

Light In Benmore

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Introduction

This investigation arose from having been involved in the 'Constellations' scheme. The proposal I produced for that became that of a particular type of public art - an obvious 'art' statement. Although it involved working with an element of the community and aimed to be integrated, it was rather limited in what it could do for the area and the people in it. In short it addressed 'art' rather than 'place'. By looking at public art in this sense, the working process was restricted and didn't capitalise on what could be achieved in public space.

Going through that process encouraged me to investigate more *supportive* opportunities for art and artists in Benmore and at Optima Housing Association in general. I've since felt that there are many questions to be asked, many community needs to be addressed - and its much more important that artist involvement can work with questioning, identifying and responding to needs over time. This also means the scope for what artists can do and achieve, might be much larger and more productive in the long term to residents through a collective effort in enhancing their environment.

I felt it necessary to investigate how incremental small changes could be much more beneficial than sudden massive changes brought about by typical art statements.

I also felt it necessary to understand how artists could be collectively part of the regeneration process and how that might realistically work as a *process*.

I aimed to revisit the history of the site, find its important identity and ethos and perhaps show how current local authority documents could support a more tailored response to a residential area so close to the city centre.

1. Maintaining Character and ethos.

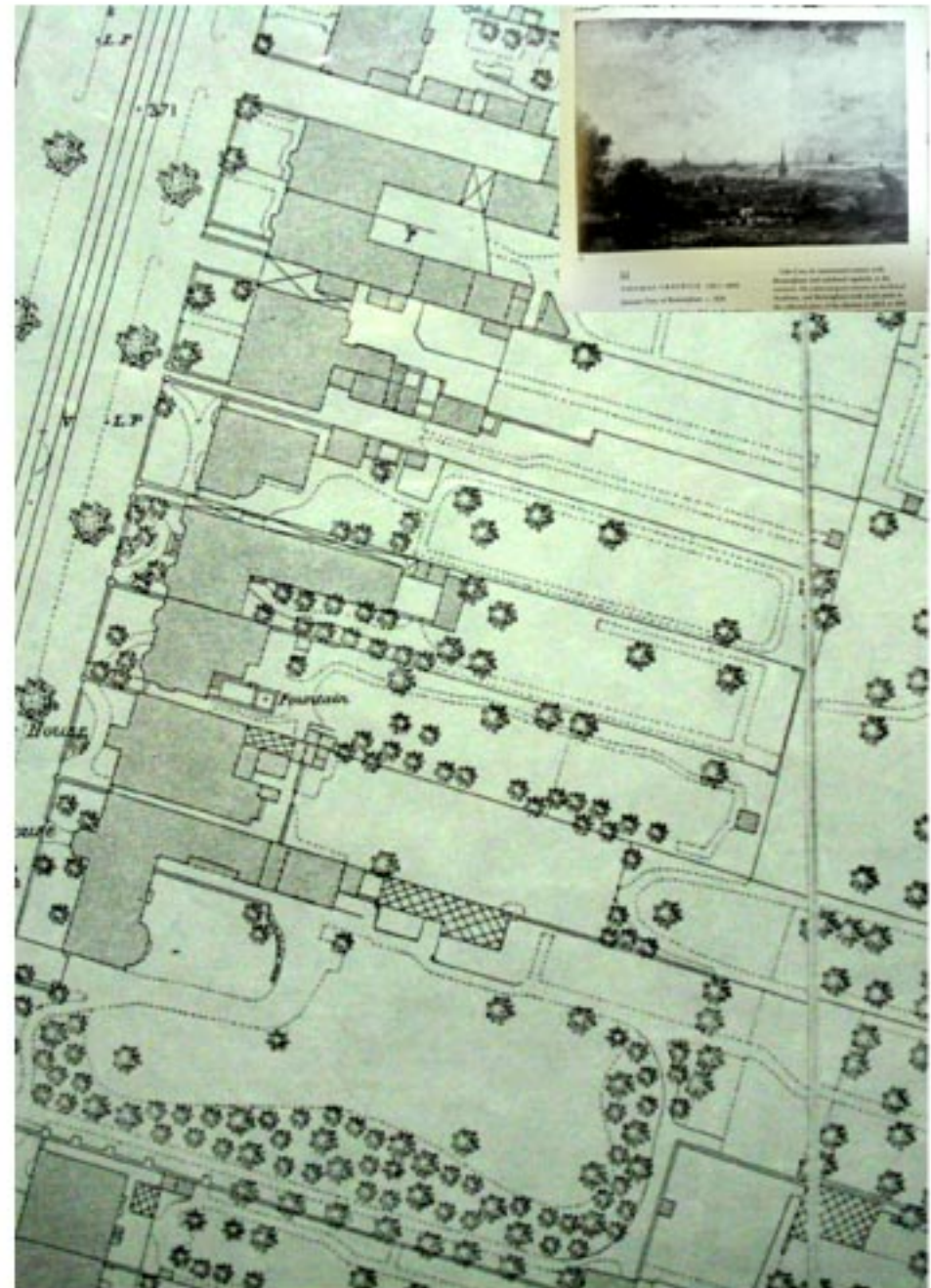
Benmore is a 'residential' area. It remained outside the industrialization of more central Birmingham as it sits on the edge of the Gough – Calthorpe estate, which was consciously preserved as a 'semi-rural oasis in the heart of an industrial city'. It is this residential nature that needs addressing with the support of the Big City plan.

