



## **Artists in public: projects and practices in Dorset**

We're going to be hearing about a range of public art projects this afternoon that have been instigated under the Wide Open Space initiative – so I am going to complement this information by focussing on work and opportunities which have arisen out of the partnership working between local authorities, the Areas of Outstanding National Beauty, and the Jurassic Coast.

Last year I undertook some work with regard to the future role, remit and activity of the Dorset Design and Heritage Forum – which, with its partners, has been championing an integrated approach to involving artists and creativity in building and regeneration programmes in Dorset. The aim being to involve artists at the conceptual and design stage of place shaping and to encourage and support artists working as part of multidisciplinary teams and as 'visual engineers' rather than just 'bringers of objects'. This strand of work had the broad working title of 'Bog Standard or Beautiful' and included how artists could and should engage with the changing built and natural environment within the Jurassic Coast World Heritage site.

Successful public art practice contributes to cultural process and product. It can add value to quality design, reveal histories and contribute to shared values in ways we do not expect. In addition to this the drivers of tourism, health and wellbeing and audience engagement also feature – so during my short presentation I will be focussing on projects that have been or are focussed on artists engaging with place and context

But first, a bit of background - in the Citizens Panel Survey April 2009 conducted by the Culture Theme Group of the Dorset Strategic Partnership:

Seventy eight per cent of people surveyed agreed that access to cultural activities helps to make Dorset a better place to live and seventy seven per cent agreed that engagement in cultural activities contributes to an improved quality of life.

This correlates with one of the last pieces of research that CABE – The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment undertook, prior to its merger, which centred around Beauty and whether it mattered to people and how we could put beauty in our environment - back on the agenda.

There is evidence that the public is more sensitive than ever to the limits of narrowly economic approaches to growth and arguably, we are less tolerant of poor-quality developments and degraded environments. Which is why CABE decided to start thinking about what matters most to people about their places. They asked questions about beauty, and the answers were revealing.

Four out of five – said that everyone should be able to experience beauty on a regular basis and hardly anyone thought that beauty mattered less to those on a lower income. Only 12 per cent were too busy to notice beauty in their area and 65 per cent experienced beauty in the natural environment.

The people interviewed talked about beauty in relation to the image of their place; to redevelopment and housing policy; to the historic environment and new architecture; to green space and environmental quality; to maintenance and functionality; to personal ambition and everyday life. The research demonstrated that beauty is something people value as a public good and that they expect local authorities to take a lead. In this light Beauty starts to seem a lot less like an abstract, intangible concept and rather more like a concrete, current policy issue. And for anyone wanting to follow this up - the findings formed part of a larger project called **People and places** which explored how to get people interested and involved in shaping the quality of the place where they live.

So the challenge is to ensure that in this period of restraint - cutting the deficit should not become an excuse for lowering standards of publicly funded development and letting anything through the planning system. It does not automatically cost more, even in the short run, to make something beautiful rather than ugly – which brings us back to the bog standard or beautiful approach being taken in Dorset...

A key partner in supporting the integration of artists is the Jurassic Coast. The J C Partnership has used the World Heritage Site designation to encourage the development of creative arts and earth science projects, which would strategically support the management and communication of the WH status. Therefore a Jurassic Coast Arts Strategy was formulated and the subsequent areas of work it generated entitled 'Creative Coast' set out to influence policy and change behaviour more widely

and demonstrate that the arts can support the management of local, regional, national and international natural heritage. The programme ran from May 2008 to May this year with the overall purpose of encouraging residents and visitors of all ages to visit and experience the Jurassic Coast for themselves and to gain a deeper understanding of its importance through creative and high quality arts experiences.

An evaluation of this first strand of work has been undertaken and it is already evident that new partnerships between arts and sciences, cross fertilisation of ideas and access for artists to new areas of expertise are building and developing all the time. The Creative Coast programme is currently consolidating its funding structure and intends to continue instigating a range of opportunities and events.

During the first period its work a key initiative was the Public Art Code of Practice – which was formulated in order to manage expectations, of artists and communities alike – in terms of the opportunities which would arise for permanent public art commissions. The Code aims to create opportunities for artists to contribute to the built and natural environment, through initiating and supporting projects which encourage quality and innovation in regard to the concept, context and medium used.

