

CONTEXT MATTERS: ARTIST RESIDENCIES

How Morland Court Got Its Name



This case study is the third in a series of five which will explore key strands of the Arts and Social Change programme within Citizen Power Peterborough. This set of case studies will explore how these projects have contributed to the aims of Citizen Power and uncover some of the inherent challenges we encountered, in the hope that these may prove useful for similar initiatives.

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PEOPLE. CREATE. CHANGE.

CITIZEN POWER PETERBOROUGH

Citizen Power Peterborough is a two-year programme of action supported by Peterborough City Council, the Royal Society of Arts and Arts Council England. The aim is to build connections between people and communities, get people more involved in public life and encourage active citizenship. Citizen Power Peterborough re-examines many aspects of life in the city through a number of related projects focused on new ways of supporting local people and their communities to make a positive difference. There are six projects in Citizen Power; Recovery Capital, Peterborough Curriculum, Civic Commons, ChangeMakers, Sustainable Citizenship and Arts and Social Change.

ARTS AND SOCIAL CHANGE

Arts and Social Change looks at the role of arts and imagination in creating new connections between people and where they live in order to strengthen participation in community life in Peterborough. This programme involves a wide range of projects that place artists at the centre of re-imagining the possibilities of what a place could be and how to create this together with a focus upon:

- The commissioning of high quality, innovative arts interventions
- The building and strengthening of a locally based arts ecology
- The exploration of the role artists can play and contribute within social change contexts
- The integration of arts and creativity within the city's aspirations and initiatives

CASE STUDY 3

CONTEXT MATTERS

“ The challenge was to make these residencies relevant to Peterborough and not to use the city or its people simply as a canvas for the artist. ”

Donna Lynas, Director of Wysing Arts Centre, on developing the artists' brief for Context Matters

Context Matters consisted of two artists' residencies within the Arts and Social Change strand of Citizen Power. Hosted by self-organised, voluntary groups, they produced over a year new art and a strengthening of the social fabric in two very different settings.

In one, the artist Joshua Sofaer worked with the residents' association at Morland Court which wanted to achieve three things: 'greater social cohesion' amongst the people who actually live there, to build better relationships with the wider community in Werrington and improve the tarnished image of their building.

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In the second residency, Simon Grennan – in virtual collaboration with Chris Sperandio (his creative partner based in Houston, Texas) – joined Peterborough's Street Pastors on their regular Saturday night mission to 'listen, care and help' in the bar areas of the city centre. The Pastors' desire was to raise their profile so that more people knew their work. Their testimony formed the inspiration for a series of vivid comic strips that mysteriously began to appear each week in the local paper.

In both cases, the specific brief had been drawn up to meet the needs of the host community groups, who then participated in the interviews and selection of the artists. It was a carefully managed

matching process; the Peterborough Street Pastors and Morland Court Residents' Association were the groups artists most wanted to work with. This was the culmination of a lengthy process of research and consultation curated by Wysing Arts Centre on behalf of Citizen Power to identify suitable community groups and settings for the residencies. One local artist, Keely Mills, sourced a number of self-organised groups, from Hampton Litter Pickers to a Centre for Adults with Learning Disabilities. Ultimately, ten groups expressed interest and, of these, four put forward proposals for artists to consider. The brief also invited the residency artists to consider how mentoring local artists could feature in their projects. This element was in partnership with the Peterborough's cultural and leisure charitable trust, Vivacity and was designed to be part of a sustainable legacy with local artists picking up new ideas and skills from the residency artists.

To manage the residencies effectively and to ensure that the artists had the support they needed to get on and do the work, a structure was then put in place, with a project manager from the city council, Graeme Clark, and Georgina Chatfield from the RSA leading initially on community engagement, a role that expanded over time to pastoral support for the artists and project logistics in general.

This case study will examine the challenges and achievements of these two residencies in their local context but it also suggests what might be learned from them about purpose and good practice in this area of artistic engagement.

We look first at the implications of commissioning artists to 'work closely with self-organised community and voluntary groups in order to make creative responses to their work'. This is the brief for which artists had to demonstrate relevant experience: it also required that applicants be fully experienced in 'working in socially engaged and participatory settings'.



↳ Morland Court resident participating in a drawing workshop

RESPONDING TO THE CONTEXT

“ We drag ourselves somewhere we don't belong, unpack our knowledge and education and then see how we can engage in that context. ”

Chris Sperandio

Both Joshua Sofaer and Grennan & Sperandio have considerable experience working in a variety of physical and community settings, in the UK and internationally. Their work exemplifies the 'social turn' in artistic practice – of artists acting together with the public.

