

Reflecting on water

'It is not only artists that make you see your surroundings differently – engineers create moments of epiphany too' – this is just one outcome of the Reflecting on Water workshop organised by CIWEM's Arts and Environmental Network (AEN) in Exeter. **Amanda Ravetz** explains



The River Exe, Devon

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THE WORKSHOP, part of the group's wider initiative to 'put arts and ecology at the heart of environmental engineering' was organised originally as a way to explore the potential of the AEN Steering Group and developed into the broader exploration of alternative, interdisciplinary approaches to water and environmental infrastructure projects. In particular the aim was to investigate ways in which learning and skills from arts-based practice might become more integrated into the core processes of designing and delivering water and environmental engineering projects.

The event was held on site in Exeter city centre and at the Centre for Contemporary Art and the Natural World's (CCANW) gallery and project space at Haldon Forest. Participants included artists, curators, architects and landscape architects, engineers, ecologists, senior members of the Environment Agency (EA) project delivery teams and the EA National Environmental Assessment Service (NEAS).

On the first afternoon, participants walked along the River Exe, stopping at three potential project sites selected by the organisers for the purposes of the workshop. The business of the day concluded with a survey of the environmental art of Peter Randall-Page, presented by the artist.

The following day, in CCANW's project space in Haldon Forest, a senior member of the NEAS team gave a presentation about some of the Environment Agency's flood defence schemes, before participants divided into three groups to work with responses to the sites visited on the first day.

Speculative ideas for the sites presented by the groups at the conclusion of the workshop included a greater regard for a whole systems watershed approach, an island of houses, a commitment to increased biodiversity and community involvement around the existing 1960s defence scheme; and floating retractable walls along the historic port.

As an anthropologist from MIRIAD, (Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design), I was invited by the organisers to report on the event. I found that by the end of the workshop everyone agreed on the need to involve artists at the beginning of large-scale environmental engineering projects, rather than 'bolting' artwork on at a later stage to make change more palatable. I also considered some of the problems that were brought up during the workshop – for example the difficulty of making decisions in the absence of planners, legislators and health and safety officers; and the problem of agreeing the scope of any given project when professionals' motivations might vary between statistical analysis of risk, the need to make the environment the client, and the desire to encourage the resilience of communities.

Laura Harrington, one of the artists attending the event, has had firsthand experience of working with these kinds of issues. Harrington

was awarded an artist residency with the Environment Agency (North East region). Based with the local Levy Team (which raises money from local authorities and is managed by the EA) at the EA's Newcastle office, she has been collaborating with staff, individual project teams and partner organisations to develop ideas for projects across Northumberland. This is only the second time such a residency had been awarded, forming part of a unique and evolving partnership between Commissions North, Inspire Northumberland and the EA. The partnership has introduced artists and designers into a range of EA projects over the last four years.

The evolution of this particular artist residency programme is provoking new and exciting discussions between a wide range of people from within the organisation and beyond. This is by no means an artist's retreat, where one can concentrate purely on personal research within a specific context. It is about collaboration, process and working together in a team, being immersed completely within the organisation. An artist will attend monthly team meetings on a par with marine biologists, engineers and communications officers. The idea that the artist can become part of the framework of the organisation - adding a different kind of value and experience - is evolving all the time and is testament to the trust, open mindedness and enthusiasm of specific people from the EA Levy team, working together with organisations such as Commissions North.

The work Laura has been developing con-

sists of around five projects involving a number of different artists and collaborators. The mediums used in each case varies from printed matter, a live concert and collaboration with AV Festival; a sculptural installation on a new interpretation trail in rural Northumberland, an intervention which has influenced the design and implementation of a wall; and a small booklet which looks at hypothetical ideas from an artistic point of view.

For the EA, the residency programme will give the individuals who work there the opportunity to consider the cultural position and power an environmental activity can have - a flood defence stops water, but its structure also demarcates an area that is both necessary to and dangerous for a specific community. As Harrington explains: 'The arts can often help us to understand the environmental problems facing the world and can bring some of the solutions within reach on a human scale. A creative attitude to the day-to-day management of our relationship to the natural world can bring opportunities for new ways of thinking.'

If the accepted model for artistic involvement in large schemes is a brief for a piece of public art, usually in the form of an object, residencies like those being developed by the EA suggest that the artist has something more fundamental to offer, 'capable of working across hierarchies and social groupings, enabling individuals to transcend barriers of discipline, belief and specialism,' and offering different frames of reference to those that develop in organisations that are likely to

value conformity and loyalty (Douglas and Freemantle 2009 p.6)

But while artists and enlightened partners within the EA NEAS teams are helping to push this research forward, the challenge for CIWEM is to convince engineering project delivery teams within all organisations deliv-

ering environmental infrastructure that putting arts and ecology at the heart of engineering projects is essential, and, rather than being a costly and unnecessary aspiration, can add real value.

Viewed as a step towards this ambition, the Reflecting on Water event was highly successful, pointing to the need for yet further initiatives to underpin CIWEM's larger aim. Included in these might be a review of different models used to bring arts, ecology and environmental engineering together, and a discussion of what constitutes shared interest between diverse professional interests, alongside the means to evaluate success. Indeed, ideas and approaches to working that emerged from the workshop are feeding back directly into a new initiative within CIWEM's Arts and Environmental Network.

As the workshop showed, the starting point for convincing different constituencies of the value of arts can sometimes rest on having the chance to 'play' together as a way to examine the assumptions we carry about how 'other' professions work. On the site visit, I noticed an engineer sketching potential solutions in his notebook, while an artist poked around an ugly corner that no-one else seemed interested in. This fitted the stereotype of engineers solving problems and artists trying to shift the debate by looking at things askance. But by the end of the two days some of these preconceptions were overturned. It was artist David Haley who spoke at the final summing up of having had 'an epiphany' in the face of an EA engineer's idea of a floating retractable wall; a lovely complication to the categorical ways we like to see things, and an example of how bringing different ways of knowing together can open us to new insights and change. ■

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Amanda Ravetz is an anthropologist from MIRIAD, (Manchester Institute for Research and Innovation in Art and Design). She wrote this article with contributions from Paul Simkins of Arup, artist Laura Harrington, and artist and academic, David Haley, vice chair of CIWEM's Arts and Environment Network.