

Southern Comfort 2006
What an Architecture Centre can do for You
Speech by Paul Grover, Chief Executive of Solent Centre for Architecture + Design

The Solent Centre for Architecture + Design is one of a group of some 15 or 16 Centres in the country. Importance of Democracy and Engagement related to Architecture and Design. The Centre is about enthusing people and showing them how they can become involved. We are funded by CABE. CABE itself has helped to bring about improved design. Design is intrinsic to the quality of life. The Arts Council also contributes towards our funding. Additional funds also come from SEEDA. At present there is talk about Centres of Excellence for every City. We started up in April 2005 and there is a broad view represented on our Committee. We do things such as holding exhibitions – usually based on themes such as, 'The future of Bridges', 'The future of Southwark', and 'The future of Croydon'.

Our home is currently at Lyndurst in the New Forest. Architecture Week is very important to us, so during that week we encourage people to draw in the centre of Lyndhurst. We wanted people to stop and look; we are always passing architecture. We don't always need to go to galleries. Schools work well with us – children love drawing. We can become dull to our environment.

This year we have been involved with sculpture at Havant Arts Centre. The idea is for the sculpture to draw people in. Getting children involved is very important to us e.g. with the project at Ryde on the Isle of Wight. We try to get across the notion of good citizenship. The children worked on how it is possible to change public space. When children see what they have helped to achieve they are elated. The Centre is also doing some commercial work. Projects are at the centre of our work. Our emphasis in the programme for 2006 – 2008 will be on: -

- Public participation
- Design Advocacy and
- Education

We constantly 'nag' funding bodies.

Consultation often means in effect telling people what they will get! We find that there is a lack of training for Planners but this is changing because of the new notion of design quality as part of planning. Sustainability and Inclusion are also important. As part of Design Advocacy we go out to Local Authorities and help them. We consider ourselves as being an Educational Body. We believe that discussion and debate are important.

Public Participation

We organised Architecture Week 2006 in the South East. There were 'links' to numerous events on our website. The Portsmouth Society's bus tour was an excellent idea. Let us know your plans for 2007!

Hidden Histories

Getting people involved in their local histories e.g., the Titanic project in Southampton where we involved people in oral history. Links with specific buildings can be made

with the appropriate use of modern technology. This approach is the equivalent of turning a city itself into a gallery.

City vision Centres

This idea goes back to the demolition of the dividing wall in Berlin. What should the unified Berlin look like? There is now a new Vision Centre for London. Drawings/Photographs have helped to raise questions about the future of London. So far, seven debates have been held. It is a process of engaging people in decision making.

We would like to see City Vision Centres in Southampton and Portsmouth. By using aerial photographs and creating 3-dimensional imagery on computers it is possible to create virtual models and to have the models in a prominent place so that local people can join in the debate using the models. Cities and Towns are never finished. We need to get across the idea that we are always launching into the future. We should set out to encourage citizens to come to the new City Vision Centres and to have their say.

Annual Exhibitions

These can sometimes deal with the everyday concern of 'ordinary' people. E.g. Air Conditioning. It is important to create active participation at these exhibitions. Another way of consulting people is to 'go out' to them. Hence the importance of road shows etc. The importance of sharing views is to be encouraged. A good example would be all the debates and consultation that have gone into the creation of 'Home Zones' in cities where pedestrians take priority to the car.

Education

There are four of us at the Centre, so we cannot go out to all Hampshire Schools (we are not service providers). What we do is to set up 'models' and 'projects' for people to use, At present we are working with three Secondary Schools which each have different backgrounds. Thirty children are involved in each of the schools and we also work with the teachers.

The idea is to 'cascade down' what we have to offer. We have helped with lesson plans and children can use images from our website. We have interested not just Art Teachers but also PE and RS Teachers. One school has exchanged with a school in China. All three schools have linked with a city abroad.

Question & Answer session 1 (Chaired by Dr Roger James, Secretary of the Portsmouth Society)

Q. In West Sussex there is a Design Organisation. They have come up with some design principles for West Sussex. It is a different approach to the Solent Centre. Is the Solent Centre going to come up with its own design principles?

A. Architects are taught to design objects to go into a space but design needs to relate to the urban framework. Urban design needs to come to the forefront - not just building design. More work needs to be done on sustainability. Sustainability needs

to be related to costs. The outcome should be based on principles of urban design not just 'style'. Start with the public and the broad view not with abstract principles.

Q. I found what you had to say exciting. How do we encourage the Local Authorities?

A. Local Authorities are used to 'the status quo'. They are not used to planning for the futures' we hope the groundswell will in time work upwards.

Q. I liked your innovative approach. Have you had experience of Local Authorities involving the public?

A. I have worked with three of the poorest London Boroughs. They moved over to an innovative approach e.g. consultations on the streets. People need to see the worthwhileness of what is being planned. The Chief Executives and the Leaders of these Councils were 'on board.' By the end of the road shows the Officers had started to take notice. The main thrust was that of 'going out to the people'.

Q. I would like to put in a word for those Societies, which organise walks. This brings in the young and grannies.

A. I agree. They are a useful tool. Walks in Gosport, for instance, have thrown up all sorts of interesting issues. Please key in the results on the Centre's website Use 'Google Map' technology. We could put your Societies on our website with a 'link', if you wish.

Q. I was interested in 3D Plans. Should each city have a City Masterplan?

A. Yes – plans should not be seen in isolation. There should be a Citizens' Forum in every city and town. Every City and Town should have an 'Architecture Centre'.

Statement in Weymouth we are signed up to the Sailing Project connected with the forthcoming London Olympics.

Q. How do we change the training of architects in relation to community involvement?

A... don't abolish the present training – widen it and relate it to the community.

Q. I am aware of a growing interest in a cultural Olympiad in connection with the London Games. English Heritage has stressed the appropriate use of money apart from just that necessary for the stadiums.

A. I am pleased to hear about this development. It is encouraging.