

WE'VE COME A LONG WAY. NOW, WHERE DO WE WANT TO GO FROM HERE?

Research funded by the Center for Cultural Studies in Seyðisfjörður
A catalyst for crafting creative futures for the community

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Samantekt

Seyðisfjörður hefur skapað sérstakan sess í menningarlífi á Íslandi um langa hríð, þar sem farið hafa saman frjór jarðvegur, rík saga, öflugar menningarstofnanir, frumkvöðlastarfsemi og óbilandi hugsjónastarf. Alþjóðleg samskipti hafa skipt sköpum í mannlífinu, en snemma á 20.öldinni varð Seyðisfjörður hlið til Evrópu vegna góðra hafnarskilyrða og sæstrengs til meginlandsins. Seinna varð þar til listrænt samfélag sem skapaði menningarlega sjálfsmynd bæjarins. Sjálfsmynd, sem byggir á tilraunum, samtali og samvinnu opnu fyrir alþjóðlegum straumum.

Á undanförunum árum hefur reynt á samfélagið á Seyðisfirði, bæði efnahagslega og félagslega. Áföll tengd aurskriðunni árið 2020 og brotthvarfi sjávarútvegs hafa sett mark sitt á samfélagið og ekki eru allir á eitt sáttir um sameiningu og árstíðabundna ferðaþjónustu. Þetta hefur skapað álag á innviði, ímynd og heilsu samfélagsins. Menningarstofnanir eru virkar, en rekstrarumhverfi þeirra reynist sífellt erfiðara.

Það var í ofangreindu samhengi sem þetta skapandi rannsóknar- og þáttökuverkefni var sett af stað árið 2025, til að kanna stöðu menningarlífs á Seyðisfirði og hvert samfélagið vildi stefna með það. Fljótlega varð ljóst að menningarlíf eitt og sér yrði ekki rannsakað án þess að taka mið af stöðunni í samfélaginu. Það reyndist því ekki síður mikilvægt að reyna að skilja það hlutverk sem menningin gæti gegnt í sjálfbærri framtíð Seyðisfjarðar, með áherslu á að upphelja raddir íbúa, lífsreynslu og drauma. Með samtölum, viðtölum, opnum viðburðum og vinnustofu með íbúum varð niðurstaðan sú að menningarlíf á Seyðisfirði yrði best skilgreint sem hluti af daglegu lífi frekar en afmarkaður geiri. Að list tengist menntun, ferðaþjónustu, handverki, sjálfsmynd, efnahag og tilfinningu fyrir því að tilheyra. Íbúar lýstu sterkum tilfinningatengslum við menningararfinn og áhuga fyrir endurnýjun, en einnig áþreifanlegri þreytu, minnkandi þátttöku fólks og aukinni tilfinningu fyrir því að menningarlífið væri að einangrast.

Rannsóknin dregur fram nokkrar lykilniðurstöður:

- **Menningarlegur grunnur er sterkur en brothættur.** Það eru mikil tækifæri til að byggja á menningarlegu DNA Seyðisfjarðar en skipulagt menningarstarf hvílir á fámennum hópi fólks, sem eykur hættuna á kulnun og getur haft áhrif á samfellu til langs tíma.
- **Menning er samtvinnuð daglegu lífi.** Ef menning er skilgreind sem „listir + sjálfsmynd, nám, vinna og umönnun“ verður hún lykilatriði fyrir félagslega velferð og efnahagslega seiglu.
- **Efnahagsleg og félagsleg áföll.** Sameiningin við stærri stjórnsýslueiningu, aukin árstíðabundin ferðamennska og áföll í atvinnulífi hafa aukið óvissu um umboð bæjarbúa til stefnumótunar í sínum eigin málum.
- **Þátttaka er ójöfn, ekki fjarverandi.** Áhugi á að móta framtíðina er til staðar, en mörgum íbúum finnst þeir ekki velkomnir í að taka þátt og sumum finnst menningarlífið vera að fjarlægjast samfélagið.

- **Menning hefur gegnt lykilhlutverki í að laða að nýja íbúa til Seyðisfjarðar.** Ungt fólk og einstaklingar með fjölbreyttan bakgrunn hafa flutt til bæjarins og lagt til færni, ný sjónarhorn og kraft sem styrkir samfélagið allt árið.
- **Skapandi fólk býr yfir hagnýtri færni, sem er vanmetin.** Fólk með ýmsa færni, s.s. trésmíði, sköpun ýmiskonar, stafræna framleiðslu, hönnun og kennslu leggur nú þegar sitt af mörkum til hagkerfis bæjarins, sérstaklega utan háannatíma. Þetta væri hægt að viðurkenna - og virkja betur.
- **Menning skapar efnahagslegt virði, en það er ekki almennt viðurkennt.** Án sameiginlegs skilnings á virði menningar eru líkur á að menningarlegt framlag og afleidd áhrif séu vanmetin í aðgerðum og ákvarðanatöku sveitarfélagsins.

Þessar niðurstöður benda til þess að menning geti gegnt lykilhlutverki fyrir samfélagslega heilsu og efnahagslega seiglu og að framtíðarverkefnið verði ekki einungis nýtt viðburðaframboð og nýbreytni í þróun menningarlífsins, heldur snúist það um að styrkja lífsskilyrði menningarlífsins til lengri tíma. Það fæli í sér aðgengi að sameiginlegum rýmum, auðveldari leið að fjármagni, eignarhald heimamanna á auðlindum, virkni allt árið um kring og endurnýjaða trú á sameiginlegum aðgerðum og samtali.

