

The Art of Regeneration

Introduction

This article explores the idea of public art, its use and application, and its role in regeneration, which is inextricably linked to tourist activity and interest. It is quite clear from research into major events and development, such as the Commonwealth Games, Docklands, Cardiff Bay and Newcastle City Centre, that any attempt at regeneration has to consider tourism. The article then discusses how public art can be used to enhance destination image and provides recommendations for practitioners to support the use of art as a tool in regeneration, and finally also provides a guide to organizations that can help and support arts-based regeneration.

What is Public Art?

Four years ago English Heritage exhibited in the empty shell of Belsay Hall a crystal chandelier in the form of a horse, made by Stella McCartney and formed from 8000 Swarovski crystals. It provided a stunning and delicate contrast with the stone interiors, and formed part of the many modern art exhibitions that have taken place at the property since the 1990s.

Walking along the beach at Aldeburgh in Suffolk it is hard not to notice the Benjamin Brittain memorial sculpture, which takes the form of a vast metal shell and the haunting words 'I hear those voices that will not be drowned'. It forms a stark but relevant contrast to the pebble beach.

It is also impossible not to be impressed by Paul Day's 'The Meeting Place', the sculptural centrepiece of the newly redeveloped St Pancras Station in London, and it is equally hard to pass by the Angel of the North without being distracted from the job of driving.

What these works of art have in common is their position. They are taken out of the comfortable and familiar context of galleries and exhibition halls and placed in 'public' for everyone to see. All art is, of course, subjective and this positioning will not suit all tastes, but it will challenge ideas and create debates. Should, for example, modern art be placed at a heritage site? Is it in-keeping, does it bring relevance to the site, is it there to be controversial, or ultimately to engage and inspire and to ask new perspectives of visitors? And does it matter? If it creates negative publicity, is that really a problem? The question then, really, is how to successfully integrate artwork so that it performs a function.

Public art, therefore, generally refers to any artwork in any media, which can include everything from films to paintings and theatre to music. Sometimes this art is simple and straightforward, traditionally taking the form of statues of famous people, or memorials to notable events. Sometimes it is used to soften, enhance or make interesting the appearance of everyday items such as street lighting, park benches and public buildings. Sometimes it is designed to be challenging and controversial and sometimes it is just there to complement new buildings or redevelopments, to brighten up stonework and public spaces, to be funny, different or unique. It 'can be static, moving, part of the infrastructure or a projection of light and sound. It can last for a minute, a day, a year or a lifetime' (Public Art South West, 2008).

However, artwork such as this is unlikely to be cheap. It isn't a commodity to be bought 'off the shelf'. There is a long planning process involving public art, and it is, therefore, often considered as a package of measures aimed at regeneration. During the regeneration of various coalfields in the UK it was observed that 'Public Art can play an important role in providing an attractive, high quality environment and in helping to build a new community. Public Art can provide a focal point, enhanced sense of place and delight for local residents.



To provide added value, the process associated with commissioning the artwork can involve local communities, help build local pride, and help foster social cohesion and community cohesion' (English Partnerships, 2005). These are all components of regeneration and the links between public art and regeneration are clear.

Installing Art

Arts Council England provides a description of the processes of developing public art, and these are described below, in three categories. It is essentially not enough to choose an artist and ask for an inspired piece of work. It is important to consider the commission process. This should be managed like a tender, asking artists for ideas and the rationale that underpins these, considering how they are inspired by their proposed location, purpose and cultural setting. Badly managed art installations will end up a source of community derision, and may in the end be nothing more than a target for vandals, although in some cases, as discussed later in the article, even this can be part of the art:

- Developmental activities: commission, installation, investment, collaboration, participation, exhibition, performance, intervention, dialogue or theoretical indication;
- Role of public art: architectural collaboration, urban design, social responsibility, cultural regeneration and sustainability;
- Regeneration: Public Art has a 'cultural function' through architectural branding and signature buildings, gateways, landmark features and art interventions are now an indispensable part of any city's cultural and architectural identity.