Joshua is – to use his own words – 'an artist who is centrally concerned with modes of collaboration and participation'. He aims to make high quality arts events, performances and exhibitions that often involve the participation of members of the public: 'I want to use art to enable people to see the world as a place of potentiality and to become more active citizens'.

Simon Grennan is equally concerned with extending people's 'horizons of expectation'. He and his partner state that their work 'invariably involves the authorial or editorial participation of other people' and is 'focused on social narrative and social exchange'.

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Of course, the outcomes of the two residencies in Peterborough were shaped as much by the context and culture the artists found themselves in as by the experiences and skills they brought to engage with them. One crucial factor that distinguished the two residencies lay in how far the groups they were invited to work closely with were indeed 'self organised' – and how far 'their work' encouraged a creative response. They were two very different hosts and they required very different approaches from the artists – one

to deliver a plan agreed with the group right at the start, the other to work towards an outcome in a more exploratory way.

The Peterborough Street Pastors are part of a growing, nationwide voluntary movement aimed at addressing a growing crisis that Prime Minister David Cameron has described as the 'scandal of our society': a drinking culture that costs the NHS more than £2.7bn annually and the economy far more through crime and lost work. Its most visible and damaging expression is in our city and town centres every Saturday night. By definition, the Street Pastors are all highly motivated – why else would they volunteer to stay up well into the early hours of Sunday morning dealing gently but firmly with people very much worse the wear for drink, drugs or emotional collapse? Similarly, the work the Pastors do is very well defined, from the visible practical assistance they offer – offering water and blankets, providing flip-flops to replace tottering high heels, picking up glass bottles, listening to people's outpouring of woe – to the subliminal impact of their demonstration of Christian charity.

There was a very good fit between the host community and the artists, both of whom stood to benefit from an artistic rendering of the stories of individual Pastors.

'It was a fantastic experience going out with them,' Simon admits. 'It was interesting to see how they filled the gap between the static authority of the police and ambulance crews and the invisible CCTV monitoring of the whole town centre. There might only be three or four police officers on duty and the door staff of the bars can't move any more than a hundred yards from their posts... The Pastors are constantly on the alert but will only get involved once something seems to be kicking off. They offer people an opportunity to step back from the brink but they never judge people for their behaviour.'

Grennan & Sperandio's way towards fulfilling their commission was, therefore, relatively straightforward. There was a very good fit between the host community and the artists, both of whom stood to benefit from an artistic rendering of the stories of individual Pastors, which would be published in the local newspaper. Their subsequent exhibition at the Peterborough City Art Gallery which is managed by Vivacity was an opportunity to see the full body of comic strips as a

collective narrative and to inspire other community groups to think about telling their own 'stories'.

The fact that Simon Grennan, although a firm non-believer himself, was entirely convinced by the sincerity and logic of the Pastors' mission meant that the irony he and his partner might apply in some of their other work was not appropriate for this project. This adds to the impression that the residency, while it may have lacked a critical edge, was a happy marriage of artistic observation and storytelling with group self-definition and promotion. Conversations are now taking place about the further use of the artwork, including uploading it to websites, to, in effect, market the Street Pastors initiative more effectively locally and perhaps even beyond the city to emerging groups elsewhere. The artists, in this case, seem to have become participant-observers, content – or at least not resisting the fact – that their intervention is serving the larger politics of social harmony.

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In the second case, the artist – Joshua Sofaer – faced a different kind of challenge. At the start, the differences with the Pastors' set-up might not have been so obvious. The group applying for the second residency appeared, in name at least, to be 'self-organised'. The residents' association of Morland Court was represented at the interviews by its then chair, Paul Spencer, who was an eloquent and enthusiastic advocate for what an artist could achieve for the place he lived in. Again, a pressing social issue drove the project: how to affect the culture of Morland Court, where the lack of a sense of community or belonging – the absence of loyalty to the place – was signified by a series of antisocial crimes in the past, from vandalism to forced entry into the building.

Unfortunately, the physical nature of the buildings themselves had not helped foster the development of communal energy needed to empower and support a fully effective residents association. Morland Court is composed of 51 single-occupancy flats with no internal communal space other than an unfurnished foyer area and a laundry room. The landlord, The Hyde Group tried to support the residents'

association by providing access to the only meeting room in the building from which the group could run, however the passionate commitment of Paul and his successor as chair, John Abbott, could not in itself resolve the paradox of a community association in search of a community. In place of the coherent ideology and organisation of the Street Pastors was a vacuum – at least in the practical terms useful to the artist in devising an approach to the residency and in shaping the required ‘creative response’ to the local group’s work.

