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SPACE TO THINK

How contemporary public art is reinforcing our sense of place and pride in our surroundings

DAVID BUURMA AND
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While strolling through a town centre, you might be fortunate enough to stumble upon a piece of art in an unexpected place. From classic granite war memorials to challenging constructions of glass and steel, the quality of art in our public spaces is often seen as a barometer of economic and cultural health. Art can do much to reconnect people with their local environment, and is an important tool in the reanimation of our built environment. We all experience a mixture of reactions at different times - it might remind us of something trivial, cheer us up, or evoke a particular historical event. Alternatively, the art may simply invoke a sense of joy through shape, beauty or just fun.

Over the last 20 years there has been a shift in the role of public art. Sculptures, placed in the public arena more than 200 years ago, were often symbolised expressions of power through large-scale classical geometric objects such as pyramids and obelisks, or a man on horseback upon a pedestal. These days most public artworks have come down off the pedestal and are quite often expected to work harder amongst the crowds at ground level.

Two waterfront pieces of art in Falmouth are good examples of this shift - the rather ambiguous Killigrew Monument near the National Maritime Museum, and the recently rededicated St Nazaire Memorial on the Prince of Wales Pier in Falmouth.

The Killigrew Monument is a stunning 10m sharp pyramid that commemorates one of Falmouth's best-known families. The monument sparks curiosity owing to its awesome geometric beauty, but the lack of information surrounding it means that it falls short of truly engaging the public. We are further held at arm's length by planting and railings. The monument's anonymity purposefully conceals the true story behind the Killigrew family, as research suggests that not only is it a tribute to the family's

contribution to Falmouth town, but it also links to stories of piracy, greed and ambition.

In comparison, the rededicated St Nazaire Memorial is a far more accessible and welcoming piece of art. Seven white concrete oval plinths draw the eye towards the stone memorial, and on each plinth is a brass plaque holding quotes from servicemen involved in the raid.

Those taking part in the invasion set off from Falmouth in March 1942 with the aim of destroying the St Nazaire dock in France and preventing the Tirpitz, the Germans' largest and most powerful warship, from being put to sea and destroying Allied shipping. By aiming to satisfy physical, emotional and spiritual human needs surrounding the



St Nazaire Memorial



Tinnners Hounds

history of this memorial, the redesign of the public space encourages people to take a moment to reflect on this event. Such islands of calm and contemplation are much needed in public spaces today, and offer an interactive experience for those passing by.

Another evocative memorial that engages the public can be found in Redruth. As part of the successful public realm regeneration project in the town, a pack of bronze hounds, called the Tinnners Hounds, has been installed by internationally known artist David Kemp. The original hounds were made from the discarded miners' rubber wellies that littered the mine after it closed down in 1990, ending a 4000-year history of tin mining in the area. The idea was to celebrate the legacy of the miners' labour in a light-hearted and inspiring way. The hounds, now cast in bronze rather than their original rubber, are described by David Kemp as 'relics of a vast underground workforce that rarely saw the light of day... released from their subterranean labours, they now wander the clifftops looking for a proper job'.

At Pencalenick School, the Penhaligon Star sculpture is a more personal form of memorial, enjoyed and appreciated by children and adults alike. Popular Cornish MP David Penhaligon died in a car accident in 1986. On her wreath at David's funeral, his widow Annette quoted a poem from Shakespeare's 'Romeo and Juliet':

*When he shall die
Take him and cut him out in little stars
And he will make the face of heaven so fine
That all the world shall be in love with night*



Pencalenick School

The significance and relevance of art in public spaces has grown and changed over the last ten years in Cornwall, and artists have played a significant role in transforming them. This has seen creative freedom flourish, with practical everyday objects such as handrails, bike racks, tree grates, lighting, planters and bollards becoming public art, resulting in a more profound interaction between the public and the public space.

So when you're visiting our town centres or more rural destinations, look around at the increasing number of artistic expressions that provoke memories, inspire your imagination, or just make you smile. Through art, meaningful public space takes on a unique identity, suitable for multiple functions. An ordinary space can develop its own 'soul' and become a truly unique and special place.

David Buurma

Landscape Architect & Artist, Partner at Mor

David has a Masters Degree in Landscape Architecture from Harvard University. His work has ranged from urban regeneration schemes and public parks to private gardens. His key skills are also public art and furniture and garden design. He is an expert photographer and a keen sculptor

Philip Wyatt

Spatial Designer at Mor

Philip Wyatt graduated from Falmouth College of Arts with a BA (Hons) in Spatial Design in 2003. He is currently working on the Crayford Waterside Gardens project in Kent. His main interest is in encouraging a sense of wellbeing through the design of people-friendly places and designs which will stand the test of time.



The Penhaligon Star