

ARTISTIC AND QUALITY ASSESSMENT FORM

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Not all sections of the form will be applicable to all activities. The questions under each heading are there as prompts – there is no need to answer them if they are not relevant or do not add any value to the assessment.

Name of Assessor:	Rita McLean
Organisation being assessed:	Preston City Council
Title of activity:	Beautiful and Brutal: 50 Years in the Life of Preston Bus Station
Date: <i>(if relevant)</i>	14.11.19
Venue: <i>(if relevant)</i>	Harris Museum, Art Gallery & Library
Time: <i>(if relevant)</i>	

Context

Please give details of the context you bring to this assessment. For example, your familiarity with the organisation's work, the work being assessed or the artists/practitioners involved. How familiar are you with the style/genre/sub-artform/discipline? Are you familiar with the venue/museum or is it your first visit?

I had not visited the Harris Museum & Art Gallery before so only had general rather than first-hand knowledge of the museum and art gallery's collections and programming.

I had general knowledge of Preston Bus Station from architectural and media reports/perspectives, in relation to the past public debates and campaigns to list and preserve the building.

I have visited numerous exhibitions with a focus on architecture and social history across the UK and internationally over many years. I have also staged, as part of museum professional roles, as well as assessed a number of local and social history exhibitions.

1. The Vision and Concept of the work

Concept: Did you think it was an interesting idea?

a) Consider what was interesting about the concept and vision of the work and why. Was there a strong idea behind the work? If you didn't think the concept and vision was interesting, consider why.

As Preston Bus Station is such an iconic piece of modern architecture and has figured in the media in recent years in relation to its threatened demolition then rescue, I felt it was a strong idea to stage an exhibition about the building during its 50th anniversary year.

Publicity information about the exhibition describing it as bringing together archival and design material related to its development, objects associated with the building, the stories of people who used or were associated with it, its role in the city sounded an interesting concept and approach.

Relevance: Did it have something to say about the world we live in

b) Consider whether the work represents or explores issues which are relevant and important to society and why. If you didn't think the work had something relevant to say, consider why. Does the work reflect the diversity of contemporary society? Is the work relevant to the audiences and/or participants, and why?

Local Impact: Was it important it was happening here

c) Consider whether the themes, production or presentation of the work had a connection with the place (locality or specific venue) in which it was presented and why. What difference did this make to the experience of the work? If you didn't think the work had a strong local impact, consider why.

1 b&c:

In adopting a multi-dimensional approach to portraying the story of Preston Bus Station, the exhibition explored many issues relevant to society. Public attitudes towards postwar architecture and public space, conservation versus regeneration/change, public campaigning, forming pressure groups, insights into architectural design processes - were all strands of the exhibition narratives relevant to contemporary society.

The exhibition was highly relevant to local audiences given the building's dominance in central Preston and its use by many local people. It also encompassed many narratives of local people associated with the building in a range of ways – those involved in its design and construction as well as those who had worked in the building or used the bus services. The exhibition also interestingly showcased the stories and experiences of campaigners who fought for its preservation.

2. Execution, Production and Presentation

Rigour: was it well thought through and put together

a) Consider whether the work had been fully thought through and executed to a high standard and why? If the aims for the work are clearly stated in publicity material or accompanying programmes etc, were they achieved? If you didn't think the work was well thought through and put together, consider why.

Beautiful and Brutal: 50 Years in the Life of Preston Bus Station had been well thought through and put together in terms of bringing together content which interpreted the social as well as architectural history of the building and through also encompassing contemporary artists' responses.

The exhibition was described in explanatory material as being 'embedded into the whole of the Harris'. This was certainly the case as various elements were imaginatively shown in a range of areas and galleries. A ticket kiosk produced by the company who made the first kiosks for the bus station in 1969 was displayed in the entrance space; films by Preston artists and makers about the bus station as well as tables and seating from the original bus station cafe were shown displayed in the museum's cafe. Display cases of bus station-related objects, video portraits of people talking about their various associations with and experiences of the bus station, newly commissioned photographs and contemporary artworks were situated in a number of different locations across all floors of the museum and art gallery. The physical design, construction and fit-out of the bus station was mapped out through displays of design drawings, photographs and objects in a run of galleries on the top floor.

The locations of the various exhibits were shown in a useful floor plan which also provided information on the various exhibition elements and partner organisations involved.