Here another difference in the two settings needs considering. Simon Grennan was able to enter the physical space where the Pastors worked, on the chaotic streets of a city centre Saturday night, where he could witness the effects of their interventions directly. He could then call or meet up with individuals again to tease out what they gained from putting themselves out in this way.

In Joshua Sofaer’s case, however it was difficult to meet the group; as there was no established communal meeting point. He had either to hang about the entrance or inside, in the foyer, or otherwise decamp to a local coffee bar.

← Morland Court sign – work in progress



MORE THAN I HAD HOPED FOR

Interestingly, both residencies resulted in stories. Just as Grennan & Sperandio’s comic strips narrate the modest night-time heroism of the Street Pastors, so the large heraldic sign adorning the side of Morland Court relates one of the imaginative tales invented by local people to explain ‘how it got its name’: from everyday Marvels to contemporary Kiplingesque. One of the constants of artists’ residencies is the notion of the artist encountering another culture: the telling of stories is our most obvious way towards understanding each other’s culture.

At the launch of the exhibition of Street Pastor Stories at the City Art Gallery, a number of volunteers – some clutching signed copies of the comic strip they featured in– spoke of their pleasure and pride in being depicted (in one happy case, on two strips) in these frame-by-frame scenarios: their uniforms of hopeful blue threading their way through the garish lights and multi-coloured crowds and deep shadows of the city centre. Painting of course generally abstracts, perhaps especially in cartooning, from the details of reality – one Pastor was thrilled to see her wrinkles had magically disappeared – but there was unanimous agreement that the reality of the Pastors’ work and the faith that inspires it had been properly respected and represented. For the viewer, the inclusion of two strips focusing on the views and experiences of a former clubber and a bar owner who know and respect the work of the Pastors adds extra verisimilitude.

In literary terms, unlike this almost novelistic group portrait of the Pastors, discovering the story of Morland Court was more like a medieval quest narrative, with the artist confronted at each stage by another unexpected trial...

Undaunted by the seemingly impervious citadel of Morland Court, Joshua first set out to slay the dragon of its ill repute by setting a contest, namely: to change its name. This, he and the leading residents and the landlord and many others agreed, would do much to transform opinions within and without its walls. All went along well until the Guardian of Names from



↗ Street Pastor, Veronica Lemon with Simon Grennan

↙ Grennan and Sperandio comic strip: Spencer, landlord



the city refused to countenance such a change, fearing that all manner of postal anarchy might ensue. The gauntlet was cast down again – as were the populace.

Joshua had to think very quickly of an alternative. The planned mailing to the 12,500 people of Werrington now took the form of a leaflet illustrated by local artist Hannah Robinson, promoting a storytelling competition. Whatever the response might be, Joshua believed that the flyer itself – depicting Morland Court with paint palettes and rocket-boosted post-boxes flying out of it – would still send a positive message of change: 'It says that this is no longer a place where kids go and break windows – it is a fun orange building with an offer of an iPad if you can make up a convincing story of how it got its name.'

The story that won the competition, by local Peterborough resident Emily Henderson, relates the fantasy of a grandfather's buried treasure, retold by three of his grandchildren to an architect who is sizing up the site where Morland Court is to stand. Their names are Moira, Olivia and Robert, thus providing the initials for the land that has been developed for local people like them, rather than – as Moira had feared – for 'Londoners'.

Joshua brought in local artists as tutors to help deliver a range of creative workshops, encouraging local people to engage in drawing, photography, writing, t-shirt printing – and even local archaeological history.

In his role as mentor, Joshua brought in local artists as tutors to help deliver a range of creative workshops, encouraging local people to engage in drawing, photography, writing, t-shirt printing – and even local archaeological history. In this way, Joshua managed to create a community of interest around the work, turning what had been what he calls 'a flashpoint' – Morland Court – into a symbol of integration between its residents and those of the wider community in Werrington. Stuart Payn, an artist based in Peterborough, was commissioned to create a sign based on the winning story and this is now affixed to the wall. It serves to call public attention to a building that has been, over the last few months, given a comprehensive makeover by the landlord.



The Hyde Group was founded, like Shelter, not long after Cathy Come Home, the television programme that uncovered the scandal of homelessness in the UK back in 1967. Since then it has been committed to staying true to its original vision of 'helping people excluded from the mainstream housing market by providing them with decent, affordable homes and managing them properly'. Morland Court has had new windows fitted and is now part way through entirely regenerating the building with each resident given the opportunity of a complete refurbishment of their flat, including structural alterations to create more living space in each unit. Alongside this, residents who are out of work – around half the population – have been offered a 12-week employability programme.

