



Pride in Place: Tackling Incivilities

Case Study: Urban Eye

The 'Westway'





ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Written by Ekosgen Consultants
Photographs courtesy of Urban Eye

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The Challenge

The elevated A40(M) motorway (or the Westway as it is known locally) slices through the West London communities of Paddington, Notting Hill and Ladbrooke Grove. After 30 years of exposure to city pollution, the surfaces of the flyover had blackened and the structure was generally perceived as dull. The flyover had not only become dirty and ugly, the areas beneath it were blighted by crime and dereliction. For local communities, these areas felt unsafe and intimidating and presented a possible health risk.



The Response

In 1998, a local artist formed an organisation initially called the Westway group, with a plan to clean and paint sections of the flyover, its bridges and adjacent walls. The group became a charity in 2001 and changed its name to Urban Eye in 2009. Urban Eye plans and implements environmental improvements that transform neglected spaces and improve public safety. The work to improve the Westway remains their most significant project, and involved cleaning, painting and installing lighting underneath the flyover. The project took several years to deliver and has won numerous awards. To date, working with schools, youth projects and housing and resident associations, Urban Eye has delivered 40 art-led projects to improve the local environment.

How it worked

- Using bold, large-scale art, new lighting and other measures, Urban Eye worked in partnership with engineers and others to transform what were once dark and threatening areas into safe, bright, and welcoming places. The charity also began a programme of community-led art projects, working with schools and neighbourhoods to design and produce mosaics and murals along pedestrian walkways and bridges.
- The large, complex, public art projects include community consultation both before and after works are undertaken. Local neighbourhoods and schools are involved at every stage of the smaller community art projects.
- Urban Eye's well-planned use of colour, light and public art have helped to transform neglected spaces and improve public safety. The charity has won nine awards and is regularly invited to speak at high profile events.
- Vision, dedication, long-term commitment and remarkable persistence are just some of the attributes that have made the charity successful. Very early on, it also recognised the need to work in partnership, including often taking regularly taking the lead within partnerships and co-ordinating the activities of other organisations.
- In future, Urban Eye plans to continue delivering its unique and innovative model of improving the urban environment across London boroughs.



Background to the project

The elevated A40(M) motorway (or the Westway as it is known locally), built in the late 1960s on the US 'freeway' model, slices through the mixed West London communities of Paddington, Notting Hill and Ladbroke Grove, some of which are amongst the most deprived in the capital. To make way for its construction, many of the original road networks had to be severed, thereby restricting pedestrian access and dividing neighbourhoods.

After 30 years of exposure to city pollution, the surfaces of the flyover had blackened and the structure was generally perceived as dull, oppressive and a dangerous place to frequent at night.

In 1996, founder member of Urban Eye, Miles Watson, and a friend responded to an invitation from regeneration body City Challenge to local artists for local artists to come up with design ideas to improve the run-down Portobello London Underground bridge.

Designs were submitted, yet nothing came of the scheme since no-one could be found at London Underground willing to take responsibility for approving the proposals. However, Miles continued to believe in the potential of this type of work and decided to form a group with the vision of using art and design to transform the underside of the nearby Westway Flyover, which cast an even greater shadow on the surrounding environment and local community.



What the project does

The Pilot Project

In 1997, Miles reapplied to City Challenge via North Kensington Arts and secured a small grant to research the feasibility of making improvements to the underside of the Westway. The grant provided access to a local computer design facility and it was stipulated that he work with other artists and publish the results on an internet site.

Research into suitable materials for use on the flyover took place and possible design approaches were drafted, while a short film was made documenting local people's attitudes to the Westway.

A key moment came in 1998 when an application for funding to develop the project was backed by Maunsell Ltd (Westway's original design engineers) with development funding for the project and support right up to CEO level.

Initial contact with the Highways Agency - who were responsible for maintaining the flyover - was not encouraging. The first design proposals were rejected out of hand since, at that time, the Agency's policy was that no outside party could undertake work on the structure. It also had a ban on any paint materials being used for fear that they might conceal structural flaws.

After a campaign assisted by Maunsell's contacts with the Highways Agency at high level and further research into paint materials to demonstrate that coatings existed that would in fact facilitate rather than impede inspection, the Agency agreed to change their policy and, in 1999, decided to fund Urban Eye to test this approach on the Westway Flyover.

