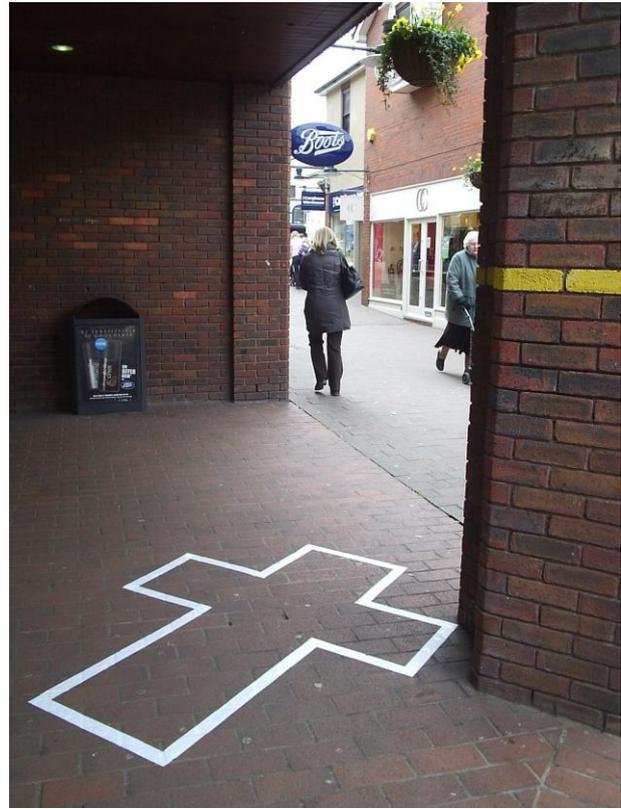


Sacred & Creative Space: public art as spiritual regeneration for communities

This presentation, from October 2009, aims to explore public art as a means of engaging people with regeneration and ideas for church involvement in that engagement. We're going to do this by looking at a range of artworks and projects with which I've had the privilege of having some involvement; in my curacy in Barking; my incumbency here in Seven Kings; and more broadly through a new arts organisation called commission4mission.

The traditional stereotypes of Barking and Dagenham are, firstly, as a monochrome working class culture focused on the Becontree Heath estate built in the 1920s and 30s and, at that time, the largest council housing estate in Europe and, secondly, the borough's manufacturing base as a major site for the Ford Motor Company's UK operation.



More recently, of course, the borough has acquired a different reputation, as in 2006, following the election of 11 British National Party (BNP) Councillors, *The Guardian* dubbed the borough the "new far right capital of Britain."ⁱ All have been reasons for those living outside of the borough to bypass it.

However, in recent years the borough has been acquiring a very different reputation for its ability to commission and deliver public art projects as their Town Centre Artscape project has followed hot on the coat tails of the A13 Artscape project which was listed as one of the 200 most important modern and contemporary art sites around the world in Amy Dempster's *Destination Art*.ⁱⁱ

Barking and Dagenham's Council are seeking to change the reputation of the borough through a series of ambitious regeneration projects and their Artscape programmes are designed to signal the cultural, economic and social changes that regeneration seeks to bring.

For example, Council Chief Executive Rob Whiteman has said of the Artscape programme: "The vision, ambition and innovation which these works represent mirror perfectly the kind of social environment we are aiming to achieve through the regeneration of Barking Town Centre. As such these installations are a pivotal element of our goal of making our shared space

more attractive." The borough's Artscape projects are therefore a test case for the extent to which art can contribute to changing the cultural and social ambience of a locality and raise major questions about the commissioning, opening and bedding-in of significant works of public art.

A13 Artscape, devised by lead artist Tom de Paor in 1996, took advantage of programmed road works to involve artists in a wide range of schemes including large scale artist-designed landscapes, major light works, new sculptural commissions, street furniture, artists residencies, community projects, temporary projects and new commissions in drama and dance to celebrate the public art. Local residents were offered the opportunity to get involved, through discussions on designs with artists and architects, and also as participants in specially commissioned dance, drama, music and visual arts projects linked to the overall scheme. A13 Artscape gained what was then the largest Arts Council National Lottery Award to a public art project of £3.895m and had an overall budget in excess of £9m.

