

Public displays...

Fancy working with community members to put words to their latest neighbourhood development? Sarah Butler explores the rich world of public art as the writer's domain.

As a writer drawn to both people and places, I have always been interested in the possibilities of working as an artist as well as an agent of social change and community development. Currently growing in popularity as a valid and energetic writing outlet, is an emerging arena in the field of regeneration and urban renewal that holds vast potential for writers. Eluding easy categorisation, it incorporates writing as an integral element of public art, community development, architecture, planning and consultation, offering a rich seam of work and inspiration.

So, what does this kind of work look like? What form does it take? What does it achieve? What does it offer to writers? And what are the potential issues and pitfalls you should be aware of when starting to work in this area?

One of the joys of working in the context of regeneration is that it offers a vast range of opportunities and approaches for writers, no matter what their original subject area or format. Working as a writer on a regeneration project might involve being commissioned to create new poetry or prose inspired by a particular place. This writing might be your own personal response – or a series of pieces created alongside an identified community or group: facilitating workshops, initiating conversations or leading community walks. It might become part of the physical environment (incorporated into statues, carved into walls); it might exist temporarily (as part of a performance, written in chalk, etc.); or it might appear in digitally-published form.

Remits, too, are multi-fold. Writers are commissioned to work on regeneration projects for a variety of reasons. Councils or developers might want a writer to positively engage a local community in a process of change and development through creative activities and local input into art works, or to create work that will attract more visitors to an area, or

to find ways of creating or uncovering a 'sense of place' for a new development. They may be interested in how an artist might respond to a specific site and give no more of a brief than that, allowing the artist a great amount of freedom. You may collaborate with other artists and craftspeople, particularly if your work is to be permanently installed. You could be employed by a public art consultancy, a local council, or a regeneration agency. Whatever form an individual assignment takes, you can rest assured that every one will be different.

Linda France is a poet who has been involved with public art projects for over 20 years. Most of her projects have resulted in permanent outcomes: her words have been etched into stone, cast in steel, and carved into wood at sites across the North East of England. Donna Daley-Clarke is a novelist who took on her first public art commission in Bristol in 2008, the outcome of which were three published short stories. Denna Jones' background is in art history and urban design, and she uses narrative as a catalyst for community development and regeneration. Her current project in Devonport responds to the local regeneration agency and council's desire for a heritage trail by exploring and presenting the historical narratives of the town, drawing out stories that people living there today can relate to and be inspired by. 'A public art legacy doesn't need to be an object,' says Jones. 'The whole town is the legacy.'

Variety, when it comes to public art, is a key ingredient. As France points out, this work is anything but formulaic: every project is about responding to that particular space, that particular brief, that particular community. 'You have to remember that the place is the most important thing,' she says. 'You need to allow the site to be part of the writing.' France sees pieces of public art as opportunities to find moments of clarity within an often complicated and

confused world: 'They're like touchstones which offer people the opportunity to stop and think, to connect,' she offers. Such commissions enable writers to create new work that speaks very specifically to the place they are working in. Work that responds, if you will.

Another compelling element is the way in which site-specific work can create lasting change for those individuals and communities involved. Regeneration means change, and according to Daley-Clarke, where there is change, 'there is conflict, edginess and friction – but with that comes energy and vitality.' In this capacity, writers can not only reflect, comment upon and be creatively inspired by that change, they can also become agents of change for communities and places that they care about.

'People doing something creative together, that's a powerful magic,' says France. 'This work has a real effect on individuals and their relationship with a place. That makes you feel optimistic.' She spent a whole year working with five community groups based in and around Murton, in the North East. The project created permanent pieces of work for a new public space on the former Hawthorn Cokeworks site, old industrial land which had to be decontaminated before it was reclaimed, replanted and redeveloped. When I visited the site, I met two women who had attended France's workshops and whose writing had been incorporated into the final pieces. Talking to them about their participation drove home the extent to which that process of creative engagement had given them a real sense of ownership of and pride in the area, one that lasted long after France's work with them had finished.

