



by Gordon Craigie

Showcasing a virtual future...



Are we in Hong Kong? Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

MANY OF its residents still see the Dundee suburb of Stobswell as a village, which it was until the growth of Dundee's jute industry during the Industrial Revolution demanded additional housing for workers in the nineteenth century. But how many of those proud villagers, and other Dundonians, are aware of another revolution taking place in their midst, courtesy of a truly ground-breaking charitable organisation operating in the heart of the *Stobbie*?

Showcase the Street (StS) is a social enterprise, set up by former police officer Fergus Storrier, which aims to "make things like dance, fashion

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and sport and all those cultural subjects affordable for young people and accessible for everyone". Based in three converted warehouse buildings in Dundonald Street, StS's facilities include two 3G indoor football pitches, two dance studios and an indoor roller hockey rink. Fully qualified staff offer classes in dance, ranging from ballet to street, and musical theatre, while the Stevie Campbell Football Academy provides professional football coaching. There is also a range of community-focused tenants based at StS – the Scottish Football Association has its regional office here, Baby Sensory Dundee operates classes and parties for babies, and Mini Professors runs science classes for children. Many local groups make use of the affordable facilities for a wide range of daytime, evening and weekend activities, and also to socialise in the Tartan Coffee House.

StS originated as a spin-off from an early 90s Arbroath project, Locals Against Drug Abuse (LADA), which came

about in response to problems caused by under-occupied young people 'hanging around' and 'causing trouble'. LADA initially developed one of Scotland's first ever drop-in centres, which was where Fergus got involved as a volunteer. At the time, through his 'day job' as a community safety officer with Tayside Police, he was well aware of the importance of providing young people with facilities and opportunities in helping to prevent crime. "My background is that I've worked in the youth justice system for years. When I was in the police, I initiated projects that cut youth crime in Angus by doing the basics – organising activities on a Friday night, like football and dance, which took kids off the streets. Surprise, surprise, the crime rate dropped in half. It wisnae rocket science! And it didn't cost a lot of money to do either. I was able to show the councillors, 'here's the savings – this is costing £60k a year, or whatever, but it's saving you £2.5 million'. That's the sort of political discussion that you've got to have

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to make these things more effective. Thinking they were being funny, police colleagues were asking questions like 'What do you do all day, sitting in an office?'. Well, actually, see all those calls you used to get in Arbroath, do you still get them? 'Eh, no'... So, what do you do now? 'I concentrate on real crime'. Exactly! You're not running about chasing those bairns anymore because those bairns are occupied! As an individual, and as a professional, it was incredibly fulfilling. I was satisfying the primary role of a police officer, which is to prevent crime, but I was actually providing a better service too. And it was fun!"



Girl power! Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street



Dance class. Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street

But, despite Fergus also organising a series of highly successful dance shows in a spin-off project, LADA eventually decided they didn't want to continue doing things like that, preferring instead to concentrate on the drop-in centre. Around 50 girls dug in their heels and said they didn't want to give up dancing, and Fergus thought "this is kids telling us something and we're not listening to them – I'll go and do it". And he did, starting StS initially as a dance charity offering classes and organising shows in Arbroath. This gradually expanded into the rest of Angus as well as Dundee, Aberdeenshire and Perth & Kinross then, when Fergus retired from the police force after 30 years' service, he decided to focus his energies on further developing StS. When the opportunity to acquire their current premises came about in



Happy kids! Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street

2014 Fergus knew it was too good to miss, but the process wasn't entirely straightforward. There were many complex meetings with planning officials, mainly about change of use, which were only resolved when the local MSP, Shona Robison, gave them the ultimatum – "this charity needs this building, get it sorted!" Fergus smiles at the memory. "The next day it was all changed! Shona was the Sports Minister at the time and still keeps in regular touch with us. We probably wouldn't be here if it wasn't for her."