Thanks to A13 Artscape, the Council now has a strong commitment to involving artists and designers in the public realm and to securing funding for public art and design in future. As a direct result, their Arts Services team were directed not to end the Artscape programme following the completion of the A13 works but to move the project to the next regeneration area, Barking Town Centre. There, over £1 million has been raised for the Artscape programme from external funding agencies and private companies and the project is delivering more than a dozen artworks and installations.

Through my involvement I can testify to the genuine engagement of local people in these projects and to their value in affirming the stories and significance of those taking part and will say more about this in a moment. But despite this, and for all the hundreds of local people that have either been consulted on or involved in Artscape projects, there are thousands in the borough whose only engagement is with the permanent works of art that have been erected along the A13 and in Barking Town Centre.

For these people the whole project appears much more problematic. Josie Appleton, in her online article 'Barking: the land that Labour lost'ⁱⁱⁱ, writes that "the regeneration industry floats sublimely above the grime, telling its own heady story of optimism and dynamism." Appleton claims that the art works "make Barking seem even more of a foreign land to its residents" and quotes 18 year old Hayley, who was thinking of voting BNP because there were no jobs, as saying, "It's like they are trying to turn Barking into a resort."

Some of the local criticisms made of Artscape - such as the frequent complaint that the money would be better spent on housing or jobs - are unfair and incorrect – the money used has only come and would only have come for the art – yet, like the myths propagated by the BNP in their election literature, they persist as a commonly held opinion.

One particularly tricky aspect of a programme such as Artscape is the timing between the creation of the artworks and the delivery of the regeneration

projects for which they are a flagship. In Barking and Dagenham, the art has appeared somehow in advance of the largest regeneration project, Barking Riverside, with its planned development of 10,000 + homes. The greater the gap between the art and the homes, the more local people come to view the art as window dressing distracting attention from their real issues and needs.

What of the art itself? How effective are the commissioned works in their own right and in their context? My impression is that the concepts underpinning the creation of the works often do not inform the actual experience of seeing the art, yet despite this several of the pieces work exceptionally well in context and are becoming embedded into local culture.

Tom de Paor's concept for the A13 Artscape, which he called *Arterial*, was "to choreograph serial and individual objects in space and produce a unified temporal experience - a perpetual rhythmic form whose movements are all of a piece." *Arterial* was to be "a journey through interlinking, imaginative landscape on a grand scale, with ideas, themes and connections set up to fire your curiosity and make a whole new road experience." The windscreen of your vehicle was to "perform as a moving proscenium within which the changing composition" would be constantly framed. His inspiration came from an elderly woman who lived in one of the nearby tower blocks. When she was young she used to go down to the river and watch the boats go by but now, confined to her flat, she sat and watched the A13's traffic from her high-rise window. Could you choreograph the life of the road de Paor wondered following this conversation?

Funding constraints prevented de Paor's concept from being realised in full on the ground and the sense of the eye moving consistently and coherently from work to work has been lost as a result. Yet significant landmarks and distinct features have been created that punctuate one's journey through the borough.

Holding Pattern is a lightwork clustered beneath a flyover on the A13 and was designed by Graham Ellard and Stephen Johnstone, in collaboration with Tom de Paor. A three-dimensional 'light garden' which is 70 metres long, 50 metres wide and 6 metres high, *Holding Pattern* takes its name from 74 stainless steel 'needles', each topped with a blue runway taxi light. De Paor has described *Holding Pattern* as "the Campidoglio of Barking, even though you can't stand there." I'm not convinced that comparisons of that type hold any value beyond bigging up a work that doesn't need a hard sell as it convinces in its own right. Whether on the ground circumnavigating the roundabout or in the air crossing the flyover, the multiple points of vivid light create their own unique atmosphere which lifts the spirits of those passing through.

