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CREATIVE BLACK COUNTRY

ART IN UNUSUAL LOCATIONS



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ART IN UNUSUAL LOCATIONS

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CASE STUDY THEME

› Art in unusual locations

PROJECT SUMMARY

Creative Black Country (CBC) is one of the 21 Creative People and Places (CPP) programmes funded by Arts Council England. CBC is delivering arts and cultural activity across the Black Country, with the overarching aim of getting more people and communities in the Black Country experiencing and being inspired by the arts. Specifically, the project aims to help people within the Black Country to promote and commission great art; develop peoples' skills and confidence so they can choose the art they want to see; create long-lasting partnerships between the arts sector and the voluntary, private and public sector; and increase the appetite for the arts across the Black Country.¹

Over the past two years, CBC has supported the development and delivery of the 'Desi Pubs' project, which is a project that aims to share and celebrate the largely untold story of the 'Desi' Pubs (pubs which are owned by Punjabi families serving local ales with authentic Punjabi cuisine) and the communities who have used them.² The project brought together five artists and seven pub landlords to collaborate on artwork that tells the story of how the Black Country's failing pub culture was reinvigorated by Asian landlords, opening up the pubs to all communities.

Drawing on interviews with CBC staff, artists, and landlords, in addition to feedback from pub regulars and observation of the Desi Pubs launch event, this case study focuses on how non-arts partners have collaborated with Creative Black Country and artists to deliver artwork in unusual locations across Sandwell. In particular, the case study examines the process of how partners came together to design and develop the project, highlights the strengths and challenges of delivering artwork in unusual places and what has been achieved.

¹ Earthen lamp. 2016. Creative Black Country: Interim Evaluation Report Year Two.

² Creative Black Country. Desi Pubs Project, Black Country Wide. [online][Accessed 20th October 2016]
Available from: <http://www.creativeblackcountry.co.uk/projects/project-articles/desi-pubs-project/>



Creative Black Country. Photo: Outroslide

KEY FINDINGS

- Over the last two years, non-arts partnerships with landlords and the Midland Pub Association have been supported by CBC to deliver a successful artistic programme across seven Desi pubs in the Black Country area, including artist residencies, a documentary and a BBC radio series. The project was exhibited in May 2016 at the Southbank Centre's 'Alchemy' event in London, attracting over 10,000 visitors across 10 days.
- The Desi Pubs project has helped to ignite an ambition within the landlords, pub association and the pub regulars to continue the theme, by commissioning new artwork for their pubs and expanding the project across all of the Desi pubs in the Black Country, thus expanding the 'arts in unusual places' theme.
- The project has received unprecedented regional, national and international acclaim, with a range of media outlets discussing the story. This had led to increased interest in the Desi pubs phenomenon, as well as the pub landlords and the pub association now contributing towards a book (curated by CBC, Rope Press and New Art Exchange) which will consist of photographs, personal stories, the artwork, recipes and stories from the Desi pub owners.



Creative Black Country. Photo: Outroslide

INTRODUCTION

The Black Country is an area to the north-west of Birmingham, covering the areas of Wolverhampton, Dudley, Sandwell and Walsall. As a traditionally industrial area, the history of the Black Country is often associated with the manufacturing industry; particularly the ironworking foundries and forges. Following the Second World War, many migrants from South Asia came to the Black Country to work in the foundries. Despite facing racial hostility and violence, many of these migrants went on to establish communities across the West Midlands and today, the Black Country has an ethnically diverse population.

Traditionally, the Black Country has had little arts infrastructure in place; stakeholders reported that there are a number of key arts organisations but they are separate and lack connectivity. During the last decade, a high profile arts project, 'The Public' gallery in West Bromwich attracted widespread criticism from local people after it failed to open and engage the public, despite receiving significant levels of public funding on a yearly basis. By failing to connect with the local community, a level of suspicion was produced in the public about public arts and arts events.

