

Case Study
Wild Blue Yonder
By Jeni Walwin
2010

Introduction

Bracknell Forest Council became involved in this commission in 2008, when the Principal of the College contacted the Arts and Heritage Officer at the Council for advice.

A meeting took place where the cost of the commission was discussed and key questions were asked about who could effectively manage the commission and in the time scale.

The Council recommended that the College appoint a public art consultant to manage the commission. A template consultant brief was provided along with a shortlist of consultants. The College took this advice and Jeni Walwin was appointed to coordinate the commission.

Bracknell Forest Council commissioned this case study to demonstrate the different components which have played an important part in the success of this commission, while also highlighting any truthful shortfalls.

Public art commissions can be a tricky balance of professional partnerships, opinions and relationships, which are often a hidden part of the commissioning and management process.

Much of the success of this commission lies in the strength of these relationships, the professionalism and the level of trust involved.

This case study highlights and summarises the processes, roles taken by different professionals and offers supporting information from the artist briefs to selection process.

We are grateful to Jeni Walwin for writing the case study and to Bracknell and Wokingham College for allowing us to share the case study and background papers.

Lynne Dick
Arts and Heritage Officer

WILD BLUE YONDER – A CASE STUDY OF THE PUBLIC ART COMMISSION

by Jeni Walwin

The Client

Bracknell & Wokingham College was undertaking a major redevelopment scheme which involved building a new state of the art building to replace all its previous sites in Bracknell. Ellis Williams Architects were responsible for the design of the £36 million building occupying a key site within the town. Situated at a major access point, as part of the Eastern Gateway to Bracknell, the new college building will make a significant contribution to the proposed town centre redevelopment.

The College is a community college providing a great variety of vocational, academic and adult education courses, including those in art and design, for learners of all ages. Bracknell & Wokingham College has a sound reputation locally, and has recently been judged a 'good' college following a full inspection by Ofsted.

As a condition of its planning permission the College was required to integrate the work of a contemporary artist into one of the public areas of the development.

The Brief for a Public Art Consultant

Senior staff at the College had no direct experience of managing public art projects or of working with artists on commissions of this scale, and just in the way that they had identified a Project Manager to oversee the building programme, so they recognized the need to bring in professional experience to manage the public art element. A number of public art consultants were invited to tender for this project on the basis of the following brief:

- a) identifying possible sites for the commission
- b) drawing up an artist's brief
- c) managing the selection process
- d) drafting the contract
- e) liaising between the artist, college and contractors
- f) liaising with the Public Art Advisory Panel where appropriate
- g) liaising with the planning authority
- h) managing and monitoring the progress of the commission and reporting to the college
- i) identifying other sources of funding and partners where required
- j) ensuring that the artist worked within available budget
- k) advising on the marketing, interpretation, opening and launch of the work

The Role of the Public Art Consultant

Once appointed the public art consultant undertook responsibility for all the tasks outlined above and added one or two more to the list. These included:

- a) recommending the establishment of a small Public Art Working Group, and working with the College to advise on its membership and define the role of the Group, then planning and servicing the meetings of the Group.

This group was seen as crucial to the smooth running of the project – it reflected local interest in the project, and included representatives from the Bracknell Public Art Advisory Panel, local Councillors, the College Corporation and staff of the College. The Group acted as champions for the project both internally and externally. They were involved in all the key decisions – the artists brief, the interviews and the approval of early design proposals – in this way they as a group took ownership of the project locally.

- b) managing the creative use of available funds

It was decided very early on in the project that it would be preferable to use the available budget as effectively as possible. There was an urgency to the timetable in that the college wanted the work to be completed and installed to coincide with the opening of the new building. There was therefore very little extra time to fundraise or to negotiate with new partners.

