



British
Ceramics
Biennial

The Clay Pit
Pit Pack

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“It’s very relaxing, very intense. You lose everything don’t you? You just concentrate on what you’re doing.”

–*Clay Pit Participant*

1. Introduction

The Clay Pit is an inspiring and interactive space where people freely explore liquid, dry and fired clay.

The Clay Pit was one of the highlights of the 2017 British Ceramics Biennial in Stoke-on-Trent. It won the Best Family Event award from Fantastic For Families, recognising an outstanding contribution to arts and culture for families.

Artists welcomed and introduced people to the materials, inviting them to look around, work together and create what they liked. Works were left in the space, acting as further inspiration for the next wave of visitors.

During six weeks, over 4,000 people visited the Clay Pit, using over 4 tonnes of clay.

The Clay Pit delivered benefits for visitors, who found time passed quickly as they played. Adults and children worked together, getting messy, experiencing freedom, and then reflecting on what this could teach them.

Artists working in the Clay Pit benefited from engaging with a familiar material in new ways. Adopting a person-centred approach means the Clay Pit is accessible for all visitors, regardless of age, language, ability or background. This brings advantages for organisations hosting a Clay Pit. Working with clay in a free and open-ended way could support your organisation to develop new relationships with new groups.

Drawing on experiences of delivering the Clay Pit during the 2017 British Ceramics Biennial, this Pit Pack has been produced to encourage schools, community organisations, galleries, museums and arts organisations to try setting up a Clay Pit in their local communities. The Pack is a simple 'how to' guide covering everything from motivations to materials to monitoring.

**Kat Evans, Dena Bagi
& Gabriella Rhodes**
Stoke-on-Trent, 2018

Figure 2: The Clay Pit slip trough (Alice Thatcher)



"I can't tell you how it feels, not to be told off for your little boy's behaviour. Thank you all, for making him welcome - for embracing his ideas and getting excited with him about them. You let him play, create his little world in clay"

—Visitor

Figure 3: Wall display
(Joel Fildes)



Background

Clay changes with time. Exposed to the air, it dries. If immersed in water, it can be reclaimed and returned to its wet state. Makers, thinkers and educators have documented how clay's temporal and transformational qualities have been utilised to comment on, or activate change (Livingstone, 2017). Inspired by these qualities, the Clay Pit was designed by artist-researchers Priska Falin (Aalto University, Helsinki) and Dena Bagi (British Ceramics Biennial, Stoke-on-Trent). Over a period of 5 years, both researchers had carried out research and delivered workshops exploring aesthetic processes, and people's connections to materials. Bagi and Falin aimed to encourage groups of people to explore their sense of self in a clay playground or landscape. The theoretical basis for this investigation was drawn from Jane Bennett's *Vibrant Matter* (2010). Bennett proposes that clay as a material has

agency or vitality when we interact with it. Underlying this is a belief that humans and non-humans are built from the same 'matter', not only living in but also forming part of a material world.

The collaboration between Bagi and Falin was supported by the Ceramics and its Dimensions project, and funded through the European Commission's Creative Europe Programme. In the context of this project, the artist-researchers were keen to discover if the qualities of clay would encourage individuals and groups to think about their relationship with a place, in this case an area with a long history and rapidly changing relationship with clay and ceramics: Stoke-on-Trent. However, the Clay Pit approach and methods can be adapted to a range of contexts.

Results

Between 23rd September and 5th November 2017, over 4,000 people visited the Clay Pit, using over 4 tonnes of clay.

The Clay Pit was located at the heart of the British Ceramics Biennial in Spode Works. During this prestigious cultural event, work from the UK's leading contemporary ceramic artists is presented in series of exhibitions and events across Stoke-on-Trent. The festival embraces the heritage of the city and celebrates its creative edge as an international centre for excellence in contemporary ceramics.

"It's something that when I was growing up in Stoke didn't really happen other than your history lessons and it was all very sterile. Not sterile, but not hands on and I think it's great for a place like Stoke, that's a post-industrial town, and it's got all this wealth of heritage and skill that hasn't really been celebrated or recognised in any way."

