**My Future York: what are the process by which we can re-imagine York?**

Festival of Ideas, 17.6.18

I’m here to share the approaches to York and its future that I’ve developed with Phil Bixby as part of our collaboration as ‘My Future York’ through projects connected to York’s Castle Gateway area and the York Central development.

At the heart of My Future York is the belief that the re-imagination of any city is best approached as an open, collaborative and creative process of the people who live, work and spend time there. So the emphasis in what I’m going to say is less on **what** we reimagine than on **how** **we go about** reimagining York.

The way we have approached Re-imagining York is as a question of local democracy: and that **Re-imagining Cities also requires a re-imagination of what local democracy is and might be.**

Consultation has been perhaps the most damaging piece of ‘good intentions’ to be inflicted by public organisations and governments on themselves. People are asked to ‘have their say’ usually on proposals that have already been developed. The structure of the invitation appears to say that ‘you say, we do’. But everyone knows this can’t happen because of all the work and money and time that has already gone into the proposals. As a result it is assumed that the very invitation to ‘have your say’ is a fig leaf to a decision already made, behind closed doors.

**Through this dynamic so much is lost.** The chance is lost to develop the conversation, to enable people to see the issues through other people’s eyes, to draw on expertise of all kinds to create an inform understanding of complex issues and to share responsibility for change between people and government. It is ironic, of course, as the good intentions were otherwise. But I think we can now clearly say that the unintended consequences of consultation has been to increase cynicism in democracy.

It is by a very different kind of open conversation about the places in which we live that democracy itself might start to be renewed.

Renewing democracy sounds abstract and a bit theoretical. But meaningful ideas live and are made and remade in very practical and everyday actions and interactions.

To connect the ideas and the practice, I’ll draw out what very concrete everyday things Phil and I have been experimenting with in order to enable lots and lots of people to be involved in shaping their cities.

At the core of what we do is **build community-led briefs** for the area in question. In other words, starting the public conversation much, much earlier that the traditional consultation approach. That means facilitating a process of people working out what they want to **do** not what they want to be **built**. So the reimagining of the city **at** work in **our** work isn’t about buildings, it is rather about activity, relationships and values. It is after this brief has been articulated that it is time to openly work with design professionals to start shaping a response and testing it collaboratively.

Practically to start to building the brief the first thing we do is **open up the issues and design ways of working.** Westart by calling for questions from lots of different perspectives and identifying the fundamental concerns and challenges. We use these as a starting point to design a process which enables ideas to be explored and articulated, usually through lots of different types of events.

We then actively **Identify constituencies:** Every place or issue creates its own communities of proximity or interest. We find out who is interested, both by working actively with those that come forward and by pro-actively reaching out to those that don’t.

We **start with the personal** (hence the ‘my’ we use for our projects).In building the briefwe ask people specifically about what *they* **personally** would like to do in the future. This has two crucial advantages it avoids ideas being generated ‘on behalf of’ others and makes the fact that different people have different needs and ideas very visible.

Alongside the personal narrative we also **Build a ‘public sphere’ through collaborative inquiry:** That is, we seek tocultivate a grown up and sophisticated public debate about the issues through a shared sense of exploration. We embrace the people who are sometimes dismissed as the ‘usual suspects’ of community activism and make room for individuals with particular knowledge, viewpoint or experience to lead, contribute and provide resources for collective exploration, by co-producing events and media. We then write up these events so they all contribute to the overall inquiry.

We then make the ideas live and activeby **crossing boundaries and seeking connections** between issues and ideas in order to build more rich and integrated proposals, notice where there are blocks and sticking points and explore how they can be addressed… and very literally connect up people who could help move on the debate if they had a direct conversation.

We then draw out **community briefs for formal decision-making** byanalysing and structuring information to produce purposeful documents which can feed into formal decision-making.

Then we seek to **make change together** byusing the process above to build partnerships between community groups, informal networks, individuals and public agencies in order to enable change to be made in a collective and inclusive way.

This process figures **Local democracy** as a creative and fulfilling experience that brings people together. And that engagement in this process should be a default part of citizenship so that anyone who wants to play a part in shaping the future of the city can.

It figures local democracy **not** as a set of structures but **as an ongoing exploration.**

It figures **local democracy** as the means by which otherwise seemingly intractable issues can be addressed and that this actually **requires** lots of different people to be actively involved.

To conclude, I just want to highlight the b**enefits of this open approach in terms of re-imagining cities more generally and York in particular:**

* Many projects fail because their brief has been developed from a too narrow perspective, briefs are better when more people are involved so the fundamental issues can be articled.
* Consultation gives a limited snapshot of uninformed opinion and is therefore a weak basis for any decision-making, a very open discussion which builds sophisticated debate has the potential to create a context within which political leadership can take ambitious decisions.
* Consultation positions local people as, at best, the beneficiaries of actions taken by the council. This dynamic of public-agency-as-service-provider leads to moaning, negativity and blame being directed towards politicians and professionals alike. If we work more openly and identify specific challenges collaboratively we can also productively **share** the responsibility for moving forward.

As such Re-imagining Cities **means** Re-imagining local democracy **by** Re-imagining Citizenship. Citizenship, that is, not as a duty but as a great act of collaborative creativity… as well as an enormous pleasure.