- c) expanding remit of the budget beyond the costs of the work itself

Once it was agreed by the Working Group, following the suggestion by the architects, to site the commission on the internal walls of the glazed screen at the front entrance to the building, it was clear that costs could be kept down because the work would no longer have to withstand the vagaries of the elements. This allowed the public art consultant and the artist to develop ways in which the project could create certain elements especially for students and others that would extend the project physically into the town centre. There were in the end 5 different strands to the project. With the exception of the permanent artwork, none of these had necessarily been conceived at the start, but the propitious use of the budget and the working closely with the marketing team, teaching staff and the principal at the college, allowed for this successful extension to the main work. The project contained the following elements:

- 1) the vinyl artwork on the College building
- 2) a limited edition artwork of 2000 'postcard notebooks' to be circulated to every new student in September 2009
- 3) a series of 20 x A1 posters to be placed in Bracknell town centre sites and in the College foyer during August/September 2009
- 4) An A5 catalogue documenting the project with a contextual essay and images
- 5) An open forum for A level art students comprising a brief introduction to public art, meeting the artist and hearing her ideas, and a performance inspired by her work

d) establishing criteria for the appointment of the artist

This method is a useful one to use when a public art consultant is proposing an invited long list from which the Working Group will make the short list for interview. It is important that these criteria are agreed and that the public art consultant can then bring to the table only artists who absolutely fit those criteria and who they are certain of their ability to deliver the project. In this situation it is the Working Group which makes the decision, the public art consultant being confident that any of the proposed artists would be good to work with, and this immediately bequeaths a sense of ownership of the project locally.

Relationship between Client, Artist and Public Art Consultant

The public art consultant acted as a conduit between the Client and the Artist. The Principal of the College chaired the Working Group, and agreed the agenda in advance with the public art consultant. Likewise the public art consultant would make sure that the artist was aware of the project timetable and the points at which presentations would be required. The Principal had ultimate control over the budget, but the public art consultant managed the detail of it and proposed any changes for approval. The key elements of the budget (the fees to artist and public art consultant, and the cost of the work itself) were the first to be identified. Then the artist discussed other ambitions for the project with the public art consultant and estimates were requested to see how far these extra elements might be possible. Discussions of the 'postcardnotebook' were had with both the Working Group and more importantly with a Staff Liaison Committee meeting where comments from the Special Needs teachers were especially helpful in determining the detail of the final result.

The public art consultant kept in regular touch with the artist throughout the project – visiting the studio to view early designs, and attending meetings with the fabricators, installers and printers – and relayed any change in direction back to the college. In addition the public art consultant recommended the photographer (to document the work and to supply images for the catalogue) and the lighting consultant (to propose improvements in the visibility of the work particularly from outside at night).

The artist has been especially pleased with this project – one of her largest scale works to date. The relationship between the artist, the principal, the marketing team and the staff in the art department remained positive and enthusiastic throughout.

The Role of the Artist

The selection process for the appointment of the artist is based on an assessment of the candidate's previous work, their overall approach to the brief and the panel's view of their ability to deliver the project on time and within budget. Once appointed the artist's involvement in a commission of this sort is usually divided into three phases.

a) the research and design development phase

This period enables the artist to undertake an intensive period of research before coming up with detailed proposals for the work. A number of visits to the site, meetings with relevant local people, and research in local archives allows the artist to get a complete picture of the context in which they will be working. Individual members of the Working Group may direct the artist to particular relevant individuals or to local resources during this stage. The artist's proposals are then taken to the Working Group for approval.

b) finalising design, fabrication and production

Following approval by the Working Group, planning permission was authorized by the local authority's planning department. The artist then worked intensely with Omni, the printers and fabricators, in order to meet the installation deadline the end of August 2009. It is during this stage that someone is usually identified as the project manager. This person is not the arts consultant, nor is it the artist, but often it is the architect, the landscape architect, or the construction manager. It should be someone who has expertise relevant to the project, be it in a technical, engineering, construction, or electrical capacity. This person should always be identified at an early stage in the project planning, and appropriate budget allowed for their fees. In the case of Wild Blue Yonder, Omni acted as both fabricator and project manager – researching the feasibility of materials and their durability, and organising the production and installation of the work.

c) installation, maintenance and marketing

This is the third stage of the artist's work and the installation, although undertaken by qualified professionals will always be overseen and approved by the artist in conjunction with the building's construction managers. The artist works with the project manager to outline a maintenance guide. The artist works with the arts consultant and the client to plan the launch, and marketing of the project. All related activity is developed either in discussion with the artist or as a direct result of her proposals.

