

Field Hospital: Unearthing Study Group at Delfina Foundation – Narrative Report

Field Hospital is a project initiated by Andrew Merritt and produced by Looking Forward. The initial implementations of the project are realised in partnership with the University of Cambridge (UK), The Sustainability Institute (SA) and Cocina Colaboratorio at UNAM National Autonomous University of Mexico, with the support of Fundación Jumex Arte Contemporáneo and Gaia Art Foundation.

The first *Field Hospital* Study Group took place at the Delfina Foundation in London on May 29, 2025, gathering artists, curators, researchers, and cultural practitioners who were connected through shared concerns about land, repair, and the politics of food. Conceived as a moment of reflection within the wider *Field Hospital: Nurseries for Slow Disasters* framework, the session set out to test ideas, methods, and language that underpin the project’s unfolding network across the UK, South Africa, and Mexico.

At Delfina, the study group was more of an open laboratory than a conventional meeting. Participants came together to think through how “slow disasters” — gradual ecological and cultural degradations that unfold over generations — could be addressed through interdisciplinary practices. The conversation shifted fluidly between theory and experience, between the histories of extraction and the practicalities of working with soil, seeds, and communities. The atmosphere combined the intimacy of a kitchen table discussion with the critical sharpness of a research seminar.

This inaugural meeting was hosted by artist and designer Andrew Merritt (Something & Son), curator Carolina Lio (Looking Forward), and artist Emilio Hernández Martínez, with recorded contributions from Dr Nik Petek-Sargeant (University of Cambridge) and Maya Marshak (artist, South Africa). Together, they explored how the project’s ideas might operate



between theory and practice, and how art can respond to the slow, often invisible forms of environmental degradation that define our time.

Setting the Scene

The discussion began with a shared understanding of *Field Hospital*'s origins. Emerging from the 2022 *Politics of Food* residency at Delfina Foundation, the project reimagines the mobile infrastructures of emergency response (field kitchens and field hospitals) as tools for ecological and biocultural restoration. Rather than serving immediate crises, they address landscapes damaged by the slow violence of industrialisation, colonisation, and neglect. The *Field Kitchen* becomes both a metaphor and a method: a space for co-cooking, thinking, and making that brings together artists, scientists, and communities to ask, "What food does the land need?"

At Delfina, this framework provided an anchor for discussing how art, archaeology, ecology, and design can intersect to form new infrastructures of care. Participants reflected on the project's ambition to move across scales, from the microscopic life of soil to the geopolitical forces shaping land use, and to produce a form of practice that is simultaneously poetic and practical.

Themes and Discussion

One recurring theme was the *temporality* of slow disasters. Unlike spectacular emergencies that attract rapid intervention, slow disasters operate quietly, eroding ecosystems and social relations over centuries. The group discussed how artistic and archaeological practices could make these invisible processes perceptible, not just through data alone, but through embodied, sensory, and narrative experiences. Food, in this sense, becomes both evidence and medium: a way to materialise lost ecologies and to trace continuities between past and future landscapes.

A second key theme was *methodology*. The group explored how interdisciplinary collaboration can avoid merely juxtaposing disciplines and instead form a genuinely co-productive process. Archaeologists described how deep-time perspectives might inform current models of biodiversity restoration; artists responded by proposing new ways to communicate these insights to communities through shared meals, performance, and design. What united these perspectives was a desire to shift from extractive research to reciprocal exchange — to work *with* land and people rather than *on* them.

Another important conversation centred on *knowledge and its transmission*. Participants reflected on how local and ancestral knowledge systems can coexist with scientific expertise, and how *Field Hospital* could act as a bridge between them. There was agreement that the project's success depends on listening to farmers, cooks, and craftspeople who hold intimate,



place-based understanding, and on ensuring that such knowledge remains embedded within the communities that generate it.

Contributions from the Field

Two recorded contributions further expanded the dialogue.

Dr Nik Petek-Sargeant, environmental archaeologist at the University of Cambridge, presented insights from his research into the deep histories of the Fens, showing how archaeological evidence can reveal what species once flourished there and how people once coexisted with wetland ecologies. His perspective anchored the project's ambition to build new futures on the time-depth of the past.

Maya Marshak, researcher and artist from South Africa, offered a reflection from the winelands near Cape Town, where Field Hospital South Africa is emerging around questions of indigenous species, wild foods, and care economies. She highlighted the importance of storytelling and listening as restorative acts, emphasising that “to nurse a landscape, we must first attend to the stories it holds.”

These voices from different contexts reminded the group that Field Hospital is a growing network of situated experiments, each learning from the others while remaining rooted in place.

Field Hospital as Infrastructure

Several contributions addressed the notion of the *hospital* as an infrastructure of care. The idea of “nursing the land” prompted discussion on how repair requires slowness, attention, and interdependence. The Field Hospital, envisioned as a modular structure where ideas, plants, and materials are propagated, was read as both a physical and conceptual space: a living archive where ecological, social, and aesthetic dimensions of repair converge.

The group considered how these infrastructures might operate beyond their immediate sites. Could Field Hospitals form a distributed network of restorative practices, each responding to local conditions yet connected through shared principles? This federated model, linking the Fens in the UK, the waterways of Oaxaca, and the winelands of Cape Town, reflects a commitment to relational rather than centralised forms of organisation, where knowledge circulates laterally rather than hierarchically.

Reflections and Tensions

As with any interdisciplinary endeavour, tensions surfaced. Participants questioned how to balance artistic experimentation with scientific rigour, how to translate complex ecological



data into accessible narratives without simplification, and how to navigate the ethics of working within communities affected by historical and ongoing extraction. There was recognition that ambiguity is not a weakness but an essential condition of such work: *Field Hospital* must remain porous, responsive, and open to being reshaped by the contexts it enters.

The conversation also touched on the politics of visibility and authorship. Who speaks for a landscape, and who benefits from its repair? Participants discussed strategies for ensuring equitable credit and long-term benefit-sharing, particularly as the project expands internationally. These reflections underscored that the ethics of collaboration are as critical as the ecological outcomes themselves.

Participants recognised that this inaugural meeting marked an important transition: from concept to collective research. It reaffirmed *Field Hospital's* role not only as an artwork or programme but as a growing ecosystem, a distributed infrastructure for thinking, learning, and acting on the intertwined crises of land, climate, and culture.

Concluding Thoughts

The *Delfina Study Group* demonstrated how a single conversation can become an act of restoration in itself. By gathering around the metaphorical table of the *Field Kitchen*, participants began to weave together fragments of knowledge, experience, and imagination — the very ingredients needed to repair what slow disasters have undone. As Andrew noted, Field Hospital must continue to operate “between the scientific and the poetic, between the pragmatic and the speculative.”

In doing so, the meeting embodied the ethos at the heart of *Field Hospital*: that healing is not a solitary act but a collective process of attention, care, and creativity. From the Fens to Oaxaca to Cape Town, these study groups will continue to grow this conversation across geographies, cultivating the conditions for new landscapes to emerge.