Managing high street change through silliness

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has worked predominantly in theatre on the street since the early 1990s, founding the Bureau Of Silly ideas in 2001. He is most well known for Sid N’ Nancy, the radio-controlled wheelie bins, and the Fire-Breathing Robot Horses. He is also amazing at losing keys, but only in the process of thinking up some new, fun, theatrical intervention. Roger is a specialist in making people laugh, smile and question the fabric of their reality.

Abstract ‘If at first, the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it’ is a great quote from an inspirational man who has sown seeds of hope and fear in all of us. Is this true? Who was this man, and should this rationale be applied to the process of regeneration and renewal in the public realm? Other papers have been cross-referenced, and interviews conducted with programmers of outdoor work and Clive Lyttle, who is a combined arts officer for Arts Council England (ACE) (it should be noted that his views do not necessarily reflect those of ACE). The term ‘Street Art’ is used to describe art of different and combined disciplines that is presented for no cost to the audience in the public realm. The economic impact of some street theatre festivals has been researched, examples of best practice provided, lessons learned pointed out and a hypothesis advanced on future potential developments and how applied activity during and after the process of managed regeneration and renewal can increase well-being, create community cohesion and social capital while having a positive economic impact. This paper is of value to practitioners and policy-makers in place marketing and town centre management, local authority economic development officers, business managers, urban regeneration consultants, academics, tourism officers, community leaders and town centre residents.

Keywords: footfall, ownership, income, pineapple, street art, public realm, site work

INTRODUCTION

I formed the Bureau Of Silly ideas (BOSi) in 2001 and I am referred to as a ‘maverick’ in the industry. The work of BOSi is regularly funded as part of the ACE National Portfolio of combined arts.

Previously I have worked predominantly in popular culture, touring with theatre companies and musicians, making videos and sculpture as a photographer, performer, director, maker and cameraman.

With that in mind let me explain some of the thinking behind the BOSi.

We spend a lot of time looking at what most people find annoying, boring and/or disgusting in the public realm. Often this is a great starting point for our work: a point of shared annoyance on a high street unifies people and starts to break boundaries, creating a new community formed by people of different backgrounds, races, political opinion and economic status. All will unite to grumble about the road works, bins, state of the footpath lack of light, empty shops, nowhere to park etc.

The fact that these otherwise
The challenges of producing this sort of work are significant. As we do not charge our audiences, we have to find partners willing to invest, and our usual place of work, the High Street, is changing. The street serves as an alfresco gallery and theatre, and the work we deliver falls into two categories:

1. work that we seek to produce and place;
2. work that is purchased from our stock of silliness and placed where the client requires.

Category 1 creates the stock sold in category 2 — mostly at festivals and in areas of regeneration to help quell bad feeling, increase footfall, and generate well-being and sense of community through shared emotional experience.

It seems a given that retail alone is not maintaining high streets as a destination place, and many of our high streets are starting to look the same in the day as they do at night, with the shops closed.
and a spattering of scary-looking drunken people. I believe applied street art is sometimes used as a tool to help maintain respect and generate footfall but it is not a guaranteed quick fix and takes time for the reward to arrive.

I sit on the steering group of the National Association of Street Artists and we, along with other agencies and associations are working at how to communicate and validate what we have witnessed as the effects of our work, in terms of the economic and wellbeing influence on communities over extended periods of time. This presents a challenge in its own right, as the benefits seem to take longer than an average political term to make themselves an invaluable and essential asset to a town. There are a few examples where street theatre festivals have stood the test of time and are now part of local authorities’ obliged spends, especially after studies have shown the positive economic impact.

WHICH UK TOWNS, CITIES AND REGIONS ARE REAPING THE REWARDS OF USING STREET ART?

Some examples of successful festivals

Street Diversions in Chelmsford has just celebrated its tenth anniversary. When we played it in year one, with our Hole Job show we had an audience of half a dozen embarrassed teenagers and a couple of local drunks for our first show, and possibly a hundred for the second. Eight years later, we had expectant audiences of many hundreds, who had heard about it via word of mouth for the past years. In year ten, it would have been hard to make the space for the show. Liam Rich, who programmes the festival for the city, has been told by local traders that footfall is increased by 45 per cent during the festival.

The country’s most established street theatre festival is Winchester Hat Fair. In 2009, it attracted 30,000 visitors, who spent over £734,000 on accommodation, food, drinks and parking. Kate Hazel, the current festival director reports that the figure has now increased to over £1 million and this allows for negative cost as well as positive, but it is still hard for them to justify the £30,000 they contribute to provide the leverage for the additional £100,000 the festival costs.

The 2011 Lakes Alive Festival in Cumbria is reported to have attracted over 25,000 visitors, many from overseas, with 70 acts from 12 countries. In total, 57,000 people attended Lakes Alive events (this includes the local population) and the total net impact on the Cumbrian economy was in the region of £2.4 million. In 2012, the festival attracted 17,000 new people, over 80 per cent of whom said they would be very likely to attend another event in future, and it had a net economic impact of just over £3 million. For every £1 spent on the events, £3.50 was generated for the Cumbrian economy.

