



PUBLIC ART THINK TANK

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The crunch for public art?

Art and the built environment can take a variety of forms, including: art in public places; art as public places; and socially-engaged practice. Commonly known as public art, it has become an acknowledged part of the places in which we live, work and play and can happen in a number of ways:

- Artists develop and realise their own projects with or without support;
- Artists are independently commissioned by individuals and organisations from the arts and non-arts sectors;
- Artists are commissioned as a result of public policy and regeneration initiatives.

Although hard to demonstrate with robust statistics, public policy and regeneration is the main route via which the public art sector has thrived over the last fifteen years. This has often aligned artistic practice with instrumental agendas and has introduced the sector to unfamiliar processes. It has also created a dependency, which means it is inevitable that the growth of public art will be severely impeded by the impact of the credit crunch on regeneration initiatives. Given this context, what are the key issues that the public art sector should be addressing?

Public art commissions should provide meaningful opportunities for artists. Therefore, an artist's role should be freed from arbitrary commissioning practices and differentiated from the roles of others who may be required to fulfil specific obligations. For example, whilst there is clearly the possibility of critical thinking and creativity within architecture, the role of an architect *per se* is not that of an artist, as they are primarily required to design functional constructions. Artists and architects can, do and should learn from and work with each other, blurring boundaries between the fields and finding new theoretical and practical ways to inform the development of the built environment. However, whilst it is acceptable to commission an architect to perform a purely utilitarian task, it is not acceptable to commission an artist without giving freedom to critical thinking and creativity.

Arts Council England (ACE) and the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) should bear this in mind as they debate how ACE might support architecture via its emerging policy on art, architecture and the built environment.

The planning system changed at the end of 2008 and this will have an impact on the provision of public art. Public art policies and strategies will need to articulate a compelling vision for public art. They will need to be plan-led, detailed, explicitly embedded within planning documents and supported by procedural and financial ambitions which can be justified by planning legislation. This means that out-of-date and unsophisticated approaches to securing public art should be abandoned, for example the misapplication of the original definition of Percent for Art within the context of the planning system.¹

It is important to stress that it is the public art's not the planning sector's responsibility to develop a vision for public art - the planning system is only there to promote and secure its delivery. The inclusion of public art within a national planning policy statement and the Planning Act 2008's definition of community infrastructure, and the introduction of the sorely-awaited Cultural Planning Toolkit (AP187), would go a long way towards assisting this process.

The public art sector needs to resolve conflicting Government agendas. The McMaster report for the Department for Culture Media and Sport (DCMS) is driving ACE to commit to releasing the arts from the pressures of instrumental targets. Yet this only applies to Government funding specifically for the arts and will not ease the instrumental conditions attached to the funding for public art commissions that comes via the regeneration sector. The risk is that 'big' and 'helpful' will become further embedded as the default characteristics of public art commissions funded by the regeneration sector - a proliferation of angels and horses, and public relations thinly disguised as socially-engaged practice.

The sector still lacks a credible body of evidence through which to promote an understanding of the full impact of public art. It should not simply justify its activities using the kinds of social, economic and environmental measures that the Government's evidence-based approach to policy demands. What is more important is that the sector uses an evaluation process which has at its centre a critical understanding of all types of artistic practice and recognises the values and outcomes that are most important to all the stakeholders involved in a public art commission.

¹ Percent for Art is a simplistic calculation for securing funding for public art. Its use should result in the allocation of a minimum of 1% of the construction cost of any type of development to the commissioning of artists. In 1988, the Arts Council of Great Britain sought to establish Percent for Art within the planning system, an approach which was rejected by the Government. However, its use was - and still is - promoted, but in practice it is difficult for local planning authorities to implement because it is non-mandatory and arbitrary when compared to other calculations, for example for housing or transport.

So what should the sector's strategy be? In a recent report for the Government on the credit crunch and regeneration, Professor Michael Parkinson stressed the importance of retaining the necessary skills and capacity to be capable of a response when the economy improves. This applies equally to the public art sector where skills and capacity exist. However, it is important to note that there are additional challenges for the sector: the levels of knowledge and skills are inconsistent across its ad-hoc structure; and capacity either does not exist at all, or at the right level, within key parts of the regeneration sector, for example, within the Homes and Communities Agency (HCA), most regional development agencies and most local authorities.

In order to respond to either the provision of additional investment by the Government in regeneration initiatives, or a return to the economic conditions of a year or two ago, DCMS, ACE and the public art sector need to:

- Continually develop and promote their understanding of contemporary public art practice and use an evaluation process that places art and artists at its centre;
- Support public art capacity and skills where they exist to ensure that a sophisticated view of public art is embedded within the plans and processes that drive and determine regeneration initiatives;
- Establish public art capacity and skills within the key organisations responsible for developing and delivering regeneration initiatives at a national, regional and local level;
- Secure the inclusion of public art (and the arts in general) within a national planning policy statement and the definition of community infrastructure, and progress the use of the Cultural Planning Toolkit.

Jonathan Banks is Chief Executive of ixia, the public art think tank. 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. ixia works with artists, policy makers and delivery organisations within the public and private sectors. It is a charity and regularly funded organisation of Arts Council England. e: info@ixia-info.com w: www.ixia-info.com