Planner and Urban designer David West at the recent Talking Cities Lecture at Birmingham Town Hall, described working with existing structures, as an aspect of 'complexcity', and doing things now to achieve a 'liveablecity'. When it came to 'authenticity', David urged that we look past the obviously 'authentic' areas such as the Jewellery Quarter, and at those structures you would never see anywhere else but Birmingham, celebrating the use of concrete, that '1960s extraordinariness'.

This links directly to the 'Tower's in the park' and their importance to Birmingham. On the other hand though Benmore requires a reinterpretation of that ethos that maintains the character of the area that keeps it recognizable as residential and not subject to the same public art treatments as other areas in the city – maintaining a 'residential semi rural oasis'.

The very nature of this area can drive a more integrated art approach, whilst the Big City plan and Lighting Strategy support this.

"Local distinctiveness and maintaining a distinction between places and building through diversity rather than creating homogeneity will help increase the interest and vibrancy of the city centre and cater for the differing needs of a wider range of people". ('Lighting Places' lighting Strategy Document, BCC)



2. No big statements - rethinking artist support

'Artists are communicators, facilitators, problem solvers and inventors'. Buster Simpson.

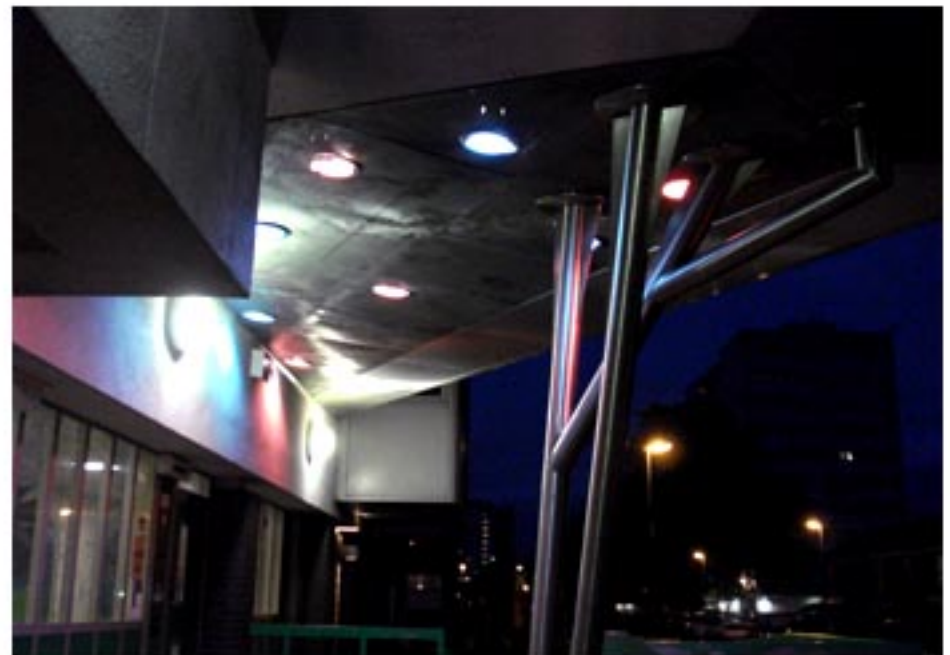
'Pursue long-term principles and goals..... work even more in partnership' Professor Michael Parkinson

