

Space of Possibilities was created by Talking Birds, Creative Partnerships, Common Purpose, and Imagineer Productions.

The artists and schools involved were:

Ravinder Dhaliwal working with Finham Park Secondary.

Jay Langdell working with Tile Hill Wood School & Language College.

Nikky Smedley working with Lyng Hall Secondary.

Fran Higginson working with Stivichall Primary.

Nicola Richardson working with Hillfields Children's Centre.

Simon Day working with Ernesford Grange Secondary.



Dilwara Begum working with Finham Primary.

Leroy Henry working with Southfields Primary.

Richard Elms, representing Herbert Media, working with Edgewick Primary.

Julia Negus and Chris O'Connell, Theatre Absolute, working with Foxford School and Community Arts College.

Kathi Leahy working with St. Mary & St. Benedict Primary.

Brian Bishop, representing Warwick Arts Centre, working with Earlsdon Primary.

Natalie Rodden, representing BBC Coventry & Warwickshire, working with Pearl Hyde Primary.

Huge thanks to all the teachers and pupils involved in the project.

With thanks also to all those organisations, individuals and politicians who gave their time to meet and

engage with Space of Possibilities including:

Councillor Gary Ridley; Simon Monaghan from Coventry Cathedral; Deepak Naik from Shree Krishna Temple; Carl Bainbridge, CCC; Coventry Tourist Information; staff at Priory Place visitor centre; staff at the BBC Open Centre; Alison Taylor and Jack Shuttleworth at the Herbert; Phil Grant at RCP Parking; Nicola Richardon for Photoshop magic; Andy Martin for building the exhibit; Emma Blundell for painting; plus Johnny O'Hanlon and Mark Hancock.

www.talkingbirds.co.uk

audio & large print formats available, call 024 7623 6160



talking birds project

ten possibilities etc...

8. THE CITY IS A SAFE RISK

Sliding down a zip-line for the first time is the kind of risk many children like. Asking someone to stop vandalising the zip-line is the kind of risk many children don't like. Safe risk isn't an inconsistency. Age-specific play areas are about a safe risk. Supervised adventure



parks are about a safe risk. Policing is key and supervision is reassuring. For teenagers, they got it from both sides - from adults who don't like them hanging around shopping centres, to younger children who don't like them hanging around their swings. Though safe risk for teenagers was addressed by ideas like city centre

skate parks, or quad-biking trails, there was an evolution of risk which was more about exploring conversation, debate, relationships - and so there was a desire for social areas where it was comfortable to meet and talk. There was a huge enthusiasm for McDonalds because it's safe, warm, affordable and you can talk to your friends. Society recognises that the pub plays an important but complicated social function for adults, and so the question was asked - masked by the debate about healthy eating - were fast food outlets doing something right that we were all missing?

9. IT GIVES US PRIDE TO SAY WE LIVE HERE

Someone said: if this was America, we'd have a theme park about the black cabs, so why don't we? There is enthusiasm about an identity of a city as expressed through various icons. A feeling that it is

easier to explore one's own identity if one is doing it from a city which is clear about its own. Amongst various groups, the city was imagined almost as if it were an ideal parent - history has given it confidence, an identity, rules which work, and it has much to be proud of because it's done some important things. This then helps its 'children' to develop confident attitudes towards both it, and the world in general. No one wants people laughing at their parents. Not that there's a general feeling that they are. There is enthusiasm about many of the institutions which both reflect Coventry's identity (the Herbert Art Gallery and Museum, for example), and those which reflect the fact that the city likes a good night out (like the Skydome). Contemporary heritage, old and new, permanent and temporary. We want to know about our city. And by extension:



10. EVERYTHING IS CELEBRATED

A parade for the start of the school holidays; anniversary of the cup final victory; Christmas lights switch-on, yes, but also Christmas lights switch-off. There is the aspiration that Coventry's social calendar should be the most packed of any city in the UK. A reputation for the right kind of liveliness. Liveliness with a focus. Harness some of the excitement about certain dates: pancake day, April Fool's Day. More parades and carnivals.

Furthermore, the creation of a cultural centre (an idea posited in a number of forms by a number of groups) would address ideas of religious and cultural identity through a city-wide celebration of each religious festival. Again, good school practice - an environment of cultural exploration - was seen as potentially good city practice. The bottom line behind this possibility: everyone likes a party.

Afterword

Ros from Common Purpose remarked that the attitude towards Coventry of the young people involved in this project was markedly more enthusiastic that the attitude towards Coventry found in young people ten, even five years ago. In many cases, a cultural strategy was expressed as finding new ways to improve access to the good things that are already

in the city, or about how to shift personal thinking and attitude, as much as it was about imagining new things, or addressing things that need fixing. The deliberate framing of this project as an imaginative exercise led some groups to the entirely reasonable question: what's the point of coming up with ideas if they're not going to happen? This was the beginning of a useful journey into the complex process of How Things Get Done In The Real World. Though this journey was seen as complex, difficult, and sometimes incomprehensible, one thing emerged: things are only changed by those who show up.

We thank everyone who showed up.

February 2007



Talking Birds, Creative Partnerships, Common Purpose and Imagineer Productions present:

Space of Possibilities

Space of Possibilities

A cultural strategy.

Sounds dull, sometimes it is dull, and the process of writing can be even duller. Its impact on a city, though, is huge, or at least it should be. And if it isn't, then what's the point of writing it at all?

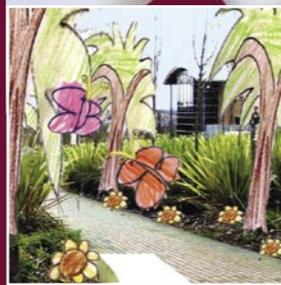
We wanted to explore a different way of creating, and then presenting, a cultural strategy. We thought a good way of starting would be to ask people who'd never heard of a cultural strategy.

