



Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab

Mapping Edinburgh's businesses Covid-19 adaptations

Covid Arcadia

Refashioning movement through material and digital adaptations in Edinburgh's independent retail sector.

Covid Arcadia is a project documenting and analysing responses to the restrictions brought in by local businesses in Edinburgh as a result of the Covid-19 national lockdown. The project is mapping retailers' digital and material adaptations to create a moving archive, and play findings back to the businesses themselves to help them innovate in a resilient way.



An overnight changing of the rules

When the Covid-19 pandemic triggered a nationwide lockdown, we all experienced something unprecedented and unexpected. The very nature of social life, all sense of polite conduct and how you encounter people in public places was disrupted. We, and the businesses and public spaces which welcome us, all had to adapt to facilitate people safely and to stay open.

One of the first examples of these adaptations was the appearance of street writing – whether inspiring messages, rainbows, street poetry in chalk or shops drawing arrows on the floor to direct customers. It was this that first inspired Liz Mcfall, Sociologist of Markets and Director of Data Civics, an Edinburgh Futures Institute research programme, to launch *Covid Arcadia* as part of the Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab, a programme created

to insert design thinking in research and innovation. The programme supports a series of co-development projects that encourage Covid-19 recovery and long-term sustainability in Edinburgh and its surrounding regions.

Covid Arcadia is investigating and recording how independent local businesses, such as Bike Trax and The Little Chartroom in Edinburgh, responded to an overnight change of rules. This is both in a technical way, documenting the experiments, innovations and creative solutions that allowed businesses to operate in the restricted environment, and in a sentimental way, exploring the role that social media, and Instagram in particular, played in emulating the physical experience of these businesses without physically being in the premises.



Edinburgh businesses' response

“The result is this quite experimental, dynamic, digital ethnography that captures the speed at which the rules changed, and some of the sheer inventiveness of those businesses that managed to navigate their way through it.”

Liz McFall
Covid Arcadia

As the pandemic set in, the *Covid Arcadia* project began to watch and capture the solutions that businesses in Edinburgh have come up with in order to continue operating. What began as a bricolage of repurposed items, tables used as barriers, over time progressed into bespoke solutions, like safe servers.

They collected evidence in a number of ways which evolved as the project and restrictions evolved. The photographic evidence - both digital and material - was collected by students, and by bicycle couriers as they delivered goods across the city.

The research marries qualitative interviews, observations, photography and experimental use of digital tools, such as Instagram. The *Covid Arcadia* project used its own Instagram channel to archive and analyse how

businesses were developing their solutions as rules changed. Importantly, this gallery of images looked at both physical and digital adaptations, and the place where the two corresponded.



Connecting with customers in digital and material ways

The research found that Instagram was one of the most important tools at the disposal of businesses forced to close or operate in a restricted way. For many, their Instagram feed changed from being a shop front, to a way of connecting with customers remotely, continuing a sense of community and projecting the atmosphere and personality of the business to their customers. The businesses were connecting with their customers in a new way, generating new kinds of content - commissioning artists, illustrators, sponsoring competitions, and pivoting to do things they've never done before.

In many instances, there was even a kind of transference between the digital and material adaptations. For example, one *Covid Arcadia* business, cafe Black Medicine, commissioned an illustrator to create content for their Instagram feed,

and the same illustrations appeared physically in their shop too.

Covid Arcadia worked in co-development with the businesses they studied to present their findings back to them, and support them to innovate and adapt in a resilient way, and most importantly, stay open and connected to their customers. They engaged a photographer with experience of qualitative research on photographs to support them to do this, to curate the visual evidence, code it and analyse it in a way that would both create a moving archive and celebrate the ingenuity of the retailers and businesses.

The *Covid Arcadia* website serves as a final, polished gallery that demonstrates the speed and movement of the pandemic and the subsequent innovations - both through digital and material adaptations.

“We became interested in how Instagram was creating an emotional bond, creating an atmosphere in that sense, even when the business has its door closed.”

Liz McFall
Covid Arcadia

The role of Edinburgh Futures Institute Design Lab

Edinburgh Futures Institute's Design Lab provided the *Covid Arcadia* project support and momentum to go from an informal piece of work to a formal one, with real local impact. And this is what is critical about the Design Lab projects like *Covid Arcadia*, its focus on Covid-19 is not just an internal University conversation, through co-development these projects are designed to benefit the sector, city and people who live and work within them as they recover from Covid-19.

Get in touch and find out more about
EFI and the Design Lab projects:

Email: efi@efi.ed.ac.uk

Web: <https://efi.ed.ac.uk/>

Funded by:



THE UNIVERSITY
of EDINBURGH

DDI Data-Driven
Innovation

The EFI Design Lab is part of a new programme alongside the Urban and Regional Data Platform to support the recovery and long-term sustainability of the Edinburgh City and Regions. Initiated over the last year, using Data Driven Innovation (DDI) Programme and SFC (Scottish Funding Council) funds awarded to the University of Edinburgh and distributed by DDI, the programme is led by the Bayes Centre and Edinburgh Futures Institute. The Design Lab encompasses four demonstrator projects that showcase the key themes and objectives of the Lab, including using data driven innovation with design and co-creation, prioritising multidisciplinary approaches and cross hub participation, creating and demonstrating local/regional impact, and evidencing an economic focus on Scotland's post-COVID-19 low-carbon economy aspirations. Image right credit: Edinburgh Futures Institute