How do we do this? How do we work with existing structures? In two ways. Firstly by artist involvement being within the infra 'structure' of regeneration at Optima Community Association. To get artists involved with practical and functional aspects of the residential environment can open up ways in which art can be part of addressing and supporting those issues.

For example if the lighting in Benmore needed to be replaced or updated then perhaps other issues could be addressed, not simply the lux levels, but the issues of environmental psychology - or simply, as the city's lighting strategy puts it; " lighting is a key element that effects how we feel about a place".

If this is achieved then this allows for art to be part of working with those physical existing structures, meaning lighting, buildings, open spaces

This means looking at 'public art' differently as continued 'artist involvement' - not obvious 'art statements' that can be pointed at. The aim being that this would address areas such as Benmore more holistically by indentifying and working with need. Artists would therefore be in a more supportive role to processes and practices at Optima.



This suggests a different way in thinking how 'art' at Optima Community Association can be part of things.

Rather than artists developing projects that dip into or stand outside the main programme of regeneration, artists can perhaps interweave within it. Again this will not necessarily lead to big statements, but more incremental and supportive working practices that change an area as a whole over time.

When art is intertwined with those practical functions and needs, collective change could embody the notion of what artist Buster Simpson calls 'poetic utility'.

This means a more integrated (or '*interconnected*') approach earlier on in the regeneration process and working together on a more holistic vision for changes.

This approach also can intelligently work with the cities lighting strategy and Big City Plan, to allow for a more specific and much more relevant approach to these residential areas.

3. Overview

The overall aim for this investigation was to gain an understanding the wider issues surrounding artist involvement within existing regeneration and maintenance procedures at Optima. It aimed to identify an alternative *approach* that might be more beneficial to residents and their surroundings, through making small changes.

4. This investigation

This small investigation aimed to see the impact on the quality of light to enhance experience at the front and back entrances areas of the five main tower blocks in Benmore. Two activities were undertaken. Firstly a workshop with the play project and secondly a four night temporary installation experiment aiming to understand:

- a. how the quality of light and colour can affect the area psychologically.
- b. How residents can be involved in decision making. In other words – creating a sense of ownership.
- c. How residents' presence can be made visible within their environment.
- d. How to encourage the possibility of future lighting events involving community.
- e. How lighting can 'activate' spaces



5. Activities

A Workshop with play project;

This consisted of a small lighting intervention of intense colour to investigate how additional and subtractive colour and effects created by shadows could change how the Play Project felt about their surroundings.

The children were given torches with coloured gels attached and asked to experiment with them by mixing colours with each other and creating shadows. They were also asked to make decisions where different colour gels should be placed over the canopy lighting.

They were asked to comment on the effect of the lighting, before and after and how it made them feel.

Temporary installation event

Following the workshop with the play project and from the group and groups leaders' comments, it seemed appropriate to do a temporary experiment on the front entrances. Three tower block entrances were treated, only with two less vibrant colours each (loosely based on complimentary colours), to maintain a sense of subtlety. Residents of the tower blocks were mailed a questionnaire. (see appendix) The coloured gels were left for four nights.



6. Results

Activity one was the beginning of a process of involvement, where there was open and engaged decision making to begin a sense of ownership of the residents environment. It also raised the profile of the Play Project and brought attention to their presence in the neighbourhood. In a small way and for a short period of time, the area had a visual representation of its *character*.

