Can you use art to restore the health of a community?

Richard Smith chair

Health is a function of communities as much as it’s a function of individuals. If you live in a strong community—one that has strong relationships, a shared identity, resources, and a sense of purpose—then you are likely to be healthy. But if your community loses its strength then your health is likely to suffer. How might such a community’s strength be restored?

Bishop Auckland in County Durham is a community that has suffered severe decline. In medieval times it was the home of the bishops of Durham, who for centuries from the Norman Conquest were in effect the kings of the north. The arrival of the railways in the early 19th century led to a huge growth in coal mining and 60 local collieries. At one point a third of the men in County Durham worked as miners, and the annual Durham Miners’ Gala was a great and colourful festival. But the last deep colliery closed in 1968, and the mining is now gone, removing employment that although dirty was comparatively well paid. Miners and their families were proud of their work, particularly during the second world war when the country came within weeks of running out of coal, and mining created a strong sense of community. The disappearance of work, income, and meaning precipitated a decline in the community, including in the health of the people.

A report from Durham Council in December 2021 reported that life expectancy in the county, which was already below the national average and already falling before the pandemic, fell by seven months in men and six months in women during the pandemic.1 The proportion of people who are overweight or obese increased from 63% to 64.8%, and smoking prevalence increased from 15% to 17%, with 15% of mothers smoking at the time of delivery compared with a national average of 9%. Less than a third of mothers were breastfeeding their babies at 6-8 weeks compared with almost half of mothers nationally. Suicide rates are higher than the national average and increased during the pandemic. More than one in 10 people in the county (10.9%) reported a low happiness score, which is higher than last year (9.5%) and above the national average of 8.7%.

I have recently been to Bishop Auckland with my wife, and one local resident told us that the town was seen as “the armpit of County Durham.” It is one of only two big towns, the other being Durham, but there is a big difference in the feel of those two towns, which are a 30 minute bus ride apart. In short, Durham with its huge cathedral and castle dominating the town is full of people, whereas Bishop Auckland feels empty. My wife and I waited for a bus in a bus station that is about the size of Trafalgar Square at 8pm on a Friday evening, and we were the only people there apart from five teenagers. When the bus came, we were the only passengers.

Perhaps a third to a half of the shops in Bishop Auckland are boarded up. The eating places are either closed for good or takeaway kebabs, pizza, Chinese, or Indian. In one of the main streets at 8pm the only lit place was an empty kebab takeaway. Looking in estate agent windows we found you can buy a three-bedroom house with two reception rooms for £50 000.

Unfortunately, there are many towns in Britain that have suffered the same downturn, but Bishop Auckland has an advantage over other such towns: it has a palace and 11 paintings by Francisco de Zurbaran, one of the greatest of Spanish painters. The paintings were purchased by Bishop Trevor in the 18th century. Trevor supported the Jewish Naturalisation Act 1753, which was passed and then promptly repealed after riots (a great British tradition). Zurbarán’s paintings are of the 12 sons of Jacob and are displayed in the dining room.

The paintings—and importantly the way they are displayed—are stunning and worth the journey to Bishop Auckland on their own. All the characters, including Jacob, are larger than life size, burst out of the paintings and look down on you. The room is long and narrow, adding to the intensity of the pictures. Each son is painted to illustrate his story, and they are arranged in descending order with Jacob first then Reuben and finally Joseph and Benjamin. The painting of Benjamin is a copy, but the original is also in Bishop Auckland.

The Zurbarans are the start of a compelling story. They seem to have been the trigger for a rich man with a passion for Spanish painting of the Golden Age to start a project to try re-energise the local community. Jonathan Ruffer, a barrister, banker, evangelical Christian, and art lover, is said to have wealth over £300 million and believes, surely correctly, that £20 million is enough for anybody.

Ruffer bought the Zurbarans and the palace in which they live in 2012, and it was opened to the public in 2019. This was the base from which he launched the Auckland Project, which has the overall aim of revitalising the community. https://aucklandproject.org/ The mission of the project is “Through historic attractions, galleries, nature, food, events and stays, The Auckland Project brings the rich and surprising story of Bishop Auckland to life for tourists. And in turn, the profits and opportunities created by our historic attractions and community engagement work, will help us create a bright future for Bishop Auckland.”