It asks people to be aware of the fact that World Heritage Sites belong to all the peoples of the world, irrespective of the territory on which they are located. Therefore it is important for the communities of people who live and work along the Jurassic Coast to understand the broader responsibilities this brings and for people wishing to create work on the coast to take a world perspective with regard to relevance, appropriateness and quality.

The emphasis of the Jurassic Coast Public Art Code of practice is to support work which is about engagement and enabling deeper understanding – rather than commissioning stand alone static works. Indeed permanent commissions would be the exception not the norm and there would have to be extremely good reasons as to why a permanent commission was proposed. The partners are being encouraged to think about how artists can contribute to the ongoing programme of work along the coast – landscaping, path re-alignment, new bridges, facilities and interpretation centres. The Code has now been adopted by the Dorset AONB as part of its protocol when working with local authorities – so any work taking place on or near the Jurassic Coast footprint – can look to the Code to support and underpin a way of working.

In the same spirit, namely to involve artists in an integrated way –is another important set of guidance – the Coastal Carparks Design Guide, promoted by West Dorset District Council in partnership with the AONB and other partners. In excess of 100 car parks have been identified in

the coastal corridor, which range from being relatively clutter free and sitting well in the landscape to poorly designed and badly maintained which have a detrimental effect on the surrounding area.

As car parks often provide a visitor's first experience of an area, the quality of parking provision information and facilities, can influence whether visitors feel welcome, enjoy their stay and decide whether to come back. The guidance recognises the important role car parks play within the overall visitor experience and as a component of quality public realm, and therefore advises on how to achieve good design and also advocates the involvement of artists – and I will talk later about a project which has come about as a result of this guidance.

So – next I am going to talk about a variety of projects both permanent and temporary but which all celebrate place and either leave a legacy of real change, or emotional perception.

**Durlston** Castle is a unique and major heritage, interpretation and refurbishment project in Swanage, Dorset, made possible through a significant Heritage Lottery Fund (HLF) bid. Durlston Castle and Country Park holds a key position along the spectacular Jurassic Coast. Very early on in the process, a lead artist – Lulu Quinn, was brought in to work as an integral part of the Design and Architectural Team in the redevelopment of the Castle, and its grounds. She was the first member of the subsequent Design Team to be appointed and her initial work helped inform the funding bid which was submitted to the Heritage Lottery Fund. She continued to work on the scheme and was part of the team who appointed the architects, Long and Kentish. Her appointment helped to identify, fuse and develop all the various strands essential to the development process. She was a catalyst for the differing viewpoints and helped to pull them together, as well as presenting new visions. Her concept for 'Over the Edge' was taken up by the architects and included within the overall vision for the redevelopment. The team very quickly came to respect the artist and her ideas. In addition to her skills and vision, her ability to empathise with and share a similar philosophy was crucial, as it enabled her to fit within and adjust to the dynamics of the team.

Lulu's approach was to stand back and listen – she worked closely with the architect MJ Long and decided that a light touch would be essential to draw out what was already there – it was a lengthy and complicated process at times but out of it came a proposal for working with transparent glass, text and light that explored new possibilities of interpretation for Durlston.

The work, entitled Diversity - is to be sited on three walls in the café with 38 glass panels containing the names of over 8,000 species that can be found on the site. Diversity is a visual poem on the diversity of species, some common and some quite mysterious and aims to provide the public, at a glance, the enormous scale of species to be found at Durlston. The piece also works as a dimable lighting scheme for the cafe.

The business manager, Martin Cooke said that Lulu's involvement from the early stages of the project ensured a clarity of thought and the provision of a number of clear themes or perhaps more appropriately emotions/essences of a reused Durlston Castle, and that these have remained critical to the design, interpretation and project development throughout the whole scheme - they have also provided clear 'themes' to come back to at times of uncertainty."

Other commissions include the appointment of artist, Gary Breeze, who has created the 'Zig Zag path – which will aid wayfinding and connections from the car park to the Castle, and which also incorporate a excerpts of a poem by Paul Hyland. In addition, Carol Ann Duffy has been commissioned to produce another written piece for the path, as part of the time-line concept.

Dorset County Council have established a reputation for pioneering fresh approaches to rural roads, with the aim of balancing the safety and access needs of users with care for the environment and the quality of our landscape and settlements. And the launch of the Rural Roads Protocol in 2008 has led to various opportunities for artists' involvement including a major scheme linked to the Cultural Olympiad which I will mention later. The Council's Environment Directorate has also embraced the notion of collaborative working and to date three Bridges have been or are in the process of being designed and constructed with the input of artists.