Presentation: Was it well produced and presented

b) Consider the quality of the production/ presentation standards? Lighting, sound, use of space, overall layout/hang, graphic design,

'interpretive design; use of digital technologies etc? Was the venue or space appropriate for the work programmed? Were appropriate materials used?

The quality of the production and presentation standards e.g., gallery and showcase lay-outs, the graphic text panels and labels were good. The displays were generally well-lit. Although the video portraits were a strong dimension to the exhibition and had interesting content, these films felt too long to be engaging for visitors particularly as most were located where visitors needed to stand to view and listen. Presenting shorter, sharper edits of the interviews in the gallery settings (and perhaps giving access to full length interviews, via another means) might have been a better approach. The lead length of the headphones for the Andrew Lloyd film was too short, meaning you had to stand too close to the screen for comfortable viewing of what was an interesting narrative. I did not observe many visitors watching the video portraits during my visit.

The venue was appropriate for the work, and as noted above - the exhibition figured imaginatively in different parts of the museum and art gallery.

3. Originality, Innovation and Risk Taking

Distinctiveness: Was it different from things you've seen before

- a)** *Consider whether the work as a whole, or elements of the work, were distinctive and different from things you have experienced before within the artform. If it was a revival of an existing work were there distinctive elements about this production or exhibition? Could the work have been more distinctive? If so, consider why.*

Originality: Was it ground breaking

- b)** *Consider whether the work broke new ground for the artform. Think about scale and ambition, use of technology, interdisciplinary working etc. If it was a revival of an existing work, was the work shown in a fresh context or from a new perspective? Could the work have been more original? If so, consider why.*

3a&b

The exhibition was distinctive in terms of subject matter and the multi-dimensional way '50 years in the life of Preston Bus Station' was portrayed and celebrated. It was ambitious in scale – number of exhibits, themes and narratives, artists, creative practitioners, academic, community involvement. It was an original approach to depicting and interpreting the life and times of a local institution.

Risk: Did the artists/curators/museums/performers really challenge themselves

c) *Consider whether the work has taken risks in its concept and delivery and why? How successful was this? If you know the artists'/curators/museums, work, does this piece show them exploring new techniques or subject matter? Could the work have shown a greater appetite for risk taking? If so, consider why.*

I envisage the exhibition curators will have faced risks in co-ordinating and delivering such a multi-faceted exhibition with so many content strands and contributors. I felt, aside from the minor provisos mentioned in 2b above, it was executed successfully.

Excellence: was this work one of the best examples of its type that you have seen

d) *Consider the overall quality of the work, how this compares to similar things you have experienced and why. Does the work make a positive contribution to the development of the discipline? If not, consider why?*

As a whole, *Beautiful and Brutal* was a high quality approach to interpreting for local people, non-specialists and specialists interested in 20th century architecture and design a rich examination and portrayal of what has become recognised as an iconic building.

It contributed to demonstrating the value of inter-disciplinary working, partnership working, artist and community engagement in creating exhibitions.

4. The Impact of the work

Captivation: Was it absorbing? Did it hold your attention

a) *Consider how deeply you were absorbed in the work and why? Did it communicate successfully to you? What impact did it have on you? How did it make you feel? If the work wasn't captivating, why not?*

Challenge: Was it thought provoking

b) *Consider whether the work made you think differently and why. Did it give you a fresh or different perspective on its topics? Did it challenge how you thought about its topics? Did it make you think about wider issues? Could the work have been more challenging? If so, why?*

4a&b:

I found this an interesting exhibition. In particular the insights it gave into the design approaches and practice of Building Design Partnership in creating Preston Bus Station. I also appreciated seeing the contemporary art works shown – *Conductor, 8 Movements* by Keith Harrison was an absorbing and in my view, a 'stand out' work.

Enthusiasm: Would you see something like it again

- c) Consider whether you would choose to see similar work in the future, under what circumstances and why? If not, please explain*

Yes, in terms of seeing a similar approach to exploring the themes of historical/contemporary/architectural/design while also encompassing a people-focused interpretation of a public building.

5. The programming or curating of the work

- a) How does the work sit within the organisation's overall programme or catalogue and next to work created/presented/curated or published by others?*

The exhibition seemed to sit well/be complementary to the Harris' permanent gallery displays, as well as its varied temporary exhibition and contemporary art programming.

- b) For programmed work assessments only, please comment on the overall vision of the programