

Art at the Centre

Intro

In August 2005 Gerry Wall and I were appointed as lead artists on the Isle of Wight Art at the Centre programme. The Arts Council funds this programme with the aim of embedding artists at the early stage of development projects. Isle of Wight Council plans to build 820 new homes extending the Pan estate in Newport. Our brief was to integrate the design of the new estate with the old, to ensure high design values with a design code, to integrate public art into the scheme, to reduce crime, to ensure social cohesion, to promote regeneration and create jobs. The scheme was to be an 'exemplar'.

Project

In May 2005 there had been a change of administration of the council. It was decided to revisit and rethink the Pan extension plans, which had been advancing past the Supplementary Planning Guidance stage. Further the new administration fundamentally reorganised the council departments. This period of flux coincided with the Art at the Centre Programme.

Gerry and I were very excited at the possibility of really affecting the fabric of a community for the better and shared the council's ambitious aspirations. We devised a programme that we felt would deliver the desired aims in collaboration with the other agencies working on the project. Our first task was one of advocacy and communication and we spent a good deal of time presenting our ideas and proposed projects notably at an Art Plus public art day.

Our strategy used initiatives that were already taking place as a scaffolding. At the centre of our strategy was the aim of re-branding Pan and the extension as a vital and desirable community. The use of high quality design and public art would add value to Pan as a whole as well as promote a positive and active community. Some of the projects worked out and some didn't, not always in expected ways.

Looking back on this developmental stage I think that I would now argue for a strategy that worked back along a timeline from the start of construction inserting the correct budgeted project at the appropriate time. Buy-in for the whole programme would then be achieved before we started, instead of having to argue for each project individually in an ad hoc way. This would also require a developer to be chosen at an early stage who could then fund the programme properly. But we were all feeling our way through the process and it was not clear how the building programme was going to work out. There was no concrete timeline to work to except that the funding from the Arts Council was for a three year period.

In the event our first project was called Pan Chromatic and was to address the need for a colour palette to be part of a design code. We paired six local teenagers with six students from the Textile course at the Royal College of Art in London to work together for a week.

See Pan Chromatic separate document.

One issue that emerged was that a number of the projects we suggested could be described as falling outside the normal purview of the arts and some colleagues found this difficult to understand. Given the ambitious and wide ranging goals of the project we understood that the response also had to be wide ranging. It is obvious that visual art alone cannot affect the deep social changes we were being asked to address. It is also obvious we are not economists - but we are thinkers. The kind of imaginative solutions we promoted are what is needed to move debate and practise on.

A very important part of the project was advocacy. We wanted to challenge the 'normal' way developments take place, as that methodology appears flawed in terms of community building. We wanted to see most of the development and regeneration benefits accrue to the local community and to the Island as a whole. The traditional development route would ensure that the bulk of the profits would leave the Island while jobs would be filled from the mainland, and goods and services would all be supplied from across the Solent.

I am interested in a new way of thinking about development where the 'profit' from good social and ethical planning is taken into account along with the cash profit. Developers need to be compensated for adding in good social and ethical planning, which does cost more, because this will actually save councils money in the long run. Sound communities with good social and ethical foundations are socially and financially profitable communities. We should be prepared to pay more for them at the outset in order to reap benefits over the long term.

One project that we proposed worked on the basis outlined above. It was a virtuous circle of local employment and the exploitation of local resources developed with Russell Palin a local forester. It is uneconomic to extract most of the mature timber on the Isle of Wight, of which there is a large amount, as it would normally have to be shipped to the mainland to be used but here was an opportunity to use it on the island where it is economic to extract. We outlined a plan to build the new estate with prefabricated timber framed houses using local timber. Prefabrication is a cutting edge technology that produces ecologically sound buildings. A factory could be established on the proposed industrial area on the Pan extension site, which would employ local people who would not necessarily need to be very skilled. The factory could then produce houses for other parts of the island and eventually export them.

We would then have a core of workers who were becoming skilled at making things who could then make all the fixtures, fittings, street furniture and public art for the estate. We planned for these items to be designed by top artists and designers and produced as marketable items and sold on a national or even international scale.

The project did not stop there though. The waste timber would be used in woodchip boilers and generators to produce energy for the new homes and industrial estate, again creating jobs. A portion of waste would be made into methanol and potash used in the process to produce biodiesel. This would be made from locally grown rapeseed and waste chip fat. All construction, and council transport could then run on biodiesel.