Charmouth Bridge, is on the South West Coast Path national trail and is crossed more than 700,000 times a year as it provides a key access point for a very important part of the Jurassic Coast, not only is it an important gateway but it is also sited within a designated areas of outstanding natural beauty.

So when it came up for renewal, there was a strong desire to commission a design which would reflect the importance of the site, and be sensitive to the location. A brief was advertised which stated that the Council wanted to bring an artist in at the start of the project and enable them to work as part of a cross disciplinary team who would deliver the it. The artist/architect team Sans Façon were appointed and they worked closely with the County Engineers. Their design philosophy

was to start with an appreciation and understanding of context and tread lightly whilst contributing to the uniqueness of the place.

The concept behind the replacement bridge “was to celebrate the threshold between the ordered village and the natural landscape, and to mark the transition and heighten awareness of the crossing without detracting attention from the place”. To achieve this, they proposed bridging the Char by creating two piers which met halfway across the river, with a visible split in the centre enhancing the feeling and pleasure of crossing water. The wider space created where the two sides meet, would offer an opportunity to pause during crossing, which had not been possible with the old bridge.

Sans Facon also stated that the two asymmetrical piers are in keeping with the shifting and dynamic landscape and enhance the experience of the river crossing. It has been kept as narrow as possible towards the car park side keeping the feel of a pedestrian bridge, widening and bowing towards the sea in the centre to accommodate the balcony to view up and down river, before widening out on to the beach and cliff side, suggestive of a change of attitude towards the environment and opening to both the coastal path and the beach.

The bridge was opened in April this year and the collaborative approach taken with regard to replacing Charmouth Bridge, demonstrates what can be achieved when artists form a working partnership with engineers. The result is a stunning and deceptively simple design, which elevates a ordinary crossing into a new public space. The effectiveness of the design, the choice of materials and the quality of production all signal to the user that they are moving into a special place. The re-alignment with the approach path and raised height – bring additional benefits of view and perspective and it has raised the bar for other improvement and replacement projects along the coast. And as can be seen from this letter – it is much appreciated – even if people do think it was the work of local authority architects!

Newton’s Cove is a picturesque bay at the southern edge Weymouth. It is situated on the South West Coast path and the existing footbridge had come to the end of its life and required replacing. In addition the quality of the new sea defence scheme had highlighted the inappropriateness of the old design. So the artist Chris Tipping was appointed to work on concept designs in collaboration with DCC engineers, DCC Art Team, AONB and Weymouth and Portland Community Development Trust.

The new design aimed to integrate better with its surroundings, connecting the built environment of the sea defence works with the stunning natural beauty of the countryside to the south of Newton’s Cove. It emulates the aesthetical quality of its surroundings and reduces the visual footprint of the bridge by creating a light and elegant structure.

It has proved to be extremely successful with residents who have been impressed with the care and attention taken to ensure that the new bridge adds rather than detracts, from the surrounding context. The design has also been awarded Merit by the Weymouth Civic Society. In addition both Charmouth and Newton's Cove bridges have been awarded the Inspire Mark by LOCOG in recognition of the innovative ways of working.

The artist Bruce Williams was appointed to work with Dorset county council engineers, two local schools and the Westham community, to come up with a unique design for a new bridge in Weymouth. The old bridge over Newstead Road which used to carry the old railway line to Portland was demolished in 1987 to make way for road improvements. The proposals for a new bridge are part of the Sustrans Connect2 project in collaboration with the DCC 2012 Weymouth Transport Package and Dorset Engineering Consultancy and the bridge will complete the Rodwell Trail.

A student group of 17 pupils from two schools are with Bruce to develop their designs for the bridge. Working in small collaborative teams, across the age ranges, the children have explored some basic engineering principals and looked at some innovative bridge design from around the world to come up with their own creative responses. Weymouth College art students are also working on their own designs for the bridge. Following the completion of his work with the various communities, the artist has been working closely with county council engineers to interpret the ideas into a working bridge design. The slides show some of the proposals and it is hoped that the completed bridge will be in place towards the end of this year.

