THE MILLBANK ATLAS
:
RESIDENT'S PERSPECTIVE

Wilfred Rimensberger
Asked to define The Millbank Atlas, I would say it is a creative, sustainable local community enabler. This may be a mouthful but it gets at how this project operates in conjunction with others, most notably Millbank Creative Works (MCW). As a director of this community interest company, I am deeply committed to growing and diversifying a local community-based ecosystem of creative and innovative practices. The most recent version of The Millbank Atlas furthered this by working with MCW to develop aspects of its outreach, including prototyping a trolley to deliver food to housebound locals and open doors of connection with others who are atomised as a result of mental illness, unemployment or both.

It is surprising a collaboration between Chelsea College of Arts and MCW has taken so long to establish. When, more than a decade ago, it was confirmed the art school would be moving to Millbank, I recall the excitement many of us working in the area’s creative industries felt. Excited by what this might mean for our community, including local artists, designers, craftspeople, other practitioners and local residents. When the Royal Military Hospital was slated for redevelopment, we had lobbied hard to have it turned into something other than luxury flats, something certainly out of reach for most locals, with a majority on low and fixed incomes. Far more intriguing was the prospect of an art school and how it might be able to anchor a kind of cultural quarter in Westminster. But this is not exactly what has happened. Chelsea College moved to Millbank and after several years of little interaction with the local community, resentment began to grow amongst residents. There was a widespread perception that the College’s students, tutors and management were living in their own bubble. What MCW and others wanted instead was a community of stakeholders - the College, Tate, studios and other maker spaces. This is something we have been striving to create but it has taken a very long time to develop and is still in the early stages because the process stalled several times after agreements were broken and funding was pulled.
The situation has improved in the last three years thanks in good part to Senior Lecturer Shibboleth Shechter introducing her studio, Chelsea Local, (BA [Hons] Interior and Spatial Design at Chelsea College of Arts) to MCW and Millbank residents beyond. Shibboleth opened up students’ coursework by creating linkages between their activities and positions and those of the local community. MCW became the facilitator - the students’ port of call - for various kinds of community involvement.

Relations have been particularly strengthened by MCW taking up residence in the College, thanks to the provision of free office space to serve as a base for MCW’s activities. Significant too, at the early stages of our relations, was #TransActing: A Market of Values, which took place on the Rootstein Hopkins Parade Ground, Chelsea College, in July of 2015, and was coordinated by Dr Marsha Bradfield and other members of Critical Practice Research Cluster, which is also based at Chelsea College. This non-exploitative market hosted more than sixty stalls, each one featuring practices to explore value beyond the financial: trust, loyalty, care, etc. MCW participated with a stall promoting ‘shares of community values’, which proved popular with Millbank local because it created a platform in a College event for sharing their commitments and concerns. Shibboleth and her students were also involved in the Market, and it was this collaboration, in part, that led to Marsha joining Chelsea Local in 2016. Now she, Shibboleth and I are all working to incubate a local, community-based ecosystem of creative and innovative practices. This is slowly forming a community of practice that straddles the College and the communities beyond it.

The first such collaboration, Millbank Stories, ran between 2015-16. A project that used the method of storytelling to bring together design objects to tell stories, with creative events and parades to bring them to life. This enabled a space of exhibition to make visible the existing communities of Millbank and open up opportunities for new encounters between residents to take place. Building on the success of Millbank Stories, The Millbank Atlas has now taken this process to the next level. Students and locals are working together to explore the College’s environs as places to live and work, with the Atlas developing links between the College and residents and local
associations. These include libraries and events, especially the neighbourhood celebration SouthWestFest. Connections have also been made with The Passage, which runs London's largest voluntary sector resource centre for homeless and vulnerable people; and Cardinal Hume Centre, which works with homeless young people, badly housed families and others to gain the skills they need to overcome poverty and homelessness. In a further example of bolstering local community spirit there is the Wilkie Moat Community Garden, which has transformed a space that was previously notorious for anti-social-behaviour. Building relationships with associations like these is essential to supporting student projects that aim to enrich and promote new and existing community services.

The students are responsible for leading this process and, in so doing, many develop confidence as they strengthen their design practices. Local associations and residents benefit through joining students to work on projects and participate in exhibitions. For many residents this is the first time they have crossed the threshold and visited the College. These invitations through the Millbank Atlas and other projects also make them feel more at ease and hence interested in attending other public events at the College. One resident has even become a member of the University of the Arts London's Sustainability Working Group, which is now initiating the first sustainability collaboration between the University and Westminster City Council. A number of other collaborations, such as PimpUrBike, are also in development.

Mapping the neighbourhoods of SW1, exploring the experience of living in Millbank and the community and social values created by its people and associations lead to The Millbank Atlas as an exhibition. In conjunction with public events throughout January 2016, the show at the Cookhouse Gallery, Chelsea College of Arts, was fantastically well received. This mapping of local neighbourhoods also encouraged organisations such as OneWestminster, the South-Westminster Network and others to look into and organise their own cartographic exercises. In turn creating further community and heritage-related
projects. The Atlas exhibition's public events featured a daylong mapping and social enterprise workshop lead by JustMap, an ongoing collaborative map of London community resources, campaigns and projects; and SE Junction, a collaboration hub for social entrepreneurs, to swap stories and hatch plans in a convivial atmosphere. Several residents and students have subsequently begun to develop their projects for the Atlas exhibition into entrepreneurial ventures that are already demonstrating additional long-term benefits for the community. For example, with the support of locals, student Sara Abbas mapped the area’s not-for-profit activities and produced her report in the form of a newspaper template for the Atlas exhibition. The newspaper template was further piloted as a local project and the plan going forward is to publish quarterly the newly minted MPV Times. As Sara has now graduated, others are set to become involved, with the newspaper being produced by locals for locals. In another spin-off Wing Tong is developing a design start-up, using his interactive sound map for the Atlas as a starting point. Students are also joining locals in creative upcycling workshops held by MCW at Tate Britain. And, for the first time, Chelsea College will have a presence at the annual neighbourhood extravaganza, SouthWestFest, where The Millbank Atlas will be presented to thousands of festival goers. Interestingly, local resident and artist Sophie O’Leary was ‘discovered’ as a result of being in residence during the Atlas exhibition. A promoter of Flux Art, who visited the exhibition, has invited Sophie to participate in the next Flux show, providing a real stepping stone in her career.

So the future looks bright for the collaboration between Chelsea College and MCW. Thanks to our work together, I have recently been invited to apply for the SpacehiveLondon crowd-funding project supported by the Mayor of London. If successful, our funding bid will be used to establish MCW as a fully-functioning, self-sustaining community interest company, supporting students and College staff, as well as Millbank’s residents and business owners, by providing funding and organisational support for their community projects. Our vision will always be driven by creativity and sustainability as fundamental tools for community building and renewal.