

# Welcome to Birmingham! How local people and artists transformed Digbeth Coach Station into an award-winning gateway

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**Organisation:** EC-Arts

**Country:** United Kingdom

**Level of government:** Local government

**Sector:** General public services

**Type:** Partnerships

**Launched in:** 2009

**Overall development time:** 1 year(s)

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# Description

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The Digbeth Public Art Project (DPAP) was a two year project produced by National Express and implemented by EC-Arts. As part of the redevelopment of Birmingham Coach Station, Digbeth EC-Arts was required to manage the implementation of three permanent artworks, 'Boundary', 'Irish Quarter Visual Artwork' and 'Short Film', that would both enhance visitor experiences of the coach station and reflect the rich cultural history of the site. Both National Express and EC-Arts understood that public art is inherently connected to the geographical and social context that it is in – it should be site-specific, not irrelevant 'off the shelf' artwork that has no human context.

The project was shaped by a 'public art process' whereby artists worked closely with the local community to produce art works that both symbolise and reflect the culture and history of the area. Throughout this process the input from local people was key. The development of each art installation has been guided by the public through community workshops that aim to encourage service users to contribute their time, skills and ideas to design, deliver and improve services. As a result of this unique partnership between public and private sectors EC-Arts was awarded the Jaguar Land Rover Arts and Business Award 2009 for specific community engagement, and contribution to regeneration and sustainable growth.

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## Why the innovation was developed

- Every year Birmingham Coach Station sees 1.6 million passengers enter the city through its gates.
  - The old coach station was criticised by both visitors and residents alike and it was decided that public art should be used as part of the redevelopment process to enhance the visual experience of the coach station.
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## Objectives

Increase citizen engagement, Support economic growth

- In the development at each art work a ground up research approach to understand the histories and content of the site was required.
  - Community consultation and on site studies both informed the design process and highlighted how public art/artist involvement can feed into, and be integrated within, building developments.
  - An important aspect of the brief was to avoid creating an irrelevant piece of art, but to let the symbolic importance of the station and the significance of Digbeth in the history of Birmingham become the influences that informed the artists public art concept.
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## Main beneficiaries

Businesses, Civil Society, General population

- Birmingham Coach Station passengers

# Results

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## User satisfaction

- The art installations have been hugely successful and have had praise from public, press and public services alike. Some of the comments can be seen below:
- "The coach station is notable for a public art programme which sets down a marker for future developments in an area long designated as a future cultural quarter." -Terry Grimley, Arts Correspondent Birmingham Post
- "This is an early and brilliant visual project that relates to what the Big City Plan is all about – using cultural, artistic and social initiatives to lead transformational change of all aspects of an area's image, economy and character." -Councillor Neville Summerfield, Cabinet Member for Regeneration at Birmingham City Council
- "The first entry point to any city is really important because it creates a first impression, [a coach station] is a place where people have to pause for a moment. It's a place of enormous emotion, it's either a place where you are delighted to see someone or it's a place where you're distraught at someone leaving; so it's an emotionally interesting place where people will have the chance to reflect on their environment. We hope to reach out to as many people as possible and get them to think about the ways in which they engage with the arts." -Sally Luton, Director of Arts Council West Midlands

# Development

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## Design

EC-Arts created and implemented the DPAP strategy in response to National Express's need to fulfill planning conditions set by Birmingham City Council. The original brief given to EC-Arts was to produce an artistic intervention into the parameter of the new coach station in Birmingham, Digbeth which would become the 'Boundary Installation.'

However, EC-Arts saw the potential for two other artworks, 'Irish Quarter Visual Artwork' which would create a visual identity for the Irish population in the area and 'Short Film' which would create a legacy of the public art project.

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## Implementation

### Tools used:

- Conception of each artwork was developed in two stages:
- Phase 1 – research, development and community consultation.
- Phase 2 – continued community consultation, fabrication and installation.

### Resources used:

- The original budget for the project was GBP 60 000 - GBP 80 000 funded by National Express, however, after persuading the company to invest in the process rather than 'plonk art' to fulfill planning conditions, a much richer project evolved.
- National Express invested a total of GBP 350 000 in the project – evolving into a strategy following a thorough research and development process, due to the level of research and community/young people engagement in phase 1 a report was produced by EC-Arts and the lead artists that evidenced the need for a strategy rather than a single commission. National Express were willing to invest in this. EC-Arts were successful in a further GBP 87 500 public funding.
- By engaging the community with each step of the process it allowed the project to reach more networks, resulting in numerous 'in kind' contributions, i.e. Glenn Howells Architects sponsored GBP 35 000 in kind towards the Irish Quarter artwork specifically for the Irish community. South Birmingham College sponsored GBP 2000 in kind to print the project publications.
- Birmingham City Council sponsored GBP 15 000 cash towards the Irish community artwork and GBP 5-GBP 7,000 in kind with officer resources. Aston Manor Transport sponsored the vintage midland red buses in kind for the launch, it was a knock on effect. The projects engagement with the community and residents of Birmingham throughout the duration evoked a snowball of civic pride and engagement resulting in overwhelming support from private and public sector all willing the project on and supporting in every way.

# Lessons Learned

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## Lessons Learned

- It is clear that involving the community is key when producing permanent public art pieces that are reflective of the environment and cultural context that they have been created in.
  - Involving communities in the design process of the artwork leads to sustainable pieces of work that have been co-designed by the same people that view them daily, instilling a sense of pride and community in the area's residents.
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