

# Stirchley Prospects

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*Stirchley Prospects* was a nine month project in Stirchley, South Birmingham; a programme of artworks and events made as specific responses to Stirchley and strategic to Stirchley's regeneration. Since completing this project we have continued to work in Stirchley to develop proposals identified during *Stirchley Prospects* – recently delivering *Love Stirchley More* – a three day festival of love, art & commerce ([stirchleyprospects.wordpress.com](http://stirchleyprospects.wordpress.com)).

Both projects were initiated by Place Prospectors (a not-for-profit community interest company led by Emma Larkinson & Jayne Murray) [www.prospectors.org.uk](http://www.prospectors.org.uk). Place Prospectors specialises in working creatively with people where they live, work and learn. The work we do results in a shift of perspective, influences ideas and stimulates people and activities to bring about lasting and positive change.

## Introduction

As an artist and a placemaker working in partnership within the public realm we have delivered public art strategies, commissioning programmes and site responsive artworks for a range of clients. Those working in this sector will know that at times the strategic intention of public art projects – defined by policy or funding demands - can be at odds with what is appropriate or meaningful to deliver on the ground. Our desire with this project was to work to be truly responsive to place, to define our own 'brief' through research and dialogue before making a series of temporary art responses that could provide a focus for the regeneration demands of the area. Focusing our work on Stirchley reflects a personal interest for us both - as past residents still connected to the area by living within the same district. Having seen the area decline slowly over 10 years due to planning blight, we wanted to make a contribution.

The project would test how art could contribute to the regeneration process at a very local neighbourhood level. It was intended as an active project that would work with residents, businesses and organisations with an interest in the area. We aimed to link in to local plans - in particular the development of an Supplementary Planning Document (SPD) that was due to be developed whilst we were working in the area. We established a dialogue with the local plan team at the very earliest stages of our project.

The project was delivered over 10 months and we built strong relationships with the people who engaged with us in the local community. Those who collaborated with us or visited the project noted the authenticity and

responsiveness of the work – one in particular noted how many people were talking about neighbourhood planning and localism but this was the only place he'd really seen it happening. The legacy of the project will take some time to play out but even now, less than a year after completion, we can already see the impact beginning to show.

The timetable of the SPD was delayed, as such a close relationship with this process was not possible, and the influence of our project took different directions. It has influenced further activity and participation locally – rather than being restricted to policy guidelines. A greater openness to the value of creative activity, the development of the Stirchley Urban Resource Network and the delivery of *Love Stirchley More* are part of this legacy.

The issues faced by Stirchley as a small urban neighborhood are not unique. However, its history is – and our work began to reveal some of this history in new forms (through Stirchley merchandise for example) – which provided an alternative to traditional place marketing. We recognised and discovered that the cultural life of Stirchley had suffered with its decline, as the infrastructure of cultural life being historically connected with places of work, social clubs and places of worship – so many of which had been lost to this community.

The process of working throughout *Stirchley Prospects* began to mobilise and engage people to think creatively about future possibilities for the shaping of Stirchley's regeneration, and understanding its past. The artworks that were created were a way of expressing these possibilities within the public realm - thereby raising the profile of these issues whilst presenting alternatives.

Having returned to work in Stirchley to deliver *Love Stirchley More*, we found an openness and enthusiasm for art projects from residents, businesses and organisations.

### **Context**

Stirchley has seen a decline of industry and the shopping street resulting in a degraded public realm - it faces major retail development and has been blighted by delayed planning decisions. Development sites are limited in the area – the largest has been at standstill for 10 years whilst legal challenges and land assembly are resolved. Once these issues have been addressed, the prospect of a large Tesco store being built has been of concern to many residents, particularly as a second planning application by Asda for an alternative site is also being considered by the local authority. The community is split in its views on these developments – but what can be said is that there has been an absence of a strategy for the area beyond the investment that supermarkets will bring. There is inevitably a concern that the shopping street will slip further into decline with this added competition. Seen by many as they travel through by car on one of the main routes into the City, the visual quality of Stirchley's high street masks the vital community networks that exist, the huge affection for the area and the emerging creative and entrepreneurial spirit.

