

## Creative thinking in a time of financial Constraint

### Wide Open Space 4<sup>th</sup> March 2011

Good afternoon, well we have had a very stimulating morning and I hope my contribution will build on what you have already heard.

I have been asked to talk about collaboration – and as time is short I am going to look briefly at three examples of where working with artists has made a significant difference to the outcome.

But firstly I just want to talk a bit about artists, the current climate and where I see the opportunities are.

I believe that artists can bring many things to a skilled team; they have experience in multidisciplinary working, they know how to collaborate – as working in the public realm is all about collaboration, they know how to listen, how to observe, how to pick up on the minutia of a situation. They research, unearth and find layers of meaning, which otherwise might have been missed. And as we have seen this morning, and will again when Sans Façon talk, public art is not an art form, it is a principle, a principle of improving the changing environment through involving artists in the conception, development and transformation of public space. Public art has established a valued and valid role within the place making agenda and there is now general acceptance that artists should become involved at the beginning of the design or thought process, not at the end and that they should be part of the overall team and contribute conceptually, not just in terms of an object.

They are also resourceful, creative thinkers and planners who can add another dimension of thought and vision to a design team. When creating civic infrastructure you are also creating cultural meaning and the timing of when an artist begins work on a project is a significant factor that controls how the artist might be able to affect the meaning. But, despite the fact that early decisions concerning programming, schematic design and so on may define the cultural significance of developments or regeneration projects, the artist is often not on-board when these decisions are being made.

So whether the outcome of the artists involvement is functional – seating, landscaping or stand alone, sculpture, painting – or part of the overall concept of way finding and legibility – there aren't any boundaries – each project each solution should be unique to that scheme.

Because - **The art is in the experience and not in the labelling**

Also by bringing artists into the mix of people already considering the creation or development of an area, you are opening up a channel that encourages and allows local people to feed in creative ideas and thoughts as to how they want those spaces to develop. This way of involving the community is far more effective, as consultation is always a key component of any public art project.

We have had, up until the coalition Government, an unprecedented focus, in my view on environments, design, community engagement and the art of making sustainable places. Professionals have come together, schemes have demonstrated this way of working and a new confidence was emerging. But during the past nine months the landscape for cultural activity and development has dramatically shifted. Partners and methods of delivery are changing daily and the focus on quality environments and the need to ensure that thoughtful practice informs thoughtful places has been swept away by a surge of cost cutting, shedding of professions and a culture of austerity. And keeping our heads down, waiting for it all to pass and for normal service to resume won't work either! Hard times shouldn't equate with poverty of thinking, in fact it is even more important, when resources are tight, to explore the left field and embrace creativity and innovation. After all, 'Necessity is the motherhood of invention'. We know that quality of design adds value – and the value doesn't go away just because budgets get tight.

Adding value can be about doing things differently rather than more – we all know the old adage 'less is more' well this is an opportunity to pare things down – look at what really counts and maybe put more effort into working with and building the communities who are going live with the regeneration and stop creating over engineered and over designed spaces. Instead, create places which allow for personalisation, which can evolve and be further shaped by the people who use them. Good urban design is progressive, sequential, and some of the more interesting public art projects have been durational – ones that have bedded down in a community over a period of time, building relationships, taking time to listen and explore and it is these sort of projects which 'stick'.

Creative thinking is also about creative spending – it makes no sense to put in place and design all the components street furniture, hard and soft landscaping, lighting etc and then look to see where the artist can fit – the whole project should be imbued with creative solutions.

The following brief case studies – demonstrate how creative thinking and the integration of artists into the design process can make a huge difference to the end result.

**The Ashford ring road project** – “Breaking Boundaries” – has seen a number of artists working as part of design teams over the last two years, in an ambitious scheme to transform a 1970s ring road into a series of pedestrian-friendly two-way streets. The scheme followed the innovative philosophy of Shared Space, an approach to public space design which gives equal balance to pedestrians and motor vehicles on roads and highways.

The project, which encircles the growth town of Ashford in Kent, involved John Atkin as Lead Artist, John Maine, Nayan Kulkarni and Simeon Nelson. Maine and Nelson have been particularly concerned with the landscape and environment of the road, with Kulkarni appointed to develop a lighting strategy and associated landscape detailing designs. The artist Michael Pinsky was also commissioned on the project, to curate a linked programme of temporary works called the lost O in the summer of 2007, which marked the initial dismantling of the ring road and coincided with the Tour de France passing through Ashford.