Urban Eye now faced a different challenge. It had to secure the co-operation of the multiple agencies responsible for aspects of the flyover. Diverging interests and responsibilities made negotiating with each of them separately extremely difficult.

Urban Eye therefore formed a partnership to help take forward its proposals. The partnership included Maunsell, Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea (RBKC), the owners of the land underneath the flyover (Westway Development Trust), the Highways Agency and their maintenance engineers.

Finally, in 2000, after consultation with the local community, which indicated overwhelming support, the underside of the flyover was cleaned, painted and installed with new lighting.

The pilot project was unanimously pronounced a success and was immediately popular with residents and users. It proceeded to win the 2001 RBKC Environment Award. Most importantly, it also set a precedent in the UK for an approach to painting and lighting on flyover structures which had never before been approved by the Highways Agency.

The 2008 Project

Urban Eye were keen to build on the success of the pilot project and tackle the busy stretch of the flyover between the Tube station and Portobello Road, and (if possible) to widen the scheme to include the two bridges and supporting walls on both Portobello Road and at the entrance to Ladbroke Grove Tube Station. These areas had become run-down, shabby and neglected, attracting anti-social behaviour.

Extensive consultation was undertaken with a variety of stakeholders, including local residents, businesses, the Council, and the police. All agreed that it was imperative to revitalise these areas because of:

- i. safety - the location outside Ladbroke Grove Station was one of the highest crime spots in the Borough;
- ii. health - the supporting walls of bridges on Portobello Road and at the entrance of the tube station were being fouled by pigeons, and dead birds remained trapped in netting;
- iii. appearance - the bridges and their supporting walls were dirty, suffered from water seepage, and attracted fly-posting and graffiti, creating a neglected, dark, and threatening appearance.

Despite these issues, Urban Eye again encountered considerable delays and incredible persistence was required to implement the plans. In 2001, the transfer of responsibility for motorways in London switched from the Highways Agency to Transport for London (TfL), meaning that promised funds still within the original grant were now unavailable. The breakthrough occurred in 2006 when TfL launched its Access to Transport Scheme, under which it financed regeneration and public realm improvements.

To be eligible, sites had to have a high footfall and be close to a Tube / bus station that pedestrians could access. Urban Eye submitted an application to TfL (with Council support). This in itself took time, but eventually approval was given and in 2008 - eight years after Urban Eye had first proposed the project - work was undertaken to modernise and improve public confidence in these areas.

After a frustrating period of attempting to identify suitable contacts at London Underground, Urban Eye

established a partnership to implement the project, working with Metronet (maintenance engineers for London Underground) who carried out cleaning and painting works to Urban Eye's specification. Notable features of the project included:

- Installing an innovative form of cladding on the abutment walls to deter fly-posting and graffiti. Extensive research was undertaken by Urban Eye to find the right materials and shape for the cladding.
- Covering posters and cladding in funky, attractive and eye-catching designs created by Urban Eye to engender an aesthetically pleasing, welcoming feel.
- Installing colourful, laminated posters on the parapets of the bridges running across the road, which are visible from a distance.
- Installing spikes, steel mesh and angled ledges to keep out pigeons.
- Painting the underside white and installing specialised lighting on the underside of the two bridges, vastly improving their illumination, yet minimising glare for buses; installing flood lighting on the bridges to illuminate the pavement and multi-colour panel artwork on the walls; and adding colour-changing effects to all flyover columns along pedestrian routes.

Consultation after the works had been completed showed that the project helped make the area outside Ladbroke Grove Tube Station feel safer and more welcoming. Essentially, the project helped turn dark and gloomy railway bridges and a long stretch under the flyover leading to Portobello Market into welcoming spaces – a transformation for the local community.

Plans for the future

Urban Eye will continue to identify neglected public spaces and work with local communities and organisations to use art and design to improve the urban environment. It is also currently negotiating with two London Borough Councils about using its model to undertake large-scale environmental improvement projects in their areas.



Community involvement and leadership

Urban Eye comprises two individuals and two part-time volunteers. Like all charities, Urban Eye has a Board of Trustees. On its major public art projects, the organisation engages with the community through an extensive programme of consultation before and after work is carried out.

Urban Eye also operates at a more grass-roots level. Back in 2000, the group agreed to diversify its work so that smaller, more community-based projects could be carried out in between the longer (but inevitably 'slower-burn') projects, such as work under the flyover or bridge regeneration. Working directly with local neighbourhoods and schools, it has delivered over 40 lasting and transformative community artwork projects in the last 12 years. Primarily, these comprise external murals and mosaics that are installed along passageways heavily used by pedestrians, but which have become neglected and run-down.

