



sex
and
chocolate

heaven

PROJECT: A Review

Anna Minton

From Stratford City in East London, the centrepiece of the Olympic bid, to the redevelopment of the entire centre of Liverpool, towns and cities around the UK are undergoing a level of change comparable only with the post-war boom of the 1950s and 60s. At the same time, once run-down city centre areas are being cleaned up and gentrified, with former warehouses and dockside areas making way for luxury apartments, restaurants and bars, in a process characterised by the government as the 'urban renaissance'. ®



MAIN IMAGE *Sex and Chocolate*.
Nils Norman
Courtesy of the Artist

1 *Sweet Pea*.
Patricia Mackinnon-Day
Courtesy of the Artist

2 *Red Carpet and Exploding Balls*.
Patricia Mackinnon-Day
Courtesy of the Artist

3 *Victorian Jelly*.
Patricia Mackinnon-Day
Courtesy of the Artist

4 *The Homerton Playscape Multiple Struggle Niche*. Nils Norman
Courtesy of the Artist

5 *Floors (2) – draft*.
Marion Coutts. Working drawings taken from mirror mirror: a series of proposals currently under discussion with the design team of Chatham Place, Reading.
© Marion Coutts.



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But although the rhetoric of ‘urban renaissance’ is overwhelmingly positive, the upheavals of this violent social change are all too often visibly painful, characterised by the empty buildings and blighted communities of the former industrial landscape. At such times it is artists, attracted by the cheap rents and chaotic communities, who have stepped into these environments colonising abandoned warehouses, breathing new life into old buildings and acting as catalysts for the regeneration of entire areas.

The aim of PROJECT, an awards scheme funding regeneration organisations wanting to work with artists, has been to formalise the growing interest of artists in regeneration, by involving them in the development process from the beginning, working with masterplanners, designers and architects. The hope has been that, as architect Sir Terry Farrell argued in a recent lecture, artists working in development have a “*valid contribution to make as creative lateral thinkers*”. The scheme, which began life as a two-year pilot, initiated and managed by Public Art South West, and funded by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and Arts & Business, has now come to an end, after awarding around £300,000 to 30 or so schemes throughout the UK. The mix of awards targeted both artists working with masterplanning and development frameworks, as well as artistic engagement with communities involved in regeneration projects. A ‘Talking Artists’ award also offered the opportunity for critical comment on the process.

But today the future of PROJECT is uncertain and it seems unlikely that the scheme will continue in anything like its present form, despite the fact that at the time of the launch the partners gave a clear indication that they hoped it would lead to “*something much bigger*”.

With its success – or otherwise – currently being evaluated by the creative consultancy Comedia, due to publish its findings in Spring 2006, the questions now being asked are does this way of working really benefit the creation of new and existing communities and have organisations working in regeneration gained from their collaboration with artists?

If, as seems likely, the findings are positive the next question is why then does it look unlikely that the scheme will receive further funding? Unsurprisingly perhaps, this, in common with most questions regarding arts funding, is not uncontroversial territory.

PROJECT in fact began life amidst a level of controversy, replacing the well-regarded RSA Art for Architecture Scheme¹ after CABE decided to put the 13-year programme out to tender, with the brief that it wished to widen the artists’ involvement, not just to architecture but to include planning and urban design.

From the outset a concern, voiced particularly within the art world, was that diverting funding to this way of working might actually undermine the artists’ work by reducing him or her to merely an advisory or consultancy role. This overlapped with worries that the traditional role of the artist – to provoke and to question – might be stifled by attempts to use art and culture as tools to cement social cohesion.

It is to the credit of PROJECT that awards were made to proposals that examined these issues, in particular to one put forward by Dan Kidner of City Projects, in collaboration with artist Nils Norman. The *Talking Artist* award, looked at hypothetical uses for a contested public space – in this case an adventure playground in Homerton,

East London – through the creation of a fantastical scheme, which played on the use of language of an earlier feasibility study, and was circulated throughout the community in the hope of provoking engagement and debate.

But although Kidner felt that the specific *Talking Artists* award enabled this work he says that in general he would “*prefer to see a scheme which would allow artists to investigate issues of public space in a far more autonomous way*”.

This is undoubtedly a valid viewpoint, but questions of whether or not PROJECT facilitates ‘actual art’ or professional consultancy obscure the wider issue of whether or not it has benefited the creation of places.

There are a number of difficulties facing Comedia in its evaluation of this point, chief among which is that this way of working, like regeneration itself, takes a long time to bed down. To evaluate a pilot project after just two years, at the stage when at least half of the awards have yet to complete – and some, in particular among the later rounds, have hardly begun – poses obvious difficulties.

Even so, Fred Brookes, who is project managing the evaluation, says that it will be possible to investigate around half the awards, based on a study of the impact of the artist on other regeneration professionals, at this early stage in the planning process. The evaluation will centre on questionnaires and journals kept by the artist and those involved, follow-up interviews and his own involvement as *participant observer* in a smaller number of projects. As a ‘goal free evaluation’ it will not only assess whether the scheme achieved its objectives but also track unintended consequences, which may well be beneficial. Inevitably the indications so far are that some schemes have worked

better than others, but Brookes is clear that “*it is likely that the evaluation will have quite positive aspects – it’s been very stimulating in some cases*”. The awards range from environmental improvement in Peterhead, a former fisheries centre in Aberdeenshire, to the Tithebarn town centre development in Preston, an arterial roads scheme in Belfast and the proposed Brecon Design Centre for Wales.

In South Cambridgeshire, Patricia MacKinnon-Day’s work with developer Gallaghers is focusing on embedding historical identity and a sense of belonging in the creation of new places. There, a new settlement is being planned on land previously used for the production of soft fruit and a jam factory. She is suggesting artworks, which embody this history, ranging from a temporary light installation to a street-naming scheme based on the names of the former factory workers.

