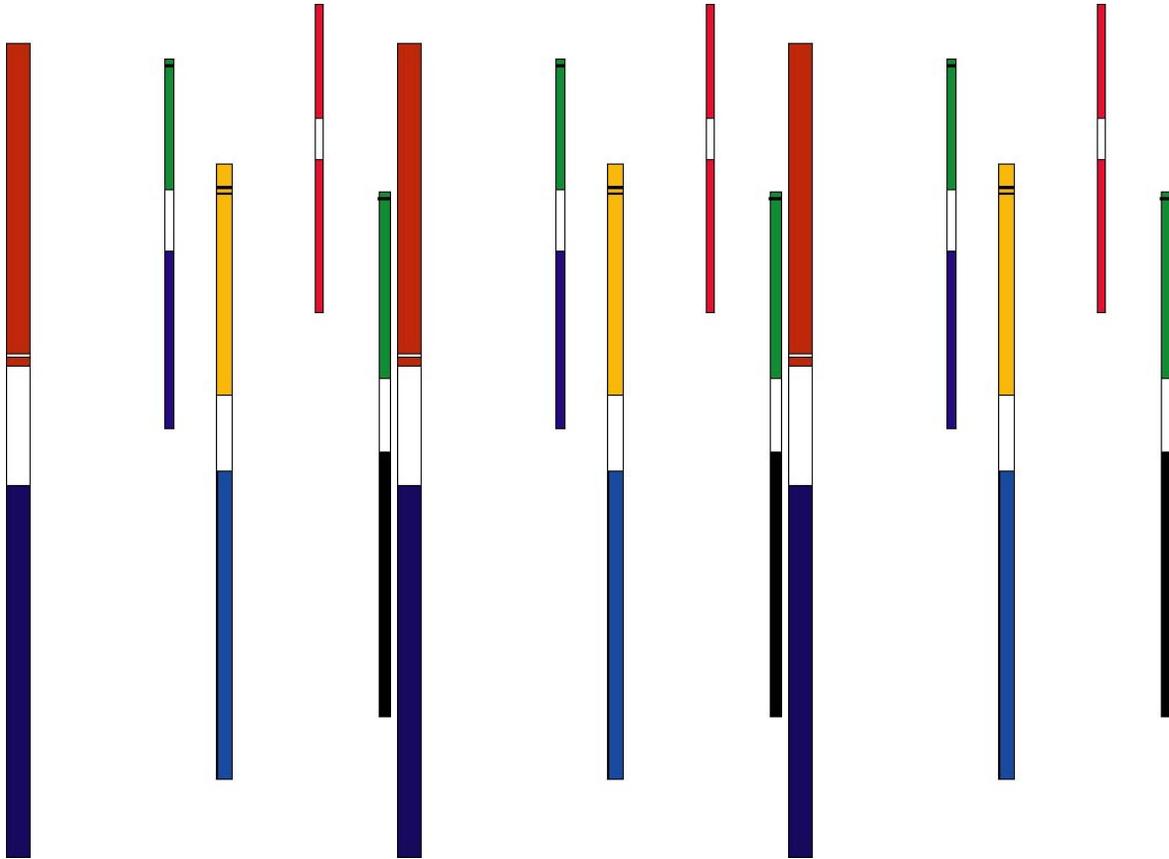


“Constellation”: Public Art in the Citadel

Residents’ Reactions



V L Pollock and J Sharp
University of Glasgow



 **Ayrshirehousing**

'Constellation': Public Art in the Citadel

Research carried out by the Urban.Space.Public.Art group,
Department of Geography, University of Glasgow



This is a summary of research carried out in August 2005 in the Citadel, Ayr. The research focussed on the Ayrshire Housing (formerly Carrick) social housing development designed by local firm the Alistair Murdoch Partnership. The aim of the research was to examine the relationship between the residents of the Citadel development and the *Constellation* artwork installation by Stephen Hurrel. As well as gaining a sense of the residents' opinions of the work, the research also sought to consider how the artwork might have affected their sense of place and, building on a previous questionnaire carried out shortly after the installation of the work, whether any attitudes or feelings had changed over time.

