

Ideas, People and Places: "Reflections on a journey of new beginnings."

Whenever and if ever I get a call from Nathalie Camus, or any of the dedicated and impassioned individuals from within the network of 'Ideas, People and Places' projects in Wales, suggesting that I could or should join a group workshop, I instinctively scrabble around in my diary and clear out any of the potential barriers that might obstruct my participation. Right from the first meeting that I attended more than three years ago in Cardiff, these gatherings, have represented more of a socially enriching and intellectually invigorating opportunity, rather than any task or duty relating to job function. This has been work related fun with both punch and purpose. It has mattered in a way that most commissioned cultural projects matter but with a deeper resonance and a greater sense of direct impact. 'Direct impact' in that there is an immediate ramification at a local level, cultural activity that leads those contributing and those engaging with its outcomes on an evolutionary journey. 'Deeper resonance' in that all of the Ideas, People and Places (IPP) projects are intertwined with prolonged and long-term cultural contributions reflecting the lives of those leading and operationalising programmes, embedded within their communities. IPP is an initiative for, about and close to locally embodied wisdom and collective cultural agency. It resoundingly advocates the global presence of the vernacular and the local across communities of intention actively co-operating on the emergence of fresh content (and 'inhabited art').

I think I may have just invented the term 'inhabited art' to emphasise that this is a process which is lived in and populated by those who already have the investment of a life-wide commitment to their 'place'. As individuals, they may have any of a number of roles in life; artist, designer, cultural entrepreneur, curator, project manager, developer, local business, activist, community advocate, educator, and the list goes on, but they are all concerned about a shared place in time. They may have motivations that vary considerably but they have formed community mindful of shared values that describe humanity and portray the better aspects of human nature in relation to 'place'. This initiative and this nurturing of fresh communities of purpose has been and is a moment of change. That was its first intention. But it is change without trauma or rapid pace, it is gentle and evolutionary. And it is change that is responsive to both habit and chance; respectful of the necessity to allow fresh or incrementally new cultural investments the opportunity to take shape and become something in direct correspondence with a place and its occupancy. 'Ideas, People and Places' is a project that has taken a position and explored a socio-political dynamic; it required people and existing communities of practice or interest to connect within or in relation to a location. It required people to form a commitment to each other based on what might be possible, or at least worth a go. Then it rewarded connected thinking with resources that would and have, over time, transformed and reified that sense of community into activity and new cultural experience. And then, it encouraged those involved to convene with others, outside of their own region, in trans-locational configurations that have taken form as a sort of horizontal studio and creative network. In such a way, it has cultivated new beginnings and then promoted cross-fertilisation through a sort of rhizome culture, rooted to place but influenced by a widened community of practice.

IPP is political. This can't be a surprise, in truth, everything is political, even without self-conscious intent. 'Ideas, People and Places' is, amongst other things, the politics of agrarian and egalitarian, though reformist by nature, eutopic decentralisation; it has been an enactment of democracy. *"To be truly radical is to make hope possible, rather than despair convincing."* (Raymond Williams). And, at the core of every supposed democracy is the innate privilege of the human condition, that of cultural production. So IPP becomes political because of its aspiration to perform and progress through semi-structured systems of cultural democracy. This is in a time when increasing areas of inalienable right have been rendered exclusive by degrees as a consequence of the self-conscious political actions of central government. Hence, engaging with the IPP projects makes radicals of us all. If Lenin ever did say *"Art belongs to the people"*, then the IPP projects may offer a few examples of what that might imply in practice. Beuys definitely wrote, *"Every human being is an artist, a freedom being..."* (and then so did many other people, often using slightly different words or an amended syntax to create specific nuance but the general sense is there) and throughout the 'Ideas, People and Places' projects, every active contribution has demonstrated some of the meaning in that quote. In each project, the collective whole (formed from a consortium of local interest that has taken its prompts and provocations from a national arts funding council) has determined to resist resolution. My observation, based on the projects that I have visited and formed correspondence with, is that the aspect of collective or shared responsibility has, in effect, devised a performative and time structured 'artform' in its own right, where value and values have been created, nurtured and sometimes deconstructed through the social and political dynamic. There have been very few or no procedures to determine a problem and then fix it. Neither to answer a social need from prescriptive diagnosis. Neither to 'regenerate' culture on behalf of those that, in supposition, require recultivation. Instead, the projects have generated value and values from self-effectuation and from inclusive dialogue and co-operative culture. To be clear, the IPP initiative is the invention of a policy of enablement; from the point of view of Arts Council of Wales, it has been an institutional initiative designed to 'allow' unpredictable outcomes and defer any judgement of relative success, meaning that there is greater scope for genuine shared ownership.