– Visitor

When asked "What did you like best about the festival?", 10% of visitors surveyed reported that the Clay Pit was their favourite aspect of the British Ceramics Biennial.

Visitors to the Clay Pit made objects, prints, paintings and installations. They made versions of their houses, gardens and family members. They made monsters, landscapes and lots of teapots.

Nothing was fired.

People experienced calmness, frustration and time passing quickly in The Clay Pit. Some people came specifically for the Pit, others dropped by whilst exploring the rest of the festival. People came back and back, worked in big groups and in isolation, and enjoyed the freedom the clay playground gave them.

"Yeah. It's fun it's really nice to do something a bit hands on, a bit different from walking round and just seeing. Actually, getting physically involved is good."

– Visitor

Visitors learnt through doing. They learnt about the different states of clay. They learnt practical skills from each other. In discussion with the artists, they reflected, and learnt something about themselves.

"Yeah it's just really nice to do something that's using your hands but also a bit artistic...Yeah, it's just been good to be involved."

– Visitor



Figure 4: Working Circle
(Joel Fildes)

Figure 5: Floor installation (Dena Bagi)



2. What is a Clay Pit?

The Clay Pit is an interactive space where artists, community, and education groups can explore clay.

The Clay Pit encourages communal hands-on play, exploration and construction via a series of pits with copious amounts of liquid, wet and fired clay, oversize clay tools, and creative props.

The Clay Pit is fun, exciting and messy. It creates tactile experiences which fire the imagination.

The Clay Pit is a person-centred learning environment. People explore clay with artists encouraging and developing their interests.

The Clay Pit is accessible for people of all ages. No previous experience is necessary.

Person-centred learning

Theories of person-centred learning are based on a belief that a person's curiosity and creativity can guide learning. Rather than a teacher directly passing on knowledge through structured lessons, person-centred learning enables an individual to direct their own learning. The Clay Pit uses this approach with adults and children.

The learning model adopted in The Clay Pit is inspired by the Reggio Emilia approach, developed by parents and psychologist Loris Malaguzzi in the Reggio Emilia area of Italy. The model acknowledges and draws on children's

natural curiosity and interest in their surroundings and their relationship with the world. It places importance on the layout of space, in order to encourage collaboration in small groups, and ensures materials and tools act as 'provocations' offering multiple possibilities for engagement (Gandini, 2003). In the Reggio approach, the documentation or display of people's work is also important in order to value, reflect on and share progress between people in the learning community. Above all, there is a belief that change is possible.

3. Why deliver a Clay Pit?

A Clay Pit can be delivered in a school, a museum, a gallery or community organisation. It offers a positive experience for visitors, artists and the host organisation.

Benefits for visitors

The Clay Pit is memorable and shareable.

There are no barriers to participation. The person-centred approach allows people to explore and engage in their own way. Visitors can collaborate with each other and experience a sense of achievement. People remember the tactile experience and associate this with feelings of wellbeing and creativity.

“I found it really difficult at first, but I worked with the people around me to figure it out!”

– Visitor

During the 2017 British Ceramics Biennial, visitors connected with their emotions and reflected on how working with the materials could lead to learning something about themselves.

“I’ve just enjoyed I think, I really have enjoyed. I feel like I’m a child and I’m starting to wonder if it’s okay to be so childish but you know what... So, I’ve had a lot of fun and like I said, today I learnt that I can let go.”

– Visitor



Benefits for artists and people working with children

The Clay Pit is experimental and inspiring.

Many artists will have experience of teaching or delivering workshops but using a more person-centred approach can create opportunities to reflect on their own practice and relationship with the material.

“I was really interested in the interdisciplinarity of it. I feel like I’ll be able to teach physics, geology, art, maths and language with the clay.”

– Visitor

“The Clay Pit has been an incredible and invaluable experience for me, as an artist. Seeing the participants enjoying the material that I work with was really inspiring... I was surprised at how experimental people could be with very little instruction or guidance.”