The first section of this report will detail the results of the questionnaire and the second section will summarise our conclusions. The two surveys on which this report draws were carried out in August 2003 by Jean Glass, a student at Glasgow School of Art, in collaboration with Stephen Hurrel and the second survey in August 2005 by Venda Louise Pollock and Jo Sharp from the Department of Geographical and Earth Sciences, University of Glasgow. Where the results are compared, they will be distinguished by the date at which the questionnaire was carried out i.e. 2003 or 2005. Otherwise, the results will be from the 2005 research.

There were important differences in the methods with which the questionnaires were delivered. The 2003 survey was done in the form of semi-structured interviews carried out in person by Jean Glass with 69% of the 78 households responding. A brief summary of the results and conclusions were written up and some included in the *Constellations* booklet published by Ayrshire Housing. The 2005 questionnaire was designed so as to ask similar questions to the 2003 surveys, thereby providing points of comparison, and to expand the scope slightly to cover issues of 'place.' The questionnaire was delivered by post with the assistance of Ayrshire Housing. The researchers then returned a week later to collect the results and discuss matters further with any residents available. 27% of households responded.

There are pros and cons to both approaches. On one hand, although a greater response rate results from the door-to-door interview questionnaires the responses tend to be 'on-the-spot', which can be both positive and negative, and the respondent may feel that they have to respond in a certain way so as not to cause offence, especially as the person conducting the interviews was involved in the process. On the other hand, the postal-delivery method yields fewer responses and those that do respond are likely to be more active tenants or those with particularly strong views - although this was not blatantly clear from our results. It is, however, more objective and by leaving the questionnaire with tenants for a week it was hoped that full, considered, honest results would be given and this seemed to be the case. By collecting the results in person, although some were returned by post via Ayrshire Housing, there was the opportunity to engage further with the tenants and discuss their views. It was made clear throughout that the 2005 research was being carried out independently and that all results would be treated anonymously.

Section 1

Profile

The majority of respondents had lived in the Citadel since it was built, only three of those questioned had moved there in the last couple of years. Almost all of the residents had moved from Ayrshire and cited their reason for moving as 'housing' related. Additional grounds for moving were the location, family reasons or a personal attachment to Ayr (e.g. 'Ayr born and bred') but none cited work or 'friends' as contributing factors. Almost two-thirds of respondents were over sixty years of age, with only one less than 35 years old. There was a relatively even division of male/female respondents with 52.4% male and 47.6% female.

The Artwork

Given that most of the respondents were from Ayr and its environs it is perhaps not surprising that about two-thirds considered themselves to have a good knowledge of the area's history: the port, industrial heritage, Churchill barracks and Cromwell's Citadel were most often mentioned with the Castle less so. A similar number, 61.9%, felt that they knew about the artwork and were able to describe it in varying levels of detail:

The art style is mainly a contrast between the modern and the old right down South Harbour Street, from Boat Vennel to the foot of the Old Harbour including the citadel.

Poles or Painted Poles

The poles, can't see any point of them...to me its not art

It is a collection of brightly painted poles positioned randomly in the public areas of the Ayrshire Housing Association's South Harbour Street Development. Inside the poles are miniature sculptures which when lighted by torch can be viewed through a peep hole.

Rubbish

Varied coloured poles with inserts and some with rattles on top

Poles with viewing 'windows' positioned to match star constellation, linking how shipping uses stars for navigation

Poles painted like ship funnels.

Around 62% of respondents referred to the artwork as 'the poles' rather than *Constellation* – there was no indication of the work having coined an alternative nickname from the residents.

When asked if they had viewed the landscapes, 42.86% said that they had – around 19.6% of the 2003 sample had viewed the landscapes. The numbers of those who had reported seeing others viewing the landscapes was approximately the same in both surveys at around 27%.

Most liked the colours of the poles and recognised their nautical theme:

I believe they were meant to match the colours more or less of the boats coming and going from the harbour

The colours are fine and repeat ships colours but a waste of money

After the colours of the boats i.e. Waverly (red and black)

The colours are bright and bold. They allude to the sea-going vessels that used Ayr harbour in the past.

The colours of the poles represent the colours of the boats in the harbour, except the rusty ones

The colours were to represent stacks on ships. Ayr was until 5 years or so ago, a thriving fishing port.

No I do not know why those colours were chosen but I think the coloured poles give a nice colour to the area

Adds colour to environment

As with the 2003 survey, over two-thirds of those questioned still had the small kit with the pole, torch, some retaining them in the pouches 'somewhere safe' and others, although not many, displaying the pole on top of the tv and so on.

