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Colourful stories: exploring the transformative potential of colour culture in a Northumbrian mining town

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ABSTRACT

2014 will see the opening of a new £100m factory in Ashington, a former mining town in Northumbria, UK. The global paint manufacturer AkzoNobel wants to ensure its investment creates not only regeneration through employment but also broader, long-term health and wellbeing improvements, through the life-enhancing qualities of colour. Committed to transforming lives through colour, they are continually striving for innovative ways to engage local communities in transformative application of colour to the built environment. This paper describes successes of the firm's global Let's Colour programme, as well as the Northumberland project, its methodology, preliminary findings and proposals. The best will be developed and implemented over three years from 2014.

1 COMPANY CONTEXT AND PROJECT ORIGINS

AkzoNobel Decorative Paints company believes that making our surroundings more colourful has a positive effect on how people live and feel. By adding colour to people's lives, both physically and metaphorically, the company integrates their economic, social and environmental ambitions. Through their Let's Colour program, paint brands such as Dulux, Levis and Coral transform the communities by renewing the spaces and uplifting people's skills. It expresses a commitment to build a sustainable business model, and inspires people to join in making the world a better place. Since launch in March 2009, the Let's Colour project has come a long way. With nearly 250 projects in more than 25 countries the firm has added colour to lives of thousands. Approximately 16000 people from the communities were trained in painting and decorating while participating in the projects. Charleroi, Belgium and São Paulo, Brazil are just two examples.

1.1 Let's Colour: Charleroi, Belgium

The Belgian industrial city of Charleroi was once regarded as the 'ugliest city in the world'. Paint brand Levis and Let's Colour worked with the local community to add colour to key places in the city. The old symbolic factory was transformed with art and music into a lively and fashionable house of creativity and expression. The old water tower, a symbol of the past and of the future, was painted in bold, vibrant yellow. Colours were added to the impoverished area of Ville Basse and a fertility hospital. In Place du Nord, where many different cultures live together, community members were happy to see an event of this kind, and it was a good opportunity for them to meet their neighbours. Now they organise events on the square, such as barbecues and parties, of their own accord. All of the approximate 1000 volunteers from the local community were very proud of what they had achieved and very happy with their new colourful environment. The project has encouraged others in the city to continue to add colour to Charleroi.

1.2 Let's Colour: São Paulo, Brazil

The traditional community of Bixiga in São Paulo was the first to be visited by the Coral project *Tudo de Cor Para Você* in 2009. Many other projects followed, including a huge urbanisation in Santa Marta favela in Rio De Janeiro. *Tudo de Cor Para Você* project aimed to inspire people through the preservation and injection of colour that was given to the community's houses. To thank the many youngsters for all their hard work in the project, they were treated to a lesson in SENAI, a national network of secondary level vocational schools. The activity of painting generated a change in people's habits and gave a feeling of pride and ownership of the job at hand. In total approximately 6m people were reached in Brazil by the Let's Colour projects, and the projects will continue.

2 ASHINGTON PROJECT

Since Woodhorn Colliery was closed in 1988, Ashington has struggled with high unemployment, a fragmenting community, and economic decline. As part of AkzoNobel's commitment to transforming lives through colour, and to celebrate their new factory in the town, they challenged Northumbria University Master's students to come up with innovative means of community engagement and impact, involving a transformative application of colour to the built environment.

AkzoNobel's prior experience and research was combined with that of Northumbria University's faculties of Arts, Design & Social Sciences and Health & Life Sciences, to provide a background of colour science and demographic, social and economic data for the region, with past examples of community arts and colour projects.

A recent Council survey, which polled almost 2400 (19%) of Ashington residents, found that despite a certain pride and community cohesion, they are pessimistic and dissatisfied, describing their town in "very negative terms" as "a town which is forgotten, neglected, shabby and dirty, and with a bleak future" (Ashington Town Council, 2012).

36% are dissatisfied with their local neighbourhood. Many request cleaner streets, free of litter and dog fouling, accompanied by road and pavement repairs, increased job prospects and improved shopping facilities.

