

'Bromford Dreams'

Graffiti Spiritualities' Project



Project Report

'Graffiti Art and Urban Youth'

Start-point: February 2012

Project Manager: Dr Chris Shannahan

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UNIVERSITY OF
BIRMINGHAM



LOTTERY FUNDED



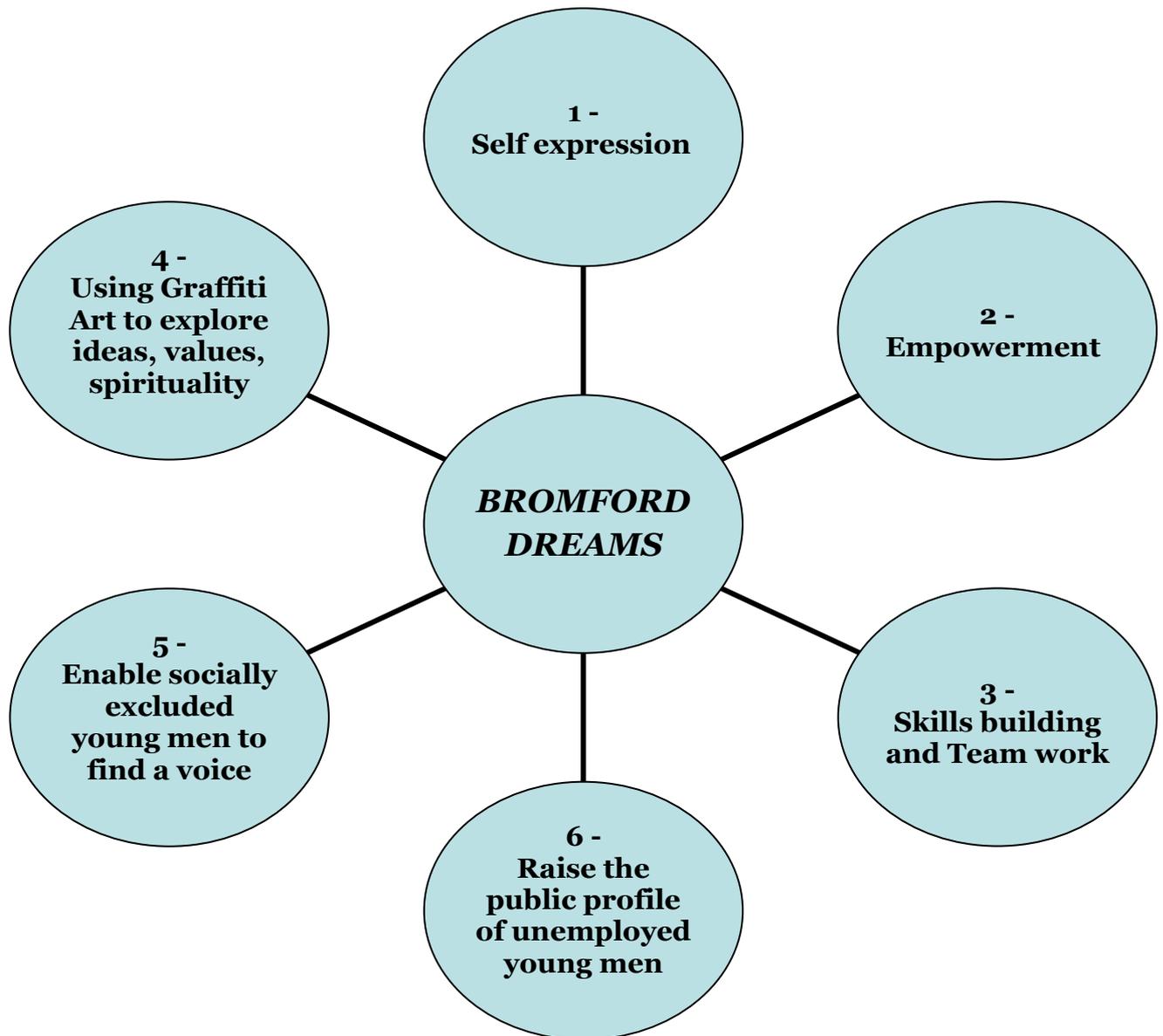
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Introduction

The 'Bromford Dreams' graffiti art and urban youth spiritualities project arises from my work as a Research Fellow in Urban Theology at the University of Birmingham. It provides the conclusion to my two year research project exploring the impact that social exclusion has on the ways in which 16-24 year old young men on the Bromford estate in east Birmingham think and talk about identity and meaning.

