King’s Hill:

A Place of Landings

Article by Tony Pritchard based on an interview with designer Richard Wolfströme

Commissioned by Futurecity, The King’s Hill ‘a place of landings’ project was completed in the summer of 2014 for developer Liberty Property Trust UK. The design and creative direction was undertaken by Richard Wolfströme a graphic designer specialising in information and environmental design.

The project has led to a focus within ‘cultural place-making’, a sphere that enables Richard to ‘explore…design solutions for places, buildings, urban environments, parks and landscapes’. His work considers interventions that incorporate a sense of ownership for the community whilst providing an informative experience for the visitor. As well as being a member of the International Society of Typographic Designers his specialism has led him to being appointed as an Academician of the Academy of Urbanism; an Associate member of the Landscape Institute; and a member of the International Place-making Leadership Council.

King’s Hill ‘a place of landings’ is situated within a retail development located by a Grade II listed art deco RAF control tower in Kent. Situated at the former West Malling airfield, this RAF base saw active service through the Second World War and up until it ceased being operational in 1969. The site continued to be used during the 1970s and 80s for air displays and as a film set for productions including the TV series Wish You Were Here and famously as a set for The Beatles’ Magical Mystery Tour film.

The scheme embraces the unique heritage of the site to evoke a thought provoking and educational experience that connects visitors and the local communities to a sense of the place. Through the project, Richard and local writers were employed to harvest the rich narratives from the memories and experiences of those who inhabited the space both past and present. These views from the residents delivered stories ‘that are moving, funny and inspiring’.

The installation comprises a number of unique features which were fabricated and designed in collaboration with the material and installation expertise of

Millimetre, who also devised a unique ‘hot-metal’ blasting technique to create something aesthetically beautiful and robust. A roundel, with a seven metre diameter and made from cast steel, has been inscribed with stencilled narratives.

The inner circle contains slang language used by RAF pilots. The outer ring is formed of memories and stories from the community that lived, worked and played during the years the airfield was active. A second cast steel roundel of the same diameter exhibits a spiral of personal narratives with a bespoke seating area, designed by Millimetre, in the centre. Historical memories and contemporary views are communicated through an assortment of ‘voices’, poetry and expressions along walkways. A series of twelve ‘brass rubbing’ roundels,

250 millimetre in diameter, depict linear drawings of planes that used the airfield including the Spitfire, Hurricane and Lysander. Children’s ‘kenning poetry’ describes each plane with a two-word description – 11 planes and one Beatles’ Magical Mystery Tour bus completed the set.

When Typographic caught up with Richard the first question we asked was what the phrase ‘sense of place’ meant to him. Richard used the word ‘connectivity’ frequently. He views place as an environment inhabited by citizens who live, work and play connected to their space. Any intervention should respect and appreciate the individual’s ownership and interpretation of the specific location.

Richard studied at Ravensbourne College of Design and Communication under the tutelage of Geoff White. He sees typography as a method of communication that adopts an appropriate and empathetic visual style to reflect the narrative being conveyed. Working with typography within a place-making context requires an interdisciplinary approach and the notion of collaborative practice is key to the resolution of many of his projects. This means working with architects, municipal bodies and specialist fabricators. He describes this work as more often being about facilitating the process as part of the team, as opposed to the individual designer imposing a predetermined visual language.

An intriguing typographic aspect of the King’s Hill project was the choice of typeface. Originally Richard had considered the use of Foundry Sans. He admired the humanist forms of the typeface and thought it a sensitive choice for conveying the personal content of the various storylines. In discussion with Millimetre, the company commissioned to fabricate the installation, concerns were raised as to whether the counters of the typeface would survive the production method of blasting molten hot metal through the forms. It was thought that a stencil typeface would be more robust. The potential issue with this choice would be its possible association with an industrial aesthetic.

Numerous alternative stencil fonts were considered and Richard sees the final selection as benefiting from the collaborative process. What might have been an issue finally yielded a stronger outcome. The final choice was a stencil typeface called Jigsaw (designed by Johanna Biľak), which had a sufficiently wider gap yet a softness in the curves of the letterforms, lending an appropriately human feel sensitive to the nature of the text.

In considering his personal position on place-making within the public realm

Richard takes the responsibility of this form of representation with due diligence. As a designer he adopts the ‘beginner’s mind’, starting each job from scratch and assuming the necessary learning process. This commences with an immersion into the community and an openness to the emerging place-specific narratives.

At times he describes this interaction as emotional and that the stories resonate at a personal level. These aren’t the recollections of famous celebrities, rather they are the stories of the everyday that can be experienced by the majority. It is the sense of the ‘everydayness’ that Richard responds to in particular and he tries to find out how typography might communicate this. He seeks to capture something of the soul of the place, expanding and developing on what is already there. It was said of Geoff White that his awareness and openness enabled him to ‘discover ideas rather than having to invent them’. This suggests that the tutor might impart a sense of philosophy to their pupils rather than indoctrinate a stylistic approach. For Richard ‘design starts further down the line’ – it’s not something that is imposed from the inception. He suggests that if you ‘immerse yourself in the place, something will come’. He feels the biggest mistake is to have a top down approach – rather you should grow the project from the ground up. Often the designer’s role is to nurture and help bring the project together. This role is not one of subservience however, there is still the need to maintain control and ensure the aesthetic is in keeping. He always retains creative control over the typography. Richard has been fortunate that his clients recognize typography as a skill and once he has explained the rationale behind the typographic approach his collaborators are usually on side. He regards himself as something of a nomad and transient within location-based projects. Whilst the project is ongoing there is total commitment but on completion the installation has to function independently to the satisfaction of the community and its visitors. When the King’s Hill project presented itself Richard had a familiarity with the region. He had been brought up in South London and his father owned a cottage in West Malling.

This knowledge of the area provoked a sense of excitement about the project and how a sensitive intervention could enhance the meaning of the place.

The notion of stories emerging from and being placed back in the environment from where they originated, came from a previous project Richard had co-created with William Shaw in 2007 entitled 41 Places. It was this project, along with previous experiences with wayfinding projects, that sparked an awareness of the intensity of communication within the spatial environment. He regards this approach as having ‘emotional authenticity’, where design is used to express narrative and its inherent meaning to those passing through. The concept of super graphics and largescale type in public spaces has become a fascination amongst other designers such as Morag Myerscough and Why Not Associates. Richard observes that whilst the canvas might be similar, what they are each doing is very different.

Considering the readership of Typographic, and in particular the annual intake of young talent into the Society, he suggests that typographic expression need have ‘no limitations to what and where you can communicate’, however the designer needs to ‘be sensitive to the landscape’ they operate within. He advocates to be inspired by the potential of typography but to avoid visual pollution and that decluttering is a worthy consideration.

The response to the project has been positive with the local community appreciating the craft involved and its resonance within the environment in which it has been set. Visitors have gained insight into the sense of place from the contributors’ correspondence set within the installations.