There is certainly an interesting parallel between Citizen Power's vision of empowerment and Hyde's 'Residents Matters', a three-year strategy for encouraging the number of residents influencing services and taking up training opportunities. There is also a shared feeling that one development has strengthened the other at Morland Court. Charlotte Wildermoth, Hyde's Resident Engagement Officer for this region, is delighted with the project – 'it achieved much more than I had hoped for' – which she helped to celebrate at a community barbecue at Morland Court in July 2012. She now believes that an artistic intervention of this kind is well worth trying out elsewhere.

Paul Spencer, Morland Court resident claims 'by being part of the residency our community has gained valuable skills in social interaction and in knowing a support network is in place to assist communities to become regenerated. It has been a pleasure to be part of this project and it does not end here'.

↪ Unveiling of the new sign at Morland Court's community BBQ

SQUARING THE CIRCLE

There is, in artist's residencies generally, a creative tension between the artist's prime function, which is to make art, and the social role they may be asked to play (or find themselves playing) – and about the role that the group or community they are working with should play in the realisation of this art.

The resident artists who worked on Context Matters all hold highly theorised positions derived from engaging in – and then reflecting on – a wide range of practice in an international variety of contexts. For example, one definition of Grennan & Sperandio's practice noted on their own website is 'relational', a term created by Nicolas Bourriaud in the early years of this century to describe the way some artists create work out of their engagement with the public – rather than, say, simply plonking work on a plinth or a gallery wall for the public to view. Yet Simon Grennan expresses doubts about Bourriaud's notion of this representing a 'mutual exchange' – 'as if Carsten Höller placing a slide for crowds to careen down in the Turbine Hall at Tate Modern created any kind of two-way process'.

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Instead of taking up any of these lofty positions, Simon is content to simplify his motivation for making work: 'We are fortunate enough to have reached a place where we are not reliant on the market or on the structures that support the arts in this country.' Street Pastor Stories was unusual in that it was something he and his partner applied for, not something they had come up with themselves and then found the money for. They were drawn to it 'selfishly' because it tallied with their interest in understanding 'why these particular

people behave in this particular way.’ Their approach is thus much closer to social anthropology than social inclusion. Simon’s conclusion about this project was not particularly academic, however: ‘It was a neat project, with a simple mechanism and, formally, it turned out pretty well. It was socially successful – something I cannot distinguish from artistic success.’

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Joshua Sofaer was also drawn by the rhetoric of Context Matters. Although a placement with Action for Happiness on his Clore Artist Fellowship had turned him off the idea of setting the outcome before doing the work, he did think the ambitious vision outlined in the Citizen Power brief was worth aspiring to. In the event, the experience of working with vulnerable adults in their homes rather than within a more neutral institution was a huge challenge. Although faintly disappointed with the artistic outcome, he believes that the project as a whole worked well: ‘All the residents became aware of the project, even if they didn’t participate, thanks to our newsletter which went to every flat and the sessions we advertised in the foyer. They knew something was going on that was to do with promoting the place they lived in.’

Joshua also learned the power of small gestures, citing the time he found a tutor for two essentially house-bound residents that Charlotte had tipped him off were keen on drawing: ‘I simply rang them to sort out dates and find a room. That’s such a simple thing – making a phone call – but I could sense them feeling that their needs were being addressed, perhaps for the first time.’ One woman has found the project transformative, going on to develop her emerging skills as a creative writer. ‘Art,’ Joshua concludes, ‘was used here as permission to do something different or to feel something differently.’ For him, that was enough to make it worthwhile.

➤ Street Pastor, Alec Clark with a signed print of his comic strip





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FOR FURTHER INFORMATION:

Citizen Power: www.citizenpower.co.uk
 Peterborough Street Pastors: www.streetpastors.co.uk/CurrentLocations/East/Peterborough/tabid/670/Default.aspx
 Morland Court: www.localgiving.com/charity/mcrassociation
 Joshua Sofaer: www.joshuasofaer.com
 Grennan & Sperandio: www.kartoonkings.com
 Wysing Arts Centre: www.wysingartscentre.org
 The Hyde Group: www.hyde-housing.co.uk
 Vivacity: www.vivacity-peterborough.com
 The RSA: www.thersa.org



↑ The new sign for Morland Court designed by Stuart Payn from Emily Henderson's story

↗ 'How Morland Court Got Its Name' competition flyer designed by Hannah Robinson