



A&B

Arts & Business New Partners
working together

The Arts and Regeneration – what makes a place a place?

My work with Bee Bee Developments was primarily about the regeneration of Corby, Kettering and Wellingborough and, from our point of view, securing planning approval for the building of 20,000 new homes on land that we either owned or had options/partnerships upon.

However, in reality, the last thing that I was concerned with was planning permission and building regulations: - my role was much more about hearts and minds, garnering support for plans that would help to rejuvenate the area, improve prosperity, being investment, new jobs, and a step change in infrastructure and facilities:



The idea was that the Growth Agenda, in addition to bringing new homes in considerable numbers, would fund the uplift of healthcare provision, learning and skills, transport links, job prospects, town centre retail provision (in what were three 'tired' towns), as well as leading to the provision of better public open spaces, more attractive leisure and healthier lifestyle facilities. In short, the growth would fix the region, making it a much more attractive place in which people could live, work and play.

It really was like 'playing God' – not in an arrogant, 'aren't I important' kind of way, but an opportunity to help to shape the future of these places, to help deliver benefits and be part of a group of people and organisations that would make life better for everybody living there. And, not wanting to duck the issue, a more prosperous and attractive place, would mean higher house prices and land-values and so a greater return on our private sector investment and higher profits. It did mean, however, that I had almost a blank piece of paper, over and above the day job, to invest time, energy and some budget, in helping to bring about this uplift as described above.

And what are the biggest things that contribute to making a place a place? Community and culture and, in the case of Corby in particular, engagements through the arts.



It started with a meeting, which I hosted at our Manor House facility in East Northants, of all the major arts groups and providers in North Northamptonshire, including individuals, artists, council arts officers and potential funders as well as the people master planning the regeneration programme. I next met with the Corby 'Shout' Youth Theatre Group, explained what was coming in terms of regeneration, they didn't believe a word, but asked me to be in one of their productions and I accepted, finding myself as a participant in a joint youth and women's theatre group production entitled 'Women of Steel' about past problems and future prospects of the town.



It seems one cannot consistently, and publicly state how important the arts are and then refuse to take part when invited. It was fantastic by the way!

I then made contact with the Arts Council and the East Midlands office of its Arts&Business organisation which was a very good fit in terms of building-in the arts into businesses and the process of regeneration. I produced a proposal for two community arts projects to be delivered in Corby during what were the early stages of the regeneration process and both were approved to go ahead by Arts&Business. These were 'Alter' and 'Thinkspace'

Alter

Alter was a photographic project designed to engage with local residents, to create a lasting record of the place (before demolition and regeneration) and to create some artworks for sale. All this, bearing in mind that some of these 'no-go' areas on Corby estates had been winning international architecture awards less than 30 years previously, and were now earmarked for demolition.



Local visual artist and photography specialist James Smith was appointed to lead to project – this is his Borough Council Identity Card which explained to suspicious local residents what he was up to!

In fact, after some suspicions, the local people – and this is typical of Corby – took a shine to James, put their collective arm around his shoulders, invited him into their homes for tea and cake, and gave him, and the project, a warm welcome.



The project involved teaching some local people about photography and for members of the Bee Bee Developments team to take part, as per the Arts&Business criteria. Use of the large format 8"x6" camera and tripod was described by James as 'Dancing with the big lady'. Some of the results, whilst not attractive in the conventional sense, were nonetheless spectacular:



The project culminated with an exhibition at a major local gallery to which residents of the estate that was the location for the work, together with local councillors and regeneration leaders were invited to assess the work and take part in a lively and fascinating debate on 'place' and how architecture impacts the people who live within it:



Do buildings shape us
Or do we shape them?
Special Invitation:
Come and see James Smith's
photographic record of Kingswood,
Daneholme and Lodge Park and join
in with the debate it has raised.
Location: Ferrywoods
Contemporary Art
Brigstock, Northants.
For directions check our website
www.beebeehome.co.uk
Tuesday March 6th,
5.30pm - 8.30pm.
Refreshments provided.
RSVP: info@beebeehome.co.uk
Bee Bee Developments Ltd
Corby Council
CCRC

Invitation



It was a conspicuous success as a project, highly commended by the Arts Council and fully supported and appreciated by Corby Borough Council, the North Northamptonshire Development Company and Bee Bee Developments.

Thinkspace

Thinkspace, a project led by local artist Jo Dacomb, was designed to engage with local people on the Kingswood estate in Corby, where many of the buildings photographed by James Smith, were to be demolished, a new square created, and new homes would be built. In Kingswood there is an existing – and notorious – square called Canada Square, which was originally opened in the 1970 by the Canadian ambassador to the UK, but has since become the focal point for drug and substance abuse, petty crime and anti-social behaviour in the town (one of several it should be said). So plans for a new square would be met with some cynicism at best and Thinkspace was designed to get people of all ages interested and positive about the regeneration process.



Younger member of the team Jo meeting with young people in the café



Thinkspace created a series of events, from large public meetings, displays and presentations, to intimate, one-to-one encounters in the place where the new square will eventually be built, designed to discuss and discover how people make use of the space currently, and how they see it being used in the future.

The project involved children from a primary school that is virtually on the square as well as local residents' groups, councillors and architects and culminated in a day and a night of screening the interviews and comments of local people, feeding back their input to their peers and other interested groups:



Thinkspace won the Arts&Business community arts programme of the year and has been recognised by the Arts Council nationally, as one of the most successful community engagement projects in the East Midlands in the last 20 years.

Adrenaline Alley

Adrenaline alley is a social enterprise, a charity, and one of the top urban sports parks in the UK. Located within a former chicken factory in Corby, 'the Alley' is a top level skate park as well as the UK's leading centre for in-line skating and BMX bikes. It is housed in a building which is owned by Bee Bee Developments and sponsored jointly by them and major local employers including Corus Steel.



The Alley also houses a regular Graffiti Jam which is one of the most successful of its kind in the UK and is also home to an original Banksy piece which was completed anonymously and secretly at the first event prior to the Alley being officially opened. (it can be seen behind the in-line skater in the image above).



Adrenaline Alley won the BBC East Midlands Social Enterprise of the year and is now a major local and national championship venue for skating, boasting one of only two 50ft 'Vert ramps' in the country, in time to host a major team for the BMX entry into the Olympics in 2012.

The Alley is also a leading local arts organisation as home to a number of local music bands and sponsor of several major 'battle of the bands' competition. I am proud to say that I launched the Alley when it first opened and played my part, as a director of the charity, during its formative period, organising all media activity, battle of the bands competition and general support for the wonderful staff at the place:

