

1 Article 27 UN Declaration of Human Rights:

‘Everyone has the right freely to participate in the cultural life of the community, to enjoy the arts and to share in scientific advancement and its benefits.’

2 AGA was one of the first sponsors of Metal, providing range cookers for both the original London space and the house in Liverpool.

3 Holden, Anthony, *The whole world in his hands*, The Observer, Sunday February 3 2008.

4 The development of Edge Lane West, one of the main arterial roads into Liverpool, has been held up by a legal challenge to the compulsory purchase order in the High Court. A second compulsory purchase order is being pursued by English Partnerships.

CASE STUDY

Collapsing The Gap

Colette Bailey

When Metal first decided to create an artists’ house in a neighbourhood on the edges of Liverpool City Centre, it was from a context, in London, of a creative laboratory space that had deliberately set out to provide a private and safe space for artists.

This London space sought no relationship with the public, or the public realm. We set out to work with artists of all disciplines, to explore new ideas and new directions in practice, with the emphasis on cross-disciplinary debate and conversation.

Our broader aim was to argue that for the arts to have the best possible relationship with any other, more ‘public’ agenda – education, regeneration etc – the artist and the artist’s process needed to be equally supported, and understood, as an important contribution to our knowledge and relationships as a society. Furthermore we wanted to give proper respect to artistic process and the formation of ideas - and recognize their inherent contribution - shifting the emphasis away from outcomes – the outcomes (when they arrived) would be all the better for it.

Shifting the emphasis from outcomes was key for us, although it still does present some challenges when talking with funders. Our belief was that to remove the need to predict the end product, before the exploratory, artistic process had really been given enough time and exposure, was to create a freedom and uncertainty that would both exhilarate and terrify – and that both these emotions would create greater focus and the potential for bigger ambitions if supported in the right environment. As an organisation, to share in that risk with the artist creates a fantastically rewarding collaboration.

We were convinced that even from this very private perspective, the artist was making a contribution to a more public arena. One of our stated aims, from the inception of Metal has been the exploration of the potential for artists and cultural practitioners to effect change in their communities and to advance article 27 of the UN Declaration of Human Rights 1948’. Our interpretation of this aim was to develop a platform where artists could (and wanted to) share more of their process, their thinking, and the early development of ideas through conversation with a wide range of people. Via our programme of AGA’ dinners, we asked, and still do ask, of artists in residence to be open with their thoughts and ideas, and to be prepared to share these (however unformed) with other artistic disciplines and individuals working seemingly outside of the cultural world. Out of these structured conversations about ideas and possibilities we noticed that actions were formed. Sometimes ours, almost always the artists who pursued their ideas to conclusions or further developments, and often – more often than we had imagined – individuals working in other sectors inspired into action by a good idea, an inspirational person, or a new way of seeing or approaching a cultural opportunity.

Theses actions were almost always manifested outside of a formal artistic environment and within the public realm and sometimes got to the heart of where things were decided – within the civic realm – creating shifts (albeit small and always within an individual) in ideas, working practices and priorities.

This I believe is the power of good artists, and inspirational thinkers that sits outside any experience or feeling that their work may provoke. Seeing a great work of theatre, dance, visual work or film can move and inspire of course, but meeting an artist, talking face to face and making the eye contact that gives you an insight into the mind that creates these wonderful works can be a more powerful motivation. What comes out of this on a human level is the potential to be more imaginative, braver and try new things in all walks of life.

Jude Kelly, who founded Metal in 2002, and is still our very active chair, recently took up post as artistic director of the Southbank Centre where she has continued, through programming some of her early ideas at Metal. The lecture series *The Artist as Leader* has asked the giants among

artists, like Daniel Barenboim, to explore the political power of the arts to help solve global problems. Writing in *The Observer*³ after hearing Barenboim speak, Antony Holden described him as “a performer who uses his eminence as a musician to give politicians masterclasses in how society can and should work”.

In my experience this can work on a local level too.

When we were invited to Kensington in Liverpool – by an artist, Ian Brownbill, who had been working in that neighbourhood for ten years - this gave us the opportunity to explore our ideas around this more fully.

Kensington was, and still is, undergoing huge physical and social change as a government-led, long term, regeneration programme tackles the housing, health, social and economic inequalities faced by those living in the area. As Metal’s association with Liverpool through the relationship with Ian deepened (our relationship was first and foremost built around a piece of theatre that we developed together, King Cotton, performed at the Lowry and Liverpool Empire in 2007) we began a number of conversations with people living and working in Kensington that ultimately led to a long term partnership with the Housing Association, *Community Seven* and the neighbourhood itself as we created our artists’ house at No.6 Marmaduke Street.

In the last great re-invention of urban living in the 1960s, the idea of modern art in the public realm, as opposed to monuments was a new and exciting idea. Now we have a situation as the UK is immersed, once again, in a massive regeneration drive, where the idea of ‘littering’ the streets with objects and street furniture no longer seems appropriate or useful (to many of us) except in a very few, exceptional cases where the investment, and the idea has been sufficiently good to make a significant statement and contribution.