The design team on the project included Jacobs as highways engineers and Whitelaw Turkington as landscape architects. The client for the scheme was Kent County Council, working closely with Ashford's Future, a public-private sector regeneration partnership which includes Ashford Borough Council. The three artists initially appointed to the ring road received the same overall brief – “work collaboratively with the design teams engaged to develop detailed proposals for the transformation of Ashford's ring road.” The brief noted particular opportunities which the artists might want to explore, including:

- Quality and character of spatial form, finish and experiences
- Gateways
- Landmarks

- Public Spaces/Pocket parks
- Street Furniture
- Community Collaboration
- Lighting
- Temporary Events and Installations

The brief outlined the way that the design team process was set up – with Jacobs leading the IDT as Project Directors and “charged with ensuring each of the disciplines...has a fair opportunity to input their expertise and ideas...”

Nayan Kulkarni’s brief also contained specific reference to the scope of a lighting strategy and the possibilities for the role of light within a shared space scheme. The aims and objectives of the Town Centre Public Realm Strategy were seen as important elements within Breaking Boundaries, and formed a key part of the artists’ briefs.

This was already a very different highways scheme for the client and design team to work on, given its high strategic importance and the involvement of the Shared Space philosophy. It was interesting to note what they felt involving artists had brought to the ring road project. It was quite clear that the notions of identity and locality and the need for distinctiveness were important reasons for bringing artists in, and certainly the designs have achieved this. The feeling is that the project has created a “street which is definitely Ashford”.

In terms of slightly less tangible contributions, the team felt that the artists had also brought in an “extra bit of patina” to the scheme, more texture and feeling than a straightforward road project. In terms of the actual working process, one design team member felt very definitely that the artists had brought a different way of thinking, made the scheme a more creative process, and also more of a challenge. The scheme has gone on to win numerous awards and is viewed as an international exemplar of multidisciplinary practice and innovation within highway design. The involvement of artists in such an integral way lifted the scheme and provided it with character, relevance and made the development an important part of Ashford’s townscape again.

**In Sheffield**, a city which has invested in a range of outstanding public spaces including the Peace Gardens, Millennium Square and Sheaf Square. It has worked closely with artists and craft workers in the design and making of these spaces, ensuring that the city’s favourite places are not only well designed for local use, but also creatively dynamic and architecturally appealing.

Artists had a key role in engaging and involving local people in the changes that were occurring, often drawing on the history and local character of the area.

**Millennium Square** is situated between two of Sheffield’s most popular public spaces, the Peace Gardens and the Winter Garden and is part of Sheffield’s Heart of the City project, a scheme that has been synonymous with the City’s economic and cultural rebirth since it began in 1998. It contains a piece of public art called ‘Rain’, created by sculptor Colin Rose. The sculpture features nine large Sheffield stainless steel spheres varying in sizes up to 2m in diameter, intended to suggest drops of rain that have just landed on the surface of the square.

The pool sparkles at night due to dozens of colour changing LED lights set in the paving, and into the rim of the pools under each of the steel ball ‘raindrops’.

The square forms the central part of a spectacular walk, the 'Gold Route', which takes visitors from Sheffield Railway Station through a series of exciting new developments each with their own distinctive lighting, public art and water features.

**Sheaf Square** is a new public space situated outside the Station. The area was previously used as a car park, and was surrounded by a major road network.

The square now provides a stunning entrance to the city centre. It contains the spectacular Cutting Edge Sculpture, which combines the city's famous resource – steel - with water and light to create a spectacular first impression. The work features a dramatic cascade of water, which uses noise and light to give the plaza an exciting atmosphere. It feels completely different at night due to the use of different coloured lighting around the paving, sculpture and water feature.

### **Peace Gardens**

The gardens employ a theme of stone, water and metal-working, reflecting Sheffield's history and development as a centre of excellence in craftsmanship and manufacturing, and are surrounded by the commercial buildings of Sheffield's past, which now house offices, shops, cafés and civic institutions.

Contemporary artists including Richard Perry, Tracey Heyes Tom Perkins, Leuan Rees, Andrew Skelton and Asquith Design Partnership have collaborated to create a unique fusion of seating, ornament, water features, street furniture and lighting set amidst a generous and carefully planned sea of planting. Combining traditional and contemporary styles to provide year-round effects and a cornucopia for the senses, natural stone, bronze, granite and gritstone combine to create gardens that can withstand the deservedly high levels of use they now receive.

The works exemplify how the emotive functions of art (a sense of place and belonging) can combine with physical functions of design, and demonstrates how early involvement within the concept stages of a master plan enables real integration of artwork into the urban landscape. This rationale was utilised to qualify and capitalise on the artwork within planning strategy, economic rationale, political agenda and audience engagement. The economic and cultural regeneration of Sheffield bears testament to this approach and has truly added to its profile and reputation as an international city.

