

Learning to Let Go

Let go...no way! The phrase is not in the public commissioner's vocabulary. Public funding requirements, design management procedures, risk adverse commissioners - all contribute to bland and boring interpretation projects. How can clients use artists to best effect?

Working with artists on public sector capital projects is in vogue. The potential benefits to both commissioner and artist are immense, however the right commissioning environment has to be created.

The practice of commissioning artists has evolved from design competitions to the now more widely used approach of artist placements and residencies. A critical factor in a successful artist commission is to create an environment where the artist can reveal an unknown insight. This environment needs to allow for the artist to research, probe and develop ideas in dialogue with the client. The outcome is probably not known at the start, so a working relationship based on trust is needed.

The ongoing arts programme at the new Royal Infirmary of Edinburgh gives a glimpse of how artists can interpret and give life to public space. The programme was initiated by a senior consultant who organised an Arts Committee with representation from consultants, managers, nursing staff, patients, the voluntary sector and the arts. The Committee meets once a month and have delegated project delivery to Artlink (a specialist arts and disability organisation) and Ginko. Members commit to three years' service - essential due to the long-term nature of arts projects. The Committee is mainly funded by Hospital Endowments but also needs to fundraise for each project, which it does through Artlink and Ginkgo.

The Committee appointed an artist selection sub-group, which is enriched with members from particular departments or interest areas. An important element of the Committee has been to ensure that its members are actively involved with artists and that art is produced rather than being just a management vehicle. The enthusiasm and energy of the Committee is essential to the success of its projects.

The Committee contracted Ginkgo to develop a strategy for commissioning artists. This strategy identified a programme of commissions based on 'mapping' the new hospital both in a physical and cultural sense, and the creation of artist designed spaces. Projects to the value of £800,000 were identified and two were taken forward:

Commissions for three 'mapping' artists to work on 25-day placements within the hospital were advertised nationally. The commissions were divided into research, concept design and implementation phases. This allowed for research and artistic freedom but provided approval points within the commissioning process. Each artist

found his or her own way into the hospital environment (this proved difficult and on other projects we have used facilitators to help information finding for the artist).

Each 'mapping' artist explored an aspect of the relationship between historical and contemporary hospital life. These have resulted in a proposed series of lightboxes; phrases associated with the old hospital engraved into oak boards (inspired by the names of junior doctors engraved into dining tables from the 1850s onwards); and a series of engraved milestones about travelling to the new hospital from around Scotland.

The Sanctuary was designed by leading Scottish artist, Donald Urquhart. He worked with the Chaplaincy team, hospital staff and the City's faith communities to create a space for patients, staff and visitors. Its design responds directly to the needs and aspirations of the hospital community. It is a space that is 'other'; set aside from the clinical environment yet located at the heart of it. The structure of the space is designed to accommodate individuals seeking solace, small groups, and use by a larger hospital congregation. It references, both obliquely and directly, the natural world and wider landscape. Through this and the extensive use of natural materials an overall feeling of light yet solid simplicity has been created.

Through combining the different artists' commissions a programme of work is evolving that helps visitors locate themselves within the hospital environment in a creative and imaginative way. Over time new commissions will help articulate the spaces and provide information about the hospital's working and cultural environment.

Working with artists will reveal unexpected insights; these provide a platform for engaging with visitors in a way that will be remembered. Please take a risk on art – it's worth it.

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