Denna Jones' interest lies in the narrative of locations and how a place's heritage can be utilised in its renewal. Her aim in Devonport is to shift people's sense of where they live, providing them with fresh perspectives on their town by

uncovering and celebrating its heritage, its narrative. The project thus far has involved an exhibit of writings and drawings by the two youngest daughters of a 19th Century Devonport admiral; workshops and research around Darwin's historical connection with Devonport; and the development of fictional narratives exploring the stories of significant local figures.

A longtime practitioner in this field, Jones is adamant about the need for writers to embed themselves in the communities they are working with. It takes commitment, she says, but it's worth it. A local developer was so taken by Jones' vision for Devonport, that he offered her a free tenancy in the 1790 Admiralty House overlooking Plymouth Sound prior to turning the house into a hotel. 'Instead of living in a hotel, I had a real base. It was my home for 8 months. I could host meetings, invite people round. It enabled me to really embed myself and allowed the community to see me as a neighbour, not just a consultant.' The other major challenge is, appropriately enough, language-based: the world of regeneration is complex and littered with acronyms and jargon that must be confronted. It's the job of a writer entering this world, she says firmly, to understand the people, the organisations and the context they are working with. 'It can be laborious, and difficult,' she says, 'but it is important.'

In 2008, as part of a project called BS1, I worked with public art commissioners InSite Arts to invite Daley-Clarke to respond to the construction of Cabot Circus, a new retail centre in central Bristol. Donna was one of six artists – and the only writer – on the project, set up

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to complement a residency by the artist Neville Gabie. Daley-Clarke's commission resulted in the publication of three stories, *Dirt*, *Stone* and *Glass*, each one exploring the human tales behind the high visibility jacket of all-too-often invisible construction workers. 'I saw myself creating stories of all these people involved in the construction of Cabot Circus,' she says, 'stories that would otherwise have been hidden and ignored. It was about giving a voice and a presence to a range of people.' The project was inspiring;



Nine Things to Do on a Bench, Cate Watkinson & Julia Darling, Grainger Town Centre, Newcastle Upon Tyne.

it offered her a unique and privileged access to the very male-orientated world of construction: 'It was like being a kid in a cake shop. It was overwhelming in a way, but it also made me realise how, as a writer, I need to take on projects which feed and stimulate my writing.'

Working in this field doesn't just enable the writer to make positive contributions to the regeneration agenda by creating more attractive environments for people to live, work and play in; uncovering or creating a sense of place; developing stronger relationships between communities and their local areas; and creating work that reflects on and reveals the nature of places undergoing change.

It also offers intriguing new possibilities when it comes to the writer's own practice and development. For France, the joy of public art commissions comes from the collaborations with visual artists, architects, landscapes, and communities. 'It's great to feel part of a team,' she says, 'to make something bigger than you are – and something that is available to a lot more people than a poetry book is.' She also relishes the fresh perspectives the work brings to her as a writer: there is something magical, she finds, about

making the process of writing poetry visible and tangible. She is intrigued by how the reader becomes a viewer, how their experience of the writing is affected by other considerations – the traffic, the weather, the horizon. 'The whole idea of legibility is different,' she says. 'You can't assume people will read from left to right, or start at the front and walk to the back.'

'I question myself more, am more aware of context, much more conscious of the process,' France says. 'It's made my work more economical, simpler, more accessible. I've become much more interested in the visual presentation of my work and, when I can, work on aspects of layout, font and design. This has become more and more important, an element of the work itself.'

Working as a writer on public art and regeneration projects offers a wealth of opportunities in terms of expanding one's horizons and feeding one's writing. It's challenging: it demands a more transparent writing process, as well as having to work within worlds far removed from the arts. And it's still developing: 'There's no canon, no critique for this work,' says France. 'We are creating it ourselves, and so we have to keep talking. This is a collaborative process which will only move on and grow through conversation.'

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