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The CABE Climate Change Festival

Paula Vandergert

As the giant, shiny pylon was gingerly craned into place in the middle of Birmingham's main city square, someone called out over the security fencing, "So this festival, then—are there rides? Music? Girls?"

Good questions. The event was about climate change. How much fun could you reasonably expect? Yet it definitely was a festival—not another conference or exhibition. We wanted to turn the climate change debate on its head. No scolding, no guilt. Just one big idea—that a sustainable city would be much better to live in than the ones we know now.

In the United Kingdom half of all carbon emissions come from the built environment. Fundamental changes in the way cities are designed and managed, from green infrastructure to transport to energy systems, are needed. Yet the biggest barrier to progress is frequently the idea that a low-carbon life is restricted and dull—no more shopping, no more holidays. No one broadcasts the promises of cutting carbon—that cities will become more beautiful, more equitable, more competitive, more sociable.

So the answer to those beyond the fence was, "yes!" Over nine days, from May 31 to June 8, 2008, there were rides (a low-energy carousel and a helter-skelter), world music, dancing, and jazz—all in the name of addressing climate change.

A Reimagined Birmingham

When the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment joined the Birmingham City Council to plan the climate change festival, our goal was to inspire people about life in a well-designed, low-carbon city. We also wanted to create a positive platform for civic leadership on climate change. But what would the main ingredients of the festival be?

First of all, it needed a dramatic focal point. Hence the 29-meter-high, mirror-coated, electricity pylon. It would sit outside the town hall in a small cornfield as if it had just been lifted there from its more usual, rural setting, making the issue of climate change visible and local.

We are so rarely conscious of how much energy we use and where it comes from. During the week, our goal was to have more people give it serious thought; we even retained amateurs to challenge people to talk about it. The pylon was a brutal object transformed. Its nickel plating sparkled in sunshine and turned color through the night from green

to gold. For nine days it provided an object for reflection, in sharp contrast to the pubs, clubs, and drinking strips which dominate nightlife in many British cities.

The theme of the festival was good design. Another of its features, then, was a popular program of walks and talks led by architects and developers. Because the festival focused on solutions to climate change—rather than its threat—there were celebratory tours of newly refurbished buildings, eco-conversions, green roofs, and secret canal networks on the cusp of regeneration. Giant photographs of the city's buildings and spaces—past, present and future—also lined the streets of the city center so residents could get to know their heritage better.

We even curated the city itself. You can never have too many places to sit, so we commissioned a series of benches to frame views. They were brightly colored, broad and generous, inviting entire families to picnic. As "furniture with a message," they were witty as well, prompting people to reflect on connections between climate change and daily choice. One view, framing buildings supplied by a district heating system, was titled "Hot, not bothered." (This was where our enquirers would likely have found girls, posing as in an informal photo studio.)

One of the most popular and simplest features was called "Claystation," featuring a giant map, half a ton of plasticine, and an outline of existing plans for urban regeneration. Claystation brought hundreds of people of all ages together for creative learning about city design. The final "remodeled" city—a map covered with lumpy fountains, new allotments, green walls, and pocket parks—illustrated what most people's dream city looked like—verdant, with the sound of water, not traffic.

Less visible, but equally important, was a program of seminars for professionals and of technical debates which engaged the city's business and design community. Schools also held a "Green Day" to bring to life the connections between climate change and the built environment. Twenty thousand pupils took part, in Birmingham and other cities, in this event, which also gave teachers the chance to explore the linking role of environmental issues in a broader curriculum.

We promised something for people aged eight to eighty. So the festival launched with teenagers watching displays of parkour, turning the urban jungle into performance space.¹ It ended with 160 people taking part in a kind of mass *t'ai chi* on the Sunday morning, followed by free dance lessons in waltz, fox trot, and rock and roll. All were presented as a low-carbon alternative to shopping, and a way of helping people take ownership of public space.

Opposite: "Furniture with a message." Benches around the city, commissioned for the Climate Change Festival, prompted people to reflect on the connections between climate change and everyday choices. Photo by Michele Turriani.

Bringing Concern into the Mainstream

So, did it work? It was hard to miss—what with a “Break the mould” billboard campaign featuring neon-colored jelly replicas of Birmingham’s best-loved buildings. The festival also attracted hugely positive media coverage and gave CABE a chance to make the case for a radical redesign of cities. Many people also personally pledged to cut carbon emissions. You cannot expect a festival to change public behavior at a stroke. Still, transformation—or permanent change—has to start with a dream. We were daring people to dream about a low-carbon city and how much better life there might be.

The festival also started to take climate concern out of the niche of green obsessives. Research by Minnesota Opinion Research, Inc., shows that taking individual action to cut carbon is not yet considered socially normal in the U.K. The festival moved it a step closer to becoming a normal—even positive—thing to think about. It also created a place to broker new relationships. We encouraged events that focused on practical solutions led by coalitions of people who usually work in separate silos. And it provided a platform for local Birmingham authorities to demonstrate political leadership. This matters, because although 68 percent of people in the U.K. believe the government should do more about climate change, neither business nor government seem to believe the political space currently exists to be radical.

Birmingham was a powerhouse of the first industrial revolution. Nowadays the city is characterized by an enduring entrepreneurial spirit, a handsome Victorian industrial heritage with a wonderful canal network—and too many cars. During the festival, the Birmingham City Council, the biggest local authority in Europe, announced its intention to cut carbon emissions by 60 percent in



just eighteen years—twice as fast as the target set by the national government.

Every age has its challenge; ours is climate change. Yet right now, statistics show that little is changing. We think that is because the debate is framed in unhelpful ways. Successful public engagement requires choices to relate to positive core values, such as fairness, fun, and health. A festival offers us all a way to re-present the offer to politicians, professionals, and the public.

In 2009, the Climate Change Festival will become a multicity event across the U.K. In 2010, it will go international. If your city might take part, just get in touch at www.climatechange festival.org.uk.

Note

1. Parkour participants move from one point to another as efficiently as possible, using only their bodies to overcome obstacles from branches and rocks to rails and concrete walls.

What is CABE?

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment is the U.K. government’s advisor on architecture, urban design, and public space. Each year, the commission reviews 350 proposals for the most significant developments in England. As a result, we know what will be built over the next decade, and few designs are being driven by sustainability.

CABE works with local authorities engaged in commissioning public building, from schools and hospitals to new city squares and flood defense. It also runs a

“sustainable cities” program to help decision-makers prioritize effective spatial policies across scales and issues. The program includes a master class, in which leadership teams from the biggest English cities (outside London) and the private sector address the most intractable issues facing them in a setting that showcases best practices in sustainable design. Our goal is the delivery of good-quality places that are socially and economically vibrant.

CABE is also developing a major on-line resource: www.cabe.org.uk