The week long graffiti art project on the Bromford estate aimed to use the arts to provide opportunities for unemployed young men in relation to:



A further subsidiary set of project aims were to –

1. Provide opportunities for the young men to perform their own rap music live when the mural was unveiled at the end of the project.
2. Develop a future rap music based initiative leading to the recording of an urban music C.D arising from the experience of young unemployed men in Bromford.
3. Use the project to aid the development of a resource book/pack/web site aimed at faith/community/third sector organisations working with similar groups of young men in other comparable urban contexts.
4. Use the creative 'data' from the project as the basis for a projected book on graffiti art and youth spiritualities co-authored by myself, Mohammed 'aerosol' Ali and the young men taking part in the project.
5. Draw on the 'data' to inform future research projects using the arts to engage with young men in urban contexts.
6. Draw on the 'data' with a view to writing a series of articles for journals and blog posts arising from the project.

The Project as it Unfolded

The Bromford Dreams project ran from Monday 13th February – Saturday 18th February 2012. Following planning on Monday 13th February an initial workshop was held at 'The Hub' youth centre in Bromford before the young men visited Mohammed Ali's gallery in the Muslim majority community of Sparkbrook, took part in a workshop he led, shared food in a Halal restaurant and visited a Mosque (a first for all of the group) on Tuesday 14th February. Arising from this 'exposure' day Wednesday 15th February was devoted to a series of brainstorming and design workshops in Bromford within which the young men discussed then mapped out the design of the cube. On this day a BBC film crew filmed the beginning of the painting process, interviewed some of the young men, Chris Shannahan, the youth worker Paul Wright and the artist Mohammed Ali. This report was aired on BBC Midlands Today on Wednesday 15th February to an audience of approximately 600,000 (see 'Outcomes' at the end of this report) and was supplemented by an online BBC News article based on an interview with Chris Shannahan and one of the young men involved in the project. On Wednesday 15th February the young men built the cube and began to prepare it for painting:



During Thursday 16th and Friday 17th the young men worked alongside the artist Mohammed Ali to paint their 'Bromford Dreams' design onto the Cube:



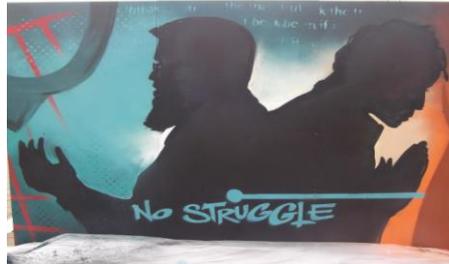
The young men worked together as a team developing new skills and sharing the following tasks – building the cube, preparing the design, painting the design and liaising with the BBC TV reporter from BBC Midlands Today. The design itself drew upon their experience of social exclusion, the attitudes they felt people had towards young men on council estates, a strong rootedness in the Bromford, a clear resistance to English Defence League activism and propaganda on the estate and a 'post-religious' spirituality characterised by hope and resistance. The young themselves all agreed that the Cube needed to reflect what they felt was the importance of prayer and solidarity and their refusal to remain trapped by negative stereotypes as well as their sense of powerlessness and their experience of unemployment and life in a neglected urban community. The four faces of the Cube reflected this:



(Images of power/powerlessness, violence, relationships with the police and the destruction of the car industry locally – formally the largest employer in the area)



(The sense expressed by the young men of being ‘trapped’ by negative stereotypes attached to ‘urban youth’. The bars however do not surround the silhouetted figure - he has used his art to break free)



(The young men clearly articulated what they felt was the importance of prayer. This was not tied to any specific religious tradition. The Muslim and the Christian figure were placed back to back but joined to symbolise solidarity and resistance to the activism of the English Defence League)



