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Sparks in the

It is over a year since an experimental funding scheme for creative individuals to research ideas relating to open space began. Here **Eileen Woods** of Gunpowder Park from where the scheme is administered, details its aims and impact thus far

Right: Theresa Smith's 'Urban viewpoints' project is looking at signage to enable urban dwellers and workers to engage with wildlife on their doorsteps



Eileen is a senior partner in Haring Woods Associates and a director of Landscape+Arts Network Services. As artistic director for Gunpowder Park she leads on the creative and partnership development.
Visit: www.gunpowderpark.org

BRIGHT SPARKS IS an opportunity for UK and non-UK individuals and groups working in any creative practice to develop research focusing on new ideas relating to open space within the British Isles. The award scheme is concerned primarily with research towards a specific outcome that is conceptually challenging, rather than the completion of a final product.

Bright Sparks is the main element of the research and development strand of Gunpowder Park's new experimental programme of work devoted to arts and the environment. It encourages and supports submissions from artists and lead applicants who will: take considered risks within their research objectives; transcend traditional disciplinary boundaries; consider contemporary cultural trends; explore new or experimental materials and new situations. The scheme is particularly interested in working across disciplines and related sectors including design, architecture, landscape architecture, the environment, science and industry – producing collaborative working processes.

What sets Bright Sparks apart from existing R&D schemes is the freedom the awardees have to develop their ideas, and follow the development path, in response to their findings and influences along the way. We are here to support the process of creative research into public space rather than await specific outcomes. And in supporting the awardees we apply our inter-disciplinary approach to developing work, to ensure they engage with different viewpoints and experiences.

The awards allow and encourage a flexible and organic research process from each of the awardees, so each research project is allowed to develop at its own pace – although most proposals begin with a research schedule that lasts between six and 18 months.

All awardees are supported and mentored by the Landscape+Arts Network Services (LANS)/Gunpowder Park team – who bring experience in the fields of the public realm, arts and design, environment and local government policy – and the expertise of Lee Valley Regional Park Authority officers. Mentors are also provided for

awardees – current mentors are Fred Manson, former director of regeneration and environment at the London Borough of Southwark, and Darryl Newport, director of the Sustainability Research Institute for the University of East London. They professionally represent the arenas of art and design, public realm, regeneration, science and industry.

“We are now moving on to the third round of Bright Sparks awards and we are still challenging artists to carry out extensive and thorough bodies of research,” says Manson. “The success of Bright Sparks proves that there is a significant part of the artistic process that needs this time of exploration and investigation. I personally enjoy not knowing where these projects will end, and following and guiding the passion and interest of the artists and creative practitioners we support. Mentoring a research project, rather than an art project which needs to conclude in an exhibition or artwork, also allows for far more intimate and focused discussions, connecting the awardees with other bodies of knowledge they can use in a far more creative way,

rather than concentrating on the success of a final product,” he adds.

Some of the awardees are engaged in projects that are shaping the public realm. For example, Theresa Smith is pursuing interest from local authorities to develop her work on urban viewpoints and David Buck’s work is now being considered as valuable source material for several potential public realm projects managed by Green Heart Partnership and Haring Woods Associates (*visit:*

Each awardee will submit a final report charting the progress and development of their research, as well as their findings and conclusions. There will be a small publication for each round of awards, published by LANS. The first of these will also include a film of the Bright Sparks seminar where awardees presented their research and progress. The publications for each round will be distributed to key partners and stakeholders, as well as interested creative practitioners, and also be

landscape



www.greenheartpartnership.org). Part funded by Knowledge East via the University of East London, Buck’s work may be incorporated into future planning for Thames Gateway sites. In addition, Emma Smith and Sadie Stowell’s SubRural project, part funded by Hertfordshire County Council, is expected to inform work being undertaken by the Green Heart Partnership (see *GP31, Review of the Year*, page 46).

accessible to download from the Gunpowder Park website.

Finally, the scheme will be evaluated by external evaluators Hall Aitken who specialise in arts and regeneration projects. The evaluation aims to investigate the value of open research processes, the additional and unexpected partnerships that have resulted from the projects, and inform the future potential for this type of funding scheme. ▶

BRIGHT SPARKS IN SUMMARY

Bright Sparks is a funding scheme for arts- and design-led research and development projects which explore the physical and social aspects of public open space in both urban and rural contexts.

Awards

The scheme is currently in the last of its three rounds, planning to award up to six further awards in round three. Award values have ranged between £3,000 and £10,000. Rounds one and two were awarded in 2006, and the deadline for round three proposals was late June, with awardees expected to be announced later this summer. Round three applicants have an extra opportunity for their research project to contribute to another Landscape+Arts Network Services project – The Art of Common Space – which also looks at the value of common public spaces in our multicultural contemporary society.