Skýrsluhöfundar leggja til eftirfarandi aðgerðir:

- **Að fjármagna verkefnastjórnunarteymi fyrir menningarverkefni með aðsetur á Seyðisfirði** (1-3 einstaklingar) til að viðhalda krafti, byggja traust, draga samstarfsaðila að borðinu og létta álagi af fámennum hópi menningarleiðtoga.
- **Að fjárfesta í nýju menningarverkefni í tilraunaskyni** sem miðar að því að tengja saman fjölbreyttan hóp íbúa og efla traust, sameiginlega sjálfsmynd og þátttöku samfélagsins.
- **Að skapa fjármögnunarleiðir fyrir sameignar- eða samstýrð menningarými,** t.d. með samfélagsreklamum fjárfestinga- eða eignasjóði eða samstarfi um fasteignarekstur.
- **Að koma á árlegri úttekt á menningarlegum áhrifum** til að fylgjast með þátttöku, atvinnusköpun, afleiddum efnahagslegum áhrifum og lífsgæðum íbúa.
- **Að framkvæma kerfisbundna kortlagningu menningarstarfsemi** í víðasta skilningi til að skapa sameiginlegan útgangspunkt fyrir áætlanagerð, samræmi og framtíðarfjárfestingar.
- **Að skilgreina hvar menningin getur verið drifkraftur í samfélaginu** fyrir félagslega heilsu og efnahagslega seiglu til að skapa grunn að aðgerðaáætlun.
- **Að viðurkenna og virkja hagnýta færni skapandi fólks** með fjárfestingu í því sem nú þegar er fyrir hendi í gegnum örstyrki, sameiginleg verkfæri og samstýrð menningarými.
- **Að kanna möguleika til mörkunar Seyðisfjarðar sem menningarhöfuðborgar Austurlands** og leggja jafnframt áherslu á að styrkja samvinnu og samstarf innan Austurlands alls, sem byggði á styrkleikum og sérstöðu hvers og eins svæðis.

Athugasemd vegna menningarstofnanna

Ein skýr niðurstaða rannsóknarinnar snýr að innra starfi menningarstofnana Seyðisfjarðar. Stærstur hluti þess, sem þær fást við er til kominn vegna þeirra verkefna, sem þeim er gert að sinna samkvæmt lögum eða hefðum. Innra starf þeirra endurspeglar því að stórum hluta þessi verkefni svo að rými fyrir nýsköpun eða nýbreytni fær minna rými en æskilegt væri. En tilgangur þessarar skýrslu er hvorki gagnrýni á þessar stofnanir né á núverandi starfsemi þeirra, heldur miklu frekar viðurkenning á mikilvægu framlagi og byrði fámenns hóps hæfra leiðtoga, og veikleikanum sem þeir sjálfir tala um að felist í þessum strúktúr.

Til að draga úr þessu varnarleysi gætu stofnanirnar tekið sig saman til að dreifa ábyrgð, skrá ferla og mótað kerfi til að útdeila og skiptast á verkefnum á einfaldan hátt og varðveita stofnanalega þekkingu. Slíkar hóflegar innri breytingar geta hjálpað til við að fyrirbyggja kulnun og styrkja samfellu, þannig að stofnanir geti betur nýtt sér utanaðkomandi uppbyggingu og stuðning, sem mælt er með í þessari skýrslu.

Að lokum er rétt að geta þess að rannsóknin setur ekki fram fastmótaða framtíðarsýn, heldur tillögur og leiðir til uppbyggingar, sem samfélagið þarf að móta áfram saman. Spurningin er ekki hvort menning skiptir máli, heldur hvernig samfélagið vill nýta hana til að móta næsta kafla í lífi Seyðisfjarðar.

Athugasemd frá rannsakendum og þakkir

Þegar við vorum að leggja lokahönd á skýrsluna reið enn eitt áfallið yfir Seyðisfjörð með frestun Fjarðarheiðargangna, en umræðan sem fylgdi í kjölfarið undirstrikaði brýna þörf fyrir utanaðkomandi stuðning til að skapa bænum blómlega framtíð. Við vonumst til að horft verði til tillagna skýrslunnar og að hún reynist góður grunnur til uppbyggingar, enda benda helstu niðurstöður hennar til þess að menningin geti orðið miðlægur drifkraftur fyrir samfélagslega og efnahagslega heilsu.

Við þökkum Seyðfirðingum fyrir góðar móttökur og fyrir að deila sögum sínum með okkur. Sérstakar þakkir fá Elfa Hlín Pétursdóttir fyrir aðstöðu á Tækniminjasafninu, Sesselja Hlín Jónasardóttir fyrir aðstöðu í Herðubreið fyrir vinnustofuna og Garðar Bachmann fyrir aðstöðu í Skaftfell Bistro.

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Executive Summary

Seyðisfjörður has long held a distinctive place in Iceland’s cultural landscape, where “fertile” grounds, rich history, institutional support and relentless work of local visionaries and artists have paved the way for numerous creative initiatives. Its deep-water port and early telegraph connection made it a gateway to the world in the early 20th century, and its later emergence as an artistic community created a cultural identity grounded in experimentation, collaboration, and international exchange.

Yet in recent years, the town has faced significant social and economic pressures. Landslides in 2020, the decline of industrial fishing, a controversial regional merger into Múlaþing, and increasing reliance on seasonal tourism have challenged local infrastructure, identity, and community morale. Cultural institutions remain active, but are increasingly stretched operationally and financially.

In this context, a research and co-design initiative was undertaken in 2025 to understand the state of cultural life in Seyðisfjörður and how the community envisioned its future. It became clear early on that cultural life could not be examined in isolation from the broader condition of the town. As a result, the research focused equally on the role culture could play in supporting a resilient and sustainable future, with an emphasis on amplifying community voices, lived experience, and shared aspirations. Through interviews, community conversations, and a workshop, the research found that cultural life in Seyðisfjörður is best understood not as a standalone sector, but as something woven into everyday life—connecting arts with education, hospitality, craft, identity, belonging, and the local economy. While residents expressed a strong emotional connection to cultural heritage and a desire for renewal, they also described fatigue, uneven participation, and a growing sense of alienation.

The research highlighted several key findings:

- **The cultural foundation is strong, but fragile.** While there are grand opportunities in building on Seyðisfjörður’s cultural DNA, cultural vitality relies heavily on a small group of leaders, creating burnout risk and limiting continuity.
- **Culture is an integrated part of life.** When understood as “arts + identity, learning, work, and care,” culture becomes central to social wellbeing and economic resilience
- **Social and economic pressures are converging.** The merger, seasonal tourism, and debates about industry have contributed to uncertainty about agency and direction.
- **Participation is uneven, not absent.** Interest in shaping the future is present, but many residents do not yet feel invited or included in the process and there seems to be a rising perception that the cultural sphere is becoming more disconnected from the community.