It was clear that the children enjoyed the interaction with colour and light and were very vocal about making decisions of colour compositions. When asked to make decisions on the colour of individual lights, their collective chorus of 'green, blue and yellow!' echoed the actual composition.

They remarked on how the colour added warmth and happiness to the lighting scheme and were obviously excited by such a simple change. This was made evident when coloured gels were removed at the end of the session and the difference was an extreme contrast in the effect and collective mood. One child remarking that the light made him feel dull'.

At the end of the session the suggestion was made to myself that there should be a test on the front canopies of the tower blocks. It was hoped that the experiment would "lead to something" the area.

Activity two created a dramatic effect with subtle colours quite simply and cost effectively. On collection of the questionnaires it was clear that the experiment raised a few issues, simply by getting residents talking about lighting.

Mood

Encouragingly there were remarks that valued colour treatment to the lighting as a 'new and different experience', the same resident calling



6. Results contd.

for an 'innovative environment'. Overall comments were that the colour made people feel happier and 'brighter' and created a sense of welcoming. There were comparisons made to Five Ways, how colour could be brought to Benmore to make the area more 'beautiful' and 'attractive'. Although there were some who couldn't see the benefit, most had an openness to change, good ideas and all wanted to see more lighting in the area in general. It was commented upon that this could mean projected light on the tower blocks.

Safety

One of the main issues raised surrounded safety around the buildings, car parks and dark spaces. It was thought light could deter people loitering in these areas.

Spending time outside

It was remarked upon that creative lighting may make residents spend more time in green spaces and gardens. One resident remarked "It would be a pleasure to spend time outside. But where do we sit? On the car park?" Perhaps the issue surrounding leisure spaces is a larger one - and perhaps should be addressed in Benmore referring to the notion of the 'Towers in the Park'. (See recommendations.)

Activities

Although there were exceptions most who replied would like to be involved in activities and events surrounding light.

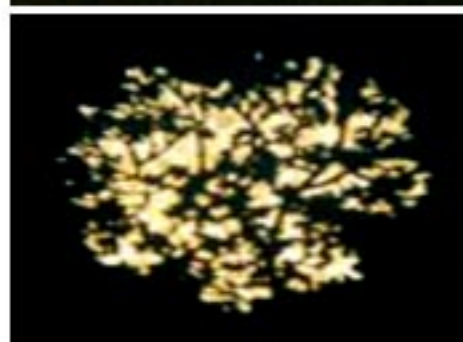
Conclusions

It is clear that the activity has provoked a response, raised and confirmed issues surrounding light and spaces in Benmore. To address these may mean further experimentation through engagement with residents. This can mean creative lighting being simply a vehicle or **catalyst for change.**



7. Recommendations/Action Plan for Benmore

1. Photos of the workshop inside Tower Block entrance (begin to reveal presence of Play project and activities).
 2. Address lighting in dark spaces or areas that welcome anti-social behaviour and 'loitering'. This can mean an experiment to see how an area associated with this can change through a temporary colour installation. Can this be projected from existing lighting units?
 3. Activate seating areas and greenspaces as 'Gardens' or 'Parks'. Can there be a change in how these areas are perceived and used? What can be the catalysts for this? Maybe light can be used creatively around seating? Can an event be staged? Or a temporary installation to test this theory? Perhaps doing this will bring about more incremental changes.
 4. Bring colour to Benmore to create 'an innovative environment', augmenting it's identity and building upon it's character as semi rural or parkland. If the tower blocks could receive projected light - why not as a subtle foliage projection?
- Could this mean colour schemes for each block?
5. Address the issue surrounding calls for 'more lighting'. If more lighting is needed - could this be both functional and creative and build the character of the area?
 6. Build activity into addressing experimentation. As some residents would like to be involved - why not a simple lighting event that could both be fun, but also bring a sense of community and community ownership of the area. It could address and subtly support key issues and be a vehicle for discussion.
It could mean seasonal lighting and activity - and be thematic



