

Flavours of the Month. Mailout Magazine, April 2000

Back in the 70 s and early 80 s, largely through the efforts of Ken Livingstone s GLC¹, *consultation, participation and ownership*, in the creation of artworks became flavour of the month. Funding bodies throughout the land, including the Arts Council itself, eventually adopted these principles and of course bureaucratized them into a tick box activity. Three terms of Thatcherism, including the abolition of the GLC and the Labour Party disowning Red Ken s policies, designated *consultation, participation and ownership*, to the derogatory margins of Social Service Art². Those three words became pass with the emergence of the New Painting, supported and promoted by — surprise, surprise — the Saatchi s. Art liberated from any hint of social responsibility eventually culminated in the *Sensation* exhibition last year, where the gesture and posture is all, again supported and promoted by the Saatchi s³.

Meanwhile, with the spread of Regeneration funding and the inauguration of Arts Lottery in the 90 s, *consultation, participation and ownership* became the new buzzwords of Public Art parlance. The more cynical might say that funding agencies and commissioners may have been more concerned with heading off criticism adverse press reaction about use of public money than with a genuine desire to engage. However, despite liberal doses of tokenism, there was a growing recognition that there is value in such an approach. It is ironic therefore, and perhaps predictable, that once such values begin to be applied to an area of art practice, it begins to decline in institutional priorities and funding. The Arts Lottery has virtually ceased funding Public Art projects and the London Arts Board has made it very clear that — despite putting a lot of time and resources into developing a long awaited policy - it has now done Public Art. Other Regional Arts Boards it seems are taking similar lines.

It is within this context that the project I am about to discuss may be viewed as the last of its kind, both in its scope and scale, for some time to come.

The origins of the Wymering Public Art Project began in 1995 when I was invited to speak at a conference in Portsmouth called Portsmouth Tomorrow: art in the urban landscape. At that time I was putting forward the view that the imaginative interpretation of meanings embodied in ideas about change — in our work at the *The Art of Change* - derives from distilling the desires of a constituency in a form that expresses those ideas symbolically and actively. This being a process of transformation through critique, collaboration and communication, involving social and visual processes inextricably linked. In that sense, the work forms a 'lens', creating a focal point in the energies of transformation. I talked about using the focus of *Agenda 21* - the Agenda for the 21st Century that came out of the Rio 'Earth Summit' - as the basis of a holistic approach, enabling us to draw together uses of new technologies, renewable energy, sustainable materials,

community involvement and identity. In short, sustainability is about cultural, as well as biological, diversity.

Instead of just inviting me to speak and show examples of other projects I had worked upon, City Arts in Portsmouth asked me to spend a week working with the Community Association in Wymering, a large council estate on Portsdown Hill above the City, where they were planning the building of a new Community & Sports Centre. They were interested in seeing what might practically come out of the kind of social process I had described. I was rather dubious about what could be achieved in a week but nevertheless took up the challenge. I was surprised, however, by the energy, creativity and commitment of the group, they were clearly primed and ready to engage in the process of changing their social and physical environment which had for so long been blighted by high levels of unemployment, neglect, vandalism and negative image of the area, both projected and internalised. We began by brainstorming how the building of a new community centre might impact upon the communities and constituencies of the area, both materially and symbolically. Issues of quality of life, ownership and identity, the history and future potentials, were central to these discussions. They saw a sustainable approach as a means to create a legacy for the future generations of Wymering. We drew up a series of proposals which were presented to the conference. They were exciting and ambitious but to be frank I thought it had been an interesting experience and I expected that to be the end of it.

But it wasn't. Chris Carrell of City Arts is not the kind of person to allow good ideas to lay dormant. He invited me back to continue the dialogue and develop the proposals into a Lottery bid. Following a trip to the Alternative Technology Centre at Machynlleth, work began on altering the design of the building and discussing a series of related artworks in the Centre and its grounds that would embody Agenda 21 principles and project the presence and identity of the Centre outwards to the wider community. A visual 'narrative of approach' was developed, from the distant view of a landmark, leading progressively to the heart of the building. We invited local artists⁴ to a brainstorming with the community over a 'Wymering Weekend' and the project began to take shape. Portsmouth City Council funded a series of workshops, involving 237 local residents and 215 school children, to refine the ideas and a successful Arts Lottery bid was made, scoring ten out of ten for community involvement.