This is value created by disruption, and encounter, and rehearsal, and curiosity; all distinctive habits commonly associated with artists. The importance of these characteristics might be summarised as divergence and an opening up of ideas and creative opportunity: or latent agency. In practice, it may have been anxious making or even, at times, tense, but the process has resisted an outcomes-based design logic or problem-solving regime. The projects have rarely sought to conclude or close-off by virtue of a summary point. Even approaching the end of the funded period, members of this new network of IPP activists are actively seeking out fresh beginnings and alternative means of continuing encounter. The overall project and process has not been about issues that require an outcome; rather, IPP is an issue and it is an outcome. There haven't been grand gesture public statements and landmark moments. Quite the converse. It has often been the case that the actors, the stakeholders, the participants, and all those involved with the projects, have discovered their aims and their shared values by doing and by being active. There is nothing of the revelatory moment in this; more that the concerns and intentions and needs of those involved

have also become their motivation and have, in most cases, restored or reformed an activism that was already there in the first place, just by giving it more agency.

This is an important point. The awarding of grants and funding afford professional status to any project in the public realm. But it is a particular feature of the arts and the cultural sector that the amateur and the professional are frequently confused or simultaneously conflated. As 'freedom beings' we all tend to seek communion through varied means and very often resort to outward expression that addresses content beyond our isolated experiences. We make or produce culture because we have an innate need and because normal social interaction is, otherwise, fruitless. Cultural production is an instinctive characteristic of our daily experience. There are those that do it more frequently than others as a concentrated and intensive set of practices and there are those that do it most of the time and as a vocation but, in any context, it's stimulus emanates from a breadth of tacit realities involved with being human. It becomes something different when funding is introduced if it has pre-purposed aspirations or a policy driven design. The introduction of resources that might be spent or committed for the sake of planned cultural production often distract the artists, or producing community, and tempers their inherent will. Public money, specifically, requires public accountability. In essence, the spending of public finance on the arts establishes the notion of a priority; it creates competition, for attention and for ideas. Therefore, a normal way to proceed, normally, would be to identify a benchmark or problem, that facilitates comparison, and then measure the responses, proposed as solutions, so as to ensure best value outcomes for the patron. This aspect of public commissioning has been different in the 'Ideas, People and Places' project. It is true that there was an initial competition, but this was designed to determine which consortiums would gain support and it was tested according to the strength and the quality of partnership rather than their big idea. Therefore, without the explicit duty of diagnosing a specific socio-geographic crisis or cause or set of problems worthy of attention, there has been less of a temptation to prescribe a remedy or react to an imposed imperative. Consequently, it has always been more likely that ideas emerging from the IPP consortiums would coalesce around a shared willingness or nuanced reflex corresponding with lived and live experiences truthfully exposed, in the context of a place, by the activism of the partners and participants.

Without wishing to overstate the case, the point of the exercise turns out to be the reversal of power. It has been a process of empowerment through convivial agreement, shared recognition and acknowledgement, and mutual trust. The projects have been a coming together. This can be assumed to be a temporary ecology and the alliances formed through IPP are likely to be ephemeral. But an essential aspect and the political power of the IPP projects is that they are, by nature, primarily centred on the agency of communities and networks. Such transitory social structures will dissolve and will reform and will excite the possibility of further networks and unforeseen beginnings. They have to be temporary because they are composed of equals with distinct character and potential. Importantly and inevitably, if each partner is to be properly valued and trusted, they must maintain their integrity and, therefore, separateness.

