



People make art in Gunpowder Park

Art of the park

What role can art play in parks? **Eileen Woods** considers the potential of public art to bring communities together.

Any debate on the role of art in public spaces, in particular parks, needs to relate to the place itself, the park's local community and wider visitor profile. Destination parks like Kew Gardens or Yorkshire Sculpture Park attract visitors from all over the world, and the majority of these visitors have a measure of understanding and appreciation of the landscape itself and the artworks sited within it. Inner city parks are used by people of many cultural backgrounds who have a different understanding of the natural and cultural resources that surround them.

Over the past three years, the Gunpowder Park team has been exploring the physical and social aspects of public open space in our contemporary society. By combining the team's creative, strategic and business experience across both the public and private sectors, we have been developing the full potential of a new working practice which is producing strong policy guidelines, commissioning new work and attracting new funding.

The Green Heart Partnership, facilitated by Gunpowder Park's team, manages a range of public realm projects which put artists at the centre of the process. This process relies on collaboration and communication, connecting with representatives from local authority departments with responsibility for public spaces, together with creative professionals trained in making work for public places. Gunpowder Park uses Perception AREA, a successful model of public consultation and engagement that uses artists and creative triggers in non-confrontational situations to capture the perceptions of target individuals and groups about specific public realm issues.

From our vantage point in Gunpowder Park we look at ways to actively seek and incorporate the voice of people who might be affected or afflicted by public art. We consider our multicultural communities, and how

different ethnic groups perceive art in public spaces. And we have developed a mechanism for incorporating these perceptions in the earliest planning stages.

Large numbers of people throughout the UK who use parks would not by choice engage with the visual arts in traditional environments like galleries or museums. Encountering visual artforms or performing arts in the 'common' and democratic space of public parks can be a profoundly important influence on people, when there is less pressure to respond in any specific or 'right' way, as there is in the heavily coded environment of cultural institutions where signs and security guards tell you what to think and what to do.

As sculptural installations in parks are rarely accompanied by any interpretation or information, which is common practice in cultural institutions, the experience for the visitor can be far more meaningful and liberating. But conversely, when no help is offered to gain an understanding of the creative motivation for the work, the materials, and the reason for placing the piece, how can visitors who encounter the work be expected to appreciate and respect it? Isn't this a great missed opportunity to engage with new audiences for public art? For the very reason that parks are 'common' space, perceived to be without specific ownership, and someone else's responsibility, parks provide a perfect environment for experimenting with different art forms to encourage positive responses.

There are endless examples of sculptural installations, fountains, gateway features and underpasses which have been commissioned and built and immediately become targets for vandalism. While there are many reasons for this, generally it is a result of the community not having any sense of ownership or responsibility for the work and a >>>

<<< feeling of antagonism towards an artist with no relationship to the place or community. Far too often artworks appear, as if parachuted in, and can be viewed as an invasion of an alien life force which doesn't 'communicate' to or with the local people.

Familiarity can imbue a work with an unexpected magical quality- that of being invisible. One of the roles of art in parks should be to attract new visitors and encourage regular ones to try new routes and diverge from their routines. Taking the Fourth Plinth's revolving programme of temporary commissions in Trafalgar Square as a simple and effective way to generate a new experience to a familiar site, we should look to create similar opportunities for artists to respond to a site and create work which will be a magnet for new and repeat visitors.

At Gunpowder Park we have developed a project called The Art of Common Space which is a large scale public event exploring the meaning and use of common space in our contemporary, multicultural society. A network of international artists and arts organisations will explore this question through a series of workshops and discussions, producing a series of site-specific installations and works in all artforms in the Park. Concrete ideas for the project were first developed in May 2006, when American artist and theatre director Robert Wilson and 17 creative individuals from seven countries came together for the first time in Gunpowder Park to 'listen to the land' and devise a concept for a large scale, site specific new project.

