

Build back better? Being Human festival points ways for towns and cities

What will our towns and cities look like in 2050? Will some feature floating communities designed to cope with rising sea levels in areas repeatedly ravaged by flooding? Pandemic aside, history tells us that our urban habitats are in a constant state of evolution.

So the 'Future of our towns and cities' sub-theme of this year's Being Human festival, the annual celebration of humanities research led by the School of Advanced Study (SAS) at the University of London, couldn't come soon enough.

Its overall 'Renewal' theme has fired up the UK's researchers who've risen to the challenge to demonstrate how humanities research and creativity can help us imagine the places we hope to see. And they could also point ways for the politicians vowing to 'build back better'.

"As the world tries to open up again after the pandemic, its effects continue to create ongoing threats to people's economic security, as well as restricting our ability to meet socially in the forms that are so central to being human. As many struggle with ongoing anxiety and grief, our society continues to reimagine how cities can be safe and flexible spaces, and humanities research helps show us the way." said Professor Sarah Churchwell, the festival's director

The Being Human festival, the UK's national celebration of the humanities, features over 200 free events exploring this year's 'Renewal' theme from 11 to 20 November. It is run in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy.

The School of Advanced Study makes its own contribution with [Future history online workshop: imagining our places in 2050](#). In this workshop, with writer, artist and maker Dr Elizabeth Dearnley, and Professor Catherine Clarke, director of the [Victoria County History of England](#), you will be experimenting with creativity and writing as you imagine your future. With the renewal of places across the UK firmly on the agenda through government policies such as the Towns Fund and Levelling Up, come and join the conversation about how research and creativity can help us imagine the places we hope to see. No creative writing experience is needed. The first 50 people to register will receive a pack of materials to help and inspire them.

If you can imagine your future urban environment, then why not get down to drawing it? That's the aim of [Drawing diversity](#) (organised by SOAS, University of London). Imagine drawing a portrait – it's an intimate process of witnessing and recognising. Join the workshop to do just that – but instead of drawing a person's face, participants will sketch while wandering through a park, then regroup for a discussion to share ideas for the park's renewal – considering diversity, inclusion and accessibility.

Do you remember when the COVID-19 lockdowns first came in? The empty High Streets and desolation? [What's in store: imagining future high streets](#) (organised by University of Southampton) will explore how we can reimagine and reconnect with our depleted high streets. This family-friendly workshop will lead participants through

a series of creative tasks and collaborations to create and curate their own shop-front exhibitions for a new kind of high street.

Other ‘Future of our towns and cities’ highlights include:

- [Making space](#) (organised by University of Lincoln). Brew Projects, a not-for-profit arts partnership, invites you to a unique drop-in workshop, inspired by Lincoln's own Charter of the Forest, kept in the city's medieval castle. It will blend the modern and the historical by bringing modern perspectives to medieval crafts, using techniques and materials found in medieval manuscripts and playing with gold leaf and calligraphy to bring ideas to life.
- [Reimagining my city](#) (organised by Queen Mary University of London). Join researcher Lucie Glasheen and performer, maker, educator and storyteller Arkem Mark Walton to explore your creative side in this workshop for 7-13-year-olds and their carers. It's a chance to draw and use collage to create a zine that reimagines the city.
- [Soho after Covid](#) (organised by University of Westminster) presents a celebratory tour of London arts venues past, present and future. This one hour guided walk will reveal secret spaces, secret histories and secret projects. Produced in collaboration with poetry collective Live Canon, the event marks a joyful return of culture and performance to the capital's streets.
- [Creating our future: the city in the 21st century](#) (organised by Anglia Ruskin University). Put ideals of democracy into action at these Citizens' Assembly style workshops. Discuss the future of our cities alongside leading experts from academic and industry and help to create the kind of change that is necessary and possible for the challenges we face in the post covid-world.
- [Ruin, repair, and renewal in architecture](#) (organised by the Courtauld). Courtauld's Conway Storytellers invites participants to explore how places undergo change, from ruins to repairs and radical renewal. There'll be creative and research-based stories from volunteers and staff at the Courtauld, who are busy digitising 1.5 million photographs. Most of the photographs have never been digitised before, so you'll be one of the first to see these beautiful prints before the website is launched.
- [Visions of Coventry's post-war future](#) (organised by Coventry University). On 14 November 1940 Coventry was subjected to a devastating air raid which changed the face of the city forever. Although borne from disaster, the Coventry Blitz presented city architect, Donald Gibson, with the opportunity to realise his vision for the 'future' Coventry. This talk will examine plans outlining the post-war reconstruction of Coventry and consider how such images evoke the desire to create a modern, ambitious urban centre to express the optimism of a country emerging from war.

These are just samples of more than 200 free public activities taking place across the UK from 11–20 November.

The full Being Human 2021 festival programme is available at <https://beinghumanfestival.org/events>

Find out more about the festival at <https://beinghumanfestival.org/> and follow the latest news on Twitter at [@BeingHumanFest](https://twitter.com/BeingHumanFest).

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Notes to Editors

- 1. Being Human: a festival of the humanities, 11–20 November 2021**
Led by the School of Advanced Study, University of London, in partnership with the Arts and Humanities Research Council and the British Academy, Being Human is a national forum for public engagement with humanities research. The festival highlights the ways in which the humanities can inspire and enrich our everyday lives. For more information, please visit www.beinghumanfestival.org or follow the festival on social media at [@BeingHumanFest](https://twitter.com/BeingHumanFest).
- 2. The School of Advanced Study (SAS)**, University of London, is the UK's national centre for the promotion and support of research in the humanities. SAS and its member institutes offer unparalleled resources, facilities and academic opportunities across a wide range of subject areas for the benefit of the national and international scholarly community. Last year SAS welcomed 996 research fellows and associates, held 1,500 events highlighting the latest research in the humanities, received 31.6 million online visits to its research resources and platforms, and hosted 100,119 visits to its specialist libraries and collections. The School also leads Being Human, the UK's only nationwide festival of the humanities. Find out more at www.sas.ac.uk or follow SAS on Twitter at [@SASNews](https://twitter.com/SASNews).
- 3. The Arts and Humanities Research Council** is part of UK Research and Innovation. We're the UK's largest funder of arts and humanities research and training, investing over £100 million every year. We fund independent researchers in a wide range of subjects, including history, archaeology, digital content, philosophy, languages, design, heritage, area studies, the creative and performing arts, and many more. The research we fund provides social and cultural benefits that contribute to the economic success of the UK, as well as to the culture and welfare of societies around the world. Find out more about us at ahrc.ukri.org, or on Twitter at [@ahrcpress](https://twitter.com/ahrcpress).
- 4. The British Academy** is the UK's national academy for the humanities and social sciences. We mobilise these disciplines to understand the world and shape a brighter future. We invest in researchers and projects across the UK and overseas, engage the public with fresh thinking and debates, and bring together scholars, government, business and civil society to influence policy for the benefit of everyone. www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk [@BritishAcademy](https://twitter.com/BritishAcademy). For further information please contact Sean Canty at the British Academy Press Office on s.canty@thebritishacademy.ac.uk or +44 (0)20 7969 5273.