The outcomes of this project revealed a need to involve local communities in the arts process, to rebuild trust and engage with them:

“It’s not about inflicting art upon people, but creating great art from people’s lives and experiences and turning them, if you like, and their stories into art.” CBC

The CBC programme has three key strands: ‘groundworks’ (which engages community groups to experience art), ‘commissions’ (linking exceptional artists to community representatives) and ‘learning’ (developing new ideas and reflecting on experiences).³ The Desi Pubs project sits within the second strand of work, as a large-scale, ‘landmark commission’ and was developed in 2015. CBC came at the right time for the Midland Pub Association; the landlords identified that they wanted to do something to celebrate the Desi pubs in the Black Country. As many of the foundries had closed and been demolished, there was feeling amongst landlords that a big part of their heritage had been lost. A project around the Desi pubs would help them to share the history of the pubs with the local communities; capturing the struggles and successes of the last fifty years to restore some of their heritage.

³ Edmonds, N, N Gratton and J Holmes. 2016. Creative Black Country: Interim Evaluation Report September 2014 – April 2016. Staffordshire University: Stafford

APPROACH TO CREATING ART IN UNUSUAL LOCATIONS

'Desi' (meaning 'of South Asia' and used to refer to something as 'authentic') pubs have their roots in the 1960s, when racial hostility towards South Asian migrants resulted in segregation in various social spheres, including pub premises. Over the decades, as migrant communities were established in the Black Country, many of the failing pubs in the area were taken over and rejuvenated by members of the Punjabi community, restoring them as premises that served traditional Punjabi food, alongside traditional British ales.⁴ The pubs were open to everyone; providing a place for the community to socialise, without the segregation and racial hostility that was so rife at the time:

"This pub has been the hub of the Asian community – specifically the Punjabi community – since the 50s, when the men came over and worked in the foundries and all lived around here. This was their central point." Landlord

As the Midland Pub Association were already discussing how they could develop a project about Desi pubs, CBC had also been approached by a local photographer who identified the Desi Pubs phenomenon and was interested in developing a project that would centre on the theme, highlighting an intrinsic part of the Black Country's history:

"It's something which is unique to this region, really. North Birmingham, the Black Country, the story of Desi Pubs, and the history behind them and the characters; we're telling that story through creative engagement and great art." CBC

The chair of the Midland Pub Association and CBC discussed how the project could develop and how the non-arts partnership could be mobilised. The Midland Pub Association was central to the negotiations round which pubs would be involved, brokering the engagement between the landlords and CBC, to develop and deliver a successful CPP arts project within places that are often considered quite 'unusual' locations for arts events. Stakeholders viewed the existing arts infrastructure as relatively poor and felt that many people in the local community would not go to traditional arts venues.

"I just don't think it's in their [the community's] everyday life. It's not something that they ever did, so for leisure they wouldn't do that... I guess it's going outside your comfort zone." Artist

The Desi Pubs project therefore opened up an opportunity to bring the arts to communities who might not otherwise engage; developing the project from venues that are known and used by local people. However, with this, CBC had to be mindful that pub-goers use the premises for a variety of different reasons and as a result, participation may manifest in a number of ways. To address this, CBC felt it was important to invest time in building up relationships with landlords and pub regulars and listen to peoples' inputs regardless of the extent of their involvement:

"The landlords understand their customers, some of them have been loyal pub regulars for over ten years. They had a clear idea about which commissions best suited their pubs at the selection panel. A gallery director on the panel was surprised at how committed the landlords were to selecting the art." CBC

⁴ Creative Black Country. Desi Pubs Project, Black Country Wide. [online][Accessed 20th October 2016] Available from: <http://www.creativeblackcountry.co.uk/projects/project-articles/desi-pubs-project/>

Despite the disparate nature of the stakeholders potentially involved in Desi Pubs, a range of perceived benefits to taking part were identified by those interviewed. For some landlords, being able to tell an untold story and sharing it with the local community was central to their participation, whereas others at first saw the project as a marketing and publicity opportunity for their pub. The artists interviewed generally felt that the project would give them the opportunity to learn about something that they had not heard about before, and to produce artwork that would share the stories with the wider communities.