- **Culture has played a key role in attracting new residents to Seyðisfjörður.** Young people and individuals from diverse backgrounds have been drawn to live and work in the town, contributing skills, perspectives, and energy that enrich the community year-round.
- **Creative workers hold broader skillsets that are under-recognized.** Skills such as carpentry, fabrication, digital production, teaching, and hospitality already contribute to the town's economy, especially in the off-season.
- **Culture generates measurable economic value, but this is not widely understood locally.** Without shared understanding, cultural contributions risk being undervalued in municipal planning.

These insights suggest that culture could become central for social and economic resilience and that the work ahead is not only about new programming or cultural development, but about strengthening the conditions that allow cultural life to sustain itself over time. This includes shared spaces, low-barrier funding, local ownership of resources, year-round participation, and renewed trust in collective action.

To carry this work forward, the report recommends:

- **Funding a trusted, Seyðisfjörður-based cultural project management team** of 1-3 people to maintain momentum, convene partners, and reduce pressure on a small group of cultural leaders.
- **Investing in a new cultural pilot** project designed to bring a diverse cross-section of residents together, strengthening trust, shared identity, and community participation.
- **Creating financial pathways for community-owned or co-managed** cultural space, such as a community-managed property trust or cooperative real estate agreements.
- **Establishing an annual cultural impact review** to track participation, employment, economic spillover, and resident quality of life.
- **Conducting a systematic mapping of cultural activity** in its broadest sense to provide a shared baseline for planning, coordination, and future investment.
- **Defining key areas where culture could serve as an engine** in community for social and economic resilience towards a strategy of action.
- **Recognizing and mobilizing the broader skillsets of cultural workers** by investing in local ownership through microgrants, shared tools, and co-managed cultural spaces.
- **Exploring the feasibility of the rebranding of Seyðisfjörður as the cultural capital of East Iceland**, whilst strengthening inter-regional collaborations.

A Note for Cultural Organizations

One clear insight from the research concerns the internal sustainability of cultural organizations. Almost everything cultural institutions can do internally mirrors or complements what the municipality is being asked to enable, and the intention here is not to critique their current efforts. Rather, it is to acknowledge the significant load carried by a small number of dedicated individuals and to reflect what cultural

leaders themselves described as a vulnerability. The one area that rests uniquely with the institutions is the opportunity to reduce this reliance by sharing responsibilities more broadly, documenting essential processes, and establishing simple systems for rotating tasks and preserving institutional knowledge. These modest internal adjustments can help prevent burnout and strengthen continuity, allowing institutions to make fuller use of the external support structures recommended in this report.

Finally, this research does not prescribe a fixed vision for Seyðisfjörður's future. Instead, it highlights pathways and proposals that can be shaped locally, over time, through collaboration and shared stewardship. The question now is not whether culture matters, but how the community wants to use it to shape the next chapter of life in Seyðisfjörður.

A Special Note from the Researchers with Acknowledgements

At the moment of concluding this report, dramatic events shook Seyðisfjörður yet again, with the postponing of the Fjarðarheiði-tunnel. The public and political debate that followed have highlighted the urgent need for external support efforts to create a thriving future for the town. We hope that the findings and the recommendations communicated in this report may serve as a valuable foundation for that work, in which culture could play an instrumental role for social and economical health.

We would like to thank the residents of Seyðisfjörður for welcoming us and sharing their stories. Thanks to Elfa Hlín Pétursdóttir for giving us an office at Tækniminjasafn Austurlands, Sesselja Hlín Jónasardóttir for the use of Herðubreið for the workshop, and Garðar Bachmann for the use of Skaftfell Bistro for the pub quiz.

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1 A Rich History

Seyðisfjörður has long been known across Iceland for its cultural life. In the late 19th and early 20th centuries, it became a hub for trade and communication, thanks to its deep-water port and telegraph linking Iceland to Europe. Seyðisfjörður has gone through many distinctive periods, e.g. the Norwegian settlement, the herring years, and war occupation. The town later emerged as an artistic enclave, perceived as a safe zone for unconventional thinking, a meeting and melting pot of creative minds, diversity and artistic freedom. The town boasts of a rich architectural history and owes its preservations in large sum to the “Fúaspýtufélagið”, a collective driven by a local architect and fellow artists that championed and pioneered renovation of the houses from the Norwegian period. In the seventies Dieter Roth was an important actor and in more recent times, the LungA festival put Seyðisfjörður on the map for grassroots arts cultures in Iceland and abroad. Seyðisfjörður became home to galleries, festivals, and cultural institutions that brought both locals and visitors together, establishing its identity as the cultural cradle of the East

In recent years, the town has faced mounting challenges. Climate-related events—most notably the 2020 landslides—shook both infrastructure and morale. Industrial fishing has all but dried up, and a controversial salmon farm is creating fractures within the community. The regional merger into Múlaþing has strained local identity and agency; the promised tunnel from Egilsstaðir, meant to cement the merger, never materialized, leaving many resentful. Population decline has put pressure on schools, cultural organizations, and local businesses. Tourism, while a vital source of income, remains highly seasonal and increasingly disruptive. Meanwhile, the town’s population is growing older with younger residents leaving for education and career opportunities, reducing the number of long-term stewards of the town’s cultural fabric. And, isolated on the coast, the town was no more spared than anywhere else from the social upheaval of COVID-19.

Cultural institutions—while still vibrant and community-driven—are struggling to maintain programming, funding, and local engagement. The question is no longer just how to preserve Seyðisfjörður’s heritage, but how to reimagine its cultural future in a way that’s resilient, relevant, and inspiring. This is the context in which a research and design initiative began in 2025, seeking new models for cultural vitality that could work not only for Seyðisfjörður, but also for other towns in Iceland facing similar transitions.

2 Designing a Research Program

To address Seyðisfjörður's cultural futures challenge, a tailored research program was designed by two experienced practitioners: Hlín Helga Guðlaugsdóttir and R. Michael Hendrix. Hlín, an Icelandic designer, curator and educator, brings deep expertise in participatory design and place-based innovation. Michael, an American designer, author, and educator based in Reykjavík, specializes in storytelling, design thinking, and cultural development.

