

Bend it like Peckham

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BELLENDEN ROAD in Peckham, south-east London, is fast becoming artists' central. You can't pop out for a pint of milk without bumping into the Royal Academician Tom Phillips, Turner Prize-winner Antony Gormley, YBA Ian Davenport, sculptors John Latham and Sokari Douglas Camp or fine artist Jacqueline Poncelet, all of whom have studio space along the road.

Meanwhile, local residents have seen a series of quirky public artworks appearing. These include chunky wooden benches by the furniture designer Mark Foldes, bar-coded pavements and street lamps (which illuminate in a neon heart-shape) by Phillips, and a series of 80 cast-iron bollards by Gormley, which he has nicknamed "the penis, the egg, the peg and the snowman". And, at number 210 Bellenden Road, you'll find Latham's splendid exploding book relief - two eight-foot interleaved books passing through a glass window.

For years, Peckham battled a reputation for poverty, crime and high unemployment. However, thanks to a pounds 260m facelift, involving the demolition of some of the worst council estates in Britain, the area is enjoying a new lease of life (including the opening of the award-winning Alsop and Stormer- designed Peckham Library in May 2000). Art is now part of the fabric of SE15 - and appreciated by people who might never dream of going to an art gallery. Of course, with the opening of Tate Modern and Zandra Rhodes' Fashion and Textile Museum, Southwark is now arguably one of London's coolest boroughs, but life has not always been easy for its residents.

Southwark is the eighth most deprived area in the country. A total of 9.1 per cent of its workforce is unemployed, the fourth highest in London. To attract new businesses to the area - smart cafes, delicatessens, a florist - shop rents on Bellenden Road have been dramatically reduced. And art has played a major role. Tom Phillips has designed shop hoardings, made from Murano glass mosaic, spelling out "We love Peckham" for a local restaurant and an antiques gallery. The laundrette displays a hologram by Claire Burbridge (showing ducks going around in a washing machine); cartographer- turned-artist, Lorraine Rutt has built a "street map" out of ceramic tiles (based on a page from the London A-Z); while the frontage of ceramist Jacqueline Poncelet's new deli - Delly Belly - will feature a "mad hedge", with repeat images of conifers in snow.

Funding for the artists came jointly from the Bellenden Renewal Team, and Arts & Business, a

private body set up to channel resources to fledgling artists in return for publicity and improvements to shops and business buildings. The decision was taken to order new street furniture not from the brochures of municipal-bollard manufacturers - but out of the imaginations of local artists.

Best of all, the idea of integrating art into the local environment came from the residents themselves, who asked, quite reasonably: "Why can't a pavement be a work of art?" Meanwhile, Gormley, who is interested in pursuing batch production, alongside his own one-off sculptures, suggested doing a bollard design for Bellenden Road for free.

All of the artworks, from street lights to shop signs, are totally functional - so no one can accuse Southwark of expensive frivolity. Because residents have been consulted at every step, there has been minimal vandalism, while Keegan's Regeneration, who make the council's regular street furniture, have produced the new works in collaboration with the artists, so that health and safety issues - and repairs - are straightforward. "Using local artists and local suppliers means we can keep the deals cheaper than employing commercial firms - and keep cash local as well," says Roger Young, senior renewal officer on the Bellenden team.

The artists themselves have an opportunity to work in a completely different medium. And no environmental detail is too mundane for their scrutiny. For example, Gormley is now busy designing a new series of manholes with a handprint and thumbprint motif, part-sponsored by Thames Water.

And the Bellenden art map is growing. The African-themed street market on nearby Choumert Road is being redesigned by sculptor Sokari Douglas Camp and, further up in East Dulwich Road, fashion designer Zandra Rhodes has revamped a parade of shopfronts, cafes and galleries - with diamond-shaped pavements, bollards, tree grilles, blinds and liquorice-stick lamp posts - all in her trademark pink. Set up in 1997, the Bellenden Renewal Scheme has transformed the area into a vibrant, revitalised neighbourhood and visitor destination. It goes without saying that house prices have risen sharply. Last month Peckham won the Local Tourism Initiative 2003 award - a near-impossible dream for Peckham even five years ago.

Which begs the question: If Bellenden can commission local artists to beautify the streets with public art on a scale unmatched by any other London neighbourhood, why can't others try harder? Why is so much industrial street furniture so banal? The good news is that the Bellenden art consultant, Camilla Goddard, is already helping Camden, Brixton and Newham to commission public artworks sympathetic to their neighbourhoods. Meanwhile, the Norwegian and Swedish governments has expressed an interest in rolling out a similar scheme.