**Grosvenor Waterside** is a large riverside development lead by Berkeley Homes subsidiary St.James with the architecture practice Make designing the buildings. Bramah House and Woods House are the most recently completed.

MAKE needed a solution to Bramah House's huge expanse of reflective metal, which Westminster City Council were worried might be too blinding or distracting unless broken up. They appointed the artist Clare Woods, a painter, at a very early stage, who took inspiration from photos taken of the surrounding buildings, railway, dock and trees, in order to unlock the character of the place.

These were turned into drawings, blown up in scale and then transposed onto the facade through a process of etching onto its anodised aluminium panel. Dressed in this two-tone panelling, the work literally wraps the building and responds to changes of natural light as it hits different areas on its surface throughout the day. Highly visible to the millions of passengers using nearby Victoria Station, the work is visually stunning and fully meets the developers aspirations which were to have embedded arts programme which ensured cohesion with the surrounding environment.

The balustrades are also Woods' design, devised from the Georgian heritage of the area and the way they used a thin metal structure for balconies almost like a drawn line, which echoed the artists' drawing process.'

These examples demonstrate that culture and creativity can be a binding force bringing people and urban space together in order to create vibrant and successful places.

We live in interesting times – as they say – as we are witnessing a reclamation of power, a taking of control and rising interest in commonality, real community engagement – which leads not follows a project – and the power of collective action. And people are beginning to discuss public art within the context of democracy and public interest which makes a refreshing change from wanting it to improve neighbourhood safety or regenerate lost causes....

The Localism Bill presents an opportunity for local authorities to exercise more creativity in how it allocates funding, the Community Infrastructure levy will allow capital and revenue investment back into the sites it arises from, communities have been presented with an opportunity to skill up and work with a range of design professions in building and shaping their own communities. Developers will need to find new ways of consulting, ways which are creative and genuinely geared at achieving a consensus – and who better to undertake creative consultation than artists?

The key thing about any public art project is that it has to have real relevance to the community or setting in which it is taking place and have a very clear legacy. There used to be margins of error for risk and experimentation but with communities and individuals losing so much of the lifestyle they used to take for granted and with the likelihood that these shifts and changes will be permanent, the challenge for arts activity is to construct ways of working which acknowledge this shift and which are weighted to really understanding what would make a difference to the community.

With regard to the Dorset Context I would like to mention the Dorset Design and Heritage Forum who have organised this event.

Briefly, the Dorset Strategic Partnership made a commitment in 2005 to become a Champion for Design and Heritage and the Forum became the vehicle by which this role could be undertaken. Its aims were to promote quality design that respects the county's landscape heritage within community planning, land use planning and arts practice in Dorset. The forum also aimed to support the county's local authorities, professional practitioners and artists, in order to make Dorset a leading place for design in the rural environment.

The term 'design and heritage' is used to describe an approach to the built landscape that includes consideration of:

- local distinctiveness
- contemporary culture and creativity
- cultural and physical heritage
- environmental sustainability
- construction technology

Since a successful launch in 2006 the Forum has initiated a range of projects including Pride of Place and Wide Open Space. However as time has moved on momentum has been lost due to a including: availability of resources to run and programme meetings and pressure of work/changed of priorities for various members.

I have been working with the steering group and we see that there are real opportunities to strengthen the Forum's role as a

- Arts-led – all heritage and Design activities are multidisciplinary

- Design Review – potential for DDHF to become a Design Review Resource for the County
- Embodying Localism – advice and guidance for Local Authorities, Communities and Developers

More information about the Forum will be available at the Wide Open Space Conference which is being planned for April/May this year.

And finally I just want to mention some recent research commissioned by CABI entitled 'Beauty Matters' which showed that eight out of ten people think everyone should be able to experience beauty on a regular basis. Only 18 per cent of people thought that that beauty mattered less if you were poor.

The findings form part of a larger project called **People and places** which explored how to get people interested and involved in shaping the quality of the place where they live.

In the national survey conducted by Ipsos MORI, people were asked about beauty and the built environment: how important beauty is to them; where they experience it most often; and who they think is responsible for it; and whether they think there is enough beauty in their area. The research revealed that people have time for beauty, and strong views on what should be done. Only 12 per cent of people are too busy to notice beauty in their area. More than half of the lower income group thought there was not enough beauty in their area. 44% of people think councils have more responsibility than anyone else for ensuring the built environment is beautiful. And who better to help place making achieve this aim than artists?

Thank you.

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