As part of the West bay Car park improvement, and linked to the Coastal Car park protocol which I mentioned earlier, a new paving scheme is being enhanced and West Dorset District Council wanted the new design to reflect the history of the cliffs that can be seen either side, its Jurassic coast history and geology. They also wanted it to reflect the history of the town, which had a strong rope making , boatbuilding and fishing heritage..

The artist Michael Fairfax was appointed and he has chosen to collaborate with the poet I contacted Paul Hyland and Nick Durnan and a local stone mason. Through consultation with the community the artist established that they certainly didn't want any more hackneyed images of fossils in the new paving (and occupational hazard for all projects which take place on the Jurassic Coast!)

However, this view was not supported by the client who was rather taken by the idea – so the artist proposed a series of bronze insets to be placed in the paving, which evoke a visual association with fossilised objects and which will be integrated within the new stone carving and text based work.

The project should be completed later on this year.

Also in West Bay the artist Peter Margerum worked with young people on concept development for a playground. Two weeks of artist led workshops were held where young people made models and drawings of potential structures. - Based on what the young people had come up with, the playground equipment manufacturer then made and installed the playground.

It has been highly successful for all ages - from tots to teens. The boy racers station themselves near the playground, and must be watching over it as it has not received any ill treatment to date...

As you will all know Weymouth and Portland are hosting the sailing events for the 2012 Olympics – but what you may not be aware of is that Weymouth has been preparing and planning for major improvements within the public realm to accommodate this event, for several years. And as part of that preparation they have been working with partners to develop a Weymouth and Portland public art commissioning plan. Key schemes within that plan are:-

**Weymouth Esplanade Lighting Scheme – which aims to** create a definite ‘signature’ for Weymouth. People will see a night time image of Weymouth seafront and know exactly where it is. A project brief for a new Artist-led lighting scheme was devised and advertised in 2009 –with the brief stating that ‘ this is a wonderful opportunity for an artist to *respond to the social history of Weymouth and create an impactful and memorable image of the town in advance of the 2012 Olympic Games and ensure Weymouth becomes a familiar, recognisable and desirable destination for years to come.*’ The team appointed were Atopia (the artist team Vong Phaophanit and Claire Obussier) working with lighting engineers Parsons Brinkerhoff. The proposed lighting scheme which is currently in the final phases of development comprises 7 artist designed sculptural columns (of which there will be two variants) and which will each project a ‘veil’ of laser light which will have a reach of about 400m.

The colour of the lasers will be green and will intersect with each other as well interact with the environment. This exciting and innovative scheme will be launched in late Autumn.

The building of a new road involves the creation of new landscapes and new vistas that will be appreciated by thousands of motorists each day. Due to the scale of the relief road and the unique opportunity it presented, it was viewed as a major opportunity for artists’ involvement. So the commissioning plan stated that public art should play a part in helping to make the relief road an attractive and engaging approach to Weymouth.

With the support of the Arts Council (who have been the major funder of the commissioning activity) Dorset County Council appointed the artist Richard Harris to develop proposals for work which would complement the Weymouth Relief Road. The artist's brief was to explore the opportunities within the scheme for integrating artwork into the newly created landscape as part of the road. Richard's response to the site has been to focus on the geology to reveal some of the material excavated as part of the road building process.

On Southdown Ridge a large amount of earth and stone had been removed to create a deep cutting, so Richard proposed to use 20 of the larger stones excavated to create a field of hovering stones, elevated by tall steel poles at a key site near to their original positions within the geological strata.

The site for the work is within the landscaping adjacent to the Jurassic roundabout in Littlemoor, where motorists can take the new road over the Southdown Ridge to Weymouth. The stones will stand on stainless steel columns rising out of still water, to reach some seven metres above the surface. The stones cluster in a shoal or dome shape 20 metres across at its widest. As you drive around them, you will appreciate their overall shape and scale, a dramatic reminder of the hidden geology beneath the ground we travel over. The work will also be lit from below at night to make the stones a landmark that will welcome visitors to the area as they approach from the North. The scheme is hoped to be completed by September this year.

This permanent commission was complemented by a temporary project entitled Littlemoor Wishes. The aim of the project was provide the people of Littlemoor with an opportunity to express their experiences, thoughts and feelings about the new road by working with an artist, and for those feelings and views to become part of the process that informed the permanent work.