Relationship with other agencies

The individual members of the Public Art Working Group represented other local organisations and this was the key interface between the project and the Bracknell community. Helen Barnett, at the The New Bracknell Company Limited, was especially helpful in identifying and releasing poster sites and empty shop windows for the poster campaign in the town centre.

The Balance between Creative Potential and Deliverability

It falls to the public art consultant to ensure that the most able and reputable artist is interested in being considered for the commission, whilst at the same time needing to reign in any costly or overly extravagant plans.

Drawing up an attractive brief is one of the key tasks of the public art consultant. Briefs should identify all the detail, and history of the context in which the artist is expected to work, but should never pin down the outcomes. The practical aspects (the budgets, the timetables, and the range of sites) are all givens. Beyond those the artist should be allowed to interpret the brief as freely as possible. Creating specific outcomes in terms of size, materials, colour, treatments, etc will only deter the more interesting artist from applying. Designers, architects, applied artists usually work to a brief where there is an end result linked either to a function or to decoration. Artists are employed to bring something unexpected to the project in hand. This doesn't imply that they are not good at working within the limits of a brief and budget, but rather that they are capable of opening our eyes to something we had not expected or experienced before.

This is not to suggest that there is unnecessary risk involved. All artists would be expected to fulfil the project criteria and to have demonstrated their ability to deliver commissions or projects of an equivalent scale on time and within budget.

Linking in with other Timetables

Almost all public art projects have to work alongside someone else's schedule. This might be the timetable of a construction programme, the opening of a building or the landscaping of an environmental area. There is no doubt that in all cases the public art consultant and the artist can never be appointed too early in the proceedings. It is always good to be able to plan well in advance, so that any sharing of technical or engineering aspects can be factored in at an early stage.

For the Wild Blue Yonder project the lighting both internally and externally will undoubtedly have an impact on the visual strength of the work. All specifications for lighting had been finalised at the point at which it was clear what the artwork would entail. This has meant that an amount of the budget has been held back to contract a lighting consultant who will recommend any improvements once the external lighting has been completed.

Maintenance and Longevity

The fabricators of the work have guaranteed the vinyl print for 10 years. There are simple instructions for washing and cleaning. Should any panel need replacing then the fabricators have the details and could replace and install one at relatively low cost.

Publicity and Interpretation

Several elements which might be described under these headings were actually component parts of the project. For example the poster distribution in the town centre was seen as a subliminal campaign to intrigue shoppers, whilst only hinting at the exact nature of the project through the addition of the college website in the bottom right hand

corner of each. The postcard notebooks given to every registering student, were both functional (they could be torn off individually and used as postcards) and instructive, providing a short visual story of the ideas behind the project. The 'Meet the Artist' session was advertised internally and gave students a personal introduction to public art, to this commission and to a live performance. The A5 catalogue was intended to give greater context to the project for visitors to the building and also to publicize (through mail-outs) the project to a wider public arts constituency within the UK.

The college devoted a page on its website to the project, and with the public art consultant organised a successful evening launch, which attracted many local people who were given tours of the new building as well as the chance to see Wild Blue Yonder.

It is disappointing that public art projects rarely get a mention in the art press and this one was no exception, although all the relevant critics and magazines were targeted through a joint mailing list established by the artist and the public art consultant. The College undertook to manage and pay for the mail-outs and the cost of the evening reception.