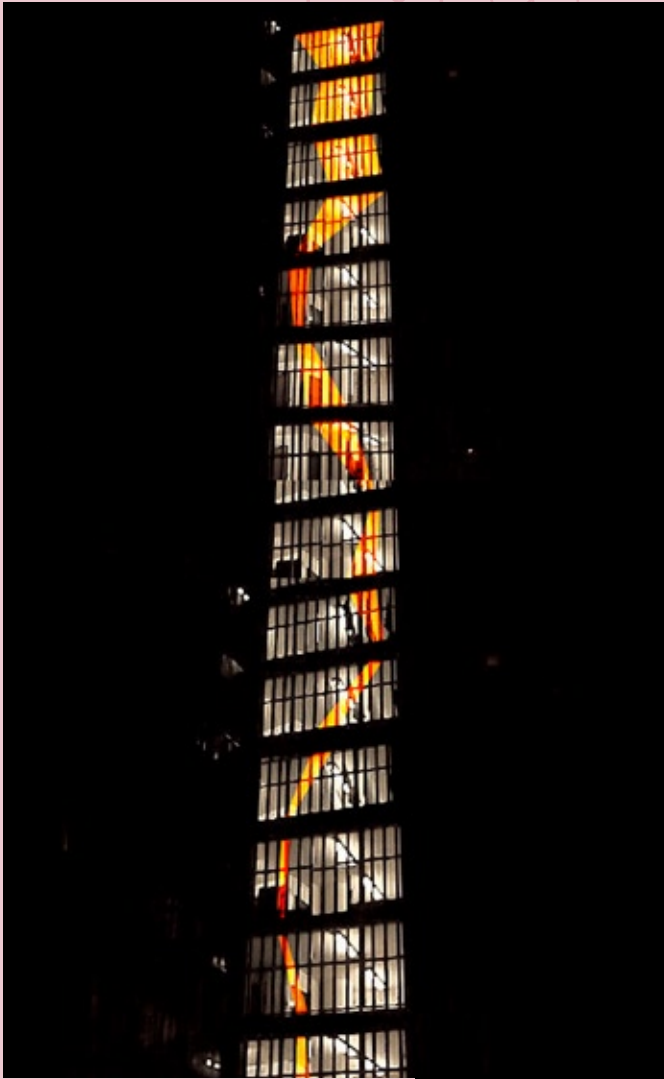
The attending international practitioners working in visual arts, combined arts, dance, sound art, environmental art, theatre arts, anthropology, political science, architecture and arts management, inspired by the physical open landscape of the park, began to develop the initial model for The Art of Common Space over four days of creative discussions. The delivery of the project depends upon creating a new network of participants and supporters, within the UK and abroad. Artists from the riparian and neighbouring boroughs will be invited to produce work for the Park, and these will include companion pieces in their home community. International artists and organisations are being involved to explore the relationship between people and natural spaces, questioning what is urban, what is rural, and how these distinctions influence our experience of public spaces. A key element of The Art of Common Space project is also the interaction with members of the public, to demystify the creative process and invite active participation in the development and production of the work.

The role of the arts in our parks and open spaces, in urban, suburban and rural locations, should be considered as a local issue affected by international influences. Parks are places for discovery, play and imagination and while the natural world is our one common experience, how we are conditioned to respond to this experience is not common. S&P

Eileen Woods is Artistic Director of Gunpowder Park. For more information go to www.gunpowderpark.org or www.greenheartpartnership.org

Do we need art?

Can art transform the way communities relate to where they live? Five artists have been appointed to galvanise communities to regenerate neglected open spaces in the Thames Gateway. The commissions aim to bring communities together, drawing on history, heritage and local culture for inspiration. The projects include Andrea Mason's Art U Need Needs U and Milika Muritu's Queensway Streams.



Queensway Streams

The Queensway Streams will run through four tower blocks on the Queensway Estate in Southend, with the aim of uniting the architecture and offering a talking point for the residents of the estate. The Streams consist of strips of coloured Perspex attached to the windows of the laundry drying rooms on each floor. Each laundry window will have a different artwork as the band of colour runs through the building. According to the artist Milika Muritu, "By day the work will create a warm glow of light in the room and by night the Perspex will be backlit by the fluorescent light in the building, creating an overall identity for each tower block".

Feedback from residents has been positive. Prince Mitton said 'Wow! Will that really happen on our estate? Can't wait to tell my friends. Everyone thinks where I live is a bit of a dump. I reckon this might change things'. The artwork is due to be completed by 1 April.



Art u need needs u

Andrea Mason programmed a series of events that took place in Basildon's open spaces during January, February and March. Events included ghost walks, mass tree hugs and a regular speaker's corner. The events, together with suggestions of the activities that could take place in a space, were listed in a diary designed by Andrea that was distributed amongst Basildon residents.

"Although it has been difficult to engage with people", says Andrea, "we have developed a good following and have started the thought process. It's important that we don't just leave when the project's finished – and a local artist who's been really supportive will continue the activities that we've started, which is great".

For more information visit www.commissionseast.org.uk

Do you think art can bring communities together? If you have any case studies that you'd like to share, send them to news@green-space.org.uk and they may be published on GreenSpace Online.