

Wide Open Space: art in the public realm, localism and rural regeneration

A Dorset Design and Heritage Forum conference

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Wide Open Space

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I am here to introduce one strand of the work of the Forum on art and design in the public realm in Dorset which we have called Wide Open Space. In doing so I want to very briefly address the key questions we asked ourselves at the start of project, which were in essence:

Can contemporary art, craft and design contribute something unique to the social and economic fabric of rural places and their communities?

What are the urgent sites and contexts to work with now and for the future?

The first question – what is the potential contribution of creative thinking to rural space – came from the Dorset Community Plan which prioritises:

- Developing the rural economy
- Protecting landscapes and safeguarding environments
- Creating safe, strong and inclusive rural communities
- Affordable and sustainable housing
- Support in wellbeing through culture

This was further refined to the contribution artists and designers can make to:

- Sustainability and design quality in public spaces
- Engagement with affordable housing schemes
- Models of good practice combining traditional materials and innovative design
- Collaborative design processes in protected landscapes

This idea of starting from the strategic needs of the community has made Wide Open Space unique in many respects as a programme of art in the public realm. Most projects in public start from either:

- a site, a place where housing, or a shopping centre is already being planned; let's include artists or designers in the process of making it
- a concept, an artist or curator or community says let's have something different; where shall we put it ?

Instead Wide Open Space said: we want to address wider social needs, how can art and design in public space contribute to these rural issues, either in terms of the debate they engender or the manifestation they take ? The process therefore was to identify places where these needs were apparent and to offer funding to support open ended research into that location and its communities.

One of the most recent projects was at Shaftesbury in North Dorset, called Common Places. Here the Shaftesbury Civic Society came forward to follow up the idea of a public work of art or design for the recently completed town centre enhancement scheme. The brief created by the Society brought together nearly all of the objectives of the Wide Open Space programme, design quality in public space, combining traditional and modern materials and collaborative design processes. The brief focussed on the idea of creating new common places within the town but left the precise site to be determined. This is because Shaftesbury is expanding with several hundred new houses being built on its Eastern edge, creating a new community to be integrated into the old town. After consultations with the local community the proposals by a collaborative team consisting of architects ZMMA and designer-maker Simon Pirie, focussed on The Commons, a space in the centre of town.

Their proposal is for an integrated scheme which features a number of structures made from local materials, referencing the stratiagraphic nature of the town's layout and its underlying geography. The structures provide multifunctional seating which can be used for resting and meeting others or functions as a market stall and site for a buskers.

The Civic Society is now seeking the support needed to develop this project which will add so much in economic and social terms as a new facility for both locals and tourists.

In the mean time the ambition of the project to link the old town and its new communities to the east has been realised through a companion project which has been commissioned by the developers Persimmon from ZMMA and Pirie, for the housing in east Shaftesbury. This project then has covered not one, two or even three of the objective we set out with but all of them, sustainability and design quality in public spaces, work with housing schemes, combining traditional materials and innovative design and collaborative processes.

For me this project also embodies the ambitions of Localism in devolving power over public space to community groups like the Civic Societies, engaging local people, utilising private finance and adding to the social and economic vitality of the town. I would like to ask: who else but a creative team like this could achieve this synthesis of local aspiration, regional and national policy and aesthetic progressiveness for this ancient market town, all for the initial investment of a few thousand pounds? Surely this then is part of the unique contribution that creative approaches can make to the fabric of rural place. London Fieldworks' project for Chickerell, part of the Wide Open Space Programme, also does this.

Moving on then to the second of my two questions - *What are the urgent sites and contexts to work with now and for the future?* - I would like to use another of Wide Open Space's projects to discuss this.

Road for the Future is different to the other projects in this series in that it originated from an artist and curator Anna Best, instead of from a civic organisation. It was selected for the Wide Open Space programme because of the desire of Anna to address personal questions which were also part of a wider set of social issues.