Regardless of the initial motivation for taking part, enough interest was generated, which resulted in a pilot project being launched in the Prince of Wales pub in Smethwick (as part of Alchemy Black Country), and, following the success of the event - which consisted of a comedy night and a photography exhibition that attracted 118 people - the project was rolled out across seven other Desi pubs in the Black Country.

The Desi Pubs project has hosted a range of activities, with the artist commissions being central to the project. As a result of a scoping phase which involved going to numerous galleries to examine artists' work, five artists were chosen by CBC and the pub association to do residencies in seven Desi pubs, working across a range of artistic mediums, including photography, lenticular, stained glass windows, mosaics and paintings. In addition to the residencies, CBC partnered with New Art Exchange and commissioned an up and coming contemporary visual artist alongside a traditional pub sign-maker to create signs for all of the pubs.

“The landlords and some of the pub regulars were part of the design process, several drafts were sent back and forth until the landlords and the artists were happy with it. The idea to use Punjabi text in the artwork came from one of the landlords - a brilliant idea! They absolutely own these signs in every way.” CBC

Alongside the art commissions, the project also included a three part radio series with the BBC about the history of the pubs and the artwork created. In addition, Media Trust filmed a documentary as part of their Brilliant Art series focussing on the artists working with the landlords.

The activities were developed through the collaboration of the landlords and CBC; at first, the landlords were a bit hesitant and suspicious about the types of art they would receive, but as the relationships developed between them and CBC, some became more enthused and proactive in working with the artists.

“Some of them [the landlords] weren't keen. But I was like, just grab it, and take it, if anything it is free publicity.” Landlord

Creative Black Country. Photo: Outroside



OUTCOMES

As the case study visit was on the day of the launch of the pubs' artwork in situ, it is perhaps too early to comment on the outcomes of the pub artwork on the local community and if having the artwork in the pubs has led to increased reach and audience numbers. However, as the developmental phase of the Desi Pubs project occurred over two years, there have been many outcomes for people involved during this phase, ranging from landlords and artists to pub regulars.

Some interviewees highlighted that while it was too soon to say about the impacts on the local community, they have noticed more 'new faces' at the pubs and more people seem quite interested about coming into the pubs and viewing the artwork. In addition, the project has raised more awareness about Desi Pubs in general, bringing a new audience to the pubs who are interested in the project:

"The project has had a huge impact, with people coming in and asking 'what is Desi Pubs all about?'" CBC

"No one [outside the Punjabi community] used the phrase 'Desi Pubs' before... now it's almost like a brand and the phrase has caught on. It's slipped into local vernacular. This project has probably been the key catalyst for that." CBC

Pub regulars have displayed some 'softer' outcomes, in terms of increased confidence around the arts and more engagement in discussions about the art in the pub. Art has gone from something that was not really discussed in the pubs, to something which is more of a focal point, and something which local people now have more confidence to express their opinion on:

"They [pub regulars] are talking to you about the art; giving their opinion about it and then you find all these stories and conversations coming up about art and what it is, and what is good or not... basically it has become pub talk" CBC

We have been able to get the stories out of the customers." Pub association

The project has also helped people to connect to the heritage of the community and there is a sense of pride in some of the regulars spoken to at the launch event. For example, one pub regular had been present for the whole process and he talked about how he spoke with the artists and shared his stories and experiences. He felt the stained-glass windows were really important and would like to see them expanded to continue telling story of the community up to the modern day.

However, as highlighted previously, pub regulars' engagement manifested in different ways, depending on their relationship with the venue and the overall chemistry of the pub they went to. Some pub-goers – especially those in the pubs which focus more on their restaurant function – were less connected to the artwork displayed in their pub because they had been less engaged in the development phase. Therefore, there was a clear distinction in terms of pub regulars' connection with the artwork and the extent to which they were involved in the consultations during the artistic process.

The Desi Pubs project has also had number of outcomes for landlords; mainly in terms of their engagement with the arts. The landlords were not perceived to be the 'usual suspects' regarding engagement with an arts project, but stakeholders highlighted how, throughout the project, landlords went from being suspicious about CBC to being proactive and critical about the artistic process, and generally more excited about the project. Not only has Desi Pubs increased the landlords' excitement about the arts, there have also been instances of behaviour change as their ownership of the project has increased.