Funders

The three-year experimental programme is developed and delivered by Landscape+Arts Network Services in partnership with Lee Valley Regional Park Authority with support from Arts Council England, East, and Arts Council England, London. Knowledge East has co-funded round one awardee David Buck and Hertfordshire County Council has co-funded round two awardees Emma Smith and Sadie Stowell. Additional partners from both the public and private sectors are providing in kind support. *Green Places* is the media partner for Bright Sparks.

Resources

All Bright Sparks awardees are supported and mentored by the LANS/Gunpowder Park team who bring experience from the public realm, arts and design, environment and local government policy, and the expertise of Lee Valley Regional Park Authority officers.

Mentors

Bright Sparks awardees are supported by current mentors Fred Manson, former director of regeneration and environment at the London Borough of Southwark, and Darryl Newport, director of Sustainability Research Institute for the University of East London, who professionally represent the arenas of art and design, public realm, regeneration, science and industry.

Presentations

In March 2007, the first Bright Sparks seminar, produced by LANS and facilitated by Judith Palmer, was held at Gunpowder Park as a public platform for each of the awardees to present their research to professionals and colleagues in the fields of arts, environment, regeneration and education. LANS commissioned artist Karen Lois Whiteread to produce a film documenting the seminar.

Publication

A Bright Sparks publication is currently being produced, charting the research processes and outcomes for round one projects. *Visit:* www.gunpowderpark.org

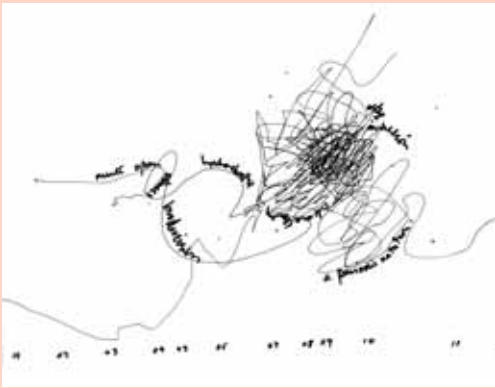
ROUND ONE

The first round of awards, worth between £6,000 and £10,000, was awarded in the summer of 2006 to two artists exploring new approaches to public space.

'Tipography' – David Buck

Landscape architect David Buck's 'Tipography' combines art and materiality, ecology and innovation to explore the synthesis between three strands of contemporary landscapes: the use of emerging landscape technologies that tackle the use of 'waste' products; the possibilities to improve man-made habitats for biodiversity; and the creation of new types of landscape intervention.

"New creative possibilities cannot be realised without commissioning courage and it was for this reason that I was



particularly delighted to receive a Bright Sparks award from Gunpowder Park. The opportunity to study contemporary issues of landscape at a place where art meets ecology, and through a real site, has been fascinating," says Buck.

He adds: "My project seeks to challenge many of the current orthodox thoughts surrounding biodiversity, recycling, and how to create new landscapes that might allow us to leave our own contemporary imprint on the cultural landscape. Particularly, I want to find new methods of design and to use cross-pollination of my own interests in the interface between music and landscape to do so. The project includes:

- How the temporality of music composition might be included overtly in developing new ways to draw landscapes. There have been over 500 new music notation methods in the last 100 years – we want to celebrate the possibilities of designing with new substrates by developing a new way of drawing landscapes.
- How might the 'emotional topography' of Peter Zinovieff's score 'December Hollow' offer a new insight into designing landscapes that expand not

just the physical possibilities of site, but also the emotional ones?

- What are the international precedents that might support and inspire new landscapes, from Fresh Kills in New York, to Yoro Tenmei in Japan?
- Why is art the mechanism, rather than politics, to change the perceptions of what is 'nature'?
- How can we find new design methods for man-made substrates that celebrate openly the reality of their genesis?

The expected outcome is currently a series of drawings and a model describing a landscape developed through Buck's evolving methodology. Further outcomes will include sourcing a site for experimental landscape design and implementation, possibly within Gunpowder Park.

'Urban viewpoints' – Theresa Smith

How can busy people in cities be made aware of the rich mix of wildlife that is often an unnoticed part of their daily lives? For the past year Smith's project has been working to develop new ideas and designs for urban viewpoints for wildlife, looking at micro green space, sites under development,

Above: A drawing from David Buck's 'Tipography' project; Above right and right: Some of Theresa Smith's suggested ways to point out city wildlife; Below and below right: City children painted images of the countryside for Emma Smith and Sadie Stowell's 'SubRural' project

ROUND TWO

The second round of Bright Sparks awards was made at the end of 2006, facilitating an overlap between the two rounds that was designed to encourage dialogue between researchers at different stages in their work. The four awards, each worth £10,000, are currently in progress and were made to the following projects:

'The 30-Year NOW: A Future For The Lee Valley' – The Harrison Studio and Associates (Britain) with David Haley

As the seas rise gracefully, how will we withdraw gracefully? The aim of the Harrison's Studio research and development will explore the issues associated with rising sea levels specific to the Lee Valley basin, addressing one of the key vulnerable areas of the British Isles, and leading to the creation of a discrete piece of work which will relate to the larger national Department for the

Environment, Food and Rural Affairs-funded project by the Harrisons, 'Greenhouse Britain'.