8. Overall Recommendations (artist involvement in Benmore within a wider context)

Process, Small changes and Need

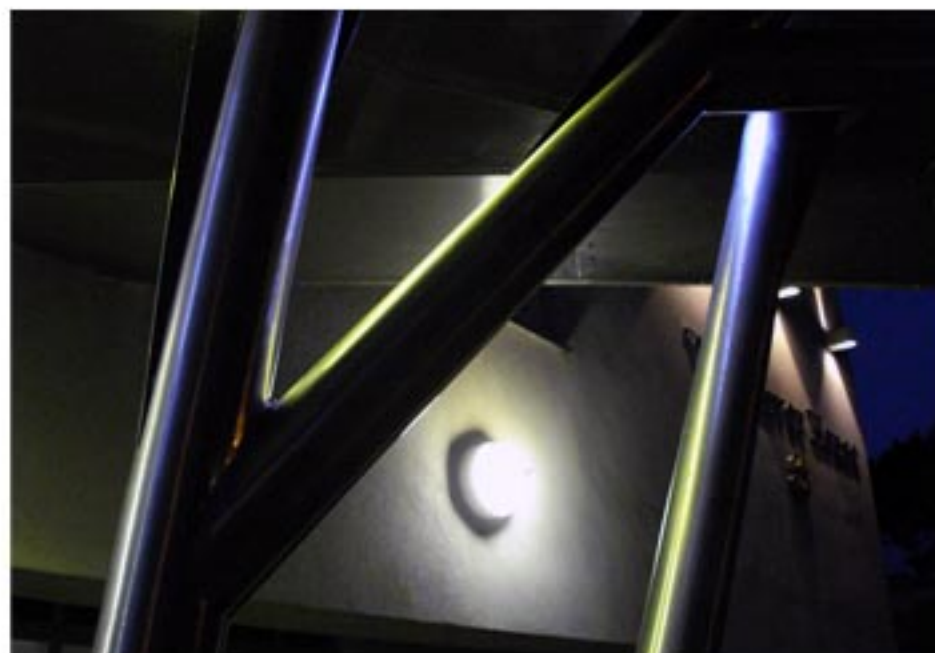
"A lot of our pre suppositions about ideas is that they come to individuals in their head – and it's a very individualistic way of thinking. Actually ideas come from being shared and being developed together over long periods of time. The routes of culture and creativity are to do with interconnectedness." Charles Leadbeater

"Everyone is a special kind of expert....intelligence is in the streets, you just need to tap it" Nabeel Hamdi

So an indicative ongoing process could be;

- Working to existing needs as outlined by a knowledge group
- Iterative process and experimentation. Finding what works and what 'knock on effects' there are or might be. This can also be identifying needs or developing on existing ones. Finding small catalysts for change.
- Feeding this to the regeneration knowledge group. This can be where supportive decision making can take place and the sharing of ideas. Or where we might pool knowledge and skills. In effect this being the heart of joined up thinking and decision making. This therefore becomes a pool of creative practices and problem solving.
- This would allow for artist input to subsequently make a physical difference, where appropriate and when issues and opportunities arise.

An iterative, collaborative and reflective process.



Events as Vehicles

"What makes a good neighbourhood? – a wonderful place to grow up"
"Integrate change and planning as a collective"
Nabeel Hamdi.

There is no reason why events and workshops should not be within the above process, again being part of pursuing long term principles that see a collaborative and holistic vision for the area.

For example. A more formalized event could take place that celebrates 'light' and brings residents together. This can be designed to reveal the presence of residents in their area and to create activity.

What if the event centred around a little used green space? At the same time as the green space is temporarily activated, investigation could be made to see what would help to activate this space on a more permanent basis. Perhaps a temporary lighting installation surrounding benches could provoke activity and the effects studied. What other activities might arise from this?

What if there was a series of small interventions that questioned light and colour that remained in position for just one week?

This would also help in long term process to engage residents in decision making and ownership of their environment.

