

## **Public Art: Not Just a Nice to Have**

On 2 July 2024 UP Projects and Sheppard Robson Architects hosted a roundtable event exploring the positive role that art and artists can play in shaping places, including engaging communities and contributing social value. The event looked to challenge the idea that public art is often seen as just a 'nice to have'; frequently being commissioned as an afterthought or because it has been stipulated as a planning condition. The conversation brought professionals from public art, architecture as well as those from the private development and local authority sectors together to discuss what changes are required to foreground the value of public art. Key points that came out of the discussion are as follows:

### **Timing is Everything!**

The conversation started by discussing the role art can play in engaging communities in the context of neighbourhoods undergoing change. Highlighted was the importance of dispelling the idea of art as an adjunct, tacked on to the end of the process. Instead, it was widely agreed that there is a need for both the public and private sector to embed public art and cultural strategies into their thinking and plans at the earliest possible stage of a project. Importantly, stakeholders need to commit the necessary resources upfront to ensure such strategies can be taken forward. It was acknowledged that if there is a clear public art strategy that aligns with wider place-shaping objectives from the start, there is a better chance of success, with all stakeholders and delivery partners involved understanding and signing up to clear objectives for public art.

### **Rethinking ideas of Permanence**

The discussion explored the pros and cons of "permanent" commissioning and the value of rethinking ideas of permanence. One contributor noted that permanence often brings its own "weight" and challenges, whereby some commissioners may not feel confident enough to take risks and afford the necessary freedom to artists if artworks are conceived as 'permanent'. Therefore, more ephemeral or temporary artworks works enabled commissioners (and especially those who were not used to working with artists) to be more adventurous and agile as a first step.

Another contributor highlighted how permanent artworks can encapsulate a particular moment in time, but then can also take on new meanings and be interpreted differently by future generations. Changing and evolving perceptions over time is a useful consideration when commissioning permanent public art.

It was also suggested that a successful public art strategy is one that is open-minded about both permanent and temporary installations and showcased how the two routes can be balanced and supported to create thoughtful and meaningful projects and programmes.

### **Value the process**

The conversation then moved towards thinking about public art not just as objects (or as “baubles”!) – but as a process that challenged the idea of “an end point” or specific output, prioritising community participation, learning and engagement throughout. One contributor pointed out that when taking a more process driven approach, communities can go on a journey of change, enabling a better understanding of their emotional connection towards a particular place, and potentially working towards healing historic issues within communities. It was noted that programmes that supported such dialogues and exchanges, offered a positive mechanism for weaving together past histories with prospective futures.

The danger of commissioning public art that does not have a clear place dialogue underpinning it was also discussed: for example, creating art for the community instead of with communities. Without this dialogue, art is imposed on communities, potentially undermining its value. Naturally it was acknowledged that taking a more process driven approach can be challenging and takes time and investment to ensure it is done well and with the necessary care.

### **Diversity in the public realm**

The role that memorials and monuments are currently playing in redressing the historic inequalities of representation in the public realm was also discussed and how ensuring our places and neighbourhoods reflect those who live and work in them is vital. The Fourth Plinth, the statue of Millicent Fawcett and the current memorial for the victims of the Transatlantic Slave Trade were mentioned as examples of work recently undertaken by the Greater London Authority and a re-naming/public spaces initiative that was informed through extensive community engagement in the Borough of Camden. The need to recontextualise and reinterpret historic memorials and monuments was also touched upon, which when undertaken as a creative process with communities can contribute to collective healing.

### **Value, Impact & Legacy**

Another reoccurring theme was the exploration of the term “value” – how are we defining it and how it can be quantified. Engaging with the idea of art-washing and commercial co-opting of public art, one contributor felt that social value and commercial value are deeply connected, and that profit and purpose have to be compatible. Through this assertion, they talked about the power of art to bring

people together, improve visitor experiences and create interest. Public Art can be a magnet and driving force to bring people to an area like a major piece of social infrastructure. This idea of ‘creating interest’ was echoed by others: public art can convey thoughtfulness and quality. However, there was a caution for art not to be “instrumentalised” to create memorable moments that aren’t connected to the social and cultural context that it is situated in.

Reinforcing this idea of a social/commercial win-win, the group discussed how meaningful art – integrated early in the project – can support the planning process and, therefore, resonates with not only communities but investors, too. Public art hasn’t traditionally come with KPIs that investors buy into, so highlighting these tangible benefits was seen as a powerful way of communicating value.

The idea of what constituted legacy was also discussed, and how often process driven projects where social impact was prioritised, were able to create legacies that were not at once visible but enabled long term social change. Legacy was emphasised by the group as being far more than just “the object” or output that maintains a physical position within communities. The social impact of projects that genuinely engage communities can be felt long after a commission or programme is completed.

### **What Needs to Change?**

The group reflected on what needs to change in order for public art to be valued as an important contributor to creating inclusive places. The lack of funding was cited and how often there is no designated budget for public art and that often it comes from other budget lines including marketing, communications, community engagement or public realm budgets such as lighting and seating. This means that public art is often tied to other agendas thus constraining possibilities. One contributor mourned the loss of Percent For Art, which despite its challenges, stipulated through planning conditions that a percentage of the overall development scheme budget must be allocated to public art.

The lack of joined up communication between local authority departments as well as between developers and local authorities was discussed, and it was acknowledged that planning professionals play a key role in ensuring public art is kept on the agenda and written into planning conditions. They also have the power to stipulate what “good” public art should/could look like and have the power to advocate for commissioners to strive for a more integrated, context specific and socially engaged approach.

A final, more nuanced point was raised was around the perception of artists within the built environment sector and how they are rarely included as core members of the development team (alongside architects, landscape architects, project managers, communications professionals and increasingly placemaking and social value professionals) despite decades of advocacy for artists to be included on public realm and urban development design teams.