## Our work

We raised the resources for our project from open access lottery funds in the 12 months prior to starting in May 2011. Our first task was to set up a base – an empty shop front on the main shopping drag. This gave us a visual profile, a space for people to meet and participate, and somewhere to exhibit our work.

[Stirchley Prospects Project Base. Photography: James Hobbs]



We went on to research the area thoroughly and to exhibit our findings at our launch event in August. The research provided the basis (or inspiration) for the artworks - seven in total. They were made as a response to issues important to the area's future: its unique characteristics; the area's weakened identity; the loss of assets through

disassociation - like the station (currently called Bournville), or dereliction – the swimming baths; delays facing major development locally; the strengthened relationships needed between business and community for renewed prosperity; and the connections with open and green spaces. We found that many of the conversations we had focused on the problems and challenges – part of our work was to start to define and point to solutions and ways of delivering these. Working within a local context, the ability to drive change comes down to individuals; access to skills and expertise; and a willingness to co-operate.

Historically, co-operation has played an important role in Stirchley – the Stirchley & Ten Acres Co-operative Society was one of the oldest and largest. The social and economic development of the area was inextricably linked with the Co-operative Society and this, in turn, with larger employers such as GKN and Cadburys. The economic structure of the area was based on local employment, a strong network of independent shops serving the community and good transport links. Stirchley still has a large number of independent shops – a strength that could be developed – and of course good transport links and green routes. The focus of inward investment via supermarkets has meant that the high street has not developed. We found that, where niche shops existed, customers would travel some distance and they had a loyal customer base. Like many high streets, new trading forms and activities need to be found. The monthly Stirchley Community Market provides some alternative shopping offer, but needs to be mainstreamed if it is to have an

impact on the shopping street and to grow trade amongst commuting residents.

The artworks made in response to our research findings were:

*Prosperity*, a painted piece on a shop wall created something beautiful in the environment and echoed the ghost writing of signs long gone. Its content focused on the closer links that existed historically between traders, residents and industry, in more prosperous times. The need for a co-ordinated and less adversarial approach to defining development needs and solutions is something that a project like ours could begin to influence by bringing together the disparate voices and activities at a local level.

[Prosperity, wall work.  
Photography: Jayne Murray.]

*Love Stirchley* aimed to profile the area within and without. One month prior to the Christmas lights switch on, we collected what people love about Stirchley and wrote it on glow sticks. Over 1500 glow sticks were snapped at the lights switch on and inserted into holes in a metal structure spelling 'Love Stirchley'. The effect was both stunning and joyous, and perfectly suited the local event.

[Love Stirchley located in the Stirchley Prospects project base over the Christmas period.

Photography: Jayne Murray]



*Love Stirchley* was positioned prominently along the main street in one of the area's few public spaces for all to see. Its situation in the open space heightened the sense of local ownership. After the event, the piece was moved to our shop window where it remained for the month of December. In the window. The loves expressed by local people

were programmed onto a scrolling LED that accompanied the piece. The piece profiled Stirchley in a completely different way to any other signage or publicity: it was for Stirchley and from Stirchley. It has been incredibly well-received, which we think is due to the participation, message, strength of idea and scale. We are working towards establishing a longer term/permanent version, and this provided a foundation for the *Love Stirchley* festival.

*Stirchley Street & Bournville until 1904* highlighted the importance of the local rail station and a desire to reassert Stirchley's name – lost since 1904. Currently called 'Bournville Station' it was originally 'Stirchley Street Station',



then became 'Stirchley Street and Bournville' and when Cadburys expanded, it became 'Bournville' only.

[Projection adjacent to Bournville Station. Photography: Jayne Murray]

The station sits directly on the border of the two neighbouring

areas. Our projection of the previous name onto the side of the station entrance was a simple and effective way of very publicly highlighting the information that many were unaware of. Our intention is to reclaim this piece of Stirchley's 'Lost Property' and we think it will benefit the area's prosperity if people are more aware that they can access Stirchley by train.