(This side of the cube reflect the rootedness of the young men in Bromford – one of the eight tower blocks from the estate and the M6 motorway flyover – The date 7.1.2001 represents the date on which a young man was killed on the estate whilst running from the police. The story provides a uniting metaphor for young adults on the estate. The fish represents the young man’s love of fishing but also the ancient Christian symbol ‘ICTHUS’)



The young men also spoke of the need to place their own experience and values on the Cube in short pithy statements, some of which were drawn from their own rap music tracks. Phrases such as those below reflect the thoughtfulness of the young men involved in the project -

- ‘No Struggle – No Progress’
- ‘More than Money’
- ‘Speak the Truth...’
- ‘Love is the basis of Reality’
- ‘Value Life’



During the painting process local residents spoke with the young men about their design, especially after the airing of the BBC TV Midlands Today report. Many were interested in the detailed imagery and wording on the cube, all of which was created by the young men and arose from their experience of growing up in Bromford. In particular the following images stimulated discussion -



(one of the tower blocks on the estate that was knocked down in 2011)



(handcuff broken open at one end and riot police officer)



(a bunch of flowers laid on the side of the Cube commemorating the life of a young man killed on the estate on 7.1.2001 – the date painted on the Cube)



(Muslim and Christian in prayer joined together as a symbol of anti-racist solidarity)

On Saturday 18th February the Cube was unveiled at a community event on the estate attended by 40 people which was recorded by the University of Birmingham and placed on its web site – <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/research/projects/social-exclusion.aspx>. Following its unveiling the Cube was displayed outside a local pub on the parade of shops at the heart of the Bromford estate from 18th February – 13th March.

The Cube Goes On Tour...

The Bromford estate is approximately 10 miles from the University of Birmingham and represents a very different face of the city. As a result of its ongoing commitment to widening participation the University of Birmingham was very keen to exhibit the Bromford Dreams cube on its campus to form a focal point for discussion and debate amongst students and staff on campus. It is difficult to measure this new audience that the Cube acquired. However there are approximately 25,000 students studying at the University from all over the UK, Europe, Asia, Africa and America. On 13th March 2012 the Bromford Dreams cube was brought to the University of Birmingham and will remain at the heart of the campus until June 2012. The Cube's arrival became a home page story on the web site of the University of Birmingham -

<http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2012/03/Campus-welcomes-cube-of-dreams.aspx>



On 23rd March the Bromford Dreams cube was given a formal 'welcome' to the University of Birmingham. An open air event was held at which one of the young men from Bromford performed one of his own rap music tracks (Part of my life) written during the project. The track can be found here - <http://soundcloud.com/tek90121/part-ov-my-life-1>. Following the welcome event a seminar focusing on the Bromford Dreams project was run at which Chris Shannahan, the youth worker Paul Wright and the artist Mohammed Ali presented papers and another young man from Bromford offered a personal reflection on the project. The welcome and seminar day was attended by 45 people.

Evaluation

Informal daily feedback sessions were held every day during the project and Chris Shannahan, Paul Wright and Mohammed Ali met daily to assess progress in relation to the project aims. Further post-project assessment meetings have been held between Chris Shannahan, Paul Wright and Mohammed Ali.

