

(Re)generating change: writing the public realm

Rosa Ainley, May 2010

Almost exactly a year ago I began work on a regeneration initiative for Leysdown-on-Sea, on the Isle of Sheppey in Kent. Leysdown-on-Sea is a much loved and widely derided, neglected and cherished village at the eastern end of the island. It has a long history as a holiday resort, is close by protected marshlands and wetland habitats, and is today in urgent need of investment and environmental improvement. Swale Borough Council and Kent County Council successfully applied for Sea Change funding for artist-led regeneration to coastal areas from CABE (Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment). Their ambition was to devise a Vision to reinvigorate the public realm in Leysdown and increase a sense of ownership in and pride about place. I was commissioned as the lead artist in June 2009 by Swale Borough Council, working alongside muf architecture/art. A phased and costed delivery plan had to be produced alongside the Vision, as no funding was in place for implementation.

I'm a writer with a background in architecture and photography, who uses image and sound as well as words. My work often involves unearthing and/or imagining the stories that architecture and landscape tells, the narratives woven into places and written upon its fabric. This commission held out the promise of bringing these interests and media together. I first worked on a regeneration initiative in 1988 with Freeform Arts Trust on environmental improvements in schools, and have played various roles from project writer to managing editor on public space projects, including City Challenge and New Deal for Communities. I invited muf architecture/art to contribute to the Vision, having worked with them in the past and recognising the need for architectural expertise.

My work is about ambivalence, uncovering contrasting and conflicting voices, the spoken and the unspoken, saying what's not been said. And this also works as a description of my approach to creating a Vision for Leysdown: writing what hadn't yet been vocalised, providing spaces for articulation of wishes, and translating them into project form. Becoming visible in a place brings responsibilities: people assume that you have more power than is usually the case as an artist. Yet I had the power of the commission, and the time to listen, and I had the means to speak to representatives from the various councils involved – including the Parish and the Traders' Association. I also had a certain amount of freedom to work outside and across their structures, unfixing the narrative from municipal assumptions, widening ownership beyond official channels. As an outsider, you can ask obvious and uncomfortable questions, you can see where (and sometimes, why) those conversations that are crucial for change to happen have stalled.

The slew of expectations of local people and of various bodies and organisations involved was a force to be navigated and interpreted. There was an

expectation that I would perform an alchemic transformation of ideas from local people and stakeholders into reality – but I was not there to synthesise ideas into a lowest common denominator that ticked every box and only united everyone in opposition. Our Vision aimed to raise expectation and ambition, to stamp out the fear that the project might be yet another occasion when people were left with nothing more than a dose of consultation fatigue. Since funding for delivery was yet to be raised, we had to work out how to ensure that the Vision left behind something more than a mark on the grass (which I took as a title for a piece of writing in the *Leysdown Rose-tinted* booklet <http://www.leysdownpc.kentparishes.gov.uk/default.cfm?pid=3129>) from the project's Portakabin base.



This graffiti appeared on the side of the Portakabin project HQ shortly after it arrived, a gorgeous engagement with the project, and was reproduced in a set of postcards.

The project was founded on the belief that arts can change your experience of where you live and so how you see your own and the wider world; that development of the community, of new relationships and interest groups and previously unheard voices underpins regeneration; and that involvement in the creative process is itself a starting point. The art of change is as much in the process as in the delivery of any object, in starting conversations, even in creating the controversy that initiates the conversation. For this reason, I am going to concentrate here on the process rather than the projects. Sharing some of the details and insights about how it came about is part of the project's wider legacy.

The first phase of research involved familiarisation and immersion in and around the site, its parameters and environments – particularly important due to the proximity and sometimes overlapping layers of resort, country, village, urban space, seaside. Leysdown is a place of quite extreme contrasts, even in its soundscapes – from the squeals of the arcade to birdsong in the Site of Special

Scientific Interest. I needed to develop an understanding of how people use the space on a daily basis before I could imagine how it might be. A grounding in local and regional plans and strategies was followed by research into – among other things – landforms, kites, tile and brick manufacture, signage, inflatables, historical and contemporary guides and visitor accounts, community transport vehicles, local authors, flora and fauna, railways, birds and local histories.

Working with muf, principles emerged to help shape and define ideas for the Vision. The lack of funding spurred the idea of a series of phased projects in which each interlinked initiative can also stand alone. Our principles included the idea of exchange – that we give something back for what we're getting from people who engage with the project; that everything specified in the Vision should have at least two functions (seen in the swap-library/bus stop, and the Leysdown Illuminations, gorgeous and educational lighting). The principle of exchange was one impetus to write *A mark on the grass*. I wanted to produce a piece of writing that conveyed the multi-layered nature of the place, in a project that was focused on the visual and the built, and to give something outside of the terms of my contract.