A similar experience is to be had at the Town Centre Artscape work, *The Lighted Lady of Barking* by Joost Van Santen. Again located on a roundabout, this work comprises 20 metres of white-coated steel, topped by a blue acrylic disc, which is lit at night from below by multiple colours. It stands at one of the main road entrances to the borough making a positive statement about the diversity of Barking's multi-cultural society. Again, its effect is overwhelmingly

to lift the spirits. Lighting projects have been among the most successful of the Artscape works coming into their own at night as they interact with the changing rhythms of the streetscape; dwelling, street and vehicle lighting.

Some of the less well received works have, despite their initial reception, also managed to embed themselves into local consciousness as significant local landmarks. The *Twin Roundabouts* created by Thomas Heatherwick Studios were intended to correspond to the two rocks through which Jason had to pass on his epic journey with the Argonauts. I doubt that anyone considers this reference as they drive between these two black sprayed concrete structures or views their commuter journey as 'epic' in the way that the artists intended. Nevertheless, by being aptly nicknamed 'Madonna's Bra', they have passed into local folklore in a way that other works have not. For all the consultation and commissioning undertaken by the Arts Services team in taking forward what the Arts Council consider to be one of the most significant projects in the UK today, it seems that there is a large element of luck about which works are taken to heart by local people.

Art by itself cannot create the cultural change that Rob Whiteman hopes will come within the borough he serves. For many the promised homes in the major regeneration projects are lagging too far behind the creation of the artworks themselves and this affects the reception afforded to the art. Yet many of the artworks do change and enhance the environment within which local people currently live. For those who have been engaged in elements of the major commissions or involved in linked local arts projects, there is a real sense of excitement and interest in the Artscape initiative. Our lives have been enriched through involvement; our talents and our stories have been affirmed. Yet many remain outside of these involvements and their unwillingness or inability to engage often spills over into their negative responses to the finished works.

The Artscape programme has been a risky and brave initiative for this local authority to take, particularly in their recognition that creating cohesive communities requires that the aesthetic and artistic be addressed within plans for regeneration. Artscape's successes speak volumes about the quality of the Arts Services team and the artists they have commissioned. Its inadequacies speak of the ultimate inability of social engineering to engineer society.

Barking and Dagenham continues to exist in tensions that derive from its working class past and its multi-cultural present. Artscape has not and cannot resolve those tensions, indeed it currently adds to the mix of tensions, but it also sets up new dynamics and influences which may yet point the way to a community that is both cohesive and creative.

I first became engaged with the A13 Artscape when in 1999, as a parent, I spent a cold and windy evening on a newly completed section of the A13 watching my daughter's dance group perform as part of a site-specific dance project entitled *Roadworks: A Diversion on the A13* which involved 160 local people. 'The Independent' listed it as one of the dance events of the year. Engaging local people in a variety of ways with the Artscape projects has

been a major element of the work of the Council's Arts Services team and later, as a Curate at the historic church of St Margaret's Barking, I was able to play a part in enabling local people to contribute to two of the early projects in the Town Centre Artscape programme.

Love & Light illuminated and animated significant buildings in the Town Centre with a series of video arts installations. SDNA, a visual jockey and digital art duo from the public arts collective plugfish filmed and digitally animated members of the church community together with the churchyard's flora and wildlife, setting them within delicate moving imagery before projecting them onto the windows, walls, roof and tower of the church. Projected onto the clear windows of the church were moving images of the local body of Christ at St Margaret's - dancing mums, waving ladies, an eight piece dance group, the vergers and curate racing each other up the Church Tower, an imaginary teenage rock band, and a number of other spinning, walking, waving, smiling members of the congregation. This piece, rightly entitled *Abbey Happy*, showed the church at play.



Studding this celebration of the diverse congregation at St Margaret's were reminders of Barking's past which drew on memorials contained within the church. Captain Cook's ship, The Endeavour, sailed again next to the stained glass window commemorating Barking's fishing heritage. This window then provided motifs of sea horses, shells and water that featured in several other projections. The whole was a joyful celebration, not just of St Margaret's special history, but also of its lively and diverse present. In it the church was truly seen as a place of love, light and laughter.

