



"Icosahedron" by Taslim Martin pictured with Cllr Bob Bryant

# *Shared Vision: Lessons in public art*

*Andy O'Hanlon*

The construction of new development in and around Cambridge is prompting the commissioning of more public art. The latest example is the mile long art work on the new sustrans cycle route from Shelford to Addenbrookes Hospital, which spells out the BRCA2 genome in vivid colours. What constitutes good public art? Where does it come from and how does it happen?

Public art refers to any contribution made by an artist or artists in a publicly accessible location. As such it can encompass the fine and applied arts, soft and hard landscape design, specially crafted street furniture, ceramics, prints, lighting, celebrations, performance, mixed media and artist in residence schemes.

The claimed benefits of public art are diverse and include enhancing the quality of the environment, the saleability of the development, improved orientation and interpretation for the locality. Public Art can also enhance local distinctiveness.

The commissioning of public art works within the Cambridge sub-region is set to

continue. The recent Cambridgeshire Horizons arts and cultural strategy placed public art within the context of the national, regional and local planning control processes, as well as the Government's Sustainable Communities Plan and a Treasury-driven evidence-based approach to policy.

## ***Village markers***

It can be argued that this inclusion of public art in spatial planning policy marks a shift in appreciation; that there is now a greater understanding of the value and impact of arts intervention in the built and social environment. Councils without a public art officer will generally rely on an arts development officer, if they have one, to translate public art - in all its diversity - into a development control mechanism. The first art works in the villages of South Cambridgeshire - including the Comberton memorial (2002) by Mel Fraser and the Harlton village sign (2002) by William Garfitt and Cambridge Carving Workshop - were match-funded by the district council against funds raised by the parish

council. In new building developments, public art is often reliant on developers' contributions.

For the new village of Cambourne the agreement between the Council and the developers was signed before the formation of an arts service (in 1994) and consequently the evidence of arts facilities or public art is thin on the ground. Notable exceptions are the Morrison's commission Flight (2003) by Richard Thornton and Antonia Hockton, the Icosahedron (2004), made for the Business Park by Taslim Martin and the village markers by Martin Heron (2005).

## ***Embed an artist***

Both the success of the village projects and the lack of a vigorous approach at Cambourne led to council approval of a public art policy (with a percent for art mechanism of 1-5%) in February 2004.

In contrast to Cambourne, the development of public art at Arbury Park - a 900 home development to the north of Cambridge in the parish of Impington - is being achieved through close partnership between the Council and



The 1 mile long "Braca 2 Genome" cycle path by Katy Hallett

Gallagher Estates. Together, they sought ways to embed an artist in the design group and to influence the master planning process, integrating arts features into the whole scheme.

In spite of best intentions it was not possible to appoint an artist from the earliest design phase and it was only due to the intervention of Ben Koralek of shape Cambridge - and a successful CABA Project award - that the artist Patricia Mackinnon Day was appointed a few months before the signing of the section 106 agreement. This collaboration - supported by the visual art agency Commissions East - led to the artist's Shared Vision scheme.

### ***Orchards and fruit making***

Photographer Richard Heeps has been appointed to record the process and a community artist will be contracted to work closely with the new Arbury Park community development worker and new residents on a range of public art projects including a 'seasons' trail that relates to the orchards and fruit making industry that thrived on the site until the 1970s. Mackinnon-Day and other artists will

produce works for the central square, the hotel, the school and the guided bus stops.

Whilst the delivery of this work is directed by a top-down planning process the desire is to see artists and the new community working together to enhance, enjoy and celebrate their environment.

The most urgent issue for local planning authorities in the field of public art is the ad-hoc approach, different across all Cambridgeshire's local authorities as well as across the regional offices of Arts Council England. Standards of good practice and government-supported recommendations would help us to promote an improved public understanding of artistic practice and the desire to reshape traditional notions of identity, public space and community.

Help is at hand in the form of ixia, a national think tank for public art. Its aim is to provide an independent and objective view of the factors that affect the quality of artists' work in the public realm by undertaking research and enabling debate. English Partnerships, the national regeneration agency, is working with

ixia on developing new guidelines for improved public art practice. With any luck, it will be in time for the development of Northstowe - a planned new town six miles north of Cambridge where the lead developer is - English Partnerships. Watch this space. ●

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### **Links**

[www.cambournebusinesspark.co.uk](http://www.cambournebusinesspark.co.uk)

[www.cambridgeshirehorizons.co.uk](http://www.cambridgeshirehorizons.co.uk)

[www.commissionseast.org.uk](http://www.commissionseast.org.uk)

[www.englishpartnerships.co.uk](http://www.englishpartnerships.co.uk)

[www.gallagherestates.co.uk](http://www.gallagherestates.co.uk)

[www.ixia-info.com](http://www.ixia-info.com)

[www.landorconferences.co.uk](http://www.landorconferences.co.uk)

[www.publicartonline.org.uk](http://www.publicartonline.org.uk)

[www.scambs.gov.uk](http://www.scambs.gov.uk)

[www.shape-cambridge.org.uk](http://www.shape-cambridge.org.uk)

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