It seemed to us at Metal that a number of things needed to be improved upon: Those who were deciding on and ‘delivering’ regeneration rarely lived in the area affected by the change and upheaval. The art within regeneration was often project based, come in, do to, leave an object or performance behind, and leave. Those with artistic influence rarely placed their core activities at the heart of a neighbourhood where little cultural infrastructure or activity happened – any activity in these areas was called ‘outreach’, and was often at arms length from where the real excitement and activity of the arts programme was happening.

So we moved Metal into the heart of Kensington, I lived within the community too, and we placed our artistic influence and the commitment that went with that squarely alongside the residents of Kensington. No. 6 Marmaduke Street is part of a beautiful Grade II listed terrace of mansion houses. It was standing empty as long-term plans for the area were developed, to be sold at a later date. As houses were emptied of tenants and boarded up, leaving a strange desolation and feeling of limbo behind, Metal suggested that, at least one house (one that was not destined for demolition and had been empty for some time) could be brought back into a useful life and make a contribution to the rapidly changing community landscape. Our thinking was that financial investment does not always provide the whole solution for neighbourhoods like Kensington, and that a house that concentrated on investing new ideas, creative thinking and constant fresh perspectives on the area from artists and thinkers from around the UK and overseas, brought into direct contact with the expertise and knowledge of those who lived and worked locally would provide the catalyst for all manner of new ideas, projects, friendships, shared knowledge, interest in and energy to the area.

It was an experiment, and we were acting on a hunch that it would work. Artists were invited to live at the house on the same terms as we built our residency arrangements in London – to explore, to have time and space, and to follow curiosity where it led – being prepared to talk about it with invited others – the invited others in this case being the local community, the regeneration and housing association officials, and the cultural sector of the north west among

others. We wanted the house to develop organically – not to create an organisation that found ways to ‘place’ artworks within the physical regeneration of the neighbourhood, nor as a place that would initiate projects to deliver outcomes or ‘numbers’ required by funding bodies or local regeneration agency agendas – but to create a space that would form relationships through the communication of ideas initiated by the artists who we invited to live in that space for a while. Our hunch was that some of these connections made would turn into actions – projects, participation and work – and those that didn’t would still make a contribution overall by provoking meetings and conversations, raising the cultural profile of the neighbourhood and sending artists away with a positive impression of an area of Liverpool that visitors to the city would not usually venture into.

It took a long time for meaningful relationships and trust to develop between us and our neighbours, not least because housing was (and still is) a very sensitive issue locally. Friends and neighbours were being moved on, and there we were with a whole house for artists. Fierce and impassioned opposition to the Housing Pathfinder Renewal Plan⁴ has met with some legal success, but has failed to change the hearts and minds of the ultimate decision makers and the result has been a prolonged process – now 8 of the 10 years allotted to a regeneration plan – that has continued to witness a steady decline in the state of the empty, ‘tinned’ properties that still form much of the landscape of the neighbourhood. It has taken us even longer to establish a formal relationship with the local regeneration framework, and so far everything we have achieved within the area has been funded from elsewhere, and through other sectors.

Fast forward four years and the house is well established, has strong local connections and has hosted visits from well over 200 artists from at least 15 different countries working in 10 different artistic disciplines. The ideas and the conversations generated have, I know, though it’s hard to quantify in any formalised evaluation process, sparked a confidence locally, particularly in individuals, who have established or tried out new ideas, built new sets of business and personal relationships, found new interests, or simply been able to find an outlet to tell their story. A number of visible contributions are beginning to speak of a potential new future for the area – notably bringing back into use the well-known local landmark and historical icon, Edge Hill Station. This station is the oldest surviving passenger railway station in the world. It is from here that George Stephenson’s *Rocket* left, with the Prime Minister - The Duke Of Wellington - on board, at the opening of the Liverpool to Manchester Railway in 1830. The station buildings (built slightly later in 1836) herald within the grandeur of the architecture all the excitement about the new possibilities that the railways were to bring – the ambitions and the aspirations for a brighter, better future, and what these would mean for the prospects of local people. What better message from the heritage of the neighbourhood to revitalise and to speak of its future? On 2 May this year, Metal reopened the first of the Edge Hill buildings as a place for art, events and conversation for 2008.

Internally, Metal has found a comfortable existence between what some would define as our artistic ambitions and those driven by the belief in access to great art for everyone, social justice, and the belief in artists’ power to create and inspire change. It is more difficult to find the language to describe this work to external audiences, particularly across different sectors, but also within the arts sector – which still seems determined to prolong an unnecessary separation between ‘real art’ (that happens in the gallery or the formalised ‘art’ space) and ‘community art’ (that happens elsewhere). The house in Liverpool represents a successful model of collapsing the sometimes enormous ‘rhetoric’ gap between ‘art’ and the ‘community’, between ‘local’ and ‘international’ between what can find a comfortable place within the arts world and also invite a truly inclusive, diverse approach and audience. This is how artists are – they are part of all these things – it is organisations that find the structures and reasons for making these things hard.



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