

# Innovations in space

Despite their importance, public spaces often suffer from a lack of imagination and innovation. **Jon Severs** finds that SEEDA are attempting to change all that with temporary transformations that push the boundaries of design.

Local councillors tend to like to keep things simple, especially in terms of design. It's not that they don't enjoy a good Picasso abstract, but more that the voters keep them in a job and design has the potential to alienate people. Safer, then, to stick to what people have already accepted.

However, in their reluctance to embrace their imaginations, there is a danger that the public spaces in many communities are being left unloved, unused and, worse of all, unnoticed, by a mass production approach to urban design. Thankfully, in the south-east at least, there are moves to take councillors out of their comfort zone.

"We are keen to make sure people create distinctive places built on what people value, rather than parachuting in imposed standard solutions," says Miranda Pearce, South-East England Development Agency (SEEDA) Urban Renaissance Manager.

"The public realm, the civic space, is an important meeting place, it is where businesses and communities meet, it sets the tone for the area. We recognise the impact the quality of the public realm can have on people's perception of an area."

With this in mind, SEEDA set up the Places from Spaces scheme. A public space in each of the cities of Brighton, Portsmouth and Southampton, that had been singled out by the local council as being in need of regeneration, was adopted for a week-long temporary transformation. The design was based on ideas from students from the local universities with help from local architects. The aim was to demonstrate that creative design is a feasible option for local authorities and also that there is expertise sitting dormant that councils could tap in to.

Pearce explains: "You need a range of expertise to create good urban environments and we were keen to link up with architectural

centres. We also wanted universities and councils to work closer together as there is rich expertise in universities that can be used, but isn't.

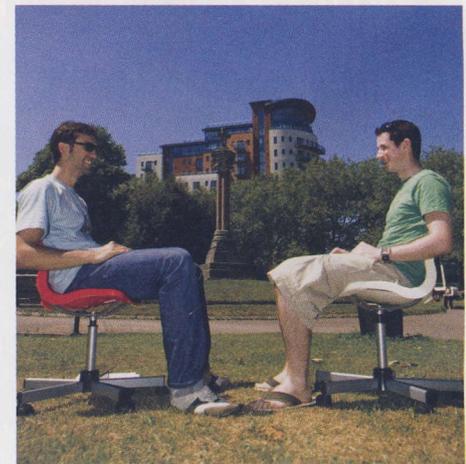
"Also, an important part of this was helping councils realise how they could involve the local communities in the creative process. The temporary transformations are a really good way of engaging with the community in a useful way."

The trouble is, there is an assumption that with the words 'innovation' or 'imaginative design' comes big budgets and inaccessible design concepts. SEEDA hopes to dispel the myth that interesting design comes at a high cost or that it is too 'out there' for voters to appreciate. Putting its money where its mouth is, it funded the week-long transformations itself.

Phil Smith of the Solent Centre for Architecture & Design, a key player in the scheme, explains: "It was an opportunity for people in local government to take more risks. As we were in partnership with them and the project was funded by us at SEEDA, it allowed us to be more creative in terms of our approach. But one of the criteria for the space was that each space should have been on the agenda for change.

"So there were no specific plans in place for the sites, but there was a realisation that these spaces were problematic, that there was a need for change and there was potential for resources to be available to put those changes in practice."

So while the transformations were 'temporary', there was always one eye on the project's legacy and an insistence that important information could be collated and used to influence future developments of the sites. Hence, the brief for each project was geared to fixing the long-standing problems at each space.



The issue at Brighton's Valley Gardens was marshy land preventing development and its position between the two main thoroughfares in and out of Brighton. Brighton University architecture students were tasked with making the space something people would want to stay in and make use of.

The winning entry was by Lucy Palmer who envisioned a nature trail plotted out using 700



trees in pots to bring some greenery and interest back to an area surrounded by heavy urban development.

Ian McKay, Brighton Architect and Lecturer, said it ticked all the boxes: "Lucy's walking woods idea was thought to be a winner on so many different levels. People do react to plants and trees in a way that they would not to an inanimate object. We settled on six native species of tree, which would complement the grove of mature Elm trees in the gardens, one of only two places in the UK where mature Elms still survive.

"We were all biting our fingers a little bit, as when you have something new like this, you never know how it is going to go. But, in the end, we had a fantastic public response. There were so many more people on the site, it felt completely different."

Down the coast in Southampton, things were slightly different. Instead of architectural students, the Institute of Sound and Vibration at Southampton University stepped in to transform the Queens Park area with a soundscape scheme. The park is used mainly as a thoroughfare and suffers from heavy noise pollution from the surrounding roads. The students at the university came up with the idea of playing sounds in different areas of the park. Users of the park could take their chair and sit within reach of the sound they liked best, which includes the likes of running water, a chanting football crowd and birdsong.

Mark Ellison, Principal Urban Designer at Southampton City Council, says it was a massive success: "It has been a very positive project and I think all those involved in it on the city council side have learnt a lot from it. We raised the profile of the park, we collected direct information which would be useful to us in influencing design in respect of seating position preferences, and the soundscape itself has emerged as a possible tool we could use for a permanent transformation of the park."

At the time of writing, the Portsmouth project had yet to have its week in the spotlight. But the transformation of the city's major transport interchange, The Hard, was to centre

on reconnecting the area with the city, as at present it is visually and functionally cut off. Hence, routes were to be established and marked out from The Hard to the city's key areas. This was to be done with beach huts and items representing the history of the city.

But has any of this rubbed off on the politicians? Well, the relationship-building element of the scheme does seem to have worked. Pearce reveals: "We have had very positive feedback on the legacy of the project, mostly in terms of the chance for different professions within the councils having the chance to meet on a project basis, so that they are able to learn together and build relationships."

As for the design side, Smith says the transformations will have an impact: "The permanent transformations may not happen in exactly the same way, but the temporary interventions have been catalysts for discussion. The process has fed into the discussion on what is going to be happening in that space in the future."

But in order for all this to have a real impact, the reticent councillors need to be persuaded. In general, Pearce says there was a positive response from local authority members, though she would have liked more of them to attend the planning meetings on a more consistent basis.

There was also a feeling that some were perhaps more sceptical than supportive, as Ellison explains: "We haven't told the council leader of its popularity yet, but I think it would come as a surprise to him as I am not sure how convinced he was of the project, though he did come down and give us an hour of his time and was supportive. I think he felt that it would not be welcomed, but that has not been the case."

Considering the weight of positive feedback from the public about the temporary transformations, this sort of cynicism about imaginative design looks distinctly outdated. Thanks to the Places from Spaces scheme, councillors should be less afraid to try new and different things, as the public are more than ready to embrace something different in the design of their public spaces. ●

• The temporary transformation of public spaces has shown local authorities how imaginative and affordable regeneration can be achieved in the public realm.