Anna moved here from London a few years ago and told me that one of the questions she asked was "Where is the common space?". At least in London there are parks and streets and squares. In the wide open spaces of the countryside which seems like public space, most places are in fact private.

Some interesting facts about land in Britain :

- There are 60 million acres of land in Britain, and 60 million people
- 70% of UK is owned by 1 % of the population.
- 90% of the people live on less than 10% of the land.
- Modern homes are 1 third smaller than those belonging to our parents.

It was for reasons like these that Anna became involved in a project on her doorstep, the Bridport to Maiden Newton trailway which was being put together on an old railway line by Sustrans and other partners like the Dorset Wildlife Trust. Her aim was to see how art projects could help to transform this cycle and walking route into a new social space. In particular to raise awareness amongst the public of the site's heritage and ecology, issues of sustainable transport and undertake an exploration of the meaning of "common land" in the 21st century.

With funding from Wide Open Space, Road for the Future has already put together two temporary projects, inviting Phil Minton's Feral Choir and Pilot Publishing's Energy Cafe to the area. Phil Minton's Feral Choir uses local people to create an improvisational performance which is unique every time. This version was staged on the Trailway itself as a way of engaging with local people and encouraging them to take a metaphorical and literal ownership of the site through their presence and by making donations to the cause.

Peter Henshaw from Sustrans says that this has been a valuable way of focussing attention on the Trailway as they continue to negotiate with individual landowners for access across their land, a process which is complicated and difficult.

This project highlights some of the issues inherent in creating art works for rural spaces. The basic tension is between the desire by a large part of the modern community for access to the countryside and private ownership. Also rural locations are at a disadvantage in attracting investment for public realm art projects for arguably two main reasons which are:

- low population density equals low returns per capita on investment for whatever purpose, social or economic
- planning policy since the 1950's means that many public rural locations are protected, sensitive or conserved, prohibiting most permanent interventions

One possible solution to this conundrum is to consider, not only traditional public space like parks and squares, but also infrastructure as an important site for artists and designers. Infrastructure includes transport, water management, waste management, energy and communications. At a time when economic pressure means that the focus will be on essentials only, these are spaces which must still be maintained and renewed. This same economic pressure also emphasises arts projects which are "low-cost" or "maintenance-free".

Art works which are located in infrastructure may be the solution, particularly if we think of a physical infrastructure which is relational, where some or all of these conduits like roads, paths, electricity pylons, lighting, fences or gates, are made open, accessible and "inclusive".

A relational infrastructure would offer the opportunity of creating public art projects, platforms or networks which would be long lived and yet mutable and participatory. As infrastructure already exists capital costs are low which means there would be a higher return in terms of any cost/benefit ratio.

This is the approach I have taken in a project I am working on in Lyme Regis, part of the ongoing Pride of Place Scheme, also developed by the Design and Heritage Forum to reflect on ideas of local distinctiveness and sustainability. For this I have been working with environmental action group Turn Lyme Green on a way of recycling the existing lighting in the town to create an artwork that the community and environment can influence or control. Together with West Dorset District Council we have conceived of programming an LED street light with a variety of functions such as marking births, deaths and marriages in the parish or responding to wave and tidal movements.

The environmental premise is to combine traditional seaside lighting with utilitarian street lighting, eliminating duplicated energy usage. In theory the project is open ended with no reason why the idea cannot be used for festivals or Christmas lighting or general seaside fun. We also hope this will get across the relationship between energy consumption, the community and its environment.

We will also hear later about the way artist Michael Pinsky has created relational infrastructure, proposing artworks that make the roads within the Dorset Area of Outstanding Natural Beauty into more accessible spaces for the public and that respect its aesthetic sensitivities.

I hope I have therefore at least indicated answers to my original questions about the unique contribution of artists: synthesising local aspiration, regional and national policy and aesthetic progressiveness and perhaps some of the future contexts we might work within: both traditional public spaces and in creating a relational infrastructure for the future.

More project information for Wide Open Space is available at:

<http://www.dorsetforyou.com/390685>