(Arts Council England cf. Public Art South West)

The Roles of Public Art

This discussion focuses upon specific examples of public art in situ and considers different types of artwork, used for different purposes. For clarity, an attempt has been made to categorize the application of art:

- Art Galleries and Sculpture Parks describe the spaces dedicated to the display of art as permanent or temporary exhibitions, and collections usually reflect the interest of the visitor group. For example, National Galleries hold collections of internationally renowned artwork, but smaller local galleries often hold temporary exhibitions alongside a locally relevant collection of local paintings and work by artists from the area.
- Sculpture dates back many thousands of years and was popularly used as an architectural tool to create 'eyecatchers' in private and public parks and commemorations in urban centres, often taking the form of obelisks, 'ruins', follies, statues, arches and clock towers. This practice continues today, often seeking new and innovative works. Famous pieces today include Anthony Gormley's 'Angel of the North' and 'Another Place'.
- Art as a tool for social inclusion must be considered in any discussion about regeneration, with communities involved in the choice of artworks from a commission process, and in some cases involved in the creation of the artworks, led by a notable local or national artist.
- Art is also important in architectural design, and many new buildings are designed to be sculptural, to take on an artistic form and to include the work of artists within their spaces. The use of innovative and striking design to enhance cityscapes or attractions help to create a buzz of publicity around the opening of new shopping centres and community buildings.



- Performance is also an art form, but not one that is often considered outside of the theatre where it is traditionally performed, but in York, for example, street performers have always formed a part of the tourist experience. They are as important to York's artistic cultural identity as an art gallery or museum.

Art, Destinations and Publicity

In many destinations sculpture and artwork is synonymous with the place where it is located. In West Bromwich the uniquely designed 'The Public', which includes an art gallery, works as a 'groundbreaking versatile public space for people to get together for virtually any purpose – cultural and educational exhibitions, live performances, social relaxation, community activities and clubs and major corporate or entertainment events' (The Public, 2008). The development has been beset by budget problems, delays and controversy, and has received much news coverage, but is this really a problem when art is involved? Another example is the infamous 'concrete cows' in Milton Keynes, where publicity has ranged from acclaim to comedic value as they have made the news for 'vandalism' that has included painting pyjamas on to them and the addition of concrete 'cow pats'!

As Tony Dennett (Director of the Sculptors' Society of Ireland) observes, 'Where public art really fails is not where there is negative publicity but rather where there is indifference' (Public Art South West, 2008). It is artistically possible to argue that vandalism forms a part of the installation and even negative publicity is good for a destination where it is clearly about something that can be seen that does not convey a negative image of the whole place.

Other examples of good practice include the brick-built sculpture of Mallard at Darlington, celebrating the area's railway engineering history, and the inclusion of modern architecture in the redevelopment of Cardiff Bay. This major regeneration project, which in many ways apes that of Docklands in the 1970s and 1980s, sought to revitalize the derelict and unwelcoming Tiger Bay into a major waterfront destination within Wales' Capital City. The careful restoration of significant historical buildings complemented by the newer architecture of the Millennium Centre (an arts facility), Assembly building and commercial offices has delivered an attractive and well planned destination, interspersed with areas of public performance and public art. What seems to have made the project so successful is the fact that the architecture and associated sculpture and public space have been planned in from the start of the redevelopment. Charles Quick (artist) comments that 'It is essential that artists are supported and encouraged to have a creative input into the regeneration of our cities. If you look at other successful cities across the world you recognise the ones that are proactively encouraging artist activity. They are the cities that people want to visit and remember visiting' (Public Art South West, 2008).

The Impact of Art

Research is plentiful in this field, often because the public art that is commissioned has been funded and therefore its impact needs to be measured. Three examples are highlighted here from the *Art and Architecture Journal*.

