COLOUR SCHEME

After years of funding difficulties, West Bromwich's new cultural centre, The Public, has finally opened. Susie Sell seeks an expert opinion on whether the new building will help with the area's regeneration.

Even before West Bromwich's community arts centre the Public opened its pink doors over the summer, it was already the source of controversy. The nub of the criticism was the ballooning expense of the project, which eventually peaked at £63 million, of which national development agency the Arts Council contributed more than half.

The centre was the brainchild of Sylvia King, a local community arts leader who envisioned a permanent home for her community project Jubilee Arts and teamed up with architect Will Alsop to transform her plans into reality. When, in 2004, Alsop's practice went into administration, architects Flannery and de la Pole took over, tweaking the internal layout but keeping Alsop's trademark colourful exterior intact.

The project was due to open in 2006, but the date was pushed back when the original company behind the project The Public Building Ltd - born out of Jubilee Arts - also went into administration. Sandwell Metropolitan Borough Council took over the project, but it faced a further hurdle when, this January, the Arts Council withdrew its annual commitment of £500,000 for the interactive gallery, one of the Public's main features. However, it did give a final one-off grant of £3 million in a last-ditch attempt to get the building off the ground. The Public finally opened fully in August.

The project is in the town centre of West Bromwich, one of the six towns that make up the borough of Sandwell. It is built on the site of a former bus station and has four storeys. The ground level is home to a theatre and concert space, exhibits and a restaurant. Ascending the building via a sloping walkway that hugs the perimeter leads to exhibition and viewing galleries on the second and third floors. The top floor is office space, but none of this has yet been leased out.

Regeneration & Renewal asked Chris Khamis, director of regeneration consultancy CSK Strategies, to visit the Public and offer a critique.

What did you think of the building's external design?
Is the technical term 'wacky'? At the moment, it doesn’t blend in with the surroundings, which is a good thing as this area is the site of a major regeneration programme so you wouldn’t really want it to. The building is certainly iconic, and it stands out in what otherwise would be a drab town centre. However, they have got to do a bit of work to make the place look more welcoming. At the moment, there are these big, pink doors, and you don’t know if they are the entrance or not. But, we have been told that they are going to address that [with clearer signs].

Does West Bromwich need this building?
Yes. This is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country and is desperately in need of regen-
Do you think that it will attract local people?

It can be hard for something as visionary as this to gain acceptance in such a deprived area. Regeneration is a difficult thing to manage in the local community, so what’s important is that you don’t lose the links and make people feel excluded from it all. While the building externally doesn’t reflect the history of the area, the exhibitions inside certainly do. For example, there was an exhibition of Malcolm X’s visit to the area in 1965, which was excellent because it showed the local Sikh community and the Bangladeshi community speaking about how he inspired them. I also think that the way community groups are encouraged to put displays on, and the fact that they have a series of programmes that focus on particular community groups, is valuable.
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**Does West Bromwich need this building?**

Yes. This is one of the most deprived boroughs in the country and is desperately in need of regeneration, and culture and arts are an area in a number of senses. First, like the Public alters what the place is like, it allows the town centre to be a little more than somewhere that closes down when the shops shut. But the Public is also an opportunity to generate income because it is another venue for this sort of functions. It is also important because it is a place for people to interact, and innovative industries and artists. I just think there is a need to cause the place needs it.

Do you think that it will attract local arts organisations? It can be hard for something as grand as this to gain acceptance in such a deprived community, so what’s important is that the links and make people feel part of it all. While the building externally tells the history of the area, the exhibition spaces do that better. For example, there was Malcolm X's visit to the area as being a very important and excellent event because it showed the community and the Bangladeshi community about how he inspired them. In time, community groups are encouraged to play a part in the building, and the fact that they are able to take over programmes and spaces in the building is valuable.
and arts are important for an area. Firstly, having a project that the place feels like, and that is good for living, rather than being a project that is going to close down and die when the project is over. The Public also has the potential to provide a new form of the 'drib' town centre seen from an upper floor (top right). The Public also has the potential because it provides a hands-on exhibit (lower right) that can attract people and stimulate creativity.

**Do you think businesses will relocate here?**

It's one of the most unusual business premises I have seen, but it's an exciting place. It has the potential to buzz in a way that boring office blocks don't, which creative businesses will like. The location is good as it's just by the M5 motorway, and rent will be cheaper than in Birmingham city centre, which isn't too far away. While the space can be leased to several small firms or occupied by one large one, I think it would be better if the space is used by a single business because it seems to be open for several firms. I wonder whether they could interact here without the risk of ideas being stolen or of people overhearing conversations.

**Will it act as a template for regeneration in the town?**

My feeling has always been that in the West Midlands and Sandwell there is a tendency to think small. Or else think so big that you lose your feet from the ground. It's a case of achieving that mix of humility and visionary thinking, and it does look as though they have begun to do that. The Public has also avoided the danger that Sandwell sometimes falls into, which is its big Think Local campaign. While this is valuable in stimulating local firms, it also runs the risk of the place becoming inward looking and not pulling in the creative thinking of the world at large. But the exhibitions here, such as the one on the West Bromwich townscape as photographed by a Los Angeles artist, are particularly valuable as they show the importance of building on what's here, but also keeping the links with the rest of the world.

**What future does the project have?**

It's great that they have got it going because the area needs it. It's going to be a struggle over the next few years while they try to get the rest of the regeneration going, but if they can be forward-looking and if they can think about the content and make sure they interact with the community and bring people and performances in, it should happen. Maybe they need to think about whether they can use it for other regeneration services, such as employment fairs or training. So, rather than being just a cultural and leisure project, it could be used for ongoing education and help to uplift the area.