Michael Cousin was the next Artscape artist to work with the congregation at St Margaret's. His *RE:Generation* exhibition was hosted by St Margaret's and included two opposing facets. The first documented physical changes as he located the original sites of old photographs of the area as closely as possible and took a contemporary still to set alongside the original. Combining these two layers showed the passage of time and the, often, radical changes it had made. In these photos time had swept away architecture that once would have seemed monolithic. In these photos everything seemed different and nothing was untouched by change.

The second facet of *RE:Generation* was a film documenting the personal anecdotes, memories and views on change of local people, many of whom were part of the St Margaret's congregation. In a moment, we'll watch the opening section of the film; four extracts from the interviews that Michael Cousin conducted including two members of the St Margaret's congregation – Ron Wylde and Vera Rook. Ron gives the film its introduction and context by explaining how the sense of community locally was lost through the building of tower blocks on the Gascoigne Estate. Michael then plunges us into memories of community and childhood from 1907 onwards as the film gradually brings up to the present day.

It was here, in people's stories, hopes, fears and concerns that Cousin found continuity and commonality across the generations. As past images from local people's lives were viewed so their stories were also heard. The images came from another time and place but the stories could have been contemporary as they spoke of community, relationships, children, the future, happiness, death and suffering.

Anthony Shapland, the Director and Curator of g39 in Cardiff, has said of Cousin that, "he successfully combines the naïvety of a child seeing the world afresh with a grown-up, stubborn belief that things could be different. He is intent on ... willing the viewer to look at something with new eyes, to experience reality refreshed."^{iv} In this film and exhibition Cousin created a space for the contemplation of change. His text for the project came from Ecclesiastes: "there is nothing new under the sun." Although change is inevitable and unstoppable human concerns transcend generations and the radical changes that regeneration brings. At the heart of his project was a reminder and affirmation of the similarities between generations rather than a distancing through the differences.

RE:Generation involved people in art and regeneration through the telling of their stories and explored the extent to which people experienced continuity within change. *Love & Light* made local people the focus of the projections and celebrated the diversity of the community. Beginning with these Artscape projects, I've also been on a journey; a journey which has involved engaging people in exploring spirituality through public art. So I'm going to end by showing some other public art projects to illustrate some other possible forms of church involvement.

Parish Centre. The resulting conceptual sculpture, *The Cabinet of Sin and Salvation*, included constructions, paintings and photomontages and was exhibited as part of the *Visual Dialogue* art exhibition that was held in the church over our Patronal Festival weekend.

As I worked on the project I invited users of the centre to comment on the work as it developed. As a result, the community involvement in this project was not so much in its creation as in its interpretation. I also documented the project photographically and posted daily blogs about the project which included the comments made daily by people from the local community.

The involvement of local people in this project was their commentary on the artwork as it developed and this formed a key project of the overall project. The artwork itself raised issues of sin and salvation and a significant part of the interest in this project stemmed from the extent to which people engaged with or ignored those issues in their commentary.

This example is essentially an artist-in-residence approach either for a short period as in this example or over the course of several months or maybe a year. The idea throughout is that art related to regeneration is produced publicly with local people able to see and engage with its development.

Hertford stns was a project that offered the opportunity for someone to stumble upon a Station of the Cross and want to discover more and the chance to challenge a narrow view of worship by taking worship into a range of churches and public spaces.

Through artist workshops in Lent, six artworks were made, inspired by six of the Stations of the Cross, in a variety of different media. Each work was a collective response by those attending the workshop. The remaining eight stations were produced by local artists and the complete set were sited either in different places of worship throughout the town or in public, civic and outdoor locations.

The idea was to plot the sequence of stations geographically so that during Holy Week local people could make a pilgrimage, travelling from station to station with accompanying meditations to aid their spiritual journey. In addition to local churches, other Station sites included a local Art Gallery, the Library, the Town Centre Shopping Precinct and the local Tesco Supermarket.



This project created an encounter with art and spirituality in a town centre and as local people went about their everyday lives. That encounter may have been just with one artwork but each person then had the opportunity, should they wish to, to go on the spiritual and artistic journey that the *Hertford stns* trail provided.

