

Open letter to Councillors of the City of Inverness Area Committee

My Ness / Gathering Place
31st July 2019

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Councillor Helen Carmichael, Provost and City Leader
Chair of the City of Inverness Area Committee
Highland Council
Townhouse,
Inverness, IV1 1JJ

Dear Councillors,

Over recent weeks some of the facts about the *My Ness / Gathering Place* project have been misrepresented or skewed. As the artist team who have been working on the project for two years and care deeply about fulfilling the vision of the Highland Council for all the people of Inverness, we would like to provide a true account of the course of events, the intentions and the design of the work itself.

It was a wonderfully thoughtful and ambitious brief set out by the Highland Council

“The brief for the artists is to re-connect the city with the river, drawing out its stories, engendering a sense of place and creating some access to the river. The artworks should provide spaces where both residents and visitors can linger, gather in small or larger groups, contemplate different views of the river and draw people along its banks.”

Rarely does a project of such civic potential happen in our cities, we have worked diligently to fulfil this brief.

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There has been suggestion that the project has been done in secret and people have not had the opportunity to share their views:

The engagement and consultation which took place in establishing the brief and throughout the development of the wider project *The River Ness Art Projects* was made available to our team at the outset, and gave valuable insight informing our approach.

Upon being commissioned one of the very first things we did was hold public launch of the project at Eden court on 22nd June 2017. We presented our approach, and inspiration, this was followed by a workshop with stakeholders to listen and learn about people's relationship to the River Ness, past and present.

We hosted a further two full day public event in the train station on 21st & 22nd October 2017, at which people were invited to share their thoughts, opinions and stories directly with the artist team and the client team. (By public request the film produced for this event of a flyover of the length of the River Ness was made available online with a selection of stories given by the public and has been available since October 2017. <https://www.myriverness.com/thefilm>

The project is indebted to the people who shared their knowledge, opinions and suggestions at these events, it was a challenging task to distil these conversations into one work, but it made all the difference directing the subject of the project, the location and the materials.

We presented the resulting concept to the public on 25th May 2018 at the Highland Archive Centre, to a packed room of stakeholders including Councillors, Community Councillors and anglers, and I think is fair to say the concept was warmly received. All these events were widely publicised prior and extensively reported in the press.

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Following approval to proceed we undertook detail design, planning, and tendering for construction. Throughout which neither the concept, nor materials have changed. We are delivering what was presented to the public in May 2018, whilst complying with all planning conditions.

2- The Material – stone

The inspiration for the material choice of the work is the buildings and monuments of Inverness, and so the surfaces that you see and touch will be stone, very similar to the stone of the Town House. Furthermore our preferred supplier, if quality and quantity can be assured, is from a quarry in Elgin. Because it is beautiful and local, this particular stone was also used in the creation of the National Museum of Scotland in Edinburgh, and as such feels befitting to the creation of a new public project in Inverness.

We utilise concrete only in the substructure where required.

The work is intentionally, light in touch, a thin ribbon of stone frames the Ness, starting as an access, becoming a path for children to walk along, a bench for reading a book, a viewing point up and down the river, a back rest for looking across. In its upstream portion it weaves through the trees and bushes to offer a unique view up the river or back to the castle and the cathedral. The diversity of interaction with the structure invites a wide range of possibilities for many users throughout the seasons. The circular nature of the piece is intersected by the river the creating a playful tension between both banks with the river at the heart.

My River Ness Proposal, presented publicly March 2018.

The work needs a certain solidity to withstand use and weather, but we have been careful to keep a low vertical presence, and work with the shape of the bank to not obstruct views, or dominate, the star of the show is rightly the river.

3- Wildlife, natural habitat & trees

This area of the river Ness is beautiful because of these things, we understand that. A great deal of care and attention has been taken by the team in thinking about how to bring people to a place with as minimal or no impact on wildlife, the natural habitats and trees.

The majority of the project is located on grassed areas, the short jetty has been designed to avoid and protect all trees designated as high value, and in accordance with planning conditions will have tree and root barrier protection throughout construction. There will be no impact or any protected species.

In the design and planning process, Scottish Natural Heritage, Scottish Environment Protection Agency, Historic Environment Scotland, the Forestry Officer, and the Flood Risk Management team have all been consulted, the project will be fully compliant with all requirements and recommendations under the care of these agencies.