Thirteen schools across Coventry worked with thirteen artists on a vision of the city. Children aged five to fifteen were asked what excited them, what they thought excited other people, and how they wanted their city to make them feel. It wasn't just a consultation exercise. Liberated from the responsibility of practically delivering the ideas, these sessions were demanding, creative, and designed to focus some of the most imaginative minds in our community.

The Space of Possibilities is a way of expressing what we found.



ten possibilities for coventry



1. IT IS THE GREENEST CITY IN THE UK

A big ambition, and an important ambition. From the 'monorail-isation' of the ring road, to new eco-buildings; from renewable energy, to the aspiration for all citizens to never be more than five minutes away from a green space, almost all ideas had a green, sustainable agenda. Many groups insisted their own research trips be carbon-neutral. Culture here was about taking responsibility for the environment, and about the challenges facing the young generation burdened with the massive undertaking of 'healing' the planet. An undertaking which

doesn't intimidate them, but one which they're impatient to start. In the *Space of Possibilities*, to be the greenest city in the UK is to be Coventry's first mission statement.

2. NO ONE IS LONELY

Some schools have mechanisms where older children look out for younger children who are feeling isolated. A supportive, considerate environment is developed, but how is this transferred into a city? Ideas about friendship benches, text zones, young people's 'mentors' or 'city guides' were among the many offered. In one school, a concept of 'Bob' emerged. An individual who can make things happen for people in danger of slipping into loneliness (and loneliness was identified as a cross-generational issue). Someone who'll organise events,



initiate clubs, be a hero. The more 'Bob' was described, the more Bob sounded like a cultural producer. The idea of a city being organised like a well-functioning school is both understandable (it is for young people the most familiar system outside the family unit), but also offers the interesting conception that a city's purpose is to help grow, encourage, or rescue the individuals who constitute it.

3. ALL JOURNEYS ARE THRILLING

It's hard to say if a helter skelter from each floor of the Axa building is meant to be taken literally. It expresses much, though. It comes from the same place as the

impulse to ride on the top floor of the bus on the way to school. An understanding that the journey can be transformative. The children who discussed this possibility want you to imagine the subways flooded with light from coloured



glass; to imagine tram journeys which allow you to actually appreciate the great views of the city you get as you travel in; to imagine if your walk to work or school took you near the sight and sound of water. They want you to imagine how that would help the rest of your day. Those transition moments in a day were about reflection, about readiness, about stimulation, about a 'gift' from the city on your way to contributing to it.

4. THE CITY MAKES US LAUGH

Under Millennium Place there is a robot world; at the North, South, East and West end of the city there are drive-in cinemas; the city holds backwards skateboarding competitions; blue plaques commemorate the place where heroic chat-up lines were delivered; there's a maze in Memorial park; each neighbourhood has a sprinkler park. It was acknowledged that there's a place for humour and wit in all cities, but perhaps in a city that still has the scars of conflict there's a greater place than most. Exploring serious issues - something a city should always encourage - should never prevent dedicated and worthy consideration of the frivolous, the whimsical, and the sometimes downright stupid.



5. SPECTACULAR YET FULL OF ACCIDENTAL BEAUTY

Yes to stand-out architecture, yes to bold building, yes to churches and cathedrals, but also yes to gaps in the skyline where a sunset or a rainbow can be seen. Yes to an overgrown bank of wild flowers. Yes to the appearance of muddy puddles to jump into. Yes to frost on trees. Yes to riding bikes on waste ground. Yes to having the right music on your headphones as you walk over the railway bridge. Some great moments in a city can't be imposed or legislated for, they simply have value because of the individual's perspective at a certain place or time. It's perhaps valuable if there's a place where all this transient, secret beauty is

documented, but mainly this 'possibility' was formulated as an acknowledgment that people are capable of finding beauty or inspiration when it's least expected, and that the individual is ultimately responsible for his or her own aesthetic experience.

6. VIEWS UP HIGH AND DOWN LOW

Being up high is exciting. Even those who didn't like skyscrapers liked what could be seen from the top floor. Observation galleries should be put in the tallest buildings. Towers should be built whose sole purpose is both the view from the top and the journey in the glass lift to get there. Hot air balloon rides. Helicopters. Anything which gives both perspective, and the feeling of being on top of the world is valuable. Even a few metres above pavement level is exciting too: let's extend the Millennium Bridge so

more of the city can be traversed from another level. Let's have more skyways generally. The higher the altitude the higher the spirits. Conversely, there was concern about what there is to see if you're small. What's at pushchair level apart from knees, exhaust pipes, and chewing gum? The world becomes a dull and smelly place. Inspiration and stimulation - artwork, colour, lights, sounds, textures - need to start from pavement level, and then continue into the clouds.

7. THE CITY EASES FAMILY STRESS

Another big issue. Places to go as a family. Places, moreover, where it's free to go as a family, where parents aren't forced to spend money at every turn. The idea of a beach came up independently in a few groups. It represented holiday, time-out from a routine, uncomplicated

enjoyment, water-fun, unpretentiousness, and relaxation. Many believed a city should commit to reducing the stress of families by investing in such amenities, though the idea of a beach in the country's most coast-distant city obviously ties into statement 4. There was also recognised an anxiety in families feeling trapped in their own part of the city. This was expressed most acutely by those who are in the process of learning English. With 100 languages spoken in Coventry translation of signs into all of them is neither practical nor desired, but there is an issue of the city's legibility and subsequently its citizens' mobility. Projects which open the city up to people - trips, guided tours, outings - should be supported and made easier.

