

Art and design in the public realm: Symposium for artists and arts organisations

5 October 2012, Trowbridge

A summary of key issues and points

The symposium was attended by 21 people from the arts sector, with three people sending their apologies. The key issues/points raised on the day are listed below. Further details will be placed on Wiltshire Council's web pages www.wiltshire.gov.uk/arts in due course.

Please note that the words "art and design in the public realm" and "public art" are interchangeable.

1. Art and design in the public realm is diverse and works across all art forms, indoor, outdoor, permanent and temporary
2. Public Art should:
 - be site specific and built upon local research and engagement with the community – the importance of research and design should not be underestimated
 - transform a place, its identity and its people and not just decorate a space
 - be aware of the relationship between people and the places where they live, work, relax and use this knowledge to inform the project. Adoption of a project and it being nurtured by the community is important.
3. Projects should have a champion (key political or locally influential person) and a small steering team (made up of people delivering the development and local stakeholders). The benefits of a steering/working group shouldn't be overlooked and they can create accountability ensuring that the work "fits the brief" rather than "do I like it"
4. Public art can benefit from a professional curator or consultant/project manager who can act as a broker between commissioner and artist, and is experienced in setting a brief for the commission to fulfil, and then co-ordinating the steering team, setting criteria for selection and helping with technical issues such as contracting, maintenance, installation, permissions and decommissioning etc.
5. It is important:
 - to identify the right idea for the right site and to gather together the right skills to deliver otherwise the project will be compromised
 - for artists working in the public realm to understand the building industry, its language and time-scales, its motivation forces and limits
 - for artists looking to work in the public realm to understand the different routes to work; this can be through developer contributions, through local authority funding, through lottery funding or through artist initiated projects
 - for artists to have confidence in their work, which might mean building up experience through smaller commissions and slowly stretching their practice and skills
 - for artists to look for experiences to extend their own interest, practice and capacity through the delivery of work that they can grow from rather than turn out 'tins of beans'
 - for commissioners not to pigeonhole artists based on past experience or their usual medium. If you like what an artist does then you will usually like the way the 'think' and the way they think may be applied in a different context to their usual way of working.
 - to have trust, good communication and positive relationships/partnerships whether this be with the curator/project manager/art consultant and artist; artists and the community;

artist/consultant and the arts development officer; artist/consultant and the developer/commissioner

- to understand the 'trigger-points' for work and the miles-stones for planning processes as the schedules for large scale developments can be very long and can change
 - for the right people to work together and for the right collaborations and partnerships to be formed with artists being able to feed off each other
 - artists and commissioners especially should not underestimated 'the community' or try to second guess what they will and will not like. Communities can enjoy creative and left field thinking if it is relevant to them and their place. Temporary commissions and events can be hugely significant to local places and people and can have an impact beyond the immediate event itself.
6. Just as important as delivering the project is delivering a sustainable experience of that project; this means practical consideration such as maintenance and on-going liabilities and it means recording the temporal nature of the experience through photography, publication or living memory and accepting decommissioning when deemed appropriate
 7. Working in the public realm can be very frustrating including the need to overcome fixed views of those involved and the length of time that projects can take to come to fruition. These challenges often result in compromise from all parties, but this should not necessarily be viewed as a negative.
 8. Public Art means engaging with the public; either in the conception and creation or through the exhibition of work (be ready for criticism and potentially damage!)

We mentioned a forthcoming training session for artists and arts organisations wishing to engage with art and design in the public realm: "What artists need to know about how to become commission ready". The training includes a brief overview of current public art and design thinking, practical advice on responding to commissions, an introduction to public art activity and context in Wiltshire and hands-on participatory sessions.