

“Every £1 of public money invested in the arts levers in a further £2 from elsewhere, creates jobs and contributes significantly to the fastest growing sector of our national economy ... culture is important for any government which places quality of life for its citizens at the heart of its agenda”

Arts Council England Chief Executive Alan Davey

The time for creativity

In times of recession when life goes on hold, it's actually a time to plan, step back and re-think how we embed cultural involvement in place and apply 'total place' thinking, says **Maggie Bolt**

Traditionally, when the going gets tough – creativity gets dumped! Whenever expenditure gets tight, quality of design and materials, along with landscaping and public art, have frequently been lost as costly extras. But it's actually a time to plan, step back and re-think how we embed cultural involvement and apply 'total place' thinking within development.

Such thinking needs to embrace public space, the environment and sustainability issues. It must also ensure that places and spaces are welcoming, encouraging users to interact and engage with each other and their environment. Hard times encourage us, through necessity, to eschew pressure to seek new and shiny goods and experiences, and to step off the never-ending retail treadmill and to re-connect with home-made, local and non-retail pleasures. People seek meaning: we cease being just customers and remember we are also citizens. Contemporary craft and innovative community engagement projects are well placed to celebrate this innovative thinking, and should be a key element of the place makers' skillset.

A new emphasis on the importance

of sustaining cultural activity and working creatively to keep communities together has re-emerged in the US through Obama's presidency. Our Government is also attempting to flag up the importance of retaining quality (although regrettably a correlation with budgets is not yet noticeable).

Awareness of the importance of retaining creativity in difficult times is widespread. Over the past twelve months my organisation has been in dialogue with projects in Russia, South Africa, Canada and Japan, looking at ways in which artists can be involved in regeneration projects and changing environments.

EMBRACING CREATIVITY

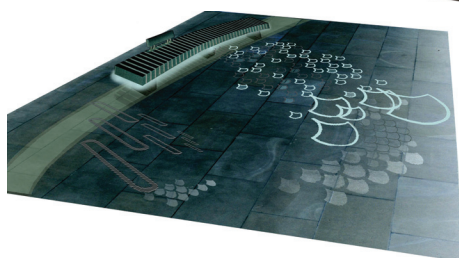
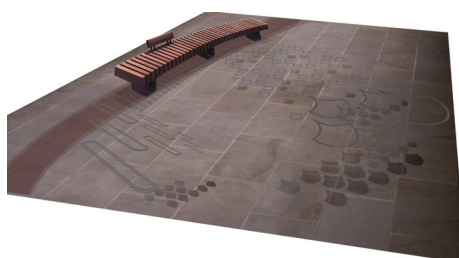
In Swindon, a timely project is taking shape, with the local authority leading on several initiatives to fill the gap left by big development slowing down. The creativity intrinsic to, and in some cases leading, these projects has come about partly because artist Natalie Woolf and public art consultant Diana Hatton have been welcomed by the team leading regeneration in the area.

Plans for the re-design and re-furbishment of Swindon's central network of streets will include innovative and technically challenging pavement design by Natalie Woolf. The original design was for pavers that were

LEARNING FROM EXPERIENCE

Corporate memories are short at the best of times so it is always important to refer to best practice, other projects and case studies and learn from past 'mistakes'. We must study different practices and frameworks in order to be able to make the case for retaining mixed creative teams which involve artists.

The website www.publicartonline.org.uk is a unique resource, with a huge range of case studies, strategies and policies, practical advice and information on current practice and practitioners. It is important to have the right skillset prevalent in any delivery team, and there are many experienced public art consultants who can bring ideas, artists and funding strategies to bear on projects, often working jointly with lead artists.



ABOVE: Artist Natalie Woolf's impressions of pavement design in Swindon, with an emphasis on lighting elements. The stone cutting in the pavers will store water and represent the difficulty of water drainage in an urban setting

TOP RIGHT: Cultural regeneration a driver for change in Folkestone. Elements of the regeneration programme include a masterplan for the redevelopment of harbour and seafront

RIGHT: Foyle Public Art Project's selected proposal, by Vong Phoaphanit and Claire Obussier, is entitled 'Mute Meadow' and touches on issues of identity, history and riverscape



responsive to weather, but the emphasis is now on lighting elements. The stone cutting in the pavers will store water and represent the difficulty of urban water drainage. The lighting element has been linked to a weather station so that patterns of changing colour speed and frequency and movement across the site are representative of the nature that has been lost.

A general debate is also underway as to the best use of derelict 'development land'. One proposal is for a series of short-life projects (up to five years) which will, via community engagement, ensure creative solutions are embedded within the design and resulting usage of the space).

Folkestone has also been bucking the trend by placing its faith in a major arts-led programme managed by the Arts and Regeneration Charity 'Creative Foundation'. Like many seaside towns around the country, Folkestone has been in decline since the middle of the 20th century. The Foundation wanted an innovative answer to this by ensuring that urban regeneration did not only focus on economic development, but also on creating a

place where people wanted to live and work. For Folkestone, cultural regeneration is a driver for change.

The much admired Folkestone Triennial forms a major component of this strategy. Other elements of the regeneration programme include a masterplan for the redevelopment of the harbour and seafront, a new £38m city academy specialising in the arts, a university campus with a focus on arts courses, plus a new performing arts centre and a Creative Quarter with more than 100 artists established in a growing number of refurbished studio, living and retail spaces.

In Londonderry, urban regeneration company Ilex has placed arts and culture at the centre of its regeneration plans by supporting the Foyle Public Art Project. The selected proposal by Vong Phoaphanit and Claire Obussier, entitled 'Mute Meadow', touches on the issues of identity, history and the riverscape on which the city stands.

This focus on art connects Londonderry to the European cities with rich heritages that have also developed public art projects as a way of negotiating the future. The project is part of a process of regeneration and

re-thinking the city's identity through arts initiatives, and is viewed as a major contribution to the total process. The Arts Minister acknowledges that the work will place arts and culture at the centre of Londonderry's regeneration, encouraging tourism and investment.

EXCEEDING EXPECTATIONS

The range and diversity of public art practice in the UK over the past 10-15 years has built up a body of understanding that the arts are not only an essential part of everyday life, but also provide stimuli and contexts for all our activities. It is also now clear that they can be central to economic recovery as well.

But this can't happen in a vacuum. As with everything, good planning, research and bringing on board the right expertise helps ensure a successful outcome. Remember: it is even more important in times of recession to not just meet expectations, but to exceed them. It is only by ensuring that creativity imbues the regeneration process that this can be achieved.

■ Maggie Bolt is the Director of Public Art South West