The new Stobswell premises allowed StS to greatly expand the dance and sporting activities they could offer and opened up opportunities to grow in different directions too. By 2016 StS had also become a fully-fledged SQA Approved Centre, allowing it to work with local schools to help young people gain recognised national certificates in, for example, Personal Development. And earlier this year, when one of StS's original tenants, Kanzen Karate, moved on to bigger premises nearby, StS took advantage of the newly-vacated space to push on with their latest, and definitely most revolutionary, venture – into the world of Virtual Reality (VR).

For the benefit of anyone who's been hiding under a rock for a few years, *techopedia.com* offers a (relatively) simple definition of VR as consisting of "computer-generated environments or realities that are designed to simulate a person's physical presence in a specific environment that is designed to feel real. The purpose of VR is to allow a person to experience and manipulate the environment as if it were the real world. The best virtual realities are able to immerse the user completely". VR is the next big thing. Actually, it's been the next big thing for a while but now it's maturing and gaining – jargon alert – market penetration! Squillions of dollars have been invested by all the usual suspects – Apple, Facebook, Google, Microsoft et al. – so it is entirely refreshing to discover that non-materialistic good is also being achieved through this new medium, in converted warehouses... in Dundee...

Fergus explains, "We'd been exploring possibilities with a couple of organisations who deal with young people suffering



Showtime! Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street

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from Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE) and others from Anxiety in Motion (AIM). One of the things we discovered was an initiative in America where they are using VR therapy with troops coming back from Iraq and Iran suffering from Post-Traumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD). Using VR, they can put the troops *virtually* into situations that appear risky and then pull them out. Then they put them in again, and pull them out, and so on. The result was that the trauma they experienced reduced quite dramatically. They were able to cope better with situations in life and they were able to move forward in a



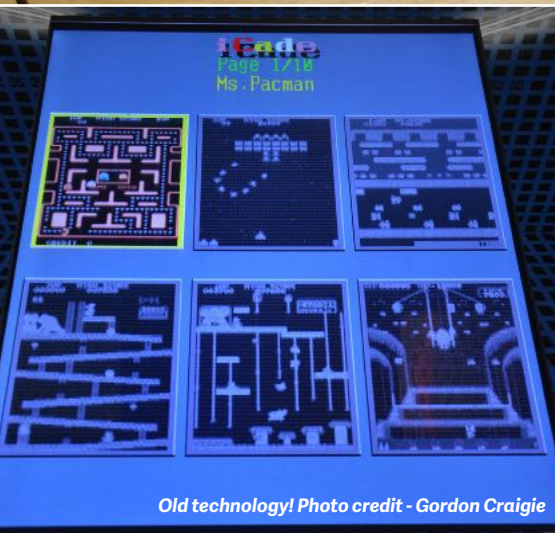
Football coaching group. Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street



VR Centre - before...
Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street



... and after (almost there!). Photo courtesy of Showcase the Street



Old technology! Photo credit - Gordon Craigie



Omni treadmill.
Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

Cutting-edge technology doesn't come cheap, but Fergus argues that that the cost is heavily outweighed by the value

much easier way than the other troops that didn't undergo this therapy."

Giving what he describes as a basic example, in the context of AIMs sufferers, Fergus explains the isolation experienced by people who won't go to Dundee's main shopping centre, the Overgate, because they're scared of going up the escalator. By taking a VR headset out to their homes, in a safe and comfortable environment, they can virtually be 'put' on the escalator 'in' the Overgate and supported through the experience. Just like the PTSD therapy, by repeating the process several times, gradually they can be prepared for an actual visit where they can finally go up the escalator having realised that it wasn't that bad after all. "This is really new, but we can see a huge benefit to it. We've got to work with agencies who're good at the support side and know how to do all that but don't have enough resources. It's pretty groundbreaking stuff, but we're confident that it will work."