Another approach is to use art to create spaces of rest and reflection in the midst of regeneration. This project involved an art installation comprising of three panels of mirrored perspex mounted on wooden backing panels which were displayed in a selection of Redbridge churches during Advent. This project was designed by a small planning group drawn from the six churches who each hosted the installation in turn throughout Advent.

One of the key concepts of the artwork is that people became a part of the installation by viewing themselves in its mirrored surfaces. Our aim was that the installation formed the focal point in churches creating a place of stillness and reflection that enabled Christians and non Christians alike to find a space to relax and reflect. In this way, we aimed to be an alternative to the busyness and busyness that the Christmas period brings and to enable our churches to be opened to a wider public during this period. Scatter cushions, candles and music were used to create a contemplative environment around the installation.



I finish with two photographic series. The first is called 'Windows on the world' and is a weekly feature on my blog. As each of us view life from our own perspective, each photograph in this series features a foreground object providing a frame for what can be viewed beyond. As there is always something beyond our immediate frame of reference, each photograph also features something that can be glimpsed beyond the foreground image. By framing what is beyond, the photograph acts as a window on a part of our world and at the same time signals the presence of the beyond, maybe in this way also acting as a window onto the divine. The series therefore seeks to reveal heaven in the ordinary.

My final example is of a current project which makes regeneration itself the focus of the art project. This project is a collaboration with Fr. Benjamin Wallace, Vicar of St Georges Barkingside. The project involves photographing and painting the Gants Hill area on a roughly monthly basis during the period of its current regeneration. My photographs will be posted on my blog and our work will also be displayed at St Georges. There is an open invitation to others to join us and our approach involves conversations with any local people known to us or showing interest in what we are doing while out and about photographing and painting the area.

I am involved with a new Christian arts organisation called commission4mission which is building up a pool of artists able to undertake commissions for churches, run workshops, encourage churches to explore the arts and organise art exhibitions. We have a varied range of artists working in different media and can arrange both solo and group exhibitions. Profiles of

our artists and their work can be found at:
<http://commissionformission.blogspot.com/>.

Since our launch in March of this year we have exhibited at the Pentecost, West Ham and Leytonstone Festivals and as part of the Leytonstone and E17 Art Trails. We have gained commissions at Queens Hospital Romford and St Pauls Goodmayes and have organised both a networking evening for artists and a Study Day, which is to be held at Chelmsford Cathedral in November. The projects that I have been describing are ones that commission4mission can design, deliver and assist with for churches interested in exploring for themselves the links between art, regeneration and church.

Through the projects I have shown local people have been engaged by: performances in public spaces; being filmed and those images projected onto public buildings; personal stories and memorabilia featuring in a film; learning skills and creating a community mural; commenting on the development of an artwork; encountering art in a town centre; and coming in to a contemplative space.

Through these projects we have explored: the diversity of the community; continuity within change, concepts at the heart of community; ideas of sin and salvation; epiphany and pilgrimage; and reflections of light and peace.

Benefits from involvement in these public art projects have included:

- improving streetscapes and creating local landmarks;
- encouraging congregations and local people because they have been able to contribute to the projects and see their contribution in the finished artwork;
- raising the profile of churches locally because the projects have each made very visual stories that the local press wanted to feature. The projects have each generated considerable interest and comment locally and have featured in the local, church, arts and regeneration media;
- either bringing people into church to see the project/exhibition or taking the church out into the community; and
- on occasion, leaving something of permanent benefit to the community created through the church and community working together.

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ⁱ H. Mair, 'Welcome to Barking - new far right capital of Britain' in *The Guardian*, Saturday May 6, 2006.

ⁱⁱ A. Dempster, *Destination Art*, Thames & Hudson, 2006.

ⁱⁱⁱ *spiked*, Thursday 26 April 2006 - <http://www.spiked-online.com/index.php?/site/article/45/>

^{iv} Michael Cousin at *Axis* - <http://www.axisweb.org/seCVFU.aspx?ARTISTID=6144>