– Alice Thatcher, Artist



Figure 6: Floor printing (Joel Fildes)



Benefits for organisations

The Clay Pit is engaging and inclusive.

“My son spent three hours in the clay pit. I have never seen him so engaged with a material.”

– Visitor

If promoted through ‘What’s On’ and family listing websites, a Clay Pit can attract young families to an arts, education or heritage site or event. We found that children typically spent extended periods of time in the Pit. As a free and/or regular activity, people are likely to return more than once and will value the chance to be ‘hands on’ in a gallery or museum environment.

“The Clay Pit was exciting. It generated an energy within the heart of the festival. Large numbers of people gravitated towards the Pit - people had an irresistible urge to get their hands on the materials.”

– Barney Hare Duke, Artistic Director, British Ceramics Biennial

The value of the pit was recognised when the British Ceramics Biennial won the Best Family Event award from Fantastic For Families, recognising an outstanding contribution to arts and culture for families.

4. Setting up your Clay Pit

Location

Your Clay Pit should be somewhere accessible. It needs to be a place that people feel free to get messy. Talk to your current visitors and approach children centres or local schools to decide on a place, time and date(s) that work for everyone. To encourage maximum engagement, it could be a location that people come across as part of their everyday routines.

Time and Frequency

Your Clay Pit could last a few hours or be a regular occurrence, so people can return regularly. When planning, consider the time it takes to set up and clean up the space.

Designing the space

As described in Section 2, arrangement of the space is important to encourage collaboration between your visitors. We created 'working circles' on the floor and walls, as well as tables at different heights to ensure everyone was included.

Materials and Equipment

Large quantities of clay (liquid, dried, wet, fired) is offered to participants like a canteen. Both common and alternative tools are laid out in the most enticing way possible. This draws people into the space and offers a starting point for investigation, highlighting the many ways the materials can be manipulated.

People

The artists working in the pit should themselves be passionate about the possibilities of clay, and the value of play. Their creative processes will activate and inspire, modelling behaviours that can extend people's ideas. It is not important for the artists to have a high level of technical knowledge as no specific skills (coiling, hand-building etc) are taught.

Engagement

Nothing made in a Clay Pit is fired. This opens up many creative possibilities. Fired and wet clay can be combined to build a structure, solid forms can be created, clay can be used for building, drawing, printing. It is important for artists to verbally give visitors permission to play, but also to support creativity by taking a lead from people's interests and encouraging them to expand their ideas or interact with the tools and materials in new ways.

Display

Inviting visitors to display their work on a shelf, or document it through photography and naming, will give status to their work, encourage reflection on their experience and give inspiration to the next visitors.