Stockton International Riverside Festival has grown steadily for 25 years and has helped the area evolve as a festival destination, with other events happening throughout the year. The local authority is taking into account the festival’s use of public space as a major point of its regeneration programme (Frank Wilson Festival Director).

This seems to prove that established festivals are a bonus to a local economy and high street but is this only for the duration of the festival? Jo Burgess of Fools Paradise has been programming regular, small-scale street acts in Wigan, and what has been interesting to her is the development of social media groups that discuss the shared emotional experiences provided by street performances. She feels that street theatre encourages people to meet and develop a sense of ownership of
their public spaces.

Some festivals, such as Norfolk and Norwich, are developing annual outreach programmes that will engage the local community in the development of activity having a focus during the annual festival dates, and Lakes Alive tours the rural communities of Cumbria for many weeks before their Mint Fest in Kendal.

EXAMPLES OF OUR OWN WORK IN REGENERATION CONTEXTS

Burst Pipe Dream

This project was commissioned with the intention of repopulating and increasing footfall in a new square in Brighton. The square is sited on an old car park, and the construction works had overrun by a couple of years with some of the buildings, including a library and restaurant, being open before the works concluded. My first challenge was to attract people to this new area and create interest. I chose to play on the public feelings of apathy and resentment towards the area always being a building site, and created a brand-new, significant regeneration programme for the area, working with the Brighton Festival, local authorities, media and some students. I wanted to create controversy, and then make people smile and join in the suspension of disbelief. To do this, I created a company dedicated to finding the perfect site for a Giant Squid Farm. The conceit was that the works on the site had been delayed by the discovery of an underground chamber that would be an ideal place to lure a mating pair of Giant Squid — of course!

The company Big Oriental Squid Inc. was formed to be the delivery device, and appeared to apply for planning permission and promote its case of bringing economic advantage to the area through the industries of pigment and protein supply. Meanwhile, students were encouraged to spread rumour about the unethical practices of the company.

We spent two months setting the ground with occasional press releases from the company and tie-ins with the Brighton Festival media team. The ten-day finale started with a local BBC breakfast radio interview held with the actor playing the part of the CEO of BOSInc. He explained that in order to lure the Giant Squid, we needed pheromones generated by mammals in a state of fear, and invited the good people of Brighton to bring their pets to us in the square where we had a special collar and would give them a little fright.

While the CEO was on air, a BOSInc-branded shipping container with logos, website information and an 0800 number announcing the arrival of ‘Europe’s first Giant Squid Farm’ was placed on the square and left with the sound of distressed cats and dogs emanating from it. This activity attracted public and planned media attention, and the students started to protest on the square.

As the construction workers and equipment eventually arrived, spectators would see behaviour patterns and signage designed to make them question the works. The workforce was formed of circus performers, who juggled road cones and performed somersaults, while a dug-out trench (a piece of set, specially built to closely resemble real construction works) housed an interactive water feature that children soon discovered and played with. People started to come to the square to join in and play, and there was a staged protest that was televised and resulted in the company changing its policy on scaring animals. Instead, we started to harvest fear pheromones from children by spinning them around in a cage on the end of a mini-digger (a specially built, fairground certified ride using a digger
donated by Takeuchi) (Figure 2).

This work attracted many thousands of people to the square, and I was most surprised by the cyber traffic generated, with tens of thousand of hits to the BOSInc website.

On this occasion we were in control of the space, in others we have worked alongside and within real works, which raises a lot of issues to do with perceptions of the real contractors and traffic flows.

When Brixton High Street was repaved, we worked alongside Conway and had to demonstrate to Transport for London that we were very risk-aware and trained in construction industry-specific legislation. We developed an overarching narrative, and placed performers and installations alongside and in some of the works. The points of visual and performative engagement succeeded in making people stop, think and smile at the inconveniences caused, although the planned use of media to tell the overarching narrative was squashed by the local authority for fear of being associated with ‘silly’ and possible negative spin. This is both a shame and a huge missed opportunity, as additional media development is what fuels traffic to websites, which we can then develop with the local communications team to generate positive association and legacy.

CHALLENGES TO THIS WAY OF WORKING

The projects and festivals detailed above, both my own and those taking place in other areas of the country, are notable for their success, but all of these projects and festivals seeking to embed Street Arts into public space face challenges not only to their successful realised, but to even getting off the ground at all. The major challenges faced by artists and
organisations working within the sector and seeking to embed their work in public spaces are touched upon below.

**Health and safety**
Frequently, health and safety is cited as a reason not to allow us to work. However, with a bit of persistence and further investigation, everything is possible, it just gets heavy and expensive. We have extracted fear from children by spinning them in a cage fixed to a mini-digger and been allowed to work inside active construction sites. Celebrated creative company Artichoke have rebuilt parts of the Mall in London, and moved a lot of lamp-posts in Liverpool, but only after proper risk assessment and method statements have been created.