The most obvious signs of the Auckland Project are the restored palace, the walled garden and extensive deer park that are part of the palace, the Spanish Gallery, the Museum of Mine Art, the Auckland Tower, and a tapas restaurant. We visited all of these,
but the best-known part of the project to the locals is the Kynren, an outdoor show that recreates the history of England with boats, horses, lights, fireworks, and a huge cast, most of them volunteers. Thousands can watch, and getting a ticket is hard. We didn’t even know about it before we went.

There are other parts to the project that we didn’t see: education, apprenticeships, investment in businesses, wellbeing projects, learning opportunities, and more.

The palace includes an exhibition of British landscape painting. We stood in a room of pictures by Richard Wilson, a landscape painter who came before Turner and Constable and was greatly admired by both. A man with an upper-class voice came in and began to tell us about Wilson. He pointed out his best painting but said that Wilson had degenerated to painting the same pictures again and again with his technique steadily degrading. The man showed us the contrast in how Wilson had painted leaves before and after his fall.

We began to talk to the man about the Zurbarans and the broader project. He was immensely knowledgeable, and I imagined that he must be the art director. But slowly as we talked, I began to guess that he must be Ruffer, and indeed he was. We learnt about the project and his aspirations (he sees it as at least a 25 year project, and he’s some 10 years in), and he politely asked about us. My wife told him she was a painter, gave him her card, and said how she had been inspired by El Greco to paint an apostolate, which she has sold. He asked me what I did and after I told him he said he read The BMJ because his wife was a doctor.

After this interesting encounter, I saw him talk to many groups of people. He wants to know what people think. He is learning all the time. We met him again later outside, and he wanted to know what we had seen that could be improved. I mentioned the lack of accommodation, but unusually we couldn’t think of anything else. The work is all done to a high standard. Ruffer has invested much more than money, faith, art, and talent into the project. He badly wants it to succeed. In many ways he has succeeded already, beautifully restoring the palace, and creating the two galleries. That might be enough for many people, but his bigger aim is a reflowering of Bishop Auckland, providing a model for other depressed towns.

Whether that will work is less certain. None of the local people we met outside the buildings of the project had been to any of the buildings. Many mentioned the Kynren, but few had been. In contrast, the volunteers working in the buildings, one of them a retired GP, were very enthusiastic, keen to tell us about the paintings and history, including recent history that they remembered.

A central part of the project is clearly to attract people to travel to Bishop Auckland and spend money, providing a flow of income that will be needed to restore the town and its surroundings. Art has been used to revitalise towns like Margate with its Turner Gallery and depressed areas, as with the Beaubourg in Paris and Tate Modern on the South Bank in London. Abu Dhabi has brought in the Louvre, New York University, and other cultural attractions to prepare for a post-oil economy. The art is important not just to bring tourists but to provide accessible beauty, but is beauty an essential ingredient for restoring a community? I’d like to think it is, but I remember as a medical student being shocked that in the (banned) film A Clockwork Orange Alex, the gang leader who delighted in crime and violence, was passionate about Beethoven’s music.

I’d imagined—even hoped—that Bishop Auckland might be throbbing with people visiting, but it wasn’t. One reason may be that it’s hard to find somewhere agreeable to stay, although the pub where we stayed in Escomb was fine and had the great bonus of an 8th century Saxon church, one of the three oldest churches in England, next door. But the Auckland Project is opening much better accommodation in October. Finding somewhere good to eat is also a problem: the tapas restaurant was excellent but closes at 5pm most days.

An odd thing about the Saxon church is that at its back, beyond a small road, is a row of poor quality council houses built in perhaps the 70s. They have bins outside, and several seem neglected. Why, one of the local guides said to us, would the council allow such buildings around a treasure? I remember the senior members of the Greenwich Labour Party arguing when I was a teenager member that they would favour knocking down the Naval College, one of Britain’s finest buildings with its ceiling painted by Rubens, to build council houses. People and their needs must come before buildings, but surely a balance is possible.

The attitude of the council might help explain clashes between Ruffer and Durham County Council. For Ruffer beauty is a foundation on which a thriving community is built. For the Council it’s a nice-to-have extra but not a starting point.

The Auckland Project is nearer its beginning than its end in that it’s taken years to restore and develop the buildings and then the pandemic stopped visitors until recently. A new Museum of Faith has been built and will open soon. Success is not guaranteed, and will depend on visitors, but I hope the project thrives.

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