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Inspire: a UK participatory public art evaluation

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Introduction

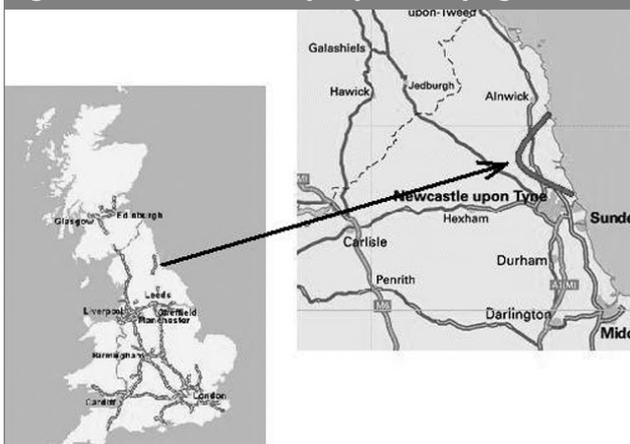
This article focuses on a participatory evaluation of the Inspire public art programme in South East Northumberland, UK. The evaluation was to determine whether several of its key objectives were achieved and raises a number of interesting issues about using participatory approaches in public art programmes.

South East Northumberland covers 56 square miles. It has

a population of 141,000 (see Figure 1). It was a prosperous area with successful fishing, coal mining and ship building industries. But between the 1980s and 2000, there was a significant decline. The area suffered from unemployment, lack of investment and a decline in public services such as health and education. It had socio-economic problems, poor infrastructure, and high levels of ill health, unemployment and poorly maintained housing. Many young people are now choosing to leave the area.

In response, in 1997 Northumberland County Council (the regional public administration) and other key partners from the public, private and voluntary sectors formed the Northumberland Strategic Partnership (NSP). The partnership was created to undertake a comprehensive regeneration of the county (Audit Commission, 1999).¹ Inspire is supported by the NSP, which also commissioned the Northumberland Public Art Plan (researched and written by Commissions North), which informs public art development throughout Northumberland.²

Figure 1: Location of the Inspire public art programme



¹ Regeneration means achieving economic, social and environmental development, including reducing unemployment, increasing investment and improving health care and education, across the entire region

² Commissions North was established within Arts Council England, North East in 1999 to support public art commissioning within capital and regeneration projects. See: www.publicartonline.org.uk/news/reports/inspire.html

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The Inspire Public Art Programme

The programme forms a significant contribution to the regeneration of South East Northumberland, by improving the environment through public art and good quality design. Inspire commissions artists to produce landmarks, gateway features, sculptures, artworks in buildings, and environmental enhancements (such as improvements in street and communal area designs) in the boroughs of Wansbeck and Blyth in South-east Northumberland.

One of our main objectives was to involve local communities in the development of the art projects. Inspire identifies the need for public art in a local area and, depending on circumstances, can involve communities in choosing an artist or commissioning the artist themselves. It can then involve communities in choosing or developing the individual art pieces. Some of Inspire’s objectives include:

- to identify and commission new artwork to improve the image of Blyth Valley and Wansbeck;
- to enable artists to work collaboratively with other design professionals and to become involved at the earliest stages; and
- to ensure that key stakeholders are appropriately engaged in public art and design development.

The evaluation of the Inspire Programme was commissioned to determine whether this had been achieved.

The evaluation process

After two years, an evaluation was commissioned to measure the Inspire Public Art Programme’s impact on local communities and the regeneration process.

Part of this evaluation took a participatory approach. We wanted a bottom-up perspective on the role of art in the area’s regeneration; how the public had been involved; and how the art has affected people’s sense of place and belonging in South East Northumberland. About 60 people in total were involved in the evaluation, including:

- members of the public who used the public spaces where the art was located;

Box 1: Focus group discussions

In focus group discussions, participants discussed:

- What makes a place good to live in?
- What does an attractive environment mean to you? Is what’s attractive to you attractive to someone else?
- What impact does increasing the attractiveness have? Does it make you want to stay in the area? Does it make you proud of the area? Does it lower crime? Does it make the area more prosperous? How?
- What do you think of the art project? What are the strengths and weaknesses? What would you change? How would you do it differently?
- Tell me about the process of your involvement in the project. How did you want to be involved? Do you think others wanted to be involved? Do you think it should be left to professionals? How would you change your involvement? More/less, earlier/later?
- Does your involvement in an art project make you feel you have more ownership of the art and the surroundings?
- Do you feel better about living in the area and your place within it as a result of your involvement with the art project?

