



Asking people makes a difference

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When residents in Newcastle's West End asked metal sculptor Will Pym for a CCTV camera, he suggested an artistic solution within their budget: a giant steel raven, fastened high on a wall, its beady eye overseeing the public space below. When he returned for a second round of consultation with the community, he got a firm tap on the shoulder. "I recognised him - he was a big bloke from the street," Pym recalls. "He said, 'Did you make that bird?' I thought, this is the end of my public art career. I said, I did actually, yes. And he replied, 'Cos it looks ***** frightening!'"

Never let it be said that public art does not profoundly affect the people who live with it. "Now I always warn the communities I work with that art is powerful," says Pym. "People have very strong views about it."

Public art is well established in the corporate and public sectors - Gateshead's Angel of the North, credited with fuelling the region's regeneration, is a prime example of a piece that changed public perceptions of what major works can achieve. Art in places where people live has a lower profile but arguably a more

profound influence on people's lives.

Will Pym's pieces grace urban spaces all over the North East. He's one of the region's most successful artists and he's made community involvement his forte, artistically interpreting the ideas of the people who will live with his work. Asking people makes a difference.

"People who might not buy art for their houses do notice and enjoy the fact that there's art around," he explains. "I was installing one piece and someone walked past on the way to a job interview. He said, 'Oh, are you the guy who did the piece over the other side of town? I live next to it!'"

His experience gives the lie to the contention that public art is forced on communities. Developers, on the other hand, can be less than willing. "I recently had a project where a housing company was trying to get permission to develop a site," says Pym. "The council asked for a public art piece but the company had no interest in art. Hopefully I've designed something that's actually a functional object but contains within it quite radical ideas. So I can bring the passion and turn what might otherwise be a box-ticking exercise into something that people who

actually live there will value." Just because something seems a no-brainer, he adds, doesn't mean an artist can't turn it into something wonderful.

Don't think that all businesses are philistine though. "You can over-exaggerate the differences between businessmen and artists. Businessmen get pretty fed up with people saying they're uncultured."

So how does he answer people who haven't got much money when they say art funding is better spent on the essentials, or on reducing house prices? "It has been said to me," he acknowledges. "I do a lot of community consultations and it happens a lot. But over fifteen years of practice, the amount of times and the vehemence with which you get that question have declined."

If the choice was art or saving lives he'd be the first to say save life, agrees Pym, but it doesn't work that way. "A lot of money is spent on our housing environment. To say that we can only have the lowest common denominator - that we only deserve the most basic, the cheapest and the most functional - was an attitude that existed in the North East until recently. In fact, people realise that public spaces are fantastic places and the better you make them, the more they're looked after and valued. So I would say, in your portfolio of things to spend money on, it's right to spend a small amount of it making sure the buildings we build and the services we offer are done in an environment that's



beautiful and stimulating, because it will help us all live our lives."

Unfortunately public art can also be a focus for antisocial behaviour. Residents don't want a collecting point for troublemakers. The raven, for example, was installed in a space where a mural would have been possible but the community feared it would create a trouble hot spot. And why risk high concept art in a place where graffiti is the indigenous art form?

Pym is pragmatic about this. "In the public sphere everything gets wear and tear, so it's naïve to suggest you can put up a piece of work and expect it to be untouched," he says. "If there's vandalism in an area, everything will get attacked. But I would be upset, and I think I would have got it wrong, if there was a perpetual and determined attack. There have been isolated attacks but they've been more about something else than the artworks concerned. And there have been some

things that, on paper, I've had to fight really hard for because people have rightly believed they would be graffiti-ed. Yet they've been untouched. You have to make allowances - you have to make the piece tough and durable. But I do feel courageous enough to say to people, be brave: the better, more original, more beautifully made something is, the better you make the environment, the more people respect it. People look at you, and say oh that's hopelessly naïve, but I think it's true."

So people like how their local art looks but what do they make of it? "They might not all reach the same conclusion. That's fine. It's not like a road sign, it's much more about stimulating a creative kind of thought. Not everyone concludes the same thing after reading a book and that should be true about art, so I've tended to avoid putting plaques in front of things. A residential area isn't an art gallery, where things have been collected in a museum:

you're encountering art in the same way as you would a natural object. I would much rather people encountered the work and made their own stories and ideas up about it, hoping that I've presented something that will allow them enough ways in that it doesn't feel like a totally alien object."

Telling stories is a theme in Pym's work. He defines his style as naturalistic in the sense of being inspired by natural forms; realist because it's about real objects; and contemporary in attempting to do that. "It's also narrative," he says. "A lot of pieces tell a story or hint that a story can be told."

More simply, he makes the places we live better to live in. His work helps people value their communities by giving them something special to value. "That's what I do," he agrees. "I get raw, rusty steel in, and hopefully out of the other end comes something rather beautiful."

Will Pym's studio is in what was once Europe's largest lead processing works but is now a peaceful corner of rural Northumberland. Born in Wiltshire, he graduated from Newcastle University with a degree in Fine Art (Sculpture) and soon established himself in the North East. His favoured materials are wrought iron and welded steel, which he combines with less obvious materials such as glass, light and growing plants. He works with two full-time assistants and is happy to be described as sculptor, blacksmith, craftsman, public artist, metalworker, designer or even an artisan. www.pymsculpture.co.uk