The research set out to map the scope and successes of the current cultural scene, and proactively explore which alternative futures people dream about. At the core it was about amplifying community voices and lived experiences, creating dialog and providing cultural institutions with valuable insight for further strategic planning.

To inform this analysis, the researchers conducted a human-centered, qualitative "design research" process over a year. This methodology applied a strategic blend of semi-structured expert interviews, ethnographic observation, targeted literature reviews and co-design. Built on established design thinking principles, this process emphasized pattern recognition and the synthesis of diverse perspectives to generate deep insights rather than simple data aggregation.

The project began with the premise that cultural resilience requires both imagination and local ownership. Rather than importing ready-made solutions, the researchers sought to create a space where residents could explore future possibilities together—grounded in lived experience but open to new ideas. They asked, “Where does the community want to go next, and what role should cultural institutions play in that future?”

The research program was structured in two phases, followed by the third one focused on communication and community engagement. *Phase 1* involved background research, contextual observations, qualitative interviews, and in-person conversations with cultural leaders, residents, and local government representatives. This work provided a nuanced understanding of both the historical significance of Seyðisfjörður's cultural institutions and the current barriers to sustaining them.

Phase 2 focused on co-creation through a workshop with residents and stakeholders. For this, the team developed tailored prompts, visual assets, and speculative scenarios to inspire creative thinking. Importantly, the process was designed not only to generate ideas, but also to strengthen the community's capacity to envision and act on its own cultural future.

Phase 3 evolved around communicating the results of the research and furthering community engagement. This was done through a social media campaign, culminating in a public event in Seyðisfjörður focusing on the opportunities ahead.

While the research provides valuable insights, its scope also has practical limits. Participation tended to be stronger among those already involved in cultural institutions, with less representation from residents outside those circles. Efforts were made to broaden involvement, for example, by coordinating with community events, but the wider cross-section hoped for did not fully materialize. As a result, the findings should be understood as grounded, but not exhaustive. There are additional voices and perspectives that could further enrich the work and extended participation should be encouraged, moving forward. Based on the research team's experience, these would likely reinforce the central insights while having meaningful influence on how resulting actions are understood, shared, and adopted within the community.

It is also important to note that the research program itself developed incrementally, supported first by a research grant from Austurbrú on behalf of MMF, then by the Iceland Design Fund to document and create a case study and finally a supplementary funding from Austurbrú for the last phase of the project. This stepped approach emerged not from a predefined cultural strategy, but from a growing recognition that Seyðisfjörður was at a moment of cultural and social inflection and that continuing the research could be valuable for understanding the situation. While this funding model made the work possible, it also created natural constraints. The start-stop rhythm and lean resourcing limited the depth of engagement and the ability to contract more broadly within the community.

Understanding Seyðisfjörður's cultural life quickly proved inseparable from understanding the town as a whole. Culture is deeply intertwined with the place's identity, but so too are its industrial heritage, its distinct international character, and its longstanding entrepreneurial spirit. While this research focuses on cultural activity, it necessarily touches the points where arts, identity, and economic life intersect. These intersections shape both the strengths and the vulnerabilities of the community, and recognizing them is essential for identifying the challenges and opportunities that lie ahead for a thriving future.

Perhaps most importantly, the absence of a single commissioning "owner" of the process leaves the responsibility for carrying the work forward shared, rather than clearly held. This is appropriate for design research, whose purpose is not to prescribe solutions but to hold up a mirror, revealing needs, possibilities, and paths that can be taken. The extent to which the work influences the future depends on the willingness of stakeholders to recognize themselves in that mirror and to act on what they see. It is fair to say this is not an easy task given the context of the last five years.

3 Research Observations (Phase 1)

In October 2024, the research team spent three days in Seyðisfjörður conducting 15 semi-structured, qualitative interviews with cultural leaders, artists, entrepreneurs, and residents. They also made contextual observations through informal conversations, local events, and site visits. What follows is a set of initial reflections and key themes from that work, which formed the foundation for Phase 2 of the project in May 2025.

Observation 1: Fertile Ground

Over the past three decades, Seyðisfjörður has developed a remarkably rich cultural foundation. The number of grassroots cultural organizations operating in such a small and geographically isolated location is notable, and their influence extends beyond the town itself into the broader region and national cultural landscape.

A longstanding openness to collaboration with people from outside the region has been central to this growth. Initiatives such as Skaftfell, LungA, and Heima have benefitted from the commitment, creativity, and ongoing contributions of both foreign nationals and Icelanders from other parts of the country, many of whom ultimately chose to make Seyðisfjörður their home, either part-time or permanently.

The 2020 landslides were catastrophic, and disrupted the lives of many yet the town's resilience has since been demonstrated in practice. Stories repeatedly highlighted patterns of regeneration and adaptive reuse. The same determination that ensured the survival of the Blue Church through the last two centuries is now visible in efforts to rebuild the historic house Angró after the landslides and revitalize the Technical Museum. These are but a few examples of this town's rich history of transformation and resilience. Important pillars for a thriving future together with the entrepreneurial mindsets that continue to shape the town's cultural identity.