- residents who lived where the art was to be located;
- residents’ association members involved in the art development planning process;
- residents who attended area committees where the art development took place;
- frontline community development professionals who had worked with local communities on other development projects;
- elected councillors who represented residents from areas where the art was located;
- young people who lived where the art was located; and
- community leaders e.g. Area Assembly representatives and Church leaders.

We wanted to create a process of critical appraisal and reflection amongst the participants. We talked to groups and individuals who had been most involved with the public art development, either by choosing the location of the art and artist, or being involved in decisions about the type of art. We held facilitated focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews in a series of convenient times and places, such as in local community centres, after community meetings, in public spaces such as the main street, and in areas where the art was located (Box 1).

Measuring Inspire’s impact: reflections on the approach

One of our objectives was to increase the attractiveness of the environment to local communities, local organisations, and to visitors. Our evaluation showed that local communi-

Box 2: Some Public Art examples

Newbiggin Sailing Club Wall before development. This is a public gathering place. Note how run-down and unattractive it looks



Photo: Richard Hollinshead, Public Art Officer, Wansbeck District Council

Sailing club members choosing which artist they would like to paint the installations for their wall.



Photo: Malcolm Muir (permission granted by the Newbiggin Hall Sailing Club)

The Sailing Club with the installed public art (three paintings on the wall).



Photo: Richard Hollinshead, Public Art Officer, Wansbeck District Council

The renovated building together with the public art, make the public space much brighter and more cheerful. Some comments from passers-by included:
It's quite relaxin' seeing that.
Hasn't it tidied the area up?
I expected them to be covered in spray paint, but they haven't been touched.
Everyone who's seen them has said they're wonderful.

ties and stakeholder organisations felt satisfied with the outcome and were supportive of the public art within their local environment. They felt that the Programme had increased the attractiveness of the environment (see Box 2). For example, one group of local residents said that they felt that the art and its development '...belongs to the Hirst Community'.

Another objective was to help make the environment more modern and distinctive. To judge whether this had

been achieved, we asked young adults (aged 16–24) living in the area what they thought. All the young people involved in the evaluation were very enthusiastic about the Inspire art and expressed considerable support for the modernity of the art. They recognised the importance of remembering local history and heritage – although, in their own words, 'not to live it'. They felt that public art gave an area a sense of identity; it encouraged other people to visit and had an influence on whether residents chose to leave

Box 3: Comments from young people

Two focus groups were held with young people aged between 12 and 18, from one rural and one urban setting. All members agreed that there was little for them to do in their areas:

... there's nowt for us to do ... the only good thing is the park.

...if it's good I'd stay, something to do, somewhere that looks good.

They wanted to see art combined with resources they could use, such as sculptures and art in a modern skate park, and street furniture:

...build wi' some benches 'cos we're sitting on the walls.

They also wanted to see a more attractive, modern and forward-looking environment, which would make them more inclined to stay:

...more people would come, less people would leave.

or stay in an area (see Box 3).

A main objective was to ensure that communities and stakeholders were properly engaged in public art development. For us, this meant providing satisfactory opportunities for people to get involved in the type of art selected. Our evaluation indicates that communities and stakeholders have been properly engaged (see Box 3). We also wanted to know if there was a link between feelings of public ownership of public art and the level of stakeholder involvement. Our evaluation found that the most important factor in public ownership is process. We found that attention to the consultation process is key to how confident community members felt in both choosing and feeling a sense of ownership of the art. The participatory evaluation showed that if stakeholders feel they have had sufficient opportunity to air their views, even (possibly particularly) their negative views, to discuss proposals and the art, then they feel a greater level of ownership and satisfaction (see Box 4).

We also wanted to see if there had been any change in people's sense of place in the case study examples, after being involved in the public art projects. Our evaluation indicated that after being involved, even in a consultative manner, people felt better about living in their local environment (see Box 4).

Lessons learnt and critical reflections

Our original research proposal laid out our participatory evaluation approach:

Participatory evaluation (PE) consists of community members or stakeholders evaluating a project that they have been involved in from the outset, i.e. in design, planning and implementation. Participatory evaluation is a process of critical appraisal and reflection by community members or stakeholders of the successes, failures, strengths and weaknesses of the project and often leads to planning of subsequent ventures in light of the evaluation.

Box 4: Comments about public involvement in the art development

One professional who worked with a community group said, 'a good relationship developed between the residents and the service providers'. And public meetings provided people with the necessary opportunity to discuss art project proposals with the Public Art Development Officer. One group said that

...people weren't scared of new ideas but wanted things talked about and explained

...it's about sharing information, [Inspire] has been good at doing that ... need a debate and discussion and they [Inspire] did that.