One landlord commented that being involved in the project had made him more ambitious about where they can take the project next. He has already built up enough capacity and capability around the art commissioning process to have a series of photographs to be taken about the Desi pubs to be put on the walls. Another stakeholder highlighted that to understand about behaviour change, it is necessary to look at the pubs that they did not work with; many of which are now 'desperate' to be involved.

Although many of the outcomes identified have been positive, one of the landlords was unhappy about the final piece of artwork that had been produced; to the extent that they "rejected it." In particular, he felt that the artwork did not capture what they wanted it to capture, in terms of the resemblance of the portraits to the people they were depicting and it didn't represent the story of his pub or his pub regulars very well. To an extent this was down to a lack of understanding between the artist and the landlord about what was needed, but it was also down to a difference in their conceptualisation of the art.

**"I've put in all this hard work and after all this time, when it comes to the crunch,
I have nothing." Landlord**

To rectify this issue, the artist, landlord and CBC are working together to identify how they can produce a piece of artwork that better represents the landlord's story and art.

In addition to these outcomes for landlords and pub regulars, the project has also generated an unexpectedly large media interest, which has benefitted CBC, in terms of increased recognition about the project, and potentially the wider arts sector. The project has featured on regional and national television, across a range of press and media outlets and it has even been discussed in international press in Mumbai. For many of those interviewed, the most exciting aspect of the project was being invited to the Alchemy festival at the Southbank Centre in London in May 2016. Landlords and artists attended the event; there was a high level of comradery and excitement and their reception was 'remarkable', with 10,000 people enjoying the exhibition over ten days.



Creative Black Country. Photo: Outroslide

WHAT WORKED WELL

- › The partnership working between the landlords which has been facilitated by the Pub Association has been really valuable because it has helped during the co-ordination of the project. They have been able to utilise their existing pub association meetings to discuss the project and how they can progress with it, which has been beneficial.

“Because of that [their existing relationships] the project has gone really well.

If everyone had gone their own ways, it wouldn’t have worked well. [The partnership] helped to co-ordinate the project” Landlord

- › The relationship-building work that CBC has done with the landlords has worked well so far, particularly as the landlords are not the ‘usual suspects’ and are particularly hard-to-reach because “they are working-age men who do their own thing”. In order to ensure that the project is a success, it has been necessary for CBC to develop a relationship with the landlords that not only means they can work together, but also so they can be critical about ideas and challenge one another.

“If you’re going to bring people into a creative process who don’t usually do it,

you need to have a good relationship with them. You need to actually get to a point

where you can disagree with each other.” CBC

- › The buy-in from the landlords has been significant. In part this is because the landlords already wanted to develop a project around the Desi pubs, but also because CBC managed the balance between leading the project and empowering the landlords to fully participate in the project. As the project is based around the stories and experiences shared from the landlords and their customers, there is a level of personal investment in the project. Furthermore, place is significant in this; as they have ownership of their pubs, there is another level of pride that the landlords have in ensuring that the project is followed through and is a success.
- › By bringing in local artists to support with the project, several of the interviewees felt that it helped in the process of the art becoming more relatable to the community. Simply by being in close proximity to the community that they’re working with, artists are more likely to become embedded in the project and the community:

“if you don’t live locally you’re not going to be able to make the relationships with people.”

LESSONS LEARNT

- › At times CBC and the artists struggled with landlords’ time management and they spent a lot of time at the beginning bouncing ideas around and trying to co-ordinate what they were going to do across a wide range of people, who are busy because the project is not their priority – their business is. This long process of consultation and discussion resulted in other aspects of the process feeling a bit rushed. In future, CBC would timetable the project so that the participants would know when they needed to make decisions by.
- › With a non-arts partnership it is necessary to invest time in building up relationships with all people involved, ranging from the landlords and pub association to the pub regulars and visitors. As pub-goers use the premises for a range of different purposes, their engagement and involvement in pub activities might vary. To address these variations, time must be spent listening to the inputs and discussions of regulars, to see if their inputs can be incorporated into the project, to increase overall ownership of the project.