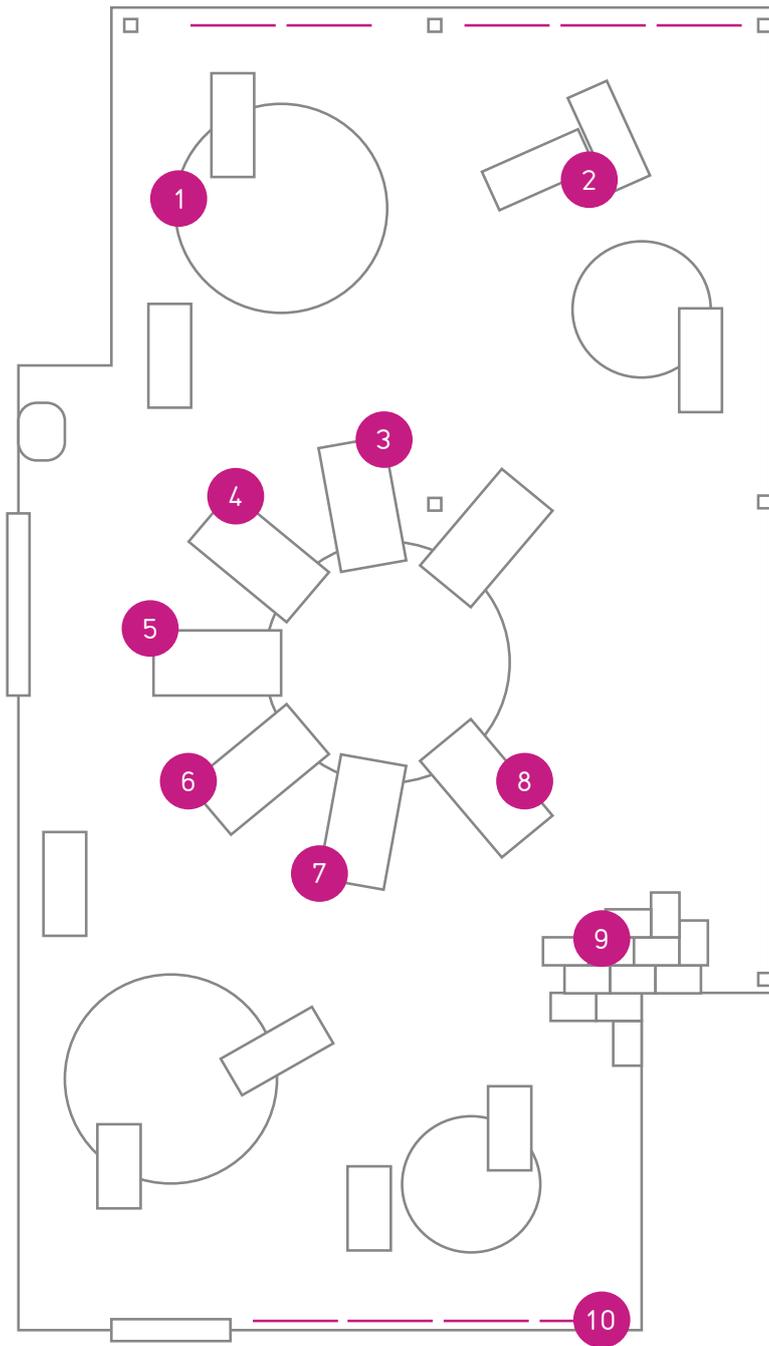
Figure 7: Clay Pit from above (Joel Fildes)



“My Dad created the bricks, and I built the structure!”

Visitor

Floor plan



Key here?

1. Working circles
2. Benches
3. Tools
4. Tiles - fired
5. Shards - dry
6. Scraps - leather hard
7. Liquid clay
8. Sausages - wet
9. Clay 'wall'
10. Boards, Shelves, Drawings



Figure 8: Pit layout (Joel Fildes)

Equipment, material and tools

Slip (liquid clay)

Cubes, oblongs and large 'sausages' of wet clay

Leather-hard slabs and clay scraps

Fired tiles

Wooden boards

Large wooden tools including spoons, rolling pins, guides, and spatulas

Large trough, workbenches, shelves

Roles

A Clay Pit can become busy. We recommend a minimum of 2 roles with the following responsibilities:

'Dry' staff/volunteer

Meet and greet

Observe running of the pit, assess risks, make changes to layout

Monitor numbers, collect feedback and evaluation data

Assist the artist(s), providing cover if necessary

'Wet' artist

Prepare the materials

Engage and assist visitors, model activity

Clear and clean the space

Top tips

Welcoming - Give a warm welcome. Explain that the Pit is a place to play, that there are no rules and people can make what they like and get as messy as they like.

Mirroring – Copy someone's making style, extending and developing it in your own making.

Matching – If two people are tearing clay, tell them about each other to encourage people to notice, share and collaborate.



Figure 9: Large tools (Joel Fildes)



Figure 10: Tools and materials (Dena Bagi)

Figure 12: Messy play (Dena Bagi)



5. More information

The Clay Pit concept was developed by the British Ceramics Biennial and Aalto University and supported by the Ceramics and its Dimensions project, funded through the European Commission's Creative Europe Programme.

ceramicsanditsdimensions.eu

britishceramicsbiennial.com

aalto.fi

To find out more, please email info@britishceramicsbiennial.org

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