**Finances**
Cost is frequently cited as another reason for us not to be able to work; I would debate that it is not so much the cost as the lack of budgeting to include street arts in a project from the onset, that become the barrier. We are used to making a lot out of a little, and can often find additional funds to put in a project pot if there is enough lead-in time. It seems that sometimes we are called in as a treat for people because a bit of money was found somewhere (usually towards the end of a construction project) and then our impact and overall value is significantly reduced.

**Project planning**
As touched upon above, the biggest barrier to creating and embedding quality street art into renewal and regeneration or construction works is the lack of joined-up thinking at the planning stages. To have all the parties involved in a regeneration project working together from the start to look at embedding art into the process of the works, as well as the completed landscapes that the works create, is the ideal, but sadly not the norm.

**SOME DREAM VISIONS**
For new builds, I would like to see street arts creators paid to be involved in the initial consultation, with a brief of creating new ways of listening, observing and investigating local opinion, history, and myths and legends. They would then be able to join the architects, planners and construction teams, and find areas of time and space during the works that can be points of engagement and celebration.

Take Lambeth as an example of an area with significant regeneration plans currently in development. The area has a very diverse heritage mix and its claims to heritage firsts include the site of the world’s first circus (Astley’s amphitheatre), the first public museum (Tradescant’s The Ark), and celebrating the myth of having grown the first pineapple in Europe.

From this early point on we can engage in an interesting way, exchanging significant, not very common local knowledge, for opinions relating to the regeneration proposals. To do this, I would run with the pineapple theme, making it large and eccentric so people are curious — performers juggling pineapples, giant, inflatable pineapple gazebos and pineapple lanterns would appear. These points of engagement would be staffed by people who could answer questions as to why a pineapple has appeared and invite spectators to comment on the future plans (Figure 3). Soon, the pineapple heritage would be being talked about in shopping queues, hairdressers, bars, pubs, cafés and social clubs, and people would as well have the chance to contribute to the consultation. Soon, Lambeth could be re-branded as the ‘Pineapple Borough’, celebrating its association with an international symbol of hospitality. It
would not take long for people to say ‘Hey y’know they should make a building that resembles a pineapple as a house and a museum, and with things for the people in it!’.

In a large project, the disruption caused by the works can easily span a generation or two, and some local families and children will grow up with this process as an everyday occurrence, while others will move in and live in the area with the process still going on. Keeping children out of construction sites is hard, so why not make child-safe areas that children can think they have broken into, and leave things to be discovered in it that link to local history and future happenings during the process? The potential list of discoveries is endless, and in Lambeth could include pineapples and mythical creatures as well as artefacts that may have fallen from Elizabeth I’s boat as she sailed down the River Effra to visit Brixton.

If residents are encouraged to participate in the process of change in a hospitable way and have access to some funds, they will use the new spaces to generate cultural activities that attract newcomers and growth. I believe it will always be in the land and property owners’ financial interest to help fund these activities regularly: they will find that the percentage return over time will be significant.

Similarly, a high street is in decline only if people do not use it, and street arts can be used to bring people in and recreate communities. This needs to be planned and takes time to grow, but once people arrive, entrepreneurs will appear to take advantage of them. Where I have seen high street and market growth along side street arts, the growth has frequently been in localism, with artisan foods and crafts becoming the staple of a market place that has added flourish with performance and music. One example of this is Brixton Village.
I look forward with interest to the studies that are soon to be published on the economic and cultural impact of the Showtime Festival that spread over London during the summer of 2012 as well as The Association Of Town Centre Management longer term study working across Europe Measuring The Impact Of Culture Led Events.  

It seems that more focus is being put on the culture industries with a view to how they survive in recession and can continue to grow. It is a simplistic view to take and a mistake to look only at paying audiences and their return. There is a valid argument that is starting to be proven by studies showing the economic return to high streets and communities by the placing of free-to-access cultural activity. I understand that the London Show Time report puts additional spend at £5.47 per person across the festival. It is now that this country should be investing in its public realm cultural activity. I have heard arguments that demonstrate that the punks of the 1970s became a tourist attraction bringing significant income into the country.

There is a need for a place dedicated to collective study and creation across all sections of public realm cultural activity and placement of art. We still live in a world where the art forms are studied and commissioned separately, and I propose we should make a centre dedicated to cross-platform creation of work in the public realm. This would be a place where producers can work next to artists and see them working, and artists see each other’s practice; circus skills near a foundry and dance academy, with painters, fountain makers, engineers and crafts folk all working alongside each other, with a focus on improving the world through the placement of great art for everyone. This would surely be a prudent investment for any community, especially a city that sells itself as a cultural capital. And the building could be a statement of hospitality in its own right — back to pineapple!

A final observation is that it appears to me that the creation and allowance of eccentric behaviour in public places generates audiences, participants and communities who are willing to spend and invest. It should therefore come as no surprise that Boris Johnson said ‘At a time of recession it is more important than ever to invest in the arts’, and Albert Einstein said, ‘If at first, the idea is not absurd, then there is no hope for it’.  

Too true.

References