The questionnaire asked tenants if they were 'involved' in the *Constellation* project and a further question asked how (attending the installation, being consulted by the artist etc.). Somewhat surprisingly given the engaged nature of the process only 19% of those questioned considered themselves 'involved'. This may point to some confusion over the term 'involvement' or that, with time, things have been forgotten, or it may simply be that these people were not involved. On a more positive note, those who were involved found it to be a positive experience, in some instances making them more aware of an environment they already considered themselves to be familiar with, others got to know neighbours, and for some it reminded them of things they already knew.

As the 2003 survey was carried out shortly after installation, many were still getting used to their new surroundings. This was reflected in the results which showed that over 50% had not yet formed a firm opinion of the artwork. By 2005, however, opinions seemed to have polarised with only 14% not responding, indicating ambivalence or that they were unsure. From the remaining 86%, 62% expressed a disliking of the work and 24% did like it. As with the 2003 survey 71% of those responding in 2005 said that their opinion had not changed since installation. For those whose opinions had changed, some liked it more, others had issues relating to the placement of the poles and their privacy (referring to poles outside windows) and others felt that the money could have been better spent, an issue that will be considered later. For some, the poles have become such a part of their environment that they no longer notice them and, as one respondent pointed out, the questionnaire served to remind them of the installation and reconsider its place in their environment. Others had become more accustomed to them, they appreciated the colours, especially during winter, and knowing more about them has helped appreciate the poles more. Despite a general negativity the overwhelming majority felt that the work fitted in well with the environment – both the nautical theme and its modern nature were mentioned as

factors. Residents also noted that it was a point of discussion with passers-by and generated some curiosity about the area.

The response when asked what they thought their neighbours thought of the artwork echoed that to the question about liking the artwork. In the 2003 survey there was still unsure and mixed views, although more thought the tenants' response would be negative rather than positive. In the 2005 survey the majority felt that their was not a positive response to the artwork amongst their fellow tenants. Having said that over a third of those questioned felt that 'the Poles' gave the area a distinct identity, echoing results from the 2003 survey where, for example, people explained that they were identifying the area to taxis by telling them to stop by the poles. Perhaps more surprisingly, given the general feeling of negativity towards the poles, almost 40% of those questioned would miss the poles were they to be removed.

Section 2

Whereas the 2003 survey concluded that the feeling was of a community settling down and getting to know their residents, the results of the 2005 survey reflected a community more decided in their views (having said this, this may be partly due to the method of surveying). Whilst the attitude toward the artworks tended to be negative, as one resident put it:

The negative response is because I do not think the cost was justified for what was created. Mind you they add something, although what, I'm not quite sure!

This issue of funding was something picked up on in the first survey and remains a problem. This is not, however, unique to the Citadel and has been an issue found in other urban regeneration schemes incorporating public art. This points toward a general need to make it clear from the outset that the money for the artwork is dedicated solely to that project and cannot be utilised in other ways. It seems that this would then change some of the negative feelings toward the artworks as the cost issue recurred throughout and those who raised it tended to have negative attitudes toward *Constellation*. In the context of the Citadel, the situation has been further complicated as there have been some serious building defects which, although the responsibility of the building contractor rather than the housing association, may have coloured some of the feelings towards the artwork.

As with the first survey, age did not seem to be a factor in determining whether the work was liked or not but, at the same time, its 'interactive' nature – looking through the peep-hole to view the landscape or listening to the chimes – was inaccessible to some of the more elderly residents. Nevertheless, their families had engaged with the work. Although there was a general negativity toward the artwork, it was interesting that residents felt that it fitted in well with the surroundings, for many, even if they disliked it, it had become a part of their urban landscape which they would then miss if it were removed. This indicates a complex interaction between the residents and the artwork.

Given the engaged nature of the process and the inclusive nature of related events it is difficult to know how residents might feel more involved in the process. Utilitarian methods like handing out information seems to defeat the purpose of having artworks as part of the environment. There is a sense that, as with many things, it is easier to comment upon once it is there and few comment beforehand. Some residents mentioned the idea of lighting up the closes as one they liked and yet, as noted by the housing association and the researchers on their way round, the closes have become very personal spaces and so whether this would work now is questionable.

Time seems to have hardened opinions towards the work and yet also made it a more familiar and accepted part of the environment.