Project Outcomes

Achieved by March 2012

1. Visit to 'The Hubb' – Mohammed Ali's art gallery, Sparkbrook Birmingham.
2. Visit to Sparkhill Islamic Centre for the young men from Bromford (14th February 2012).
3. Bromford Dreams cube – designed and painted by unemployed young men from Bromford.
4. Young men from Bromford perform their own rap music at an event held by the artist Mohammed Ali in his gallery in Sparkbrook (Sunday 19th February).
5. Bromford Dreams cube exhibited on Bromford estate (18th February – 13th March 2012)
6. BBC Midlands Today TV report <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VwBot-JNmuI> (15th February).
7. Online coverage of BBC Midlands Today report <http://zomobo.net/Bromford>, http://www.veingle.com/s/ali_pw.html, <http://www.digplanet.com/wiki/Bromford>, <http://www.liveinstantnews.com/videos/video/VwBot-JNmuI/BBC-News-Bromford-Dreams-Cube-Feb-2012.html>
8. BBC News online web site feature <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-england-birmingham-17043075>.
9. Online coverage of BBC News web site feature - <http://www.ukwirednews.com/news.php/225611-Birminghams-Bromford-estate-inspires-dream-cube>
10. Birmingham Mail article (15th February 2012).
11. Bromford Dreams Flickr photograph album (from February 2012) <http://www.flickr.com/photos/chrisshannahan/>.
12. Bromford Dreams web page on the University of Birmingham web site - <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/schools/ptr/departments/theologyandreligion/research/projects/social-exclusion.aspx>.
13. Dr Chris Shannahan, Ideas Lab podcast (5th March 2012) University of Birmingham - <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/Audio/news/dr-chris-shannahan-podcast.mp3>
14. Ideas Lab podcast (5th March 2012) on i-tunes: <http://itunes.apple.com/gb/podcast/ideas-lab-predictor-podcast/id377208270>
15. Bromford Dreams cube exhibited at centre of University of Birmingham campus (March-June 2012).
16. Bromford Dreams welcome event and seminar, University of Birmingham (23rd March 2012) – Podcasts of seminar presentations to follow.
17. Live performance at University of Birmingham of rap music written by unemployed young man from Bromford - <http://soundcloud.com/tek90121/part-ov-my-life-1> (23rd March 2012)
18. University of Birmingham web site, home page feature and picture (March 2012) <http://www.birmingham.ac.uk/news/latest/2012/03/Campus-welcomes-cube-of-dreams.aspx>
19. Dr Chris Shannahan, Bromford Dreams column on the blog of the journal Political Theology (March 2012) <http://www.politicaltheology.com/blog/?p=1980>
20. Bromford Dreams feature on Birmingham Methodist District web site (March 2012) <http://www.birminghammethodist.org.uk/index.php?page=2&readmore=262>

21. Feature on Bromford Dreams in University of Birmingham Islamic Society, March 2012, issue 1.

Projected to be achieved by September 2012

1. 'Aerosol Icons' – peer reviewed article to be published in journal Political Theology
2. Graffiti Spiritualities educational resource pack
3. 'Aerosol Icons....' Book project
4. Establishment of regular dialogue meetings between the young men and the M.P for Birmingham Hodge Hill (the Parliamentary constituency within which Bromford is sited)
5. Series of articles for The Guardian online 'Comment is Free'
6. Interview of artist Mohammed Ali on Radio WM (27th March 2012)
<http://www.mixcloud.com/aerosolarabic/bbc-wm-interview-with-mohammed-ali-on-bromford-cube/>
7. Bromford Dreams feature in 'Buzz', University of Birmingham (April 2012)
8. Dr Chris Shannahan Workshop for student Ministers at Queens Ecumenical Theological Foundation (17th May 2012)
9. University of Birmingham Community Day workshop (10th June 2012)
10. Interview on Carl Chinn show Radio WM (10th June 2012)
11. Bromford Dreams seminar, Greenbelt Arts Festival (August 2012)
12. Follow up 'Bromford Dreamers' Music Project (summer 2012)

Finance

Income

£3,000	(Arts Council England)
£1,500	(University of Birmingham)
£800	(The Hub, Worth Unlimited)

Total Income

£5,300

Expenditure

£4,850	(Artist's fees) ¹
£450	(construction of Cube)

Total Expenditure

£5,300

Conclusion

As at the end of March 2012 the graffiti art of the young unemployed men from Bromford in east Birmingham has reached a far higher audience than anticipated. To date approximately 700,000 people have seen the Bromford Dreams cube on the Bromford estate, on the campus of the University of Birmingham, on BBC TV, heard about it on Radio WM or read about it in the Birmingham Mail newspaper. The Cube has also had an online presence since mid February 2012.

¹ Artists fees of £4,850 made up of £3,000 (artists fees x 2), £1,500 (material costs), £350 (23rd March workshop costs)

It is very difficult to estimate the size of this audience. More importantly than audience figures however the funding provided by Arts Council England, the University of Birmingham and the Worth Unlimited youth organisation has enabled the development of a creative public arts project which has given rise to a partnership between unemployed young men, the arts, the academy and grass roots youth work. As a result the 'Bromford Dreams' project often ignored or maligned young men have been given voice and presence.



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28th March 2012.