Jeni Walwin
March 2010

Appendices

- I. The Role of the Public Art Working Group
- II. Press Release describing the project
- III. Artists Brief
- IV. Project Timetable
- V. Selection Criteria for the Appointment of Artist

Appendix I

PUBLIC ART PROJECT – WORKING GROUP

BRACKNELL AND WOKINGHAM COLLEGE

The Role of the Public Art Working Group

1. **Planning Requirements:** When Bracknell and Wokingham College acquired planning permission to develop a new building, the Bracknell Forest planning committee stipulated that the college should undertake a public art project as part of the new development.
2. **Funding and Management:** The college has now earmarked an allocation from its building fund to support such a project and has recently appointed Jeni Walwin, an independent public art consultant, to manage the process.
3. **The Working Group:** The College is now looking to establish a small Public Art Working Group to oversee the acquisition of a work by a contemporary artist to be sited near the entrance to the new college building.
4. **The Role of the Public Art Working Group:** In response to outline proposals, the Working Group will be asked to agree the criteria for the selection process. Following this they will consider a long-list of examples of work by relevant artists. Studio visits will then be arranged for a short-list of three artists, before a final decision on the exact work to be installed. It is hoped that members of the group will act as champions for the project locally, and support the many ways in which the work will be introduced and integrated into its educational and local context.
5. **Time Commitment:** It is anticipated that the Working Group will meet approximately three times between October 2008 and March 2009. With the exception of the studio visits, all meetings will take place in Bracknell
6. **Composition of the Group:** The Working Group will reflect local interest in the project and will include representatives from the Bracknell Public Art Advisory Panel, local councillors, the College Corporation, and staff of the college.

Appendix II

WILD BLUE YONDER

A COMMISSION FOR THE NEW BRACKNELL & WOKINGHAM COLLEGE BUILDING BY ARTIST NICKY HIRST

'Colour belongs to the arts and the sciences, both to high culture and popular culture, both to theory and to story telling. Colour is truly fluid: it spills over subjects and seeps between disciplines as no one area can claim a privileged or proprietorial relationship with the subject.'
David Batchelor

The Project

As a condition of its planning permission, the College is required to integrate the work of a contemporary artist into one of the public areas of the new building. In view of the highly visible and public service nature of the College, and its location within a few minutes' walking distance from the town centre, this work will contribute to the town's refreshed cultural strategy.

Following discussion with the College's Public Art Working Group and consultation with the architects and project managers for the new building, the glass panels at the front entrance to the building have been identified as the most appropriate site for the commission. An artist's intervention here will enhance the approach to the building for both pedestrians and drivers.

The Artist

Following a rigorous selection process, Nicky Hirst has been chosen to undertake the commission. As an artist she has significant experience in making work for public sites and has collaborated with architects on several projects for new buildings. Most recently she was the lead artist for the new Biochemistry Building for the University of Oxford. The project, entitled 'Salt Bridges', incorporated the work of several other artists in the new building as well as commissions from Hirst herself. Nicky Hirst has had solo and group shows in galleries around the UK and her work is in many private and public collections.

Each project she undertakes follows from detailed research and often entails intricate, labour-intensive production methods, where the means of fabricating the work are a comment on the subject itself.

The Art Work "Wild Blue Yonder"

Background Research

Early on in the project it was agreed that the application of printed vinyl panels to the curtain wall at the entrance to the building would be an appropriate canvas for the appointed artist. Nicky Hirst spent some time during the research period visiting

Bracknell and talking to members of the College community. Her first thoughts were to make a work that celebrated the value of education.

“I felt my proposal needed to capture the attention of the community, engage the imagination and be read on multiple levels. The work also needed to sit comfortably within the building and be ambitious. I had been thinking of the work having an outward face that could be read as one approached the college. Then, having experienced a full tour of the Church Road site and meeting more staff and students I planned to make a piece that ‘worked’ or ‘made sense’ from within the new building. After an intensive period of research, (during which I explored various areas such as people/faces, language/signing/text, trees/forests and eyes/optical/perception) I kept returning to the quote ‘the whole purpose of education is to turn mirrors into windows’ and to abstract notions of choice, selection and options - a palette. We all wonder at some point whether other people experience their surroundings in the same way we do. Do they hear the same things and see the same colours?” Nicky Hirst

