

# Bridging the gaps

*Brownfield Briefing* chose **Urban Eye**, a local Art and Regeneration organisation, as its nominated charity at the *BB Awards* last October. The funds are going towards an important bridge refurbishment. **Ian Grant** talks to UE's **Miles Watson** about the project and others.

**Urban Eye** is a London-based art and design group formed in 1998. It plans and implements environmental improvements to transform neglected spaces and improve public safety. It identifies neglected public spaces and improvements in partnership with councils, engineers and the local community.

In 2000, Urban Eye initiated a programme to upgrade the appearance of flyover structures, pedestrian walkways and bridges. The bridges are gateways into London and are prominent features of the urban landscape.

"Things are easier and better now," says Watson. When UE started its design proposals were rejected. The infrastructure institutions were bastions of the old modernist thinking.

On the flipside, there is less money and grants around now, but experience has taught Urban Eye how to work more efficiently with partners.

"The big institutional groups are more willing to work with innovative art and design projects now. At the beginning they said projects like the ones we've done were impossible." But after a pilot with the **Highways Agency**, there was a breakthrough and Watson says he was helped by **Maunsell** at the beginning.

"It is a case of finding a champion within an organisation to help drive the projects through – and that takes time. Institutions have set ways of doing things. Some Councils are very aware the negative effects of a run-down area, and conversely the positive effects and how it affects the local community and businesses."

Some of the projects have spin-offs. Prior to Urban Eye's involvement, Acklam Footbridge was known as Mugger's Bridge, after some attacks including a fatal stabbing. Post design it became an iconic bridge in the area, the footfall increased and it started featuring in music videos and fashion shoots.

Watson says the quality of the paint and finishes are important. After 10 years it can fade and the tagging can return which is why refurbishment is so important.

In conclusion, he says: "The designs can make a big difference to people's lives, which has made the struggle worth it."

## Acklam Footbridge

Acklam Footbridge is situated in a location with a hostile ambience made worse by the presence of graffiti tagging and fly posters. Locally it was called Mugger's Bridge after several attacks and a fatal stabbing. The local Council found that efforts to clean the bridge were thankless, with tags reappearing almost immediately.

The bridge is part of a busy pedestrian route near Westbourne Park Underground Station, running over the **London Underground** rail tracks and under the Westway (A40) Flyover to local businesses



and amenities at Golborne Road.

Urban Eye followed a policy that graffiti is most visually dominant on a plain

surface. By breaking up the surface with high-contrast colours and a dense pattern, subsequent graffiti loses much of its impact. The project was completed by painting a simple blue and white pattern under the flyover.

Urban Eye has also installed new lighting at this location to improve public safety at night.



## Portobello Bridge

The area under the bridge crossing over Portobello Bridge had long been an eyesore, blighted by pigeons nesting, water seeping down the abutment walls, and endless fly posting and tagging. The neglected site appeared to form a barrier between the south and north of the borough. Some tourists going from Notting Hill down Portobello Market would turn back when they saw it.

After lengthy negotiations with **London Underground**, **SSL**, **Metronet**, and the **Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea**, Urban Eye proposed bold large-scale artwork with prints on the parapet and cladding on the walls. The project also included cleaning and painting the underside of the bridge, installing new directional lighting, and anti-pigeon measures. Funding was received from the Neighbourhood Renewal Fund.



public art



### Golborne Bridge

This project spanned 11 years. One hundred years after its construction, Golborne bridge in North Kensington was in very poor condition. The paintwork had failed and rust build up caused by flyposting and subsidence had cracked and damaged the structure.

Urban Eye gained approval from Network Rail to regenerate the bridge in 2008 and local council RBKC agreed to fund the project in 2012. Miles Watson and Toby Laurent-Belson created artwork for the bridge panels, which was selected by the local community from four alternative designs.

Lighting at night was poor and gave a gloomy and oppressive feel to the area, so upgrading the lighting was a priority. Other improvements included repairs, repainting the bridge and installation of a less obtrusive security mesh.

Urban Eye worked closely on the project with Birse, one of the Network Rail approved contractors over Summer 2013. The transformation has proved popular and has helped to revitalise this neglected corner; an approach that would certainly benefit other London bridges.