The event would be a serendipitous way of finding possible solutions or useful small enhancements to the public realm, not those obvious 'public art statements'.

Events/temporary work would also keep activity focused on the quality and experience of the built environment, whilst there may be no physical changes in the short term.

9. Summary of Recommendations

- Artist involvement to look for small and incremental changes within the area as a whole. Long term and wider thinking.
- Artist involvement to support and integrate with existing needs in regeneration and maintenance
- Events to activate space and work within/ adhere to and identify needs.
- Events and temporary work to activate spaces, in the temporary absence of permanent changes/ regeneration.
- Artist to work collaboratively within a collective knowledge group (embed artist involvement within the processes that determine regeneration initiatives and targets)
- Cost effective and 'joined up' thinking.

References;

<http://www.ixia-info.com/research/public-art-and-the-economic-downturn/>

http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/Media/Lighting%20Places%206_08.pdf?MEDIA_ID=280923&FILENAME=Lighting%20Places%206_08.pdf

Small Change: The Art of Practice and the Limits of Planning in Cities.
Nabeel Hamdi (Earthscan, 2004)

Appendix:

1. Workshop 1 plan
2. Questionnaire

Benmore Play project workshop 1

Aims

To question the effects of current lighting scheme of experience and psychology/language of the place.

The involve residents in decision making

To start a dialogue for future lighting schemes

Objectives

A small lighting intervention of intense colour to investigate lighting effects additional and subtractive colour /shadows.

1. discuss torches/ gels and subtractive colour with play project.
2. allow children to experiment with torches and enjoy colour and light. (photographs)
3. Fit gels on rear canopy of Montreal building. Discussion with residents – on arrangements and effects.

Outcomes

Photographs to be taken throughout.

Feedback form residents.

Some questions to be asked

1. What sort of things do you do in this area(near the building)
2. What do you think of the existing lights – do they make you feel at home?
3. Do you think there should be more colour at night.. why?
4. What sort of colours would you like to see? What about patterns?
- 5...6...7..

Equipment

Step ladders

Gels

10 torches

Elastic bands

MP3 Recorder

Cloth to cover central light.

Aluminium tape

LIGHT IN BENMORE

I am an artist simply experimenting with light and colour and the effects it has on the lighting in the area. I've been changing the colour of the lighting to see what difference colour makes. I've been doing this with the help from the Play Project, to get the children in the area involved and to understand their thoughts. The experiments we have done have shown that the children have a presence in the area.

Hopefully you will see/have seen some of the experiments with the lighting at the entrance to the Tower blocks

These experiments are not final designs, nor something permanent, nor something that will necessarily happen. However, I'm interested to see if neighbourhood areas like Benmore could have some more interesting features to talk about. Using the lighting sources that are already there is one possible way to do this - just making small changes that are not costly.

Perhaps small interesting things can happen on the buildings and grassed areas that can make a difference?



It would be good if you would also like to be involved in activities and events - Or simply share your thoughts. Your ideas and thoughts are much appreciated.

1. How do you feel about the lighting at night in this area?

I love the sound of it

2. Do you think that coloured lighting would make a difference? This doesn't have to mean intense bright colours, but soft tones.

It will make a lot of a different it make the place beautiful and colourful

3. Do you think creative lighting could make you want to spend more time outside? Do you think there are other places that could be lit with a better effect?

time outside and if they could put this colourful light too by the garden at optima house it make a lovely garden

4. Do you think the light could make you feel ... (write your comments in the box)

Happier?

Brighter?

Safer?

More at home?

More welcome?

All of these?

all of the above

all of the colour of light. It will make a lot of difference at night which will lead to me and others spending quality

5. Do you think light is important? As something that can provide a different or new 'experience' or just to light things?

this will bring a new experience to us at optima tower for difinate

6. Are there places in the City where you have seen lighting of buildings or streets that you think make a positive difference?

Very much look at the mail box, Virgin and few other places brighter and so beautiful

Would you like to be involved in activities and events around light? YES/NO