Cutting-edge technology doesn't come cheap, but Fergus argues that that the cost is heavily outweighed by the value. "It's not that expensive when you consider it. The grant we have is £60k for all the equipment and setting up the VR room, so that's the base cost. Is it expensive? A drug user will cost society over a million pounds per year to service, to facilitate, to put through all the systems, medication the lot. The average cost of crime has all been measured. When you think of an average chaotic drug user in society, that's thousands of pounds per day. Whether it's through the courts system, the crimes they commit, the drug use, the foster service... If you think about Rossie School, as a specific example, it costs £5k per week to be in there. And that's local authority – £5k a week, £20k a month, to have one young person housed in there. That's how I have to frame it when I'm negotiating with people, from a funder's perspective when I'm looking for money, but I'm mainly concerned with highlighting the social impact. It's been proven that kids with ADHD and autism, for example, will learn in a much more functional way if things are visual than they will through just sitting speaking to them.

"StS is right at the forefront of this in the UK, nobody else is doing this. There are universities looking at research projects but there's a difference between a research project and actually taking it anywhere. Agencies who are actually

working with young people are saying to us 'that's going to work, let's go and do it'. We're not going into this to use a young person to just prove a point, we can actually see benefits for it. But even with those young people, when we first bring them in, they'll go into our VR Centre and just play a game. We're not going to throw them right in the deep-end with the really serious bit, the whole point of any project is to develop a relationship first. We really are ahead of the game here. There are only two commercial sites in Scotland, one in Livingston and one in Edinburgh.



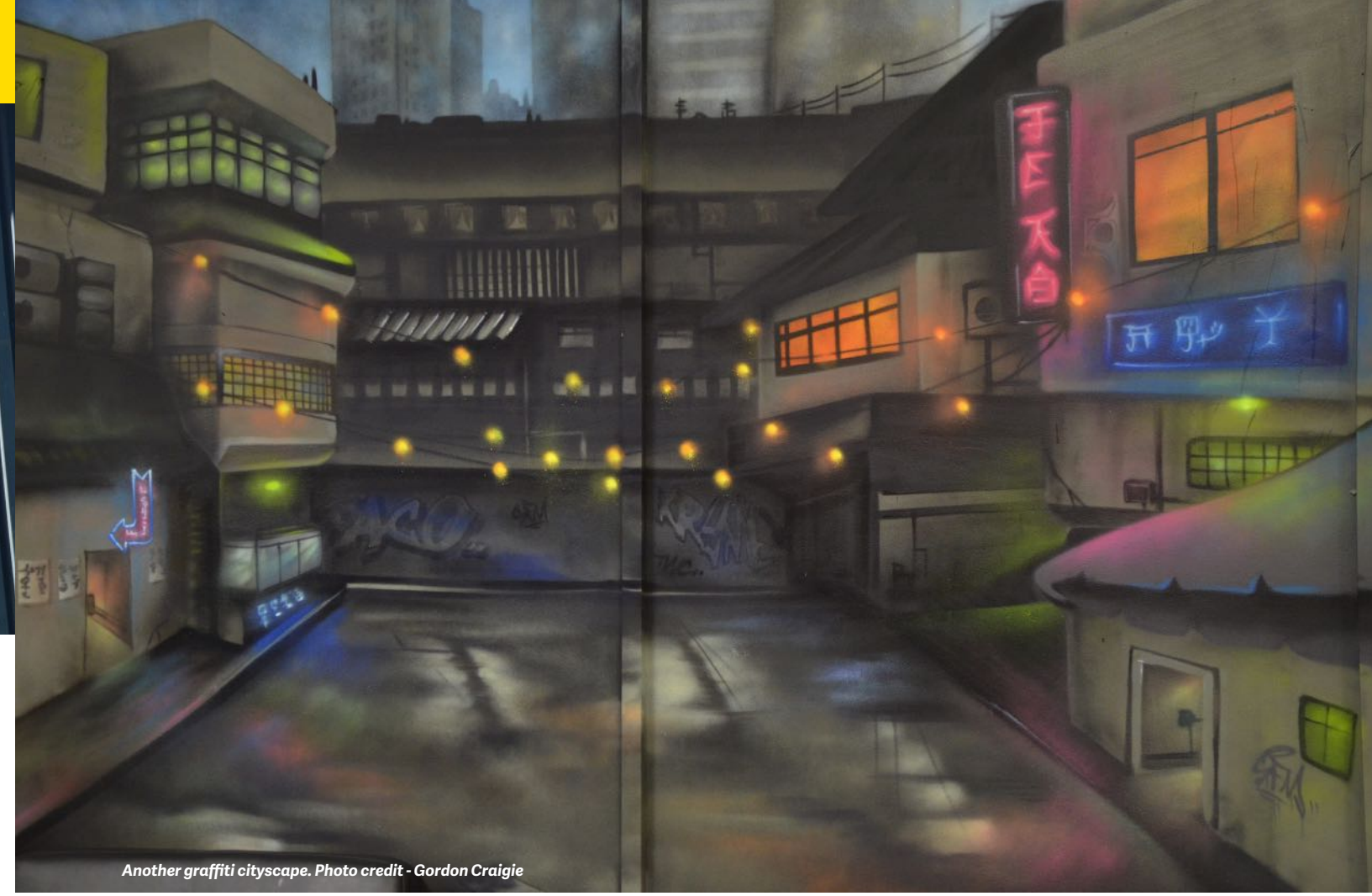
Raymond gets Fergus prepared for his F1 debut!
Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