ACHIEVING EXCELLENCE

The reception at the South Bank Centre was very positive with over 10,000 visitors attending the exhibition over ten days, with much of the audience, being ‘usual suspects’ and those who generally engage with ‘excellent art’.⁵ However, there have been some tensions with achieving ‘excellence’ and ensuring that they engage the target audience, especially as the target audience was ‘hard-to-reach’. As part of engaging these audiences, they need to have a feeling of ownership over the project, and in part that means advising on the art and being involved in critiquing the process. As a result, there may be instances where the quality of art might be compromised to allow for engagement to continue. However, as they build up the relationship with the target audience (the landlords, pub regulars) they can start to introduce new types of arts at a higher quality.

“Originally we considered some well known artists, but we realised that they were too far from it [from where the audience are currently at]... the local artists had a great understanding of the context, and the art work created makes sense in the pubs, that’s what makes them great art.” CBC

There was also debate across the stakeholders about the extent to which they perceived the Desi Pubs project to be featuring ‘art in unusual places’. For some stakeholders, the pubs are not necessarily unusual places for art – they often feature other types of art such live music performances, traditional South Asian dance and comedy nights – but the type of art that is being introduced – stained glass windows, mosaics, painting – is quite unusual for the venues:

“There’s already art around here, whether you like it or not; pubs put music on – it’s a place where people go for entertainment... it’s to do with types of art and everybody is into their own thing... we want to give them the opportunity to experience more on their patch, rather than dragging them into a foreign universe and them feeling as if it’s not really for them... It’s unusual art in traditional spaces.” CBC

In contrast, other people that were interviewed felt that the artwork was being displayed in unusual locations because the venues themselves are not traditional arts spaces. Although different forms of art do take place within the pubs, the types of art introduced through Desi Pubs are quite traditional and are not usually featured in pubs in the area.

GOOD PRACTICE – BUILDING ON EXISTING NETWORKS:

The main example of good practice identified by the stakeholders was their work around building up strong, working relationships with each other. In particular, utilising the existing networks of the landlords (through the Pub Association) was a good way to involve all landlords in the discussion around developing the project, whilst being mindful of the potential politics between the pubs. As a result of building up the strong relationships, the landlords and the pub association have really bought into the project and are now looking at ways they can continue their work.

⁵. Earthen lamp. 2016. Creative Black Country: Interim Evaluation Report Year Two.

TRANSFERABILITY:

The local context of 'Desi Pubs' has been central to the theme of the project; the focus of the project is to share the stories and experiences of individuals who have contributed to the development of the Desi Pubs in the Black Country. However, for CBC, the model in itself is transferable across a range of different groups in different contexts; members of the CBC team have used the model for projects in the past. Working on an intimate scale to begin, with subjects that are relevant to the people they are working with, they grew the work alongside their ambition and at their pace. They used a layered approach where people could experience the work on many levels through live events, permanent artwork, exhibition, broadcast and print. The crux of the model is to ensure that communities have ownership of the art process through continual engagement and consultation, so they feel more connected to the final artwork that is produced.

"It's a model that I'd used before. Long term residencies with a relatively small groups of people in a local context coming together to create a bigger 'whole'... it's worked before and I can't see any other reason why it wouldn't again. For me, it's the most effective model of working and I've found that if your objective is to create artwork in which other people are really connected to it, it is effective." CBC