A Portakabin project base bang in the middle of the Vision's defined 'priority area' brought the high visibility ideal for onsite research. I embarked on an in/formal process of identifying people's preoccupations: what's good already, what could be better, and what's missing, through conversations, meetings, research, observation, dreaming. Drop-in sessions allowed people to tell me about their ideas, their dissatisfactions and their fantasies. I heard how simultaneously great and rundown Leysdown is, how people feel safe and unsafe there, how great but inaccessible the beach is, how there's nothing to do, about exercise, isolation, lighting, litter, transport and play equipment. The Portakabin also gave service as a venue for workshops in photography, making mementoes, concrete poetry, and telling stories, run for visitors and residents by Nicole Mollett of Art@the Centre, a Swale Council-run community-arts project based on Sheppey, with a strong local presence. These contributed invaluable ideas, while also raising interest in the project and making new contacts.



Two examples from the set of postcards produced from a photography workshop

Leysdown is a holiday destination with hardly a postcard so we ran a workshop with local photographers to produce a set. I created a series of feedback cards, which gave another route for people to contribute: to inscribe or draw on as they wished, with anonymity an option. We distributed these along with the postcards at a mid-point celebration. Councillor Joe Brown of Coin Castle kindly set up a postbox in his arcade where people could deliver their cards. The responses – many of them reproduced in the *Leysdown Rose-tinted* booklet – were crucial in making decisions about the route our Vision was to take, confirming our leaps of imagination. Alongside the informal approach, discussions took place with RSPB, local artists' groups, traders, Natural England, police and community Wardens, BRfm radio, Rural Kent, Sheppey Wheels Community Transport, Local Studies Collection and Screen Archive South East.



The text on the back of the Feedback cards asked people to imagine how Leysdown would look in their wildest dreams

My research data and initial ideas were discussed and developed in collaboration with muf. We embraced the idea that the Vision had to involve one-off and continuing projects, long and short-term, temporary and permanent, low-key and ambitious, capital and revenue, to address the dreams and needs of resident and visitor populations, which are interdependent and at times incompatible. We had to devise a process where members of the muf practice and I added to a running set of ideas, which were discarded or developed further as we began to turn ideas into projects. Muf's experience of extensive public realm programmes was invaluable, particularly in limiting the project space to a realistic size and recognising what was likely to be fundable. Many of the projects can be realised with relatively small budgets and herald the longer-term, larger projects. We had to rely on success breeding success, publicity attracting more funding.

'My Winter is Your Summer' is a proposed set of seasonal skills and training workshops with residents, where capital permanent projects to attract visitors would be developed. Some of these are designed to specifically feed into built projects; all are designed to involve residents in change, whether to the public realm or to their skills pool or to the store of stories about Leysdown. The Rose

Watercolour workshop is one example: a visiting artist works with participants to develop an enjoyable skill while devising a colour palette to be used for other projects in the Vision, such as the Rose Garden planting and bird illuminations. Once it became clear that people wanted Leysdown to be transformed, but not to be changed, the direction of the Vision was set, to bring big splashes of the lyrical and hopes for the future, with performance, colour, abundance, and light, while keeping one foot always in the here and now. I described this as 'making Leysdown more itself'. Again, the Rose Garden project shows these principles working together: lavish, lurid, sensual yet essentially everyday; inexpensive yet high impact; quick to implement and long-life; and the watercolour workshops work as a trailer for the planting.



Architect's drawing overlaid on to photograph, to give impression of the Rose Garden on site at the Spinney in Leysdown.

Details of all the projects are in *Leysdown Rose-tinted* (<http://www.leysdownpc.kentparishes.gov.uk/default.cfm?pid=3129>), but I will mention a few more here. Can-do signage gives directions about what you can do in Leysdown (rather than prohibitions). The Stoop, a stage for community events and entertainments, begins life as a summer sandpit and raised seating with sea views. 'Staying put/Getting out more' is a series of initiatives designed to improve the daily lives of residents and visitors - their leisure time and their access to employment, education and training - by reinvigorating discussions about mainstream and community transport.

Looking at *Leysdown Rose-tinted* a year on, I am struck again by the productive contrasts and conflicts involved in the process of developing the projects

and my role as an artist/writer. The Vision is becoming reality. In fact, it's being used almost as a blueprint in a way that we would never have imagined and has been cited as a national exemplar of good practice by its funder, CABE. Vision is at once something measurable (and correctable) and something much less tangible, and difficult to pin down. Treading a path that encompassed both of these sums up the process and the outcome of the Vision, and strengthened my belief that regeneration is always work in progress, and needs to be always in process. The October launch of *Leysdown Rose-tinted* was a lively evening with music and dancing, as well as the standard speeches from the mayor and chief executive. I left exhilarated but also with the phrase 'I'll believe it when I see it', ringing in my ears. That verdict will soon be overturned, as the Vision starts to become visible within the coming year.

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'design for waiting room' in *outsidedge*, ed James Swinson, University of the Arts www.thelondongroup.com/outside/outside_3

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