Description of the Work

‘Wild Blue Yonder’ will be made of coloured, self-adhesive vinyl that has a lifespan guarantee of 7-10 years. The vinyl will be applied from inside the building. Each pane of glass will be divided vertically into two - one half covered in a different coloured vinyl following the RAL colour chart, the other half incorporating a computer-cut black vinyl text in lower case Helvetica. The work will be applied to the glass panes at the entrance to the College, which includes the reception and café areas. The Curtain Wall contains 4 entrance/exits to the building. The ‘glass screen’ consists of 89 panes of glass and covers an area approximately 8 metres high and 25 metres long.

The work is intended to compliment the existing architecture and thoughtfully intrigue, provoke and delight the users. The entrance to the building becomes literally a threshold for the work – on the outside the visitors are challenged by the text, and once inside all is revealed. From outside the building the text will be sideways and back to front, therefore illegible. From the inside the text will be legible and will create a kind of poetry using unrelated Crayola crayon colour names, for example atomic tangerine, shadow, antique brass, bitter sweet, periwinkle. The overall effect will be equivalent to that of a large scale stained glass window – projecting coloured shadows into the building during the day and beaming out its presence at night.

The Project Components:

‘Wild Blue Yonder’ is a work in three parts. It consists of:

- 1) the vinyl artwork on the College building
- 2) a limited edition artwork of 2000 ‘postcard notebooks’ to be circulated to every new student in September 2009 (to be discussed at 13 May meeting)
- 3) a series of 20 x A1 posters to be placed in Bracknell town centre sites and in the College foyer during August/September 2009 (locations tbc)

In addition to the above there will be an A5 catalogue documenting the project with contextual essay and images, and an open forum discussion with the artist in late September 2009. This event will be advertised on the postcard notebooks.

<http://saltbridges.bioch.ox.ac.uk>
www.nickyhirst.co.uk

Appendix III

BRACKNELL & WOKINGHAM COLLEGE PUBLIC ART PROJECT

ARTIST'S BRIEF (DRAFT)

New Building for Bracknell and Wokingham College

The College is currently undertaking a major redevelopment scheme which involves commissioning a new 'state of the art' building to replace all its current sites in Bracknell. The award winning company, Ellis William Architects (EWA) is responsible for the design of the £36 million building which occupies a key site within the town. Situated at a major access point, as part of the Eastern Gateway to Bracknell, the new college building will make a significant contribution to the proposed town centre redevelopment.

The College is a community college providing a great variety of vocational, academic and adult education courses, including those in art and design, for learners of all ages. Bracknell and Wokingham College has a sound reputation locally, and has recently been judged a "good" college following a full inspection by Ofsted.

The Public Art Commission

As a condition of planning permission, the College is required to integrate the work of a contemporary artist into one of the public areas of the development. In view of the highly visible and public service nature of the College, and its location within a few minutes' walking distance from the town centre, this work will contribute to the town's refreshed cultural strategy.

Following discussions with the College's Public Art Working Group and consultation with the architects and project managers for the new building, the glass panels at the front entrance to the building have been identified as the most appropriate site for this commission. A successful intervention here will enhance the approach to the building for both pedestrians and drivers. One suggested strategy is that the artwork be printed onto film which is then installed on the inside of the glass panels and back-lit to give a powerful effect after dark.

Timetable, Fees and Contractual Terms and Conditions

The building is scheduled to be fully occupied from September 2009, therefore the following timetable is proposed

Appoint artist	January 2009
Research and development	February 2009
Design Options presented	end March 2009
Final Design Agreed	mid April 2009
Fabrication of work	May and June 2009
Installation	July/August 2009
Reception to Launch the commission	September 2009

There is total budget for the commission of £38,000. At this stage it is anticipated that £15,000 will be allocated to artist's fees and expenses offered in three stages:

- i) Research and Development of Design Ideas,
- ii) Design Completion and Fabrication,
- iii) following successful installation

£23,000 is allocated for materials, fabrication and installation costs.

