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Artistic calling

An ambitious Cultural Masterplan is calling for creative thinkers to be involved in a multi-million artistic remaking of Sunderland. **Tamzin Lewis** talks to the Master planner.

Dan Dubowitz finds art in unlikely places. He has toured the wastelands of Europe and America, documenting beauty in decay, dilapidation and disintegration. In Britain, he has helped bring charm to Ancoats in Manchester and the Gorbals in Glasgow, once areas of social and economic deprivation and physical degradation.

The former architect-turned-artist is now Cultural Master planner for Sunderland. Not only does he have the best job title in the city, but he gets to lead its artistic regeneration.

"I am particularly interested in wastelands or lost space, and how we interpret what we throw away," Dan says. "You can tell the difference between cultures by the way they treat a wasteland. In France, wasteland is called fallow land, like fields which are waiting to be used again. America is very proud of how much it wastes and wears it on its sleeve. In Germany they

put big strong fences around wasteland, marking danger and showing fear. In Cuba, people are living in buildings which are falling around their ears."

In 2000, his former company Heisenberg drew up a permanent Artworks masterplan for Glasgow's Gorbals following a temporary artistic project called Journeymen. Dan explains: "The temporary projects were all on different sites but it was obvious they were part of the same project. They become permanent as they enter the psyche of a city and cause a dialogue between people and place. This underpins my approach to Sunderland."

Although the Cultural Masterplan for Sunderland is based on a tried and tested model, Dan believes there is a very different opportunity on Wearside. In a unique partnership, Sunderland City Council and Sunderland arc are rolling out the masterplan on a city-wide basis. Initial work will focus on key

Sunderland can only be remade by risk-takers who want to do something brilliant

regeneration sites and then encompass sites across the city. So what is the masterplan?

Sunderland's lead artist Dan explains: "A cultural masterplan is not cultural strategy. It is not providing theatre, performing arts, or arts. It is specifically providing art work, cultural activity and artists to work with the regeneration programme. Wherever there is rebuilding we want to involve the practice of artists."

The masterplan is a blueprint for regeneration involving artists from the early stages. It will bring about cultural regeneration through physical regeneration. This is based on attracting around £1bn private sector investment into Sunderland over the next 12 years. One per cent of this funding will go into a central commissioning pot. Erring on the side of caution, the project hopes to lever in at least £8m for public art. This is called the percent for innovation. But instead of this percentage being spent either on





Dan Dubowitz's work in Glasgow recalls Antony Gormley.

the specific site of the investor, or on big sculptures, this cash will be spent on artworks which weave into the fabric of renovation.

Dan says: "What is radical in Sunderland is that the 'city fathers' are willing to support the idea of starting with a sustained programme of itinerant work, not traditional sculptures on plinths."

He adds: "The city is going through a change in its identity. What will the city become? Sunderland has been unlucky in recent history but it has found itself in a position to be transformed completely by an ambitious team. It was built with a bold Victorian vision and can only be remade by risk-takers who want to do something brilliant."

So what does Dan, who lives in Tuscany but has a studio in Manchester, make of Sunderland? "I am really struck that in the heart of the city is Galley's Gill but nobody can see it or use it. It is a hidden oasis, like lungs

Hoss Gifford's digital art work Pi on beach. Hoss, as well as Dubowitz, Lane and Water, has answered the Call For Artists.

in the heart of the city. This is a really interesting site," he answers. "The other thing which grabs me is the very beautiful river and canyon. The city's prosperity and function was centred around the river and I am shocked that the city doesn't use its river. None of the buildings really let people down to the front. There is little opportunity to move along it. The loss of its Vaux site also needs to be addressed."

The Cultural Masterplan will facilitate a three-year programme of temporal artworks, followed by a series of permanent commissions involving not just artists, but experimental engineers, cosmologists, clock makers, and designers. Studio spaces for artists are likely to be built as part of the plan.

Dan says: "We will choose people based on what they can do and give them a period of time in which to come up with their idea. It is about selecting an artist not an artwork."

To encourage artists to put their ideas forward, Sunderland is making a Call For Artists. This is an opportunity for artists, whether international, national or local, to register online their interest in being considered for a commission from the Cultural Masterplan. The website is designed to last 12 years and material posted will be curated and archived.

Dan says: "Everybody gets an automatic six weeks on the site, and it is a blog, but obviously not for porn or offensive material. Developers will be given unlimited access to the site to help choose artists."

The first private sector contribution of £150,000 will come through in mid-2006 and by then there will be a huge variety of creative thinkers to choose from.

Ben Hall, Sunderland arc operations manager, and Alison Redshaw, strategic arts manager at Sunderland City Council, agree that the Call For Artists is an exciting development.

Ben says: "This is an opportunity for Sunderland to fundamentally change its physical and social environment.



Top, textile artist Clare Lane's City Scene, and above, Mary Wardle's Water Monoprint.

We believe the involvement of artists in the creation of space adds to quality of design, a uniqueness of place.

"The first stage of temporal works is aimed at activating sites which people may have forgotten about. We want to engage with the community on a sublimable level; getting people to use, notice or engage with a site. The majority of the permanent work will be woven into the buildings themselves."

Alison says: "This is a fantastically exciting time for arts and creativity in the city. The Call For Artists initiative demonstrates the scale and the ambition of opportunities we are collectively generating in Sunderland and it plays a vital role in heralding new exciting methods of engagement and fabulous opportunities to come."

* Go to www.CallForArtists.org