

New Face In Town

How cultural regeneration can transform small centres

Suzanne Dimmock

The contribution of the arts to the regeneration of cities such as Manchester, Liverpool and Newcastle is plainly evident. Public art and architecture can enhance the environment and encourage interest in and ownership of the shared public realm. New arts facilities and venues provide new opportunities for performers and audiences. Participatory arts activity such as carnivals can help connect people to the places in which they live, promoting civic pride, social cohesion and a positive self-image for the community, and even nurturing the development of fledgling creative industries.

But, according to Charles Landry and François

Matarasso in their 1996 book *The Art of Regeneration*, capital projects 'are inappropriate for, and beyond the reach of, most smaller towns' And capital projects are what unlock most of the funding (see *Capital of Culture for Liverpool*; 2012 Olympics for London.)

In a recent Guardian article, Tristram Hunt claimed that "cities need the kind of cultural infrastructure that appeals not just to residents and tourists, but investors. Art and design communities time and again provide the seedlings for civic regeneration." Of course, this is equally true of towns, only on a smaller scale, with a smaller artistic community, fewer visitors and less influence over investors.

Clone towns

Town centre managers (if towns are lucky enough to have one) are beset by a whole raft of problems. How can they compete with the next town for shoppers, how can they manage crime and disorder, and how can they stand out from all of the other similar sized towns, different to the so-called 'clone towns' with their identikit high streets? Perhaps the biggest challenge is how to key into available funding. In the North West possible solutions are the development of a Market Town Initiative such as Cockermouth, for example, or becoming a Business Improvement District like Keswick. Workington is an example of a town that has

thought long and hard about all of these challenges, and concluded that culture and the arts are a part of the solution.

Workington is a coastal town in West Cumbria, around 30 miles south of Carlisle and half an hour's drive west of the Lake District. The town has a population of 30,000 and a proud industrial heritage firmly rooted in the production and processing of coal and steel but like many similar areas had become a post-industrial town in economic decline.

Allerdale Borough Council has led the regeneration process, with Workington Regeneration playing a key role in the practical implementation. £2.74m was secured from the North West Regional Development Agency (NWDA) to enhance aspects of the public realm of Workington town centre, which was also being rebuilt. NWDA recognises that 'public art can contribute to the achievement of the Regional Economic Strategy objectives' including the encouragement of 'further investment, tourism and employment'.

Winter Lightworks Festival

NWDA funding was used to complete several major artists' commissions including *Lookout* - a new town clock by Andy Plant with sound by Matt Wand, and *Coastline*, a new town square by Simon Hitchens. NWDA funding also enabled the upgrade of many of the materials used in the town centre reconstruction. Arts Council England awarded an additional £30,000 to support a temporary programme of projects and activities designed to engage the

local community, including a Winter Lightworks Festival displaying light-based artworks in shop windows.

Public art and public realm consultants Working pArts were commissioned to develop and implement these programmes. As well as the major projects, artists and designers delivered many of the smaller schemes ranging from gates, seating and decorative grilles on the new car park, to the design of the public toilets and glass canopies that reach around the circumference of the new development. The commissioning of original artwork has been integrated into the overall development scheme, enabling the use of better materials and ensuring design quality.

Human League

The Hub, the most dramatic project in the scheme, will be completed later this year and installed where the new shopping malls intersect. It will be the first outdoor performance space in the country with 3D sound and incorporates a canopy suspended from the surrounding buildings. Following a public consultation, a design was selected to provide shelter as well as a new public performance and meeting space. An ambient 'soundscape' is being created for The Hub by Illustrious Company - Martyn Ware of Human League and Heaven 17, and Vince Clarke of Depeche Mode and Erasure.

Locally, images of Workington's artworks are frequently used by the media to represent the new 'face' of the town. In an article

accompanied by an image of the new clock, the News & Star boasts that 'property prices are booming in Workington thanks to the...town centre redevelopment'. Realestate TV comments 'the new town centre has prompted a whirl of building activity in the area... The old town centre is starting to look more like a quaint and chic harbour town than a run-down steel town and the property market is showing positive signs.'

The public art projects in Workington demonstrate that it is possible to deliver an inventive and ambitious scheme of public artworks on the scale of a town centre, and that funding for cultural regeneration is achievable at a local level. The redevelopment of Workington shows how the implementation of good design can benefit local people and give them a town centre of which they can be proud. What has been essential to the success of the Workington project is a refusal to compromise on an ambitious project, a commitment to quality, a recognition of the strategic importance of the arts from the early planning stages, and the integration of arts provision into regeneration budgets, ensuring that arts funding is ring fenced. ●

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Photos clockwise from left - The New Clock, The Hub and Coastline - new town square - photos by Roger Lee and Charlie Hedley