*Hazelwell Lane In Memoriam* focused on this once vibrant street, effectively mothballed by inactive development. Hazelwell Lane was a route linking green spaces, a mixed use street with industry, social opportunities and terraced housing, and a well used east west route in an area where there were few on account of bridging the river. Few from the community had been involved in the planning process and once we realised the street would disappear under the development plans we thought it appropriate for there to be a celebration of the life and times of the street. At first, we held workshops to commemorate the lane, bringing together our research with the memories of others. Then we created tributes, making candles in the form of past activity, for example, a working person, a terraced house, an Eccles caravan. These were placed in the window of the last remaining resident's house and lit. Other candles were distributed to all participants. We also made a floral tribute spelling 'Hazelwell Lane'. The floral tribute was carried on a memorial walk along Hazelwell Lane and laid outside Stirchley United Workings Mens Club where the walk culminated. People felt this was a valuable experience, some as a catharsis and others as heritage or activism.

[Candles made during workshops representing past activities in Hazelwell Lane]



[Hazelwell Lane Ceremonial walk with residents with floral letters made during participatory workshops. Photography: Harry Starling]



The timescale of this piece – over some weeks – allowed recurring opportunities for people to become involved. We were still receiving information while making the floral tribute and the group of people became bigger and bigger. Leaving the floral tribute for two weeks allowed us to profile the piece again, and it is testament to the project’s reception and the regard for the Lane that it was not vandalised at all during this time.

### **Impact**

The artworks provided extraordinary visual presence for local issues and elicited participation. The art that was made for Stirchley has mobilised people to engage with a public sphere - by providing different structures for people to be active in and mechanisms to voice their thoughts about what has happened to or is happening in their area. The art has articulated alternatives, which is proving to be helpful in an area where many people wish to influence and be involved in their community as it develops but do not find routes such as community meetings or ward committees a useful or stimulating experience. The very act of making something visual, tangible and memorable has a strength beyond discussing and minuting during meetings. The existence of the art highlights the debate and, depending on its accessibility and quality, can create a much more open forum in which to challenge and press issues.

We have also found that by creating public art work in a place where little value has been placed on the visual quality of the public realm, we have demonstrated the value of doing things well and taking care with the decisions that are made and shown the positive impact that careful decisions can have on the public realm. As part of the project we created a range of *Stirchley Merch* which was our response to the lack of identity that the area felt, being spatially squeezed between more affluent areas. The particular history of Stirchley is swamped by its neighbour, Bournville, which it predates. *Stirchley Merch* drew on the specifics of place to present a fresh look at its history and character and was sold at the Community Market and the Co-operative Supermarket throughout the project. We also published *The Stirchley Knows* – six periodicals that pulled together key themes of the project and linked the historical research to current concerns.



[One item from a range of Stirchley specific merchandise created as part of the project.]

The project has given people confidence, a sense of being able to have some influence and crucially to find solutions rather than focusing on the problems. This was combined with Public Service Workshops (on transport, section 106 and the public realm) which we undertook to bring in professional expertise to focus on local concerns and challenges. The conversations that have been mobilised through our work have demonstrated the need for a focused and active voice for more ambitious and alternative regeneration. To try and address this need a community action planning event took place in June and another in August 2012. From this, the emerging Stirchley Urban Resource Network has been established, which aims to empower people to become more engaged in their locality.

We hope that our contribution to the sprouts of independence seen in Stirchley has strengthened collaborative working. We also hope that the temporary artworks remain in peoples' memories - we believe they are strong enough – while permanent change is realised. The benefit of our responsive working process is that it develops from the original proposal and intention as more information is discovered and connections are made. There will be more artworks, some permanent, some annual, but all strategic.



[Public Service transport workshop with fruit simulating traffic type.]

Since we completed *Stirchley Prospects* we raised resources to develop *Love Stirchley* – which took place in February 2013. This developed our working practice of engaging across interest groups. During this project we worked with 6 host businesses to deliver 6 artworks – in addition to a variety of other events and installations. The aim was to highlight new uses for the high street and to raise the profile of individual businesses.

We are increasingly seeing the benefits of working in a collaborative but independent way. This working method chimes with current public policy to encourage and facilitate communities to take a lead in shaping local decisions and in building and sharing limited resources. Our practice places artistic expression and activity within that process of engagement and, in so doing, provides alternative and place specific responses in which to build a sense of community and explore a previously unimagined set of possibilities. It is a really useful process in a time of limited resources when lateral thinking and problem solving are most needed alongside local identity, community spirit and pride.

The project is also documented on our website: [www.prospectors.org.uk](http://www.prospectors.org.uk)