Observation 2: Gardening, Not Architecture

Several conditions that enabled this period of cultural vitality appear essential to sustaining Seyðisfjörður's cultural future. These include:

- Access to affordable or donated residential and commercial real estate
- Interdependence between cultural organizations and the municipality in programming and community engagement
- A regular flow of culturally motivated young adults who bring new ideas and energy
- Opportunities for artists to participate in the local economy through craftsmanship and small-scale creative enterprise
- Clear community and municipal agency in decision-making that protects and nurtures these conditions

Observation 3: From a Fragile Future to a Thriving Future

Despite strong achievements, the cultural ecosystem remains vulnerable. The following risks were consistently noted:

- Much of the energy driving the cultural organizations relied on a small number of individuals who frequently worked across multiple organizations to sustain them. While collaboration among Technical Museum, Skaftfell, LungA, Heima, Herðubreið, Ströndin Studio, and others was strong, there was a growing desire for new contributors and increasing concern about burnout.
- Many interviewees expressed that cruise-ship tourism, while economically beneficial to the region through port fees, had disrupted the social-cultural fabric and provided limited benefit to cultural institutions, hospitality, and food-service businesses.
- Plans for salmon farming in the fjord, despite notable protests, increased anxiety in the community and fueled dissonance amongst the inhabitants and a growing sense of distrust and loss of agency toward the regional municipality. Related to this, there were concerns that a transient workforce would not invest in the community's cultural life or attract the young families needed for long-term cultural continuity. Some cultural workers expressed that they felt driven away.
- A perceived decline in local agency contributed to uncertainty around identity. The regional merger into Múlaþing was frequently cited as a source of frustration, with examples of culturally significant buildings being considered for market use. The consideration of selling Herðubreið, which in recent years had been reestablished as a community center, was often described as demonstrating a lack of respect for, or understanding of, what already existed and needed support to sustain a thriving community.
- Many felt that the cultural organizations' economic contributions, particularly their role in attracting visitors, stimulating off-season activity, creating employment, and drawing new residents, were not fully understood or valued.
- All cultural institutions remained dependent on supplemental financial support for core operations. Existing grant mechanisms tended to be project-based and short-term, while long-term operational support was needed to ensure stability, strategic planning, and sustainable growth.

Observation 4: Accessibility and relevance

Several participants described a growing sense that the cultural sphere has become more insular—less accessible and less connected to the everyday life of the community. Many expressed a desire for broader collaboration between the arts and other sectors, noting that a more diverse and integrated approach could build a cultural ecosystem that is both meaningful and economically beneficial for a wider range of stakeholders. Examples such as Skálanes, with its research-driven partnerships, and the reciprocal relationships between local craftspeople and artists, were cited as models of this kind of productive cross-sector connection.

Observation 5: Status quo

Some voices spoke of “stagnation” or “institutionalization” within the cultural landscape, describing a prevailing sense of status quo—as if the community were collectively waiting for “the next thing” to emerge or the new changemakers to arrive.

Key Themes

From the interviews and field research, a set of recurring patterns became clear. These themes describe the current conditions and dynamics influencing cultural identity, participation, and sustainability in Seyðisfjörður.

Heritage as Identity Anchor

Residents view cultural life as inseparable from the town’s legacy of artistic experimentation, community resilience, and international exchange. The preservation and active use of cultural spaces—such as the Blue Church and Skaftfell Art Center—are understood as essential to identity and continuity.

Fatigue and Fragility

Many cultural institutions depend on a small core of committed individuals. This fosters cooperation, but also creates vulnerability and risks burnout.

Economic and Demographic Shifts

A declining year-round population and an economy centered on seasonal tourism limit participation, resources, and planning stability.

Cross-Fjord Potential

There is interest in strengthening cultural exchange across neighboring fjords, but current efforts are scattered, under-resourced and often depend on personal initiatives.

Generational Perspectives

Younger residents often describe cultural life as “institutionalized” and say it has lost its experimental, grassroots character. Many in the middle generation, who have been active in cultural work, tend to feel fatigued or more focused on the town’s liveability, social sustainability, and the role culture could play in those areas. In contrast, older residents are generally more optimistic. They emphasize the community’s long history of resourcefulness and express confidence in the ideas of younger people, noting that “these young people have lots of ideas—just support them with funding.” Together, these viewpoints show the need to bridge generational experiences when shaping a shared cultural future.

Resilience and Regenerative Thinking

Adaptive reuse, collective problem-solving, and resourcefulness remain central cultural strengths, offering a foundation for renewal if supportive conditions are in place.

Isolation and Infrastructure

Reduced services, like the absence of a doctor and a midwife, fewer leisure activities for children, and continuing delays in the construction of the tunnel have intensified geographic and political isolation, heightening emotional strain and practical challenges.

Erosion of Local Agency

Many residents feel that decision-making has shifted away from the community's hands since the merger into Múlaþing. The fish farm debate has amplified concerns that external priorities may override local values and long-term aspirations.

Phase 1 Takeaway

This phase revealed that while there is a strong emotional connection to Seyðisfjörður's cultural identity, there is also a clear appetite for new approaches that respond to evolving realities. The research points to feelings of being left out, the lingering impact of past disasters, and local leadership stretched thin—a combination that can easily lead to detachment and dampened dreams. But there are strong pillars for future cultural development and a thirst for culture to play a more active role, together with other sectors in crafting a thriving future.

4 Research Share and Co-Creation Workshop (Phase 2)

In May 2025, the research team convened a two-day workshop in Seyðisfjörður, bringing together residents, cultural leaders, municipal partners, and community members. Held at Herðubreið Community Center and livestreamed to broaden awareness, the workshop invited participants to respond to the findings from Phase 1 and to collectively explore possible futures for the town's cultural life.

Participants confirmed that the Phase 1 synthesis reflected both the strengths of Seyðisfjörður's cultural community and the pressures it is currently navigating. The workshop introduced a framing of culture as an integrated force—arts + other dimensions of community life—to move beyond the idea of “cultural institutions” as separate from daily experience. Under this framing, culture is understood as connected to:

- The identity of a town + arts (Placemaking),
- Expertise in work + arts (Industry),
- Resident attraction and retention + arts (Talent),
- Diversity and Equality + arts (Inclusion),
- Public wellness + arts (Mental and Physical Health),
- Literacy and Personal Development + arts (Education).

Cultural organizations, when viewed this way, are not only providers of programs; they generate value across social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions. Their impact can be understood through indicators such as:

- Public participation and engagement,

- Employment they generate,
- Revenue generation for their own institutions,
- Revenue generation for surrounding businesses,
- Satisfaction/ Quality of Life of customers and residents,
- Impact on manufacturing and industry, and
- Demographic shifts they create through attraction and retention of participants.

Together, these perspectives reframed a core tension voiced in early interviews. Rather than a binary of “Culture vs. Industry,” participants recognized a more productive challenge: *balancing Economic Growth and Social Sustainability*. The workshop asked participants to work with this tension intentionally, guided by shared local values and the lived experience of the community.