The first is in Newcastle where 'research into arts tourism has shown that it can play a major part in economic regeneration and in helping to promote a positive image of an area'. The projects in Newcastle Gateshead have 'helped improve the environment for local residents and visitors' (*Art and Architecture Journal*, 2005). This is important because regeneration is linked to these factors.

The second identifies the impact of new arts projects in Morecambe that were measured by Lancaster City Council Tourism Department and although dated, the trend it demonstrates is important in detailing tourist enquiries:



- 1994 – 73,529 enquiries;
- 1995 – Opening of The Stone Jetty 119,946 (+63%);
- 1998 – 144,334 (+20%);
- 1999 – Eric Morecambe statue opened – 253,657 (+76%);
- 2000 – 258,015 (+1.7%).

(Art and Architecture Journal, 2005)

A third project considered here is the Lottery-funded 'Art of Regeneration' programme, in Northern Ireland, that supports local authorities in the delivery of arts-based projects that 'tackle issues of concern to local communities, such as good relations, the environment and anti-social behaviour' and projects have included 'functional public art in children's play areas made out of recycled materials and drawing on the positive experiences of local community groups [and] building on a shared community interest in traditional music to enhance cross-community activity' (Art and Architecture Journal, 2005)

In all cases art has been a central theme and there is, therefore, a clear rationale for local authorities to use art as a catalyst for regeneration at all levels, from small community projects to major inner city redevelopments, but there is a need first to ensure that the relevant expertise and support is in place to minimize any risks associated with the project. The sources of support that follow provide a useful starting point.

Useful Resources

- Art Council England has a vision to 'promote the arts at the heart of national life, reflecting England's rich and diverse cultural identity' (<http://www.artscouncil.org.uk>);
- RIBA is very keen to support the involvement of artists in the design of the built environment (<http://www.architecture.com>);
- CABE, The Commission for Architecture and The Built Environment, 'is the government's advisor on architecture, urban design and public space' and 'work with architects, planners, designers, developers and clients, offering them guidance on projects that will shape lives' (<http://www.cabe.org.uk>);
- Public Art South West provides a useful resource for individuals and businesses with an interest in public art and its use in the built environment (<http://www.publicartonline.org.uk>);
- BURA (British Urban Regeneration Association) Steering Group & Development Forum (<http://www.bura.org.uk>);
- The Civic Trust 'seeks to improve the quality of the urban environment in cities, towns and villages across the UK through enterprising partnerships, excellence in design and engaging with the community and supports the involvement of artists as an integral part of achieving this quality' (<http://www.civictrust.org.uk>);
- Toolkits are available to support the development of public arts. Although not recently updated, the Groundwork Arts Toolkit is still relevant and although intended primarily for Groundwork's staff and artists, it 'explains the process of selecting and working with artists and shows examples of successful arts and regeneration projects' (<http://www.artandregeneration.com>).

Conclusions

Successful regeneration projects are clearly aligned to the well-planned inclusion of public art. As the Arts Council England (cf, Public Arts South West) also comments, 'Public Art should enrich our lives by enhancing our awareness and enjoyment of our environment. It should help to develop our understanding of the world in which we live. Public Art should offer many opportunities to artists to interact creatively with people and places'. As the Arts



Council identifies: 'Excellent architecture and urban design, distinguishing examples of public art, as well as high quality and well-maintained public space, all contribute to creating local distinctiveness and a sense of place [bringing] people together, they help develop a sense of shared pride and identity which is vital to thriving and integrated communities'. This is supported by the South West Development Agency (Public Art Online, 2008) who suggest that 'Public art should be an integral part of the design process and not an afterthought. It should be considered at the design brief stage', and further evidenced by DCMS (2001) who aim to 'promote 100 per cent good design in our public buildings – through the design of the building itself and the green spaces around it or the involvement of artists in the project'. As Ethan Kane (Public Art South West, 2008) also observes, 'artists, designers, planners and architects alike must face the challenge of defining public space, as an opportunity to create or improve the sense of community among those who will determine the use, or abandonment of a place'.

References

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