

News Release

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Drive-in art gallery for London housing estate

Over 60 residents of the Timber Wharves Estate on the Isle of Dogs in the Tower Hamlets borough of London provided creative input into these ornately sculptured steel car park security gates designed and built by artist Ben Coode-Adams.

The gates were commissioned by the affordable housing provider Southern Housing Group that now manages the estate built in the 1980s. SHG is well known for its innovative approach to community building and the built environment and so was keen to use the opportunity of installing the gates to engage local residents in the process.

Working from hundreds of the residents' pencil drawings expressing the cultures of river nations across the globe, Ben has converted functional prosaic security into an intellectually stimulating and visually dynamic art form. 'Permanent Beauty: The Timber Wharves Story' is the name of this engaging presentation of local history and how that history impacted the world.

Each of the four giant 7m x 2.5m individual gates represents a major river which represents a corner of the globe and – the St Lawrence for the Americas, the Ganges for the Far East, the Nile for Africa and London's River Thames for Europe. It is claimed to be the largest permanent public art commissioned in London since The Fulcrum by American artist Richard Serra was installed at Broadgate.

The residents' inspirational sketches were produced in workshops led by Ben held at the Cedar Centre, one of the most dynamic community centres in East London. Research trips to various museums and archives opened residents' eyes to the disappeared history of their neighbourhood and its connections to the rest of the world, connections which those residents themselves now embody.

For health & safety reasons no gap could be bigger than a baby's head but Ben had to maximise ventilation of vehicles' exhaust fumes, hence the density of pattern and images. The gates are constructed of thirty steel sheets weighing 100kg each. These were shaped by Ben and assistants Arek Zykin and Jarek Blaszczyk using plasma-cutting technology, which causes an arc to strike with a tungsten tip like fierce lightning. The gates filled Ben's workshop in East London for just over three months, working like demons. Ben described moving the whole 4.5 tons for the last time during installation as a huge relief but echoed residents and SHG pride in the completed gates. "It's great to see them up. So many people worked so hard for this. They look fantastic and they work! Everybody loves them. You can't get better than that."

Ends

Note to editors

Southern Housing Group has become one of the largest housing associations in the south of England over the last 100 years, to now house 48,000 residents, own and manage 24,000 homes, employ 900 people and work with more than 70 local authorities. Our activities centre on four key areas: the development of quality affordable housing, housing and neighbourhood management, a range of housing options for rent and home ownership and social investment.

Southern Housing Foundation is a charitable organisation formed in 1988 to deliver Southern Housing Group's social investment work. The foundation funds a range of community initiatives in partnership with various organisations to help create sustainable neighbourhoods where people want to live.