Urban Eye identifies the public spaces in need of improvement and then draws in the support of those living and working in the area, notably schools, residents, housing associations, youth clubs, and other groups active in the community. Urban Eye makes a concerted effort to involve local people at each stage of the project from

creating the designs through to making the mosaics and then installing them.

Community engagement is at the heart of Urban Eye's approach. It believes that local involvement not only provides children and residents with a creative outlet, it also instills a sense of ownership of the completed works. Giving local people a stake in their neighbourhood is, arguably, a longer-term legacy of the projects than the artwork itself.

Urban Eye's philosophy is successful, with some schools contacting the organisation directly to be involved in future projects. In other cases, its projects have inspired the Council to make investments in local areas, such as installing better lighting alongside completed community art projects.

Project achievements and impact



The physical transformation of the Westway flyover has had a huge impact on the local area. Consultation undertaken with local

businesses and residents before the projects were implemented revealed that safety was a major concern because the run-down appearance of the bridges, walls and flyover created such a threatening atmosphere.

After the works, further consultation revealed just how popular the renovation was. Ladbroke Grove Tube Station was no longer seen as 'no-go area'. The 2008 project is reported to have impacted upon tourism; previously the tacky and run-down state of Portobello Bridge had become a barrier between the north and south of the borough. The works encourage visitors to explore the area beyond the Portobello Road Market.

The completion of this project also appears to have had a wider economic impact, helping to draw in big business such as Sainsbury's and Café Nero. Local people believe that they would not have located next to the Ladbroke Grove station when it was dark, dingy and a crime hotspot.

The success of the project has also attracted further investment from RBKC. It is currently investing in the embankments of the bridge at Ladbroke Grove Tube station and planting attractive trees and shrubs. RBKC is also extending its partnership by backing two proposals by Urban Eye to regenerate Network Rail bridges at Golborne Road and Ladbroke Grove.

Since its first award in 2001, Urban Eye has:

- Won a further eight RBKC Environment awards;
- Been invited to give presentations and talks at high-profile events. In 2009, for example,

Urban Eye was a guest speaker at the Lighting for Social Identity seminar organised by the Institution of Lighting Engineers. This took place at the ARC (Architectural Retail & Commercial) Lighting Show at Earl's Court Exhibition Centre;

- Displayed images of some of its completed projects in the lobby outside the debating chamber at London's City Hall in May 2010;
- Displayed its unique cladding at the Surface Design Show in February 2012 at the Business Design Centre in Islington.

In addition, Urban Eye's artwork and environmental improvements are regularly featured in numerous magazines and journals, often as the backdrop to other objects or issues. For example, in June 2009, one of its mosaics was the backdrop to a centre-spread fashion shoot in the Guardian's Weekend magazine, whilst the glossy Grove Magazine featured another of its community projects in 2007.

Reasons for project successes and lessons learnt

Several key factors underpin the success of Urban Eye. These include:

- Long-term commitment, dedication and passion for improving the appearance and condition of the urban environment, demonstrated through the sheer persistence of the project team;
- Working in partnership and, specifically, taking the lead in forming multi-agency partnerships and co-ordinating the activities of individual partners;
- Putting community engagement at the heart of its activities, consulting with local people (residents, shop-keepers, visitors) on improvements to public spaces and actively involving neighbourhoods in community art project at every stage of the process, including design and production;
- Embracing the use of public relations and media coverage. In a change from its original approach, Urban Eye now seeks to raise the profile of its projects and is currently putting together various marketing materials, including plaques, which will be placed next to key projects;
- Changing the composition of its Board of Trustees. Urban Eye now benefits not only from a mixed skill-set, but has secured representation from large corporations based in the local area, including the BBC and BT. Senior executives from these organisations give Urban Eye further credibility, and, importantly, provide links and networks that could be of value to the group and its works;
- A shift in Council priorities with environmental improvement projects becoming more prominent, and a new post being created to support such work.

Advice to other communities

1. Have a clear vision and don't be side-tracked by delays, bureaucracy, and other obstructions;
2. Be persistent and prepared to work with other groups, form working partnerships, and change prevailing mind-sets where necessary;
3. Be practical and focused and attract as much publicity and support for your cause as possible.

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