

Adriana Marques explains how multi-agency collaborations that involve both artists and the public are contributing to the development of community-focused arts projects.

Unexpected influences



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Collaboration in the arts often means the bringing together of artistic minds, and a process of mutual and like-minded creativity. The Landscape+Arts Network Services (LANS) team, with projects throughout Greater London and the East of England, however, takes collaboration back to its original meaning – the simple process of working together.

As a not for profit company working in the arts and environment sectors, LANS develops and manages new initiatives whereby artists can make a positive and dramatic impact on the quality of our communities and our environment. But for such opportunities in the complex area of the public realm to be successful, a team needs to be established that merges different expertise, brings together different individuals and considers multiple perspectives. In these situations, the act of working together becomes the vital process through which common goals are achieved.

LANS manages a number of creative initiatives drawing on this essential process, which bring together not only artists, but a range of representatives of other disciplines such as sciences, architecture, education, environmental specialisms, regeneration, sustainability, and local government. In essence, our

collaborative outcomes aim to create environments by the very people that they are for – our communities.

Pooled resources

The Green Heart Partnership is a county-wide scheme managed by LANS in partnership with 11 councils across Hertfordshire and Arts Council England. It places artists alongside local authority professionals to achieve growth and capacity, as well collaborating on new, innovative, public realm projects. On many Green Heart projects, local authorities have for the first time brought together members of the arts and culture department, planning and regeneration, and maintenance and highways, to work on the same stage of a project. By introducing this collaborative process (which LANS calls CONNECT) budgets from different departments and organisations can also be pooled, allowing for a joined-up approach to decision-making and delivery. In these situations, the artist then acts as the catalyst, forming a balanced team, where everyone, from whatever discipline or department, becomes a co-maker of the final product.

The Green Heart Partnership is the best sustainable example of how LANS has introduced collaborative processes to deliver culture within the public realm. But when considering the future of our public spaces, of fundamental importance is the public itself. On the Essex coast, the Jaywick Martello Tower (JMT) is a former military fortification that has been transformed by LANS into

a multi-purpose space for the local community – a gallery, workshop and meeting point all rolled into one. When devising the vision for this historical building situated within a close-knit, historical community, it was essential to gain a genuine perception from those who would use it.

To capture these perceptions, LANS commissioned artist and filmmaker Karen Lois Whiteread to spend time in Jaywick, speaking to the community and discovering their aims and aspirations. This would then allow the LANS team to work collaboratively with the residents, schools, local businesses and media, and the different sectors throughout the County Council, in order to develop a programme of events and activities at JMT both informed by the local people and made for the local people.

Bringing together

At the core of these collaborative processes at Jaywick and throughout the Green Heart Partnership, what LANS does that makes collaboration meaningful is to identify the individual within the overused umbrella terms of 'community', 'local government' and 'the arts'. The process then becomes about empowering the right individuals, bringing them together, and developing a language that can be understood by all.

Through this process, many voices from different sectors are listened to and fed into the final product – whether this be a new design for a public space, a policy document, or a new arts event or activity. A collaborative process based on the act of working together brings about true ownership of the project, by involving those for whom it is intended.

Of course, when bringing together such wide working practices, management becomes a key process in ensuring that a balance of voices is kept. To achieve this, LANS draws on its own collaborative team, which brings together professionals with expertise in the public and private sectors, the environment, visual arts, music, theatre, science, and regeneration. These different experiences allow the team to steer discussions and projects strategically with an acute and sensitive understanding from all angles, while allowing freedom for the unexpected.

A catalyst for creativity

And it is by allowing for the unexpected that collaborations can become of true value, as seen at Gunpowder Park, one of LANS' more experimental and creative initiatives. Gunpowder Park is 90 hectares of regenerated country space in North London, where a cultural programme devoted to arts, science and nature draws on the Park's experimental heritage as a former munitions-testing facility. Now established as a beacon for arts and the environment, Gunpowder Park attracts international artists across many disciplines, to collaborate on projects in the diverse landscape of the Park and beyond.

Bright Sparks is Gunpowder Park's main research and development strand, which awards funds to creative professionals to undertake arts and design led-research projects that explore the physical and social aspects of open spaces. It is in these research processes (which are managed by LANS) that the unexpected almost certainly happens, as the Bright Sparks awardees are encouraged to consult, discuss, share and collaborate with a wide range of professionals relevant to their research. The journeys are rarely straightforward, but the results are almost always innovative, original and inspiring.

September 2007 saw the beginning of 'The Art of Common Space', a creative exploration into the common spaces of our 21st century multicultural society. Comprising new commissions in Gunpowder Park, performative and participatory activities, a series of discussions throughout Greater London and the East of England, and an online resource of other related projects, The Art of Common Space brings together all of LANS' initiatives – demonstrating the value of our collaborative processes and joining our practice into a wider and encompassing vision for the future of our public spaces. ■

Adriana Marques is Creative Production Manager for Landscape+Arts Network Services, supporting the public realm projects and overseeing the creative delivery of all Gunpowder Park projects.

*w: www.gunpowderpark.org;
www.greenheartpartnership.org;
www.jaywickmartellotower.org*



Theatre director and artist Robert Wilson with other artists, anthropologists, political scientists, landscape architects and designers at Gunpowder Park to develop the concept for The Art of Common Space