To prompt imaginative thinking, the team introduced custom co-design assets, including:

- Persona posters, representing a wide range of current and potential residents
- Cultural futures prompts, exploring themes such as shared ownership models, intergenerational collaboration, and the integration of digital tools
- Scenario boards, allowing participants to combine heritage assets with new speculative ideas

Participants recognized familiar local figures in these personas and engaged readily with the scenarios. Differences emerged not in who these characters were, but in how they might live and contribute in the future—what work they would be doing, what forms of belonging would be possible, and which institutions or networks might support them. These discussions offered a gentle way to explore differing visions of what kind of place Seyðisfjörður could become, and culture’s role in it.

As conversations shifted from reflection to possibility, the group explored how Seyðisfjörður might cultivate regenerative cultural growth—resourcing natural cycles of emergence, transformation, and renewal. The question became not simply what should be preserved, but what conditions would enable new cultural forms to take root. Researchers introduced the following starter concepts to support this discussion:

- *Community-Managed Property Trust* – A community-run initiative holding real estate for cultural use, including artist residencies, live/work spaces, and shared studios.
- *Municipal Tax Incentives for Cultural Spaces* – Municipal recognition or local tax benefits for private owners who rent or donate spaces to support cultural practitioners or events.
- *Maker Incubator* – A creative hub blending traditional craft, digital fabrication, and business mentorship, with an annual market or festival showcasing local innovation.

- *Microgrants and Pop-up Retail* – Small-scale funding and temporary retail spaces for local creatives, prioritizing projects that merge art, tourism, and sustainability.
- *Public Innovation Lab* – A space for testing and iterating small-scale cultural programs or policies, with feedback loops to refine and improve them in real-time.
- *Annual Cultural Audit* – A yearly assessment measuring the impact of the arts on employment, local businesses, and public participation in cultural activities.
- *Fab Lab or Tool Library* – A shared space offering maker tools and resources for art creation, repair, education, and small-scale manufacturing for the whole community.

When participants began proposing future cultural assets of their own, most ideas clustered near what already exists. Rather than leaping to radical innovation, participants adapted, reinterpreted, and localized familiar models, shaping them into versions that felt distinctly Seyðisfjörður. This tendency does not suggest a lack of imagination; rather, it reflects the town’s strong orientation toward grounded, practical renewal rooted in lived experience and place identity. A few notable exceptions—a speculative ski resort on Fjarðarheiði, a community greenhouse for restaurants and the school, and an amphitheater in the mountainside mines—indicated that the impulse toward imaginative play is present, even if it is not always the easiest first move.

Phase 2 Takeaway

Across discussions, a shared interest emerged in positioning Seyðisfjörður as a center of expertise—whether in sustainable food systems, preservation and reuse practices, or creative hospitality—and to collaborate more with the region. These ideas were tied closely to strengths already present in the town’s cultural DNA.

Evaluation of current cultural assets confirmed the importance of LungA, Skaftfell, the Blue Church, Herðubreið, the Technical Museum, and the symbolic value of Rainbow Street. Participants also emphasized less visible assets such as the public school’s art program and Ströndin Studio, highlighting that cultural value extends beyond iconic institutions.

The workshop also surfaced important reflections on participation. While the convening included a broad cross-section of cultural actors, some residents shared afterward that they hesitated to attend, unsure whether the space was “for them.” This underscored earlier research findings on culture becoming isolated from the community and the need to continue expanding invitations and ensuring that cultural futures are shaped with—not merely represented on behalf of—the wider community.

5 Sharing Insights & Extending Engagement (Phase 3)

The third phase of work focused on sharing the opportunity areas identified in Phase 2 and sparking practical ideas that the community could adapt into cultural and economic initiatives. Recognizing the participation challenges observed in earlier phases, the research team chose to experiment with a less formal and more social engagement format. Rather than hosting another meeting or presentation, they coordinated with local stakeholders to design a pub quiz as part of Days of Darkness—the annual late-October festival that brings together residents across East Iceland—followed by informal interviews the next day. The intent was to create an inviting, low-pressure setting where people could encounter the research in a familiar communal environment. In the week leading up to the event, the team launched an Instagram account to raise awareness about the ongoing work, hoping to reach more people, inspire and spark interest to extend engagement.

The sessions were held at Skaftfell Bistro. One took place during the weekly Friday lunch gathering, where the research served as a backdrop and conversations unfolded naturally over coffee. The other was a public quiz organized into two rounds: one that shared key research insights and another designed to prompt dialogue among participants. A sample question:

For more than 30 years, Seyðisfjörður's cultural life has thrived because...

- A) It relies mostly on government-led initiatives
- B) It's driven by grassroots collaboration between locals and outsiders
- C) It focuses on preserving tradition rather than change
- D) It limits new people joining existing networks

Answer: B) It's driven by grassroots collaboration between locals and outsiders. *Host note:* Seyðisfjörður's success has grown from openness — locals and newcomers co-creating, not competing.

A sample question promoting dialogue:

Imagine every town in East Iceland gets a role in a “cultural ecosystem.” What could Seyðisfjörður's role be?

- A) The Laboratory — where new ideas and residencies start
- B) The Showcase — where finished works are shared
- C) The Connector — linking artists, schools, and farms across fjords
- D) The Stage — where everyone gathers for annual celebrations

The answer comes from the audience discussion.

Provocative Concepts

The second category of questions drew directly from the research team's ideation work following Phase 2. These were not presented as recommendations, but as provocations—practical concepts that could make the research actionable, grounded in the “Economic Growth and Social Sustainability” framework and the regenerative models explored earlier. The concepts were organized across two time horizons, “Annual” and “Seasonal”, to emphasize that cultural development happens over cycles, with different stakeholders, not one-size-fits-all.

Annual

What conditions are needed for future cultural life?

Sustaining cultural life in Seyðisfjörður requires conditions that support ongoing participation rather than isolated projects. Ensuring access to stable, affordable spaces for making, gathering, and living is central.