The final brief will be drawn up once the artist has been appointed. It will reflect this document and will form the basis of the contract between the artist and the College. In addition to completing the commissioned project, the artist will be expected to work with the Public Art Consultant and the College to find appropriate ways of introducing the work to the College community. This may involve introductory talks or workshops, and additional fees have been set aside to accommodate a modest programme.

The budget also includes an additional allocation to support the design and print of an illustrated leaflet to be produced on completion of the project and this could include a commissioned essay. The College will host a reception to launch the installation of the work.

Key Personnel and Reporting Structures

The artist will work most closely with the Public Art Consultant (Jeni Walwin) and the Project Architect (Julian Baker, a director at Ellis Williams Architects), but overall responsibility for the appointment rests with the Principal of the College (Howard O'Keeffe).

There is in addition a small Public Art Working Group charged with overseeing the successful completion of this commission. The Group reflects local interest in the project and includes representatives from the Bracknell Public Art Advisory Panel, local councillors, the College Corporation and staff and students of the college. The Group has made recommendations in relation to the site, contributed to the artist's brief and selection process, and will consider the early design proposals.

Selection Process

Expressions of interest, biographical information, and images of relevant work from 10 invited artists will be considered at the early January meeting of the Public Art Working Group. A short-list of four artists will then be selected for interview at the end of January.

Appendix IV

Revised Timetable

- a) Establish Working Group to oversee the acquisition. The Group to include representatives from the College staff and students, the local council, the local Public Art Advisory Panel, and the architects. September 2008
- b) Consultant to draft, and Working Group to agree, criteria for the selection process. November 2008
- c) Presentation to Working Group of long-listed examples of artists/works. From which four artists would be invited for interview. Early January 2009.
- d) Interview short-listed artists. Late January 2009
- e) Appointed artist to undertake research and design development. February and March 2009
- f) Artist to present design options to Public Art Working Group. End March 2009
- g) Artist to develop the detail of the final design. April 2009
- h) Fabrication of the work. Artist and Public Art Consultant to offer introductory programme within the College. May and June 2009
- i) Installation of the completed work. Commission essay and produce illustrated leaflet. July and August 2009
- j) Liaise with College marketing team to arrange suitable launch. Coordinate design, print and mailing of invitations, and organise event itself. September 2009

Appendix V

BRACKNELL & WOKINGHAM COLLEGE PUBLIC ART PROJECT

Selection Criteria for Appointment of Artist

ARTIST SPECIFICATION

- This is a key commission for the College. Just in the way that the new College building will provide a strong visual marker for Bracknell, so the public art work will enhance the architecture and reinforce the College's position within the town centre. The commissioned work will mark visitors' arrival to the new building and the appointed artist must be at least as experienced and acclaimed as the architects responsible for the development. The selected artist will therefore have a significant national or international reputation. This will have been achieved through high profile exhibitions, the completion of public and/or private commissions, or other relevant projects which have brought their work into the public domain.
- He or she will demonstrate the ability to work where necessary with professionals from other disciplines to bring the project to fruition.
- He or she will have good presentation skills and be able to make the case for the project in a variety of contexts.
- The appointed artist will be based in the south east region and will be prepared to visit Reading on a regular basis to undertake research and to attend meetings.
- He or she will have experience of managing budgets and working to agreed timetables to deliver the work on time and within budget.

SELECTION PROCESS

- The Public Art Consultant will propose a number of artists who clearly fulfill the specification and will invite expressions of interest for the Public Art Working Party to consider. Four artists will be selected for interview.
- The shortlist of four artists will be invited for interview in late January. They will be asked to make a short visual presentation about their work, focussing particularly on aspects of their practice that they consider relevant to the commission.
- Following the artist's presentation, the interview will cover broad approaches to the commission and relevant past experience, but it would be inappropriate to expect the artist to propose a work at this stage, in advance of the research period.
- The interview panel will comprise three members of the Working Party, the Principal of the College and the Public Art Consultant.