Doesn't look much from the outside?
Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

Traditionally, in any VR centre, you go into a booth, you put the headset on and you get to play a game. StS is taking that to a different level where we're bringing in equipment that engages with the games. That's the difference. For example, we've got a couple of racing cars, and also two Omni treadmills which allow you to walk in any direction, 360 degrees. The treadmills are built with sensors and the idea is that when you walk on them you can effectively go for miles, and get



Photo credit - Gordon Craigie



Another graffiti cityscape. Photo credit - Gordon Craigie

the benefits of that physical activity, but never leave the spot that you're on. We can also take the headsets out to work with young people in schools or in their homes."

Fergus sees the new VR venture as being a natural extension of what StS has been doing for years. "We started here with dance and football, and we could see there was a revenue stream that could be generated from that. So that activity, along with rental from our tenants, brings in enough to pay for the buildings. We needed to offer something else that brings in different people, not just sport and dancing. StS has a huge footfall, something like 2-3,000 people per week. There are loads of projects in during the day that you just wouldn't normally see - mother & toddler groups, schools projects, homeless projects - then in the evenings we've got a number of community groups who hire the facility at a rate they can afford. I genuinely don't see it as a choice between social impact activities versus money-spinning fun, I think we can do both. With any true social enterprise, and that's what government wants charities to be now, you need a business arm to feed your charity arm. Big charities have been doing it for years with their shops, it's no different. We've now got the VR Centre which people can come into and pay for because they can afford it - a birthday party or whatever - and that generates a pot of money, so when we need to buy another expensive piece of technology we can do that without having to seek money from a funder. But, during the daytime, when the centre's not booked, that's when

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we bring the projects in or we take the kit out to people. The technology has grown now to allow us to do that."

StS also has ambitious developmental plans to design bespoke VR games and activities for the groups they plan to support. Abertay University is at the epicentre of Dundee's world-famous computer games industry and is an important partner in StS's VR venture. Last year, the Scottish Government launched a Social Innovation Fund to support charities working with universities and the StS/ Abertay partnership was awarded £50k to design a game to increase employability skills. Although the finished product was good it clearly didn't match up to games on Xbox or PlayStation, so thoughts immediately turned to how VR could be utilised in order to emulate those. Fergus proudly states, "The beauty of working with the Abertay students is that they are absolutely the best of the best, from all over the world. We currently have a team of six or seven students on the Masters programme working alongside us to design social impact games as part of their project or thesis. Our aim is to eventually employ our own team and, in the future, that can potentially create another revenue stream for StS as well."