From early on, reminiscence and local history work began, generating a photo-archive and chronicles of events that informed all other projects and became a valued resource in itself. This has now been taken over and extended by local residents. The artworks continued to develop through consultation and workshops until completion. The landmark concept developed into *The Wymering Tree*, a 14 meter 'Tree of Life', symbolising both sustainability and the generations that form the Wymering community. It is also a 'windmill' - generating power using the latest technologies while continuing the historic use of windmills

on Portsdown hill. The trunk has seven facets with a double helix (representing DNA) running through it. It has seven main branches and seven minor branches with mobiles signifying the four seasons. The colour of the lighting is determined by wind direction. Along the western perimeter of the site is the 90 metre long serpentine *Wymering Wall* made of carved and moulded brick produced in workshops, materials found on site such as flints, and draws on the bricklaying and building skills of local people. It includes an archway with spiral columns reflecting the 'tree of life' motif, with a crafted steel gate based on an image from the Reminiscence Project. Leading through the arch is 92 metre pedestrian pathway, incorporating sandblasted images and a range of textural materials reflecting Wymering's past and present, drawn out through workshops. The path winds through a series of earthworks and landscaping of the grounds, again based on ideas generated by the community, planted with seven oak trees and the indigenous flora and fauna of the chalk downs. The path concludes at a 9 metre bridge - a 'bridge of memories' - constructed of steel with glass elements containing images gathered from the reminiscence project. A fibre optic trail runs under the bridge, creating blue ripples that reflect off the white surface of the chalk hollow beneath. Inside the main hall of the Centre are 17 Wall Hangings which again have been made using elements designed in workshops and pick up on design elements used across the other art works. Made from felt, using 'reverse-appliqu' techniques, the hangings add colour, meaning, and soften the acoustics.

This process has taken the communities of Wymering from operating out of a cramped and dilapidated hut with a crumbling asbestos roof to a thriving Community Centre with sports and arts facilities of regional importance. Those involved have become advocates of Agenda 21 and are conscious of the need to encourage other communities to engage in a similar process. There were many problems to solve along the way as with any project of comparable scale, mainly around raising sufficient funds and slipping schedules because of so many different elements and other contractors working on the site. There was a major crisis when the artist working on the bridge pulled out about two thirds of the way though, but all of these problems were weathered due to the commitment of all those involved. To Portsmouth City Council's credit, they chose to site such a model, not in the high profile Harbour Regeneration area, but in a much neglected council estate on the margins of the City. Their investment was high; the cost of the art project was almost half a million pounds with the Arts Lottery providing £310,000 and Portsmouth City Council providing most of the balance. The building cost £1m with a similar breakdown of Sports Lottery and Council funding. But judging by the response of press and public the returns have been worth it. To quote the conclusion of one local paper, not noted for its support of the arts generally or positive coverage of Wymering in particular, The Wymering Public Art Project is a brave and heartening celebration of community self-belief. Politicians rarely have time for artists, but their contribution to the life and spirit of this community has been immense. At nearly £500,000, the project has been worth every penny. And as Chris Whittaker, the local resident now running the

reminiscence project, said, "I thought this art stuff was a load of old bollocks, but this project has changed my mind". If minds can be changed then futures can be changed.

1627 words

' Peter Dunn, Co-Director of The Art of Change, March 2000.

¹ Whilst in was 'Ken Livingston's GLC' it was very much Tony Banks' arts policy, arrived at through the direct involvement and participation of arts practitioners in both the formulation and implementation through the setting up of various sub committees - community arts, women's art and ethnic arts – which included leading artists from those constituencies.

² 'Social Service Art' being the derogatory term applied to Community Art and art dealing with social issues or working with socially excluded groups.

³ The Satchi's were of course the promotional team behind the 'Thatcher Revolution' and in there forays into the art world one is reminded of a scene in the film..... when Ruckerfella expresses his disgust with Diego Rivera's depiction of Capitalism in the mural he commissioned (and which he ordered destroyed). In this he talks about switching his support from artists like Rivera – "why are those artists so left-wing" - to promoting artists like Matisse – " there are no critical politics in the sensations of colour and line". Keeping 'critical politics out of art' has always been the watchword of the powerful, in the East as well as the West, except for a few short 'windows' created by competing power blocks.

⁴ Peter Codling (Wall, Earthworks & Path), Anna Pottern & June Heap of Dot to Dot Arts (Wall Hangings and Reminiscence) Janice Shales (Bridge). Peter Dunn was lead artist and designed the Wymering Tree in Collaboration with Anne Thorne Architects.