Interpreting the City

Using art across the City

Richard Porch

The interpretation of the built environment for public consumption has a long and not tremendously successful history. Heritage interpretation all too often involves plonking down a load of printed panels that soon get vandalised and become indecipherable and eyesores in their own right.

The idea for this article occurred after seeing this year’s Art across the City project in Swansea. Thus was curated as usual by Locws, a local arts organisation. It ran between 18 April and 10 May.

Locws was started in 1999 by artists Tim Davies and David Hastie. Its aim is to “Highlight interactions between the artist and the site; the audience and artist; the audience and site; and the audience and the artwork”. Locws works with artists to create a series of provocative and distinctive temporary artworks across the city every two years.

This year’s effort was even more interesting than usual because of a project by the Irish artist Aisling O’Beirn. She
prepared a series of small-scale drawings on five everyday themes: bridges, street furniture, urban weeds, landmarks and ships. Her drawings were then incorporated into a large pictorial panels comprised of eight or nine individual drawings representing each. The panels were attached to freestanding structures not unlike small advertising billboards. Although these were only small-scale and supported by a timber-frame they had real physical presence.

These slightly odd and unexpected objects were placed at five different sites around Swansea, places that each had a significant number of passers-by.

One was placed very publicly on Museum Green, in the heart of Swansea. Another was sited high on the embankment in the Leisure Centre carpark. A third was installed on the promenade, and a fourth in the centre of a concrete amphitheatre. The fifth was placed on the other side of the Tawe in the prestigious SA1 development near one of the Technium buildings.

**Pictures** Aisling O’Beirn

Placing the panels in the public realm was made possible by a temporary planning permission. To quote Locws, "O’Beirn’s project sees the circulation of vernacular information about Swansea bringing together the familiar and unnoticed aspects of the city". On another level entirely (and in a brilliant marketing ploy) O’Beirn had the artwork for each outdoor poster published as a full-page illustration in the local newspaper at intervals over the life span of the installation.

It seems to me that this absorbing enterprise achieved a number of things. It drew attention to previously unregarded aspects of the city and made one aware of them. The use of drawings to represent these things, rather than photographs, involved the spectator in both experiencing the drawing and recognising what it was that was drawn. There was a two-step involvement which worked to engage the viewer in the project.
The very physical presence of each illustrated panel on its supporting timber frame called made the passer-by curious to investigate it. The panels became (albeit briefly) part of the physical fabric of the city. Each was a piece of the city’s street furniture.

And in order to experience the entire set of boards and achieve completion one had to walk around the city. One got some exercise, some art and some enlightenment in the process. O’Beirn’s project was a successful and painless marriage of heritage interpretation, art and sustainable tourism. The one defect it had (if it can be called that) was that it was all temporary and disappeared once the Art across the City project came to an end. But one could easily imagine it becoming a travelling exhibition doing the local schools and civic societies in a way that would extend its use.

I found O’Beirn’s idea enthralling and so much more interesting, in heritage interpretation terms, than yet another leaflet or trail guide.

I’ve always felt that the built environment of our towns and cities is best understood as a series of stories, stories with all sorts of cross-cutting themes and sub-plots. These stories within stories have economic, industrial and social dimensions, and their number is without limit. I also think these stories are best told by getting people out of their seats with an invitation to look at buildings, spaces, places and artefacts in real time.

By creating a trail which demanded to be physically pursued and experienced the whole exercise was enhanced. And the use of drawings rather than photographs meant that viewers had to work (a little bit) at what they were seeing in order to
correlate the artwork with what they saw before them. Making people walk the trail also made sense (a shame they didn’t have some sort of calorific burn statistic to say how much energy you’d use doing it). A heritage interpretation trail that keeps you fit – what a selling point!