If it seems like StS is moving off in a totally different direction, applying lessons from the American military with PTSD and developing state-of-the-art software, that's not how Fergus looks at it. "It's trying to look all the time at how you change. Offering opportunities through dance, sport and now VR - they're actually very similar in that we know we're good at helping people because we've been doing it successfully for 15 years. What gives me the buzz is seeing things put into practice. I'm probably a stereotypical entrepreneur, once I've done one thing I want to go and do something else. The VR will open up other doors because, as we're developing it, something else will come up that will make us think, 'hadn't thought about that'. It's just using your imagination and it's not always easy for people to do that. The key thing for us is not just to look at our market, as everybody tells you, but to listen to them too. StS wouldn't exist if it hadn't been for 50 young girls in Arbroath coming to me and having the trust to say, 'we don't want this, we want someplace we can go and dance and develop our skills and not have to pay a lot of money - how do we do that?' Now we've got three full-time dance teachers, and two of them came from those classes. And there's been loads of volunteers. When we do our dance shows around Scotland we purposefully, at every show,

present our volunteers with certification, the Saltire Awards, and we're one of the few organisations to have gold award winners. That's fantastic."

The VR Centre opened in November under the watchful eye of VR Development Officer Raymond Chan, and his enthusiasm and knowledge will go a long way to ensuring the venture's success. Raymond has a degree in marketing but prefers to describe himself as a 'professional geek!' He oversaw the development of the centre, including the striking graffiti art décor, while testing and debugging all of the equipment prior to launch. His seemingly never-ending job description includes taking the VR headsets out to schools, agencies and domestic settings where he works with children and supports specialist staff in utilising the technology. Raymond thinks the potential uses are limitless. "This is an exciting age in immersive experiences. VR technology offers a fun and safe experiential space which enables users to face their greatest fears or enjoy environments and activities they may have thought were out of reach, like to see the Seven Wonders of the World or act the part of a superhero! We aim to bring this immersion to entertain and inspire the wider community." Resilient Scotland, which has supported StS since 2015, has provided start-up funding for the new VR Centre. Investment Executive Ian Knox adds their endorsement. "We were delighted to make a further investment for this innovative project. StS is a great social enterprise that provides a wide range of sports, dance and other activities for young people in and around Dundee, and the VR Centre is an exciting addition that will have educational and training applications alongside the fun stuff! We look forward to continuing our partnership with StS in the years ahead."

Here at iScot Magazine, we're all about shining a light on

the best that Scotland has to offer. If we have a recurring theme then it revolves around stories of individuals and organisations getting on and doing extraordinary things without waiting for anyone's permission. Stories which echo the philosophy 'Work as if you live in the early days of a better nation' - words inscribed on the Canongate Wall of the Scottish Parliament. Showcase the Street is a social enterprise that is most certainly doing its bit to work towards a better nation. It is justifiably proud of the range of groups, from different nationalities and backgrounds, who make use of its facilities with no barriers and no stigmas. As Fergus has said, maybe organising dance and football to keep kids occupied isn't rocket science, but it clearly works. And the exciting and revolutionary introduction of VR to the mix to provide both fun and social impact... well, that's just the latest evidence that he isn't waiting for anyone's permission, he's just getting on with doing extraordinary things.

Showcase the Street's VR Centre is available for individual and group hire and for private parties. Opening times and contact details are available on the Showcase VR website:

www.showcasevr.co.uk

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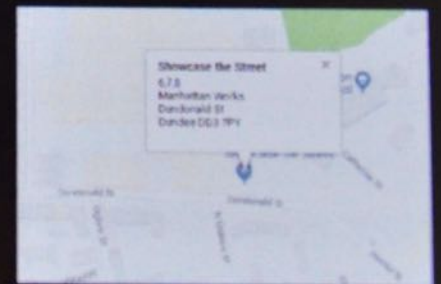
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