Community-held or cooperatively managed property could secure long-term continuity for cultural activity. Small grants and low-barrier opportunities—such as pop-up spaces or shared equipment—would make it easier to test ideas and collaborate. Shared workspaces, whether through a maker incubator, Fab Lab, or tool library, could strengthen local skills while reducing individual cost. Establishing an annual review of cultural impact would help the community understand how cultural life is contributing to employment, local business activity, wellbeing, and population patterns. Together, these conditions support culture as a living system—rooted in values, renewed through participation, and strengthened over time.

How might we make cultural support explicit?

Cultural Capital of the East

What if Seyðisfjörður's cultural significance were made visible rather than assumed? A formal designation as the Cultural Capital of the East, granted by Múlaþing, could unlock new funding, strengthen the town's cultural identity, and signal a clear invitation to visitors. With a defined cultural mandate, programming could be planned more strategically, allowing a two-day event to become a week-long regional festival that supports accommodation, dining, and cultural activity across the Eastfjords.

Establishing a cultural board composed of Seyðisfjörður residents would reinforce local agency and acknowledge the community's role in shaping the town's cultural life. This shared responsibility could help reduce burnout among current cultural leaders, while strengthening long-term continuity and purpose.

Seasonal

How might we recognize regionalism?

An Eastern Ecosystem

Though Seyðisfjörður can feel isolated—especially in winter—it is part of a wider regional network. Art education already extends across schools in the East, and fresh produce supports farm-to-table experiences in local restaurants. These exchanges currently happen informally, but they could be strengthened and made more intentional to build interdependence across the fjords. Doing so would also create clearer regional identities and tourism pathways, where each town plays a distinct role.

For example, the farm-to-table story of Skaftfell Bistro and Aldan could draw visitors from Vallanes in Egilsstaðir, while new weekend carpentry or craft courses at a local fab lab could bring one participant from each surrounding fjord—building a cohort of connected creators.

Celebrating the Working Heritage of Seyðisfjörður

Fishing remains central to Seyðisfjörður’s identity, even as the industry has changed. A community-led “Surf and Turf Parade” on Sjómannadagur could celebrate this heritage, combining puppetry, costume-making, and collective making along Rainbow Street. The “turf” element could honor both historical traditions and ongoing sheep farming, celebrating the cultural and natural resources that have sustained the region for generations. The event could grow into an art-car or art-boat parade, inviting playful participation from across the East.

Landscapes of Imagination

The mudslide protection barriers above town stand as monumental forms—part infrastructure, part landscape. What if beauty, safety, and meaning lived side-by-side? What stories could the local landscape tell? The structures could be reimagined as platforms for public art. A rotating outdoor sculpture program curated by Skaftfell could transform the hillside into a walkable sculpture garden overlooking the town, blending protection with beauty and offering a seasonal destination for residents and visitors.

Despite the thoughtful design of the pub quiz event and alignment with a local festival, it was the least attended session across the research program. This outcome underscores a key finding of the work as a whole: the desire for cultural renewal is present, but the spaces where people feel comfortable participating remain uneven. Increasing participation may require new forms of invitation, new hosts, or new rhythms of engagement—and may need to be co-designed with those who did not attend.

A social media campaign offered a secondary channel for sharing the work. The first post went live a week before the pub quiz and the account grew from no followers to 50 within a few days. By December 1, it had 80 followers. Posts averaged around 500 views, with one exceeding 3,000. In total, the campaign generated roughly 13,000 views and reached more than 1,300 accounts over five weeks, all without boosting or paid advertising. While direct engagement remained low, the campaign proved effective in broadening awareness of the project. As with the in-person sessions, this

digital format was experimental, and it suggests further opportunities to test different modes of communication and participation. The account will remain active for now.

Phase 3 Takeaway

Taken together, the Phase 3 activities demonstrate that while the community is open to cultural renewal, participation is highly sensitive to format, timing, and who extends the invitation. The pub quiz experiment showed that informal settings can spark meaningful dialogue, but it also revealed gaps in who feels comfortable showing up and under what conditions. These insights suggest that future cultural initiatives will need to diversify their engagement strategies, build on trusted relationships, and create multiple pathways for involvement. Designing with, rather than for, those who are currently absent will be essential to cultivating a cultural ecosystem that feels accessible, relevant, and shared across the whole community.

6 What Next?

Findings from the report *Framlag menningar og skapandi greina til verðmætasköpunar á Íslandi* show that the cultural and creative industries contribute significantly to national value creation, employment, and tax revenue, with each 1 ISK of public cultural investment generating an estimated 3 ISK in the wider economy. However, the research in Seyðisfjörður indicates that economic arguments alone are not enough to build engagement. There is still a disconnect in the collective understanding of economic impact and cultural activities. For many residents, the notion of “culture” as a standalone sector felt either too narrow (“arts for art’s sake”) or too closely associated with some previous projects that did not hold relevance for the community nor improve everyday life.

This suggests that the original research question may not have fully resonated with the wider community. While the project team understood culture in an expanded sense—arts + identity, belonging, creativity, work, care—many residents experienced the topic as “culture-centric,” rather than addressing the broader social and economic challenges they are navigating. A more fitting guiding question for future work may be: *How might cultural practices support Seyðisfjörður’s social and economic resilience?* or *How can culture help the town assert its identity and agency in the face of change?* These questions would need to be shaped and held locally from the outset.

Even so, the research surfaced with strong shared conditions and opportunities. Residents expressed a desire for more shared activity that brings different groups together and builds trust. This aligns with the need to balance “Economic Growth and Social Sustainability” through cultural life that strengthens civic confidence, participation and economic impact through a shared value system, a meaningful symbiosis.

The research indicates that Seyðisfjörður's future does not depend on a single transformative initiative, but rather on strengthening what already exists. The findings point to solid foundations for cultural activity and a clear appetite for exploring culture as a driver of community vitality. To build on this momentum, a systematic mapping of cultural activity in its broadest sense, anything that can be placed within the creative industries would be valuable. Such an effort would document existing practices, identify emerging “sprouts,” and reveal the full spectrum of cultural assets that contribute to the town's resilience. This groundwork would provide a shared baseline for planning, coordination, and future investment.