SUSTAINABILITY

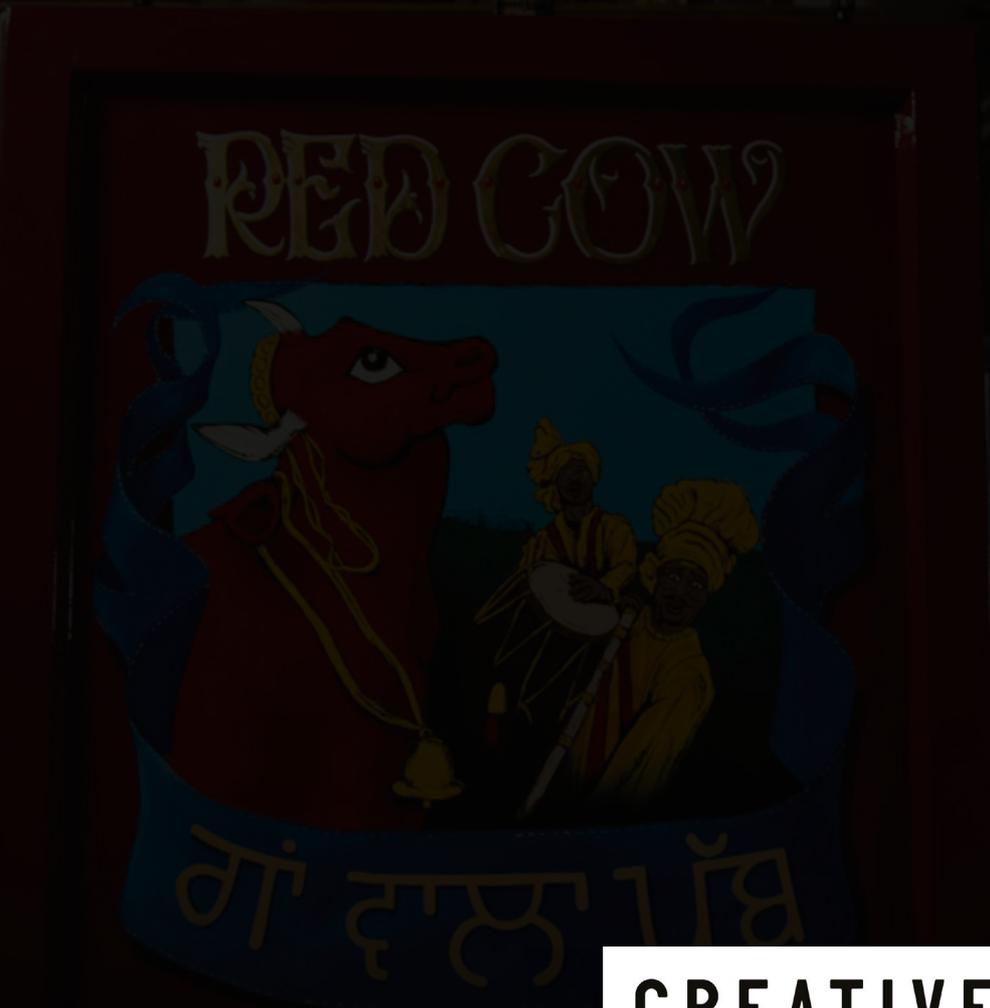
There were mixed views across stakeholders as to whether or not the project was sustainable. In one respect, there were concerns about whether the 'Desi Pubs' theme could continue to be explored or if the project matter should be changed to keep people engaged with new and fresh content. In another respect, the project clearly ignited peoples' ambition to continue developing it. In particular, there was evidence to suggest that following the main project, several landlords have gone on to commission artists to continue doing more pieces for their venue, and they have been involved in further projects such as a book about Desi Pubs and holding their own exhibitions in their pubs.

There was also a clear ambition for the project to be expanded across all of the Desi Pubs in the Black Country, as the momentum has been built up by CBC and other pubs are now keen to get involved:

"I want to get more pubs in the area involved in this. I want artwork to connect all the Desi Pubs in the Black Country." Landlord association

Through the non-arts partnership with the landlords and the landlord association, the Desi Pubs project has paved the way for a greater involvement from Desi pubs across the Black Country to expand on the work done through CBC so far.

In terms of the sustained impact of the project on the wider community, it is perhaps too early to say as many of the pieces of art were only just being unveiled at the time of the case study visit. From the stakeholder interviews, it seems that the sustained activity will mainly be around the work that landlords and the pub association will be doing to expand the project, as opposed to direct involvement from other members of the community.



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