

Shape Newham: A critique

This is commentary about [Shape Newham](#) (note the domain name, apparently they do not understand the difference between 'for profit' and 'non profit') and its associated meetings and projects.

This is their strap line *Newham Council want you to get involved in the shaping of Newham's public places and are investing £1.5m to make it happen*. So this is not 'shaping the borough' merely doodling on it. The thrust seems to be mainly (highly sanitised, see comments on Amam later on) 'street art' executed via a coterie of (well-paid, no doubt) 'consultants'.

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Budget

For a borough that is still in financial trouble, the budget for something that is currently as flawed as this is enormous. The budget would provide a great many extra youth activities, for example, so we could finally kick Coca-Cola Parklives out of the borough. I haven't investigated how much of the budget is going into the consultants, but I will be FOIing that, really soon now. The 'grants' to the artists are fairly trivial £5K and £3K, so the structure of the budget is 'interesting'. Even if I were to be in favour of a human scale version of this, it would be enacted without the consultants (or maybe we could fetch some from Jordan?) and as pilot project(s).

Silos

The revival of this project has be associated with some participative meetings. I'll admit that I didn't stay to the end of mine (Forest Gate), it was far too irritating. The proposals, as usual (or as conventional civil service practice) were in silos, 'youth', 'greening' etc. without any awareness that any of these things are connected. In fact the 'greening' seems to involve street art which uses a fair quantity of pollutants (OK this is de minimis, but). Bigger, we have 'greening' but I'm still seeing petrol motor leaf blowers and chemical sprays used at the edge of West Ham Park. I'm still seeing inaction on idling, something simple, as well. So the business of silos means that contradictions are masked or hidden. We have 'greening' as gesture, not as fact.

Vague Ambition

I'm not going to make a detailed critique of the format and process of the meetings which are similar to the current citizen's assembly meetings. I was informed, sometime last year, that the format and process (including the voting software) also came from a proprietary source. My single comment is that it's exceptionally rigid, see [unconferences](#), for example. One particularly terrifying suggestion was about 'positive messages' in public realm. Of course, everyone who likes John Carpenter knows about [They Live](#), don't they? Is that *really* where we're headed?

However, to highlight a wider difficulty, since these 'suggestions' (printed on cards by the council, see my comments about rigidity) were often vague and top-down in the extreme, they do not form a healthy basis for spending £1.5m.

Top Down

As we see from the rigidity of process, the pre-printed cards, the council appointed controllers dominating the meeting, this is a top down process. Various councils seemed to have adopted the word [co-production](#) without investigating the meaning, I quote 'to share power and responsibility, and to work together in *equal, reciprocal* and caring relationships'. What we seem to have here is what I call *asymmetric co-production*, the council or other body sets most of the scope, approach etc. in stone and then the general public nibble a little at the edges. I understand and am not suggesting free-rein, merely a little reflection and equalisation injected into the approach. Currently, this follows the Bill Hicks comment 'You are free to do as we tell you'.

Consultants

I quote from the website 'AOC Architecture in collaboration with a team of designers that include Carver Haggard, Office S&M, Europa, Social Broadcasts and Local Works Studio'. Actually at the meeting I (briefly) attended Office S&M (and I quote *an architecture practice that designs buildings which always elicit a response*, that's somewhat unsatisfactory by any standards, isn't it?) appeared, with the help of hipsters, to 'run' the process. It started, of course, with some kind of arty projection of stills and audio with (heart warming, of course) quotes from residents, to get us into the 'right mood'. Must be the first part of the 'positive messages' and we are the guinea pigs?

But to deal with larger matters, why so many, what are they being paid, do we really lack this much self confidence in our own powers? And, of course, the result will be sanitised, see the art-washing section further down.

Representation

The meeting that I (briefly) attended was a) small, not terribly well attended b) usual suspects including myself. The selection of attendees was somewhat augmented by local art gatekeepers and artists who see some possible grant money. That's not an altogether bad thing, but it's a little unhealthy in the very unrepresentative environment. No-one much young or young BAME, for example, I didn't count, but we can have a diversity FOI, if this is contested. No disability representation, as far as I could see, but prepared to be contradicted.

Then, apart from the 'meeting', we had the 'walk', a pale shadow of a [dérive](#) (I expect some of the arty consultants may know a tiny bit about Situationism, more my generation though) which I did not attend. So, the Forest Gate walk took place at 2pm on a weekday, meaning that no-one except the unemployed, retired, independently rich etc. could attend, this seems, frankly, ridiculous.

So, in summary, we have a big budget (with a great deal spaffed on consultants) for an, in principle, resident-led project where there is very, very minimal resident representation. Not good.

Scale

Following the directive silos and rigid process and a large budget, there's no capture of small projects and ideas that could be owned directly by residents, rather than gate-kept (consultants, usual suspects, council). This is a problem with the current citizen's assembly process too, although I am, in general supportive. Even if they don't change a whole bunch, they are educative, but the attendance badly needs broadening out and the process needs serious review.

Art Washing

Here's [an article](#) about art-washing, which is the current direction of travel for this project:, a couple of (TL:DR) quotes from inside the article:

Third, 'local authority-led artwashing'. The realm of 'old' and 'new' public art. In 2010, Southwark Council commissioned this film featuring many local arts and cultural organisations. Its imagery is shocking. Scene after scene painting over the Heygate Estate, the Elephant and Castle shopping centre, on and on...

Sticking Together SE17 is a project commissioned by the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation to examine the 'civic role of the arts'. The artists said they wanted to 'harvest' the stories of people living in social housing on the Aylesbury estate. But, of course, Sticking Together SE17 did nothing to protest about ongoing social cleansing of residents.

We are about to have nicey-nicey, constrained, competition decided, consultant led projects that 'celebrate' (an ugly word in this context) and nostalgise (new word, nice one though) parts of the borough, papering over the cracks. Whatever it is, it'll probably be hip in a very bland sort of way. It will 'always elicit a response'. Oh joy! We are not going to remember, for example, the [Plaiastow Triangle](#) though this is actually already celebrated at [Abbey Gardens](#) with 'what will the harvest bring. (note the .org rather than .co.uk too, important detail).

Remedies

To some extent this is a recap of the commentary within the main part of the essay. So:

1. Since 'greening' seems to be popular, and the council has, indeed, declared a 'climate emergency'. Engage part of the project as a green project, including the art, but also, for example make some 'living' displays showing pollution, total area of tarmac, car journeys etc. Friendly competitions for ward low emissions too, carrots not sticks.
2. Broaden out the consultation and make the consulting process more flexible. There are now many on-line tools that capture comment and preference, that can be used side-by-side with physical meetings, for example: <https://www.discourse.org/about> Also, as I have done, the residents can make suggestions about the process, over and above filling in 'feedback forms'. It's better if we are meta, too.
3. Remove some of the many layers of consultants, if the contracts will permit that. Otherwise, bite the bullet, pay them and set them aside. All these projects need to be much more 'community' and especially 'young community'. They may go wrong, some of them, but the ownership, at least will 'go right'.
4. I'm not against street art, but the current approach, which I (mis?)understand to be nostalgia is dreadful, even if it includes Jimi Hendrix, one of my favourites. Here I'll draw attention to Amman in Jordan: <https://www.thenational.ae/arts-culture/art/how-street-artists-have-made-amman-their-canvas-with-dramatic-effect-1.747414> is large-scale but the contributors are, in the main, not via a rigid process (but there is process, including process for removal). There's a huge difference between 'love' and 'for money, guided by consultants' as a result of 'competitive process'.

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