Furthermore, there is an opportunity to recognize that many individuals working in the cultural and creative sector possess broad skillsets that extend beyond artistic output. Skills such as carpentry, photography, painting, digital production, technology management, and marketing are highly relevant to everyday needs of the town—particularly during the off-season, when tourism and cultural events are quieter and the community becomes completely self-reliant. Supporting cultural workers as year-round contributors to municipal projects, local businesses, and regional initiatives could help diversify income, strengthen local expertise, and reduce seasonal economic strain. Making this more visible may lead to a broader understanding of the economic contribution of the cultural sector beyond the iconic organizations of the town.

On an institutional level, cultural impact can be measured and reviewed annually. Cultural organizations are not only program providers; they generate benefits across social, cultural, environmental, and economic dimensions. Tracking indicators such as public participation and engagement, employment generated, revenue within cultural institutions and surrounding businesses, resident quality of life, contributions to local craft and industry, and demographic shifts linked to attraction and retention would provide a clearer picture of how cultural activity supports the town's resilience. Establishing a consistent annual review would help the community recognize trends, allocate resources strategically, and communicate the tangible value of cultural life to both residents and regional partners.

To support this, the report recommends funding a locally based coordinator—a trusted resident responsible for gathering data, convening partners, maintaining momentum, and reducing burnout. Early actions should follow the Annual/Seasonal cadence developed in the project, matching cultural activity to the town's natural rhythms. Investment should prioritize local ownership, not outside delivery: microgrants, shared tools, co-managed spaces, and cooperative property models enable residents to create, host, and benefit directly.

Finally, Phase 3 demonstrated that how engagement is invited matters. Participation is shaped by who hosts, the tone of the space, and whether activities feel open to all. Outside researchers will be more effective in supporting roles rather than leading roles. Future outreach should be co-designed with residents who did not participate in earlier phases, preferably by a resident leader, ensuring that cultural futures are shaped with the community, rather than for it.

7 Appendix

Links

[Documentation Photos & Workshop Materials](#) (Google Drive)

[Pub Quiz](#) (Google Doc)

[Instagram Engagement](#) (Instagram Profile)

Researcher Bios

Hlín Helga Guðlaugsdóttir is an Icelandic designer and curator currently living in Reykjavik. An experienced leader within the creative sector, both as a practitioner, teacher and academician globally, Hlín also has extensive experience in consulting on design thinking, creativity and future thinking in the public and private sector as well as facilitating interdisciplinary conversations for creative problem solving and strategy work.

Hlín has held various academic positions globally since 2009, e.g. at the MA Design Program at the Iceland University of the Arts, MFA Program in Experience Design at Konstfack, University of Arts, Crafts and Design in Stockholm and at the Stockholm School of Entrepreneurship (SSES), where she remains an associate faculty. Within this capacity she has designed and lead numerous interdisciplinary studios on design thinking and futuring globally at Parsons The New School, New York, Hong Kong Polytechnic University, the National Institute of Design (NID), Ahmedabad, India, the National University of Singapore as well as at the University of Iceland, Reykjavik University and more.

As the curator and creative director of DesignTalks, the keynote event of the Icelandic design festival DesignMarch, for a decade now, Hlín has become an important voice on the local creative scene, helping establish design in Iceland as a catalyst for social change, innovation and sustainable development.

Exhibition curation and design constitutes a significant body of her work, both as an independent curator for clients such as Iceland Design and Architecture (Miðstöð hönnunar og arkitektúrs), the Icelandic Museum of Design and Applied Art, Design Forum Finland and Adorno Collectible Design Gallery, Denmark. As a part-time project manager at the Icelandic experience design studio Gagarín, since 2020, she has worked with cultural institutions, museums and public entities creating permanent and temporary exhibitions and installations in line with their respective strategic goals and future development. In this role, she's responsible for contextual research, co-creation workshops with stakeholders, content curation, creative

direction, budget and time management and leading and nurturing creative teams to do extraordinary work.

As an experience designer, Hlín has been involved in many in-depth human-centered design research projects, notably in healthcare, where she has lead numerous practice based projects for redesigning experience in end of life care and within maternity care, notably a project helping redesigning the Kvennadeild at the National University Hospital (LSH). Further to this she was a senior consultant in experience design and design thinking to public and private entities within management consultancy firm Capacent's strategy team for a couple of years, building upon her knowledge in creative strategy work and future thinking. To this end Hlín is also a regular contributor to the think tank W.I.R.E. in Switzerland.

R. Michael Hendrix is an American designer, professor, and innovation expert living in Reykjavík. He gained widespread recognition as a senior partner and Global Design Director for IDEO, one of the world's leading design and innovation firms. At IDEO he led the curation of the company's futuring portfolio and helped clients design and activate their futures through speculative design, design fiction and futuring methodologies. His high profile work spanned from entrepreneurship development with the White House to growth strategy for the GRAMMYS. Notable futuring engagements include the MIT Media Lab, Berklee College of Music, the city of Dubai, and Volkswagen Group.

Apart from IDEO, he co-founded Tricycle, Inc., a sustainable design firm that pioneered innovative software that reduced textile industry waste, and the Open Music Initiative, a non-profit that simplifies music rights management with cutting-edge technologies.

His book, *Two Beats Ahead: What Musical Minds Teach Us About Innovation* (Penguin Business, 2021), unlocks creative mindsets through interviews with artists including Pharrell, Hank Shocklee, and Imogen Heap. Coauthored with Panos A. Panay, President of the Recording Academy/GRAMMYS, the book is recognized by *Financial Times*, BBC, and *Harvard Business Review*.

Now, with 30 years of experience in design and innovation, he leads Huldunótur, a Reykjavik-based design practice that helps organizations, brands, and individuals unleash their creative potential. He also teaches international trends in creative industries at Bifröst University and contextual design at Listaháskóli Íslands, where he shares his experience on the intersection of design, culture, and business.

Michael is an AIGA Fellow, a BMW Foundation Responsible Leader, a Marshall Memorial Fellow and a Fulbright Specialist. He has received upwards of 50 awards for graphic design, brand, digital and product design, including inclusion in the Smithsonian Cooper-Hewitt National Design Museum in the United States.