Envisioning the whole Lee Valley drain basin as a single and singular ecological entity, means that it needs to be understood simultaneously as biotope, cultural landscape and sculptural form. The Harrisons' Lee Valley investigation will begin by generating the thinking, the design, the new belief structure and even indicating new economic structures that may be necessary outcomes in response to the rising ocean level.

'SubRural' – Emma Smith and Sadie Stowell

What is the essence of a rural landscape? Artist Emma Smith and landscape architect Sadie Stowell are currently carrying out a piece of research on how the rural landscape is perceived and how these perceptions can be reproduced or simulated within inner-city environments. They are exploring how mental triggers



and associations can be used to reference rural landscapes within urban designs, and how to create spaces within urban environments that evoke the same response. The research draws on the expertise of professional advisers working in the field of behavioural science and psychology and includes numerous consultation workshops conducted in Lambeth and Hertfordshire.

brownfield areas and streetscapes. The project initially sought to create new opportunities to connect people and wildlife at a local level, encompassing research into existing viewing points and codes of conduct in established wildlife centres and incorporating best practice in public policy and guidelines on biodiversity, open spaces and streetscapes.

Smith wanted her findings to: raise awareness of opportunities for wildlife engagement in otherwise overlooked areas; support the biodiversity agenda at public authority and community level; and create visually stimulating markers and structures

that pique curiosity and nurture an interest in meeting the wildlife that shares our cities.

“Originally I was interested in how a physical structure like a bird hide works and what would be the best way to develop such a facility for an urban setting,” she says. However, within the context of the Bright Sparks awards, Smith’s research was able to develop beyond her initial aims and objectives and explore alternative and more suitable options: “As I looked into this field, it actually began to dawn on me that a physical structure was not the best way of encouraging people to look at wildlife in an urban setting. What, in fact,

would be more effective is a kind of signage to tell people where and what to look for, and that is the approach I’m looking to take forward with some local authorities.

“What was unique about Bright Sparks was that I was completely free to explore the brief and draw my own creative conclusions – that has been a hugely valuable process to me. It gave me the creative space to follow my own direction of research without any pre-conceived ideas of what the outcome should be, and the benefits of this approach are evident.”

Smith was successful at drawing in professionals from a range of relevant practices and professions, such as wildlife photographer David Cottridge, to guide her on the use of bird hides and camouflage and urban ecologist Dusty Gedge of Living Roofs, who escorted Smith to spots of the capital she thought most unlikely to point out thriving ecosystems. Smith’s research concluded by consolidating information from a range of related viewpoints.

The project is nearing completion and will be presented in a final report this summer. Smith concluded that wildlife and small ecosystems live and thrive in the densest of urban environments. Rather than inviting people into highly designed structures that allow a camouflaged viewing of wildlife in more natural settings, Smith designed methods of pointing to the wildlife that already exists in the city, such as text on train windows, small tags on public fences, or new containers for bird food.



With their research, Smith and Stowell aim to develop a model for identifying appropriate art and landscape designs for different urban environments that allow for the positive emotive experience gained through the rural environment to be experienced within the inner city.

“This has been a really great opportunity for Sadie and I to work collaboratively and cross disciplinarily. The

support of the champions and all the staff at Gunpowder Park has been invaluable as a mentoring and support structure in the development of our research,” says Smith.

‘Renewable Devices for Art and Ecology’ – Justin Carter

As environmental issues are increasingly rising on the political agenda and public awareness of them has never been greater, artist Justin Carter proposes to develop imaginative and ambitious ‘solutions’ which explore and expand the possibilities for functional sculpture and environmental sustainability. His research will develop concepts in relation to landscape settings where sculptures are able to respond to the physical conditions of geography and climate, and exploit the paradoxes of supply and demand, such as a solar powered ice-cream van, wind powered kettle, geothermal or water powered heating. Carter’s work aims to push back the

boundaries of what is understood to be sustainable art, or ‘eco art’, by integrating new technologies to create new hybrids of functional devices.

‘Environmental health’ – John Cockram

The environment needs urgent care and attention, and while mankind has highly developed skills for promoting human ‘care’ and ‘health’, similar facility needs to be applied to the earth. Exploring human skills and qualities, such as ‘protection’, ‘well-being’ and ‘healing’, artist John Cockram will carry out research to evaluate arts-led and practice-based research processes that explore the interdependence between human health and well-being and environmental health. His research will provide a fresh and innovative way to reflect on the ‘well-being’ of the environment, and in turn, transplant new thoughts upon the human issues of ‘caring’, ‘tending’ and ‘health’ into the specialist healthcare debate.