There are many things about the *Constellation* project that indicate the potential of public art in regeneration schemes. The engaged nature of the process, producing a work that appeals to the residents' personal histories rather than a heritage brief, has resulted in an artwork that offers something to the residential neighbourhood and to the wider community. Making sure that the community is aware of funding is evidently a key issue to be addressed. Paradoxically, despite its negative reception by the tenants, *Constellation* has a lot to suggest to a field (public art/urban regeneration) that is increasingly being over-run by heritage-driven or tokenistic works of art.

This research was made possible by the financial assistance of the John Robertson Bequest, University of Glasgow.

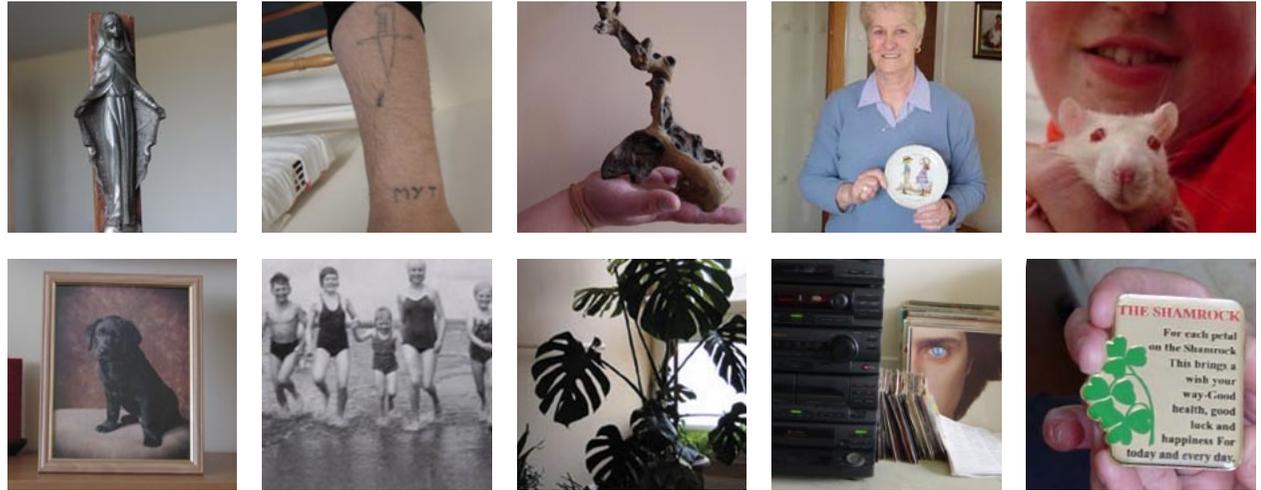
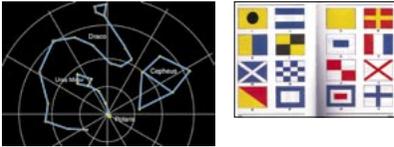
CONSTELLATION

BY STEPHEN HURREL

RESEARCH



PROCESS



Tenants were visited and interviewed. As part of these interviews they were asked; "What personal objects or images have you always taken with you when you move house?" These images and objects were documented and became part of a postcard pack to introduce tenants to the project.

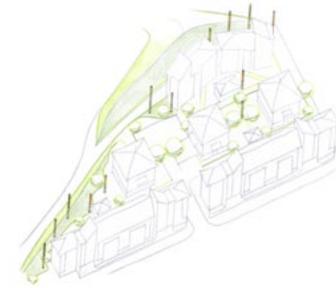


CONSTELLATION

BY STEPHEN HURREL



INSTALLATION



OPENING

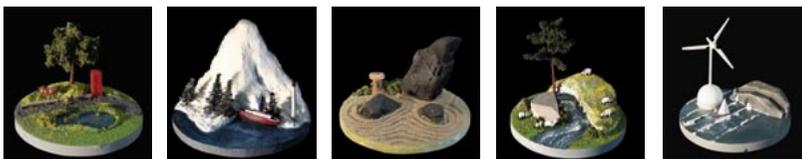


TORCH BOX



Situated on the communal landings, these boxes contain torches for viewing inside the poles, and are recharged by a solar panel.

POLE INTERIORS



Five of the poles contain miniature landscapes which can be viewed using a torch.

MINIATURE POLES IN TENANTS' HOMES

