

Heritage Learning, English Heritage. Autumn 2003

Futuretown And Beyond

Creating an interactive global town square

Shoppers and those waiting for trains and buses in the centre of Gravesend can now watch **giant** animated displays of work produced by schools and community groups, communicating their ideas about the future of their town and neighbourhoods.

Futuretown is a national scheme to raise awareness among young people of the importance of our towns and cities. Gravesend has been one of the forerunners in developing this scheme, sponsored by Boots The Chemists and Sainsbury's plc. *Futuretown And Beyond* (FAB) takes this a step further by involving over twenty schools and community groups, higher education institutions, the local authority and commercial organisations, over three years. The project uses the focus of creativity and ICT to create a model of how citizens can contribute to and promote potential 'futures' for their town centre. It aims to create a model which is sustainable and transferable to other towns and communities; to disseminate this as widely as possible and make links between participating communities.

FAB takes the metaphor of the ancient Roman Forum into the 21st Century to create a 'Global Town Square' - a place of debate and interaction; a crucible of 'citizenship'; a beautiful physical space, combining the physical and the virtual, the local and the global. It involves participants in a social process, research and prototype development, the creation of an interactive physical and virtual environment, creating visions for the future of their town.

It provides a bottom-up approach to regeneration. Workshops exploring the themes of You-topias and Futures provide the materials, which are put onto the FAB website, exhibited at TOWNCENTRIC (the Tourism, Regeneration and Information centre), and projected onto a six-metre MegaScreen in Garrick Street. These ideas are not simply pie in the sky however — Gravesham Borough Council (with the support of other partners) is saying that wherever possible and practical it will incorporate these ideas into its future planning and interactive technologies will be designed into public spaces.

Phase 1 (2001-02)

This involved creating a network of young people, research & development of ideas and technologies, getting business partners and sponsors on board. Participants were asked to start by creating 'You-topias' - looking at themselves and their surroundings as they are in the here and now. Within these images are further insights into why they were made and messages from the pupils involved in their creation. Over 400 young people participated in this stage. These inspirational 'You-topias' can be viewed as a series of 'electronic postcards' on the websites www.towncentric.co.uk, or www.futuretownandbeyond.co.uk.

Phase 2 (2002-03)

This brought community groups and organisations into the network. The website began to develop a database of 'Futures' for the town as a growing resource to expand ideas and enable the possibility for practical realisation. Through the 'Forum', participating groups and communities in Gravesend made links via email, creating and exchanging 'future visions' with other communities locally, nationally and internationally. A buddying system helped to develop ideas and prototypes to meet specific needs and directions.

Now and in the future

The **large-scale outdoor** projection system at the Garrick Street Transport Interchange was inaugurated by a Festival of Light and Renewal showing stunning work from over 300 people, from five year olds to elders. This celebrated the theme with an image and message to the people of Gravesend — beginning with Diwali, through the different cultural festivals and New Years, to Easter. Much of the work referred to these cultural festivals but there were also individual expressions and interpretations of the theme.

The project is currently developing ideas around the regeneration of Garrick Street itself, with the proposed building of a large new shelter complex, lighting and street improvements. During the coming year we plan to make the projection system interactive so that people can use mobile phones or activate infra-red beams at ground level in order to change the displays or even vote on ideas and proposals. It is hoped that these systems will be part of public artworks, utilising the work of schools and community groups, incorporated into the development. In September we will begin workshops to explore ideas for the heritage quarter in Gravesend.

The FAB project is co-ordinated by *ART.e @ the art of change* working **with Gravesend Town Centre Initiative through TOWNCENTRIC**, Gravesham Borough Council, with the support of other partners including English Heritage Education. Jennie Fordham, our South East Region Education Officer, organised INSET teacher s courses and offered advice and materials. **The project is funded by South East Regional Arts Lottery, Gravesham Borough, Kent Thameside, Kent County Council and Urban.**

For further details of the FAB project and to view the wonderful range of children s artwork representing their You-topias and Futures visit www.futuretownandbeyond.co.uk or www.towncentric.co.uk

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