

Community aesthetics

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Abstract (Summary)

Examples of UK **public art** that are designed to help regenerate urban areas are offered. Good **public art** projects can foster civic feelings of pride, but they are unable to regenerate an area's economy on their own.

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Full Text

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There's a traffic island shaped like a bird's nest in the middle of Morecambe. On a London council estate, the blue signs posted along the walkways don't give directions, but counsel "Trust" and "Forgiveness" to the estate's residents. Both are examples of public art and both are designed to help regenerate their local area.

Once all that was demanded of public art was that it dignified a town square or a shopping centre; now it is increasingly being sold as a way to cure social problems. Nearly half Britain's local authorities have a public arts policy; even more have invested in costly programmes. But few show much sign of achieving their high-blown objectives. At worst such projects are misguided and paternalistic, involving little consultation among those who have to live with the outcome.

The 1960ss Holly Street council estate in Hackney, notorious for its high rates of unemployment, crime, drug abuse and prostitution, is being completely rebuilt to give most residents individual, terraced houses in place of the existing tower blocks. A public art project has been added on to the renovation, in an attempt to go beyond just rehousing the tenants, by creating a sense of community on the estate.

According to Jane Bradley who runs the project, it's not simply a case of cleanup, then beautify: "With a community like this, you can put people into new housing, but most of the problems will still be there. The estate needed a programme of social and economic regeneration, and public art was part of that."

The project has had mixed success. A mural depicts some of the residents at the seaside. It's certainly been a talking point on the estate: one of the figures had to be painted out because the resident who inspired it was sensitive about being depicted holding her ski up to paddle in the sea. For the Holly Street Kids Project, resident children took photographs of each other. There was an exhibition of the photos in the community centre. A designer bench is still at the planning stage.

The most visible outcome of the £90,000 spent last year is the blue pedestrian signs. Viewed generously, they could perhaps be seen as therapeutic and thought-provoking; the cynic, however, might detect a whiff of social conditioning. And while some tenants love them, others find the experience of walking around the estate at night and coming face to face with "Forgiveness" distinctly spooky. "You're thinking about being mugged, and suddenly you're being asked to forgive," says one.

Bradley admits there were problems at the start over what the project was trying to achieve. "Originally it was too avant garde, too contemporary," she says. "It lacked tenant participation; it wasn't sufficiently community-led." The extent to which communities ought to be involved in public art projects is a key dilemma in the on-going debate about whether public art has any potency at all when it comes to alleviating the problems in deprived areas. Was the Holly Street idea that of introducing a piece of art which would be talked about in the art world, or was it primarily to devise social projects to involve the residents?

The problem with visual art is that it's static: once it's up, it doesn't provide much opportunity for community building. The process of creation is more likely to involve the community. "If you can get an artist with international reputation, it can give great status to the estate," says Bradley. "But it is also crucial to get public participation in the project, to create a sense of public ownership."

Then there is likely to be a gap between what the experts perceive to be "good art" and what residents want to have on their doorsteps. Erecting a piece of work that tenants cannot identify with, seems inappropriate, but palming off shoddy work into council estates because it is somehow "healing" is patronising.

The Holly Street public art project is not the only one to face these dilemmas. Sara Selwood, at the Policy Studies Institute, has carried out an enquiry into the way public art projects are carried out in Britain. Her report concludes that many projects fail to serve local communities. "There is nearly always not enough questioning of the artist's plans and whether they will work for the community," she says, pointing to how commonly the finished product suffers neglect. As a result, the art produced often ends up bringing prestige to the artists and people who have commissioned it, rather than doing anything positive for the public.

But there are success stories. This week, the British Gas Properties/Arts Council collaboration honoured public art in its annual "Working for Cities Awards". The idea was to award projects that had helped economic regeneration. The "Community Arts" award went to a youth rap group, from an estate in Cardiff, who call themselves The Underdogs. Another worthy winner was The Custard Factory arts centre in Digbeth, West Midlands, formerly a derelict biscuit factory, now an arts emporium staging dance, theatre and musical recitals.

The Tern Project in the northern seaside town of Morecambe took the Working for Cities Award for "Arts in Progress". Margaret Parker, from Lancaster city planning department was behind the project. "Morecambe has a tired old image of music halls and pinball machines. The project was about creating a new image for the town," she says.

Inspiration came from the exceptional migrant birds that visit the bay. There are bird sculptures around the town's streets, puffins squatting on bollards along the promenade (above), birds perched on huge rods at roundabouts, and a zoo-metre "flying fence" built by a local fence-maker, and embellished with metallic birds by artist David Kemp.

The project has several objectives, environmental and economic, as well as artistic. "We wanted to raise awareness of the town's assets for the people who live here, and to educate locals about the importance of the bay and so preserve it", says Parker. "We also hoped to revive the town as a visitor destination." The use of public art to achieve these objectives has been the key to its success, Parker believes.

Monika Clifford, the awards administrator for Working for Cities, cautions against over-estimating the ability of a public art project to revive the fortunes of an ailing town.

"A good public art project can improve the quality of life for people in the long-term and can foster feelings of pride," she says, "it can draw people to the area because they see it as a nice place to work. But no one is ever going to be able to say that a piece of public art is regenerating the economy of an area on its own."