

A vibrant scene of a festival or celebration. The sky is filled with a dense shower of red confetti or streamers falling over a crowd of people. In the foreground, a young man wearing a black baseball cap is seen from the side, looking up towards the falling confetti. Other people in the crowd are also visible, some with their hands raised. In the background, a brick building with a circular emblem is partially visible, along with green trees and a clear blue sky. The overall atmosphere is festive and joyful.

PERFORMING PLACES

BEXLEY

2017-2019

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Over two years, specialists in Performing Place Practices from the Royal Central School of Speech and Drama, University of London, (Central) worked with London Borough of Bexley to devise and facilitate a multi-layered, intergenerational project to improve community cohesion and foster good relations between new and existing residents in Bexley. Performing Places Bexley used a fictional narrative to consider how the public space in Bexleyheath might more easily be shared and how we might welcome strangers.

Part of the London Borough of Bexley's 'A Place for Everyone' project, funded by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Performing Places Bexley (PPB) used an overarching narrative - that also acted as a metaphor - to prompt easing tensions in a place. PPB engaged approximately 8,000 people, including toddlers, school pupils and adults aged 0-90 through more than 75 workshops, assemblies, talks and storytelling sessions (in primary and secondary schools, libraries and community groups), a production and nine days of street participatory performance. The overarching narrative created by Professor Sally Mackey (Central) focused on the arrival and departure of Par Bexian visitors from Par Bexia, a parallel universe to Bexley.

Par Bexia was disintegrating and the Par Bexians had come to Bexley to discover ways of caring for place from the residents of Bexley. The Vists, Bexley-based, inventor-archivists, acted as translators and facilitators, encouraging interactions between the Par Bexians and the residents of Bexleyheath.

Workshop participants and residents of Bexley were invited to fill the Par Bexians' safety clothing with crafted items that represented ways of caring for place, for example.

Amongst a wide range of street activities and facilitated by student volunteers, younger Bexley residents created mini flower bouquets and other gifts for passers-by and invited them to pop-up tea parties along Bexleyheath Broadway, initiating a shift towards more positive relationships between residents of different generations in Bexley.



Young residents participated in trails along Bexleyheath Broadway, obtaining place clues from shopkeepers, framing miniature figures in curious ways and spotting cartoon 'eyes' that animated objects in Broadway. These activities were designed to encourage the re-viewing of a familiar place.

Partner organisations within Bexley who participated in the project included primary and secondary schools, Bexley libraries, the Moorings Project for vulnerable young people, Mencap, Age UK, the Townswomen's Guild, the Bexley Voluntary Service Council, the Belvedere Baptist Church and around fifteen high street retailers.

Arts organisations and higher education institutions who partnered to bring this extensive participatory arts projects to the community included Central, Rose Bruford College, Bird College, Emergency Exit Arts, Little Fish Theatre Company and Mash Up Productions. The project included approximately 20 professional performers and facilitators and 145 student volunteer facilitators including applied theatre students from Central who delivered Augmented Reality workshops in schools.

Among the Bexley residents surveyed, around

80% said they felt more positive about The Broadway

which had previously experienced some intergenerational tensions.

95% said they would welcome more such cultural events in The Broadway

and around

50% said they felt more open towards people who were different from them.

Among participants in community workshops, around

70% said they felt more part of the community

demonstrating how the arts can be a powerful and cost-effective public strategy to animate public spaces and bring about a greater sense of ownership and cohesion across the community.





Although the Par Bexians returned to Par Bexia on 6 July 2019 with a spectacular farewell at the clocktower on Bexleyheath Broadway, an exhibition of work was exhibited in Bexleyheath Library and an education pack based on the place practices used for PPB has been developed for use in all Bexleyheath secondary schools.

Download the pack at: www.performingplaces.org/bexley