At one meeting, a critical discussion developed about the issues surrounding the art. The group leader said:

It was a good job there was a bar at the leisure centre, 'cos the discussions went over and over and things got heated at times.

At the end of the session, the members held a vote and an artist was chosen, with two-thirds of the members in favour. The group said that 'at the end we were all satisfied'.

This is how PE should work in an ideal world. But for the Inspire Programme, a number of factors influenced the application of PE. We found that:

- Public art initiatives are often part of wider regeneration processes, initiated by either administrative bodies or Council Officers and not by local communities themselves. This means that the 'public' are often involved at a relatively late stage in the project development process. Participation was only introduced later into the project development process. The community members did not decide 'I want a public art project here' so were not evaluating projects that they had initiated and implemented by themselves – as is the true nature of PE.
- Stakeholders have included senior managers in the NSP and local authorities, project officers, politicians and community members (many of whom were involved in this participatory evaluation). This involvement included discussions and decisions about the implementation of public art that cut across administrative and social boundaries in South East Northumberland.
- Public art is judged not only by those communities in which it is sited or who see it, but also by strategic art bodies such as Commissions North, the Arts Council, other artists, regeneration specialists, landscape designers and funders. They are removed from the PE process and have their own rationale for judging quality. However, the results from this PE will be fed back to them, for their information.
- Time is needed to evaluate the worth or value of a piece of public art. Perceptions of public art often change over a period of years. This makes participatory evaluation diffi-

Box 5: More Public Art examples

Example from an arts trail: *Footsteps in the Snow*. This piece is along a walkway. It is meant to make the trail more interesting and attract visitors to the area



Photo: Richard Hollinshead, Public Art Officer, Wansbeck District Council

Example from an arts trail: *Eating for England*. This will be on the same walkway as *Footsteps in the Snow*. This artwork is in development and will be installed soon.



Photo: Richard Hollinshead, Public Art Officer, Wansbeck District Council

cult in the short term and represents only one stage of a long PE exercise. Evaluations should be repeated every couple of years to see how people's reactions to the art develops and evolves. For example, Gateshead's *Angel of the North* created by Anthony Gormley, met with widespread resistance when it was built, but is now a symbol of the North of England.

- The definition of community is very complex in the evaluation of public art. For one project, the Klondyke Footbridge in South East Northumberland, the 'community' consists of local people who walk over the bridge, and the car and lorry drivers who pass under it whilst using the A189 road. This makes accessing 'community members' to carry out participatory evaluation difficult.

Issues of representation

The Inspire Programme made significant efforts to identify and consult with as many identified groups as possible, within the time and resources available. Our evaluation found that true community representation is difficult in public art projects, partly as there is a lack of mechanisms that allow access to different groups. Community fora are predominantly made up of older people, with often more men than women. The region has a history of male-dominated trade union public speaking and participation. So it was harder to consult with women or people from black and minority ethnic groups.

The public meetings organised by Inspire had a very low participation rate. This is often the case with more 'public' projects, whereas projects that affect a specific residential

community tend to have a committed and enthusiastic user group. However, those involved in the evaluation felt that the process Inspire provided gave people the opportunity to become involved if they wanted to. This issue was raised by one group who thought that 'only a minority [of people] want to be involved anyway ... the Church Council were impressed [with the proposals] although not many want to be involved but are for it'. Our evaluation supported this view.

Participatory evaluations are meant to gain a representative insight into how community members have been involved in something that directly impacts on them. These projects have an impact on many people, but those involved are often not representative of the wider community. However, we feel that the processes that Inspire has employed to engage with the public have been thorough and varied. And on reflection, the evaluation indicates that the process seems to be as – if not more – important than widespread community involvement.

Conclusions

Involving the community in the evaluation of public art projects is not as straightforward as it may be in other more 'traditional' development projects where PE is used. But we learnt many useful things by taking a participatory approach. People want the opportunity to become involved in public art development should they wish to. And a successful public art project should provide accessible opportunities for local people to voice their dissatisfaction or raise questions and discuss issues, even if they do not want to become directly

involved. We have also learnt that it is worth using participatory evaluation approaches in any project scenario, not just traditional 'development' projects.

For example, in area regeneration initiatives, we found that many people felt that art was lower down the list of socio-economic and environmental improvements in the areas where they lived. Yet its presence gave added value to those improvements. This notion of added value was a theme

throughout the evaluation. People were surprised to realise just how much positive impact the art had within an existing development; how it beautified an area and produced a focal point for discussion.

And finally, we learnt that it was the consultation process – allowing people to voice their opinions, hold discussions and meet artists – that was key to local ownership of public art.

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