One of the key pieces of learning from the three-year initiative is that it has a time-base, but that the commitment and delivery of projects has been slower than might be expected under more usual funding regimes. Also, that the discrete and distinctive character of those contributing to or joining the developments in each geographic area can and should be maintained as separate throughout the period of co-operation. Together, these two observations, these two lessons, relate to how we understand and think about 'place' as a conditioned location. The initiative was christened "Ideas, People and Places" and from that we can assume that an essential focus is the triangulated relationship between cultural production, social politics, and physical geography. It is important to reflect on the 'place' component and the notion of place-making. It may be assumed that a place has physical distinction and peculiarities and that the uniqueness of that material environment is, in part, determined and enhanced by a variable mix of geo-physical histories and socio-political legacy. A location becomes a place by virtue of its remembered history; it becomes a site in relation to a key focus of that history. In either case, it is significance and wider relevance that produced a transferrable memory or narrative. It follows that 'place-making' should support methods of cultural production that will either contemporarise or create a fresh dimension and, even, a new place identity. However, in the context of the IPP process it is noticeable that 'place recognition' has emerged as a greater and dominant objective, rather than place-making. The projects made use of this opportunity to explore a process of 'place recognition' by simply causing convergence and drawing together a community affected by their concern with or for a place; thereby valuing local and vernacular sources of cultural production. What seems to have happened right across the initiative is that the invention of consortial practices and project communities has promoted observation, exchange and celebration at a local level to the extent that qualities of place have become more obvious and recognisable. A place can become remarkable because it is remarked upon and responded to, in this case, from multiple perspectives; those within, those close to and some associated with that place. But this is time-dependent; producing moments of clarity that have amplified the 'living' and current latent cultural prospectus of place-based communities.

It is necessary to stress that the quality of relationships and of the dynamic interaction of people and places cannot be expected to be defensible for the long-term; it is likely that the major achievements of the projects may be transient. Sustained and sustainable outcomes should not be possible because the people of a 'place' do, in themselves, change. What has happened and what can happen now, cannot happen again in exactly the same way, nor even, necessarily, in the same location. Therefore, we can assume, that an active 'place' is a site or location that is invigorated by its communities and actualised (as a concept) by a time dimension. In short, this is who we are for this brief history and this is where we are because of our collective narrative. The 'Ideas, People and Places' initiative has proposed the notion of 'place' as more than a physical geography as it incorporates people and their ideas. In human terms, a 'place' is also a conceptual and emotional encounter that is at its most potent when shared or co-constructed with others. Effectively, and according to my understanding of the word, IPP has made manifest the meaning of the Welsh word 'hiraeth'.

This brings me to my final point and that relates to a concept of 'investable social profit'. By way of brief explanation of what I mean, this short phrase comprises three words and each requires some definition. 'Social', refers to the interpersonal collaborative partnerships inherent within each project; the contribution of and engagement with people without the prescription of purpose or presumption of an instrumental function. 'Profit' meaning that the activities that have both framed the IPP projects and the actions that have summarised their efforts or constituted a commissioned body of work, have each added value to local society and cultural memory as legacy. Without consideration of economic value and exchange, there have been tacit gains for the individuals involved and, very often, for the wider collective and this is frequently commented on at project meetings in terms of well-being. Additionally, there is, typically, a future promise of positive reward in terms of continuing intra-social cultural practices or, at least, an eventual return on the original investment of time and creativity. The term 'Investable', in this case, refers to the potential for lessons and experiences; that they might be reconfigured or adapted to suit other settings and other communities.

Following on from IPP, there is a method or a collection of methods. Those methodologies are not merely structural, they include ingredients such as; significant belief, unambiguous commitment, a realistic and adjustable timeline, extraneous support (or guidance or mentoring), and a positive attitude towards risk and failure. Whatever the detail of the IPP projects and whatever the eventual evaluations of outcomes might reveal as worthwhile metrics, the fundamental core to the three-year exercise is that 7 separate groups of varying scale and reach, based in 7 separate locations across Wales have all and each delivered at least one methodology for successful co-operation in the field of local cultural commissioning based on place sensibility and an integrated approach to community. The one ingredient that cannot be designed into those methods but that has been there in the deep roots of each consortium, even before they met, is passion. An inalienable devotion to humanity and the potential of the living soul; individuals have taken responsibility for their own cultural agency and invested their hearts with empathy to create a gift economy where the currency is gesture and caring for the cultural well-being of others. I call that 'art'.

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