

COFFEE BREAK

# COAXING CULTURE

*Sarah Gaventa, creative director at the Earls Court Development Company*

## **WHAT IS YOUR PROUDEST ACHIEVEMENT AND WHY?**

Gosh, hard one. Proud is an adjective I've never been comfortable with. But it's knowing my projects have had a positive impact. CABE Space, Sea Change Cultural Regen programme, [Illuminated River](#)—all are team efforts. The most personal project, that really was my baby, was devising and curating 'Out There: Our Post-War Public Art' at Somerset House for Historic England. Literally nine months of 24/7 work. The exhibition received five stars in the Evening Standard, which was as good as an Oscar for me, and we discovered some lost art! Obviously my real baby—Raphael—is my proudest achievement. Oh, and creating a beautiful garden from a rubbish tip.

## **WHAT WOULD YOU HAVE BEEN IF YOU HADN'T CHOSEN THE PATH YOU DID?**

I wanted to be an art historian in a museum—until I met one. At that time, museum curators were elitist snobs ('ceramics is a Greek word, you should pronounce it "Keramics"'—was one comment) who loathed engaging with the public despite being in, and funded by, public institutions. When I was studying I was the only student from a state school and was called 'the girl from the comp'. I love sharing my passion and increasing access to the arts, and have always been drawn to projects that allow that. As a teenager I wanted to be an opera singer—but didn't have the voice. I thought being able to sing wonderfully and dress up every day in great frocks for a living must be bliss. Still do....

## **WHAT OR WHO HAS BEEN THE BIGGEST INFLUENCE ON YOUR CAREER THUS FAR?**

I've been lucky to have known some inspiring women who I could turn to for 'mentoring' (aka lunch and a chat) whenever I needed advice. Carole Souter (ex-CEO of HLF), Anthea Case (ex-Treasury and CABE commissioner) and Pat Brown, to name a few. Plus the many women in my sector who are my ongoing influences—a wise and generous informal club.

## **WHAT WOULD YOUR ADVICE BE TO THOSE STARTING OUT IN YOUR PROFESSION?**

I'm not sure I have a profession. My son is trying to choose his A level subjects but finding it hard because he doesn't know what he wants to be yet. I told him nor do I, to which he replied: 'You have left it a bit late, Mum'. My career has been a process of experimenting and elimination, completing one project then trying something new and interesting that challenges me and uses my skills. My advice is: push yourself in terms of expanding your experience. Feeling like an imposter is good—if you aren't worried about that, then you are either doing it wrong or for too long. Stay curious

and open to new ideas, don't do the same as everyone else and question how you make every element work harder and benefit more.

## **WHAT WOULD YOU SAY IS THE KEY IMPACT OF THE ILLUMINATED RIVER PROJECT?**

It has brought beauty to the river at night, revealing the glorious architecture of the bridges in a respectful way, so that Londoners see it with fresh eyes after dark. It has also brought different groups working together for the first time—the bridge owners, for example—and made them think about the way they use light in their boroughs. It's also the longest public art project in the world, so that's an impact.

## **DO YOU FEEL THAT LONDON UNDER-USES THE THAMES?**

Oh yes, so much so. Travel by commuter boat drops dramatically after dark—which we hope IR will help change. It's the biggest 'public space' in London and yet you cannot get on it for free. Many low-income families have never travelled on it, and incredibly, 1 in 10 children living in central London have never even seen it. It's the whole reason why London exists in the first place, and we need to reconnect ourselves with this unique natural environment and wildlife super-highway, right in the heart of the city.

## **WHAT IS THE CHIEF CHALLENGE AT EARLS COURT?**

Apart from the scale, level changes, underground railway, above ground railway running through the site, lack of any remaining physical fabric, no nature but lots of pollution? Well, not much... It's a large site that has never been accessible (the halls offered nothing to the local area in terms of placemaking). Now they are gone we can use the opportunity to knit the site together into the wider neighbourhood and bring some much-needed life and access to a derelict and dead eyesore.

## **HOW WILL YOU TAKE THE PUBLIC WITH YOU?**

As with IR, it's about listening first—learning and understanding what the communities feel and what the area needs—and by testing things out with the public before we start construction. By building partnerships first and working together with a common aim we can create real value and opportunities for all.

## **WHAT PART DOES CULTURE AND CREATIVITY PLAY IN THE VISION?**

It's essential—it's in the DNA and heritage of the site. The exhibitions and events held there from the 19th century onwards were incredibly innovative and creative and the halls that followed hosted many iconic performances. So its 21st century incarnation must be just as innovative and creative,

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mitigating and responding to the major issues facing us, and embedding culture through the site and its activities.

**WHAT WILL THE ESSENCE OF EARLS COURT BE?**

An exceptional, welcoming and green place, connected, open and accessible, with a sense of heritage and ingenuity, a genuine blend of uses and activities that is resilient, full of pleasant surprises and a place that works even better over time.

**TO WHAT DEGREE DO YOU THINK IT IS IN 'COMPETITION' WITH OTHER QUARTERS OR LARGE DEVELOPMENT SITES ACROSS LONDON?**

We don't want to be another quarter—we want to be the

whole deal. Each development site is different, with its own unique challenges and characters. We need to ensure Earls Court stays unique. It can't be or feel like anywhere. There has certainly been a pull to the east and we want to create a place that shouts 'west is best'!

**HOW WILL IT STAND OUT?**

It's about distinctiveness, building on the qualities and rich character EC already has, solving its constraints creatively, working with the best teams and innovators in other fields so we can be thought leaders, and creating a sustainable and exciting place where people really want to live, work or just hang out. ●