). This influx of grant funding was set to taper off over 3 years,



A busy kitchen at Eyre Street

"I've been coming here a few years when I can, you know, around work and that. And, uh, I just love the atmosphere. It's a shame to see it go, actually." - John

during which time Foodhall was expected to develop income-generating activities as a means of sustaining itself.

This relieved the pressure to find money in the short-term, but it was hard to see what profit-generating activities the project could engage in to cover around £100k a year in staff wages without compromising its contribute-what-you-can ethos. About the same time, a decision was taken to transition Foodhall's base of operations from its home on Eyre St to a much larger, more high maintenance building on Brown St.

Lesson 5: In hindsight, whilst the project needed to find more stability and flexibility than Eyre St could offer, the move to Brown St was a poorly timed decision taken with too little consultation.

Before these challenge could be tackled, COVID-19 exploded onto the social horizon and Foodhall had to react. In a complete realignment of the project, everyone was now focussed on the sudden city-wide food delivery scheme at the same time as moving into and renovating a new building, all the while responding to a global pandemic.

Amidst all this change, the project was now employing a staff team of eleven, creating particular obligations to staff as well as a substantial monthly wage cost. This led the project into seeking further grants (far less successfully than before COVID) to cover future wage costs.

With this came growing mission creep - a sense the project was losing sight of its core mission whilst being pulled in different directions by the arising conditions of COVID, the building move, and fulfilling funding requirements.

Lesson 4: Becoming an employer creates an imperative to be able to pay wages; this obligation can crowd out other activity or obscure other possible paths forward and creates a reliance on working within the grant-funding cycle.

At the end of 2022, substantial building overheads and the expiry of key grants gave Foodhall no option but to cease operations. But why couldn't we have found more funding? As the project had become reliant on grants to cover core costs at the same time as bringing on a staff team, there wasn't the level of participation and familiarity with this funding model needed to be able to carry on with it after staff costs could not longer be covered.



Emmott DIYing at Brown Street

“It's about community. You get a meal as well, but it's more about community and meeting people and stuff like that....Get to know people as they go along.... Everybody's been friendly.”
- Mark

More time could have been spent developing a clear financial plan that the community understood and supported before becoming entirely reliant on grants - here the signature freewheelin' Foodhall approach towards problems didn't help.

Perhaps more regular donations and generating greater income streams from building hire and events would have sustained the project and fostered better community integration. Lacking a vision of its financial sustainability, Foodhall lacked a crucial aspect of its identity. Successfully attaining some big grants allowed the project to expand its operations, but the expansion was not sustainable and eventually compromised the projects values and goals.

For various reasons, including COVID and the disbanding of 'The Glue' sub-community discussed above, the process of developing a proper mission and governance strategy for this new phase of FH was not completed. As a result, the wider Foodhall community didn't properly understand the time-sensitive and contingent nature of the grant funding sustaining it.

During this difficult time, Foodhall was involved in wider community food provision networks in Sheffield. However, these networks and the wider community couldn't provide the support that FH needed at the time; maybe because of the difference in structure and ethics compared to other food provision orgs, or maybe because we didn't know how to ask for help. FH prided itself on doing things differently,

and so we were perhaps less ready to take valuable advice from more ‘mainstream’ organisations doing similar work.

Questions about where money comes from are far bigger than Foodhall alone; this poses problems for any radical communities or revolutionary movements today. Self- sustainability is the goal, but finding how to do this without exploitative working conditions or exclusionary pricing of services is a constant challenge.

Beyond the impact of COVID, in the past 3 years we’ve experienced a shift away from mutual aid funding and working with mutual aid models in mainstream community food provision. This atmosphere makes it increasingly difficult for projects like Foodhall to exist, with both structural (e.g. soaring rent and utilities) and individual (e.g. lower interest in volunteer roles) impacts. Nevertheless if only for a limited time, Foodhall was successful in providing a space where anyone was welcome to come and share a meal with others.



Mick and Martin outside the Foodhole-in-the-Wall during lockdown

What comes after

This reflection has come from a place of loss, and frustration that we couldn't keep Foodhall going, which might be evident at times in our critical tone. Each of us saw our lives changed for the better in some way through our encounters with the project. We had a sense that this was too important to forget and there was more to be done.

The vision that drove Foodhall continues to be truly remarkable. While it was ongoing, Foodhall turned a lot of heads locally, nationally and internationally, and inspired other projects in different communities. Its ethics were genuinely radical, and grounding these in the social arena of food and eating gave it a universal appeal.

This incarnation of Foodhall may have concluded, but many things that began in and around the project continue. There are a great many talented artists and musicians who cut their teeth at Foodhall. The National Food Service, birthed on Eyre Street, continues to be the voice for radically restructuring our relationship to food provision. Social Pickle continue to save veggies from the bin and get them into our bellies by crafting weird and wonderful preserves. Some long time Foodhalls have established a weekly social meal under the new name of Food Squad. The Sheffield Food Chain continue to redistribute food surplus around the city by bike. Sheffield Community Bike Project has arisen from the ashes of BikeHall.

Not least is the ongoing impact that Foodhall has had on Sheffield as a city and the people who call it home. There are a great many people in the city who's lives are lived more fully because of their interaction with the project, who's minds and hearts were opened to an alternative way of being in the world because of the little bit of utopia that Foodhall provided. This impact radiates out across the city, creating more and distributed little utopias, even when the one big one that held us all together has now gone.

But is it gone forever? There are surely more than a few people out there who yearn for a Foodhall 2.0. Perhaps this will come one day, when we've all learnt and digested these lessons and many more, and assessed how they fit around the conditions and contradictions of the time. For now, there are plenty of radical things to put your energy into if you've got a Foodhall shaped hole in your life:

The National Food Service | www.nationalfoodservice.uk

Open Kitchen Social Club | www.openkitchensocialclub.com

Food Squad | 12pm on Fridays at Theatre Deli

Gut Level | www.gutlevel.co.uk

Mondo Radio | www.mondo.radio

Social Pickle | www.socialpickle.co.uk

Sheffield Community Bike Project | sheffieldcommunitybikeproject.org