In Reading, Marion Coutts is working with developer AMEC’s design team on the Chatham Place Development. “*The brief is to work with the developer, landscape architect and architect on the development of a new scheme, from the ground up. It’s very much not ‘here’s a plaza, put something new in it’. It’s been very different from anything I’ve previously done,*” she says, describing the team’s first meeting, which took place in her studio, as “*quite a punt out for everybody*”. While she contributes to the planning and development process she is also presenting to public meetings her designs for visual motifs that contribute to the town’s local identity.

For developer Eric Reynolds, chair of the PROJECT advisory panel, one of the key benefits of the scheme has been to “*align a different, less corporate view to large scale renaissance schemes*” which in the process make the places themselves far more likely to stand out. ©

¹ RSA Art for Architecture website www.rsa.org.uk/afa



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With all the indications then, that while PROJECT should not be used to replace traditional arts funding streams, it nonetheless has the potential to make a significant contribution to the development process, there is disappointment that it seems unlikely to last with criticisms voiced of a short-term funding approach which did not give the scheme time to bed down and become established.

Nonetheless, despite this there is widespread acknowledgement that this way of working is gradually becoming entrenched in the development process, something which is, in itself, an achievement for the scheme.

Even so, the worry remains that the sheer volume of need for artistic input necessitated by today's level of development will not be met, particularly if formal institutional support is removed.

Now, all that supporters of the scheme can hope is that the evaluation will give a boost to this way of working, enabling the role of artists in creating places to continue.

Anna Minton is a writer and journalist and member of the PROJECT advisory panel. Her report *The privatisation of public space* was published by RICS in Spring 2006.

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PROJECT is managed by Public Art South West and funded by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE) and Arts & Business (A&B). Between June 2004 and March 2006, it awarded £305,100 to 30 schemes, to engage artists in a range of projects with a positive impact on the places in which we live. The scheme involves the arts, culture, design, education, environment, healthcare, housing and regeneration sectors in England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland. It supports artists' imaginative and creative contributions to the early stages of master planning, design frameworks and new building initiatives. Whilst opportunities to apply to the scheme have now closed, Public Art South West will continue to manage and support all the awards made until March 2006. A formal evaluation of the scheme by Comedia is due to be completed by Spring 2006. A publication is planned for June 2006.

PROJECT Awards 2004-05

11th November 2004. 10 Awards. £103,800

- Arterial Routes Initiative, Belfast, Visionary Award. £15,000.
 - Peterhead, Aberdeenshire, Creative Communities Award. £12,300.
 - Learning Spaces - Living Places, Birmingham, Team-Building Award. £15,000.
 - City Projects & Nils Norman, Homerton City Playscape, London, Talking Artists Award. £5,000.
 - Creating Inspiring Neighbourhoods, Blackburn with Darwen, Visionary Award. £12,000.
 - Preston Tithebarn Regeneration Project, Visionary Award. £15,000.
 - Chatham Place Development, Reading, Team-Building Award. £10,000.
 - Shared Vision, Cambridgeshire, Visionary Award. £15,000.
 - Article Press at the University of Central England and ixia, Habitation, Environment, Community – a new publication series exploring arts practice and the public realm, Talking Artists Award. £4,500.
- * {RMC. Re-think the tip: quarry landscaping into art, Exploration Award - withdrawn}

22nd March 2005. 7 Awards. £37,300

- Patmos Area Association, Myatts Field, Lambeth PFI Health/Housing, Exploration Award £4,800.
 - xsite Architects/Cobalt Studios, design/prefabricated sections for housing, Exploration Award. £5,000.
 - North Devon District Council, Barnstaple Regeneration Schemes, Visionary Award £9,500.
 - Raploch Regeneration Company, Stirling, new village square, IT Design Game, Creative Communities Award £10,000.
 - Northern Architecture beingthere.v3.NEWcastle.05, artist Laurie Halsey Brown, Talking Artists Award £5,000.
 - Elsie Owusu Architects, housing project, Hackney, artist Sir Peter Blake and RSA, Talking Artists Award £3,000.
- * {Cookstown District Council, N.Ireland. Town centre urban design framework – withdrawn}

8th July 2005. 6 Awards. £57,500

- Brecon Action Ltd., Team Building Award £15,000.
 - Wellington Town Partnership, West Midlands, Team Building Award £10,000.
 - Sovereign Housing Association, Bristol, Creative Homes Award £15,000.
 - Burnley Borough Council, Creative Homes Award £15,000.
 - Hames Levack, London, Talking Artists Award £2,500.
- * {Liverpool & Sefton NHS Trust, Team Building Award – withdrawn}

6th December 2005. 10 awards. £106,500

- Plymouth City Council, Plymouth Waterfront, Team Building Award £10,000.
- Guildford Cathedral, Art and Sacred Places, Visionary Award £7,500.
- South Acton Residents Action Group (SARAG), Creative Communities Award £11,000.
- Ashwell Property Group, cb1, Cambridge, Visionary Award £15,000.
- ISIS Waterside Regeneration, Warwick Bar, Birmingham, Visionary Award £10,000.
- Derbyshire County Council, Property Design Practice, Visionary Award £15,000.
- Health and Well Being Centres, Shankill and Andersontown, Northern Ireland. North & West Belfast Health and Social Services Trust, Team Building Award £5,000.
- Edinburgh City Council, Edinburgh Waterfront, Visionary Award £15,000.
- Winchburgh Future, West Lothian Council, Cala Homes, Visionary Award £15,000.
- CBAT The Arts & Regeneration Agency, STAR Radio, Cardiff, Talking Artists Award (Jennie Savage) £3,000