Only about a fifth of residents feel they can influence decisions at a local level. Younger residents feel more able to influence change than their older counterparts.

Only 12% of residents are members of a local community group or organisation.

Over 30% have a long-term, limiting illness, health problem or disability.

This background then set the context for a catalyst project, carried out by 23 Masters students studying Multidisciplinary Design Innovation (MDI) at Northumbria University.

2.1 Process, Tools and Methods

MDI students are mostly graduates from three general discipline areas: design, business/marketing, and science/technology/engineering. They worked in teams of four or five, including members of all three disciplines. Students engaged in a rapid ideation phase followed by deep-dive research including observational and experiential fieldwork, as well

as interviews and surveys, with the aim of understanding the hopes and fears of the community, then translating these into viable enhancement opportunities. Intervention ideas were generated using techniques such as concept mapping, visualisations (sketches, photomontage, CAD renderings and short films) for discussion with stakeholders, and enacting concepts in short videos.



Figure 1: Group ideation; team research; exploration and consultation.

2.2 Insights and concept highlights

The project outcomes included many valuable insights and proposals; some had an explicit theme of colour, while others were less literal interventions, with varying degrees of brand visibility. Broadly they can be categorised into five main themes: Enterprise (drop-in centres and business mentoring, high street and market revival, Space to Sell); Education and Training (scholarships, prizes, mentoring); Pride and Identity ('Made in Ashington', red squirrel 'Grey to Red' campaign, allotments and gardens); Community collaborations (film-making, theatre, annual events); Town landmarking (paths, signage and public art). Students made valuable insights in just a few weeks, through immersive fieldwork and intensive ideation phases. Sponsors and students alike were surprised at how much was accomplished in such a short time, with deep insights and radical but achievable proposals. The best of these have been pursued in a second, 10 week phase.



Figure 2: Concept examples. Made in Ashington, Race, Colour my street, On the Map.

2.3 Phase two

In this phase, teams explore three main areas of intervention: community events, an education & training programme, and colour in the Ashington landscape.

Public events (such as festivals, contests or performances) will be devised to bring together the community and wider public, bringing colour in all senses of the word. They must tap in to heritage and traditions of the local culture, yet must feel modern, optimistic and forward-looking in its content and themes, and through bold use of colour.

Education and mentoring schemes aim to engage with and nurture local talent, enabling young people to realise their potential in employment related to AkzoNobel products and brands. Projects explore how best to find and recruit such candidates, especially from hard-to-reach parts of the community, and how to connect and inspire through colour. Two tiers of engagement are pursued: firstly, sponsorship in higher education through mentorship, prizes and scholarship awards. Eligible candidates will be studying subjects relevant to employment in chemical manufacturing industry (eg physical sciences, chemical engineering, marketing, management). Secondly, vocational guidance and training will be offered in related trade skills such painting and decorating. Both strands aim to help break the cycle of unemployment, bringing back a sense of hope, ambition and aspiration to Ashington's next generation.

Colouring Ashington follows the more typical format of a Let's Colour project – community collaborations that bring colour to the public landscape, reviving and energising key areas and focal points. Targets for exploration include Ashington bus station, high street and market place, cycleways and footpaths, garden allotments, and traffic roundabouts. Student projects identify suitable sites and mechanisms for participation, and propose designs for consideration in co-creation events.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Student work has served as stimuli for the sponsors, inspiring and challenging AkzoNobel and the County Council to take bold action. For the students, this project provided valuable experience of multidisciplinary, multi-stakeholder engagement (including the public), working with and presenting to an industry client, and applying design methods to a real social challenge. New and valuable relationships were established between Northumbria University, AkzoNobel and the council. For the community itself, impact will be significant once the final projects are implemented. Let's Colour projects demonstrate the transformative power of community collaborations around the globe that resulted in bold, colourful, large-scale and highly visible change. They set a precedent for Ashington, and expectations are high for the positive impact these projects will bring in 2014 and beyond.

4 REFERENCES

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