Claire Barber undertook this project and worked closely with Richard Harris throughout the project. She was interested in the interconnection between place and the way people are connected to their surrounding environment, and began to explore the impacts of a community linked and simultaneously divided through the construction of a new road. Whilst the physical impact of the new road taking shape was impressive it was the specific landscape of the voice of the community which became significant for her.

The temporary project could be interpreted as both a physical and a conceptual work which examined ways in which people on both sides of the road corridor could create connections across it. Claire did this by gathering local people's thoughts and opinions about the new road and what their hopes were for the future, and displaying them on the temporary Herras fencing. She posted out specially made colourful tags in a package with instructions and information about her project to

all residents of Littlemoor, for them to write on and return to her. The temporary artwork was completed in July 2009 and a book was published and presented to every resident.

The Weymouth and Portland 2012 commissioning plan also proposed various ideas for temporary projects which would engage with the theme of fun at the seaside, the vision being to transform the beach scene from the traditional seaside look with its blue and white stripe uniform to a multi-coloured, ethnically diverse, creative melting pot. So, up to 500 new deck chairs are going to be created.

Led by artists Heather Parnell, David Mackie and Becky Adams, the deck chair project has been taking place over the past few months. It has involved a large number of school children and students as well as a number of community and faith groups.

The deck chairs will be launched for Summer 2012 and it is hoped that some will be previewed in July this year. Other proposals within the commissioning plan include a Temporary Project for Station Forecourt, currently in development.

Public art practice has been increasingly adopting a durational approach, of which the Exploratory Laboratory (Ex Lab) is a good example. It is a strategic 30 month project aimed at commissioning visual artists to create thought-provoking work which responds to the Jurassic Coast, by creating temporary installations along the coast and across Dorset. It is both a high quality visual arts programme of national stature and a strategic organizational development initiative for the future delivery of the visual arts in Dorset. Ex Lab is investigating our understanding of the environment through an arts and science dialogue and brings artists and the public together with scientists and technologists in an exchange of ideas and processes. A series of research residences hosted across Dorset, will result in new work commissioned which helps promote new ways of seeing and understanding the environment. Research labs will be established from July this year at locations along the Dorset coast chosen as natural vantage points for observing and collecting information about the coast and sea. They will be a focus for the artists in residence and for creative activities including public workshops, talks and discussions between artists and scientists. Ex Lab is presented by Big Picture, a collaboration between Dorset visual arts organisations, Creative Coast and the London 2012 Cultural Olympiad Programme in Weymouth and Portland.

Other projects in the pipeline include the Weymouth and Portland Waymarker Project. The brief is to employ an artist to work on concept development on interpretation, so that people can navigate around a site, and for them to see how the sites connect to each other. As opposed to typical waymarkers, the project is looking for an alternative and more creative solution. The working

process allows for a design and concept stage and then implementation – so although it is a longer programme it does mean that the outcome will be specific to the place and most definitely not the Bog standard signage often seen dotted around our coasts.

Another potential scheme which could involve artists at the outset is the proposed Weymouth and Portland Sea defence project and although not confirmed as definitely going ahead, the ground is still being prepared to facilitate an artist working as part of the design team, should it become a live project. Other opportunities for artist to be part of the place making and sustainability agenda include the Coastal Change pathfinder, which is about working with coastal communities and helping them engage with coastal change. The overall purpose is to engage with those affected communities about the necessity to plan for these environmental changes and to ensure that communities are well-equipped to understand, debate and take part in the decision making processes involved in managing coastal change.

So as you can see, this wide and varied approach to working with artists will leave a legacy in Dorset that encourages creative thinking when shaping and designing our built and natural environments. The partnership working and transference of skills and knowledge should provide a rich seam of inspiration for future projects. Public art practice continues to grow and change and the emergence of durational approaches to public art commissioning has given rise to a range of projects which create community involvement and ownership over a much longer periods of engagement.

Because, the key thing about any public art project is that it has to have real relevance to the community or setting in which it is taking place and have a very clear legacy. There used to be margins of error for projects that hadn't quite got the thinking or rationale right and therefore didn't, as a result, achieve what they set out to, but now, with communities and individuals losing so much of the lifestyle they used to take for granted and with the likelihood that these shifts and changes will be permanent, the challenge for arts activity is to construct ways of working which acknowledge this shift and which are weighted to really understanding what would make a difference to the community – it's evident that Dorset is well on the way to ensuring that this is the case.

Thank you.

MBA.March 2011