4- The Intention

The work in many ways is a monument to the social and natural heritage of the river, which is so important to keep and protect. It is a space to celebrate the sense of place, to

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interact and to perhaps see the familiar anew, to enjoy the theatre of the river, in keeping with the brief we were tasked with.

5- Angling

For generations this location has been an important site of the Inverness Angling Club, this will not change. It is the artist team's opinion, and that of many of the people who shared theirs at the engagement events, that the anglers animate the river. They are custodians and informal ambassadors for one of the great assets of this city, the river. Although outside the scope of our commission our artist team developed concepts drawings for a new Angling Club hut at the site free of charge to the club. We very much hope to work with the Angling Club to make their vision a reality and continue to support and celebrate their presence on the river and its banks.

6- The budget

At times of financial struggle or political jostling, it's a good moment to reflect on why we invest time, energy and money in public art in our cities. People often forget why it's happening, or choose to try and spin their political agendas on the back of it. Essentially all arguments centre on value of one kind or another. There is a notion that artists are just interested in aesthetics, beauty and culture. These things matter and have value but this is not the whole picture.

Waste of money is often the first accusation. A work made in a place, as is the case for *My Ness*, is constructed with the expertise of local suppliers, materials, crafts people and contractors. It is usually the case that this makes the most economical sense, so the investment is directly returned to the local economy, supporting local businesses, which in turn invest in local suppliers and pay local taxes. So in a micro sense the majority of a budget is invested in the local economy. Cancel an art project and you cancel this local investment.

A large portion of the funding for projects of this nature has been attracted from the national government by a local Council. In Scotland, Creative Scotland distributes these national funds on the merit of an application from a Council. So if this funding were not brought to Inverness it would go to another city and Inverness would lose this investment in its own economy. It is not possible to spend this budget allocated to arts and culture nationally on any other need locally.

There is a cost yes. What is being made is unique, it's not off-the-shelf, it takes crafts people and quality materials to make a work that can be enjoyed for many years and to have the durability and life required to exist in public space. It is however being created as economically as possible, we can't be wasteful or flippant with the budget, we have to squeeze value out of every element of design so we can fulfill the ambitious goals of the brief. As the artists working on *My Ness*, I can assure you we have and continue to donate hundreds of hours for free to help make this project possible.

It is important to remember also that whilst the primary intention is to create a work for the people of Inverness, works of this nature also draws people from much further afield. In 2011, 10 million inbound visits to the UK involved engagement with the arts and culture, representing 32 per cent of all visits to the UK and 42 per cent of all inbound tourism-related expenditure (from *The contribution of the arts and culture to the national economy CEBR, 2013*). The economic value is not a hard one to argue, it is precisely why cities all over the world invest in public art. When we can leverage our Culture and Heritage for others to see, engage with and participate in, it is to our economic

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advantage. Which is especially true with this project, it says look at our outstanding natural heritage, rivers clean enough to fish in the heart of the city, it shouts about something no other city has. *My Ness* is a tool through which we can celebrate the qualities of our place.

Another important aspect of a project like *My Ness* is what doing projects like this says to others about a place, its vision and character. The strength and vibrancy of a city comes from more than just being an economic machine of course.

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Fear of change is a real thing for all of us.

Generally nobody really likes change, it stokes up fear that things people value will be lost. We are not cavalier about this at all. People's love and care for this place has and is at the heart of this project, which will continue to be undertaken with great care and sensitivity for the environment, people's opinions and the reputation of the city.

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And lastly the team, Tristan and Charles (Sans façon) and Karsten and Bernd (OSA).

We have spent 18 years as artists making work in the public realm, we have been fortunate to have the opportunity to work in many different places and contexts. We do this work not to get rich—you really don't—, not to get famous—this rarely happens, there are much quicker ways to gain notoriety— but because it is a privilege to learn about the unique qualities of a place and create a work which can be celebrated and enjoyed by its community for generations, a catalyst for new discoveries, relationships and engagement with a city and with each other, this is what we enjoy and care about.

As always please feel free to contact us directly with any questions at anytime (tristan@sansfacon.org), we remain passionately committed to realising this work for the city of Inverness.

Yours sincerely,



Tristan Surtees



Charles Blanc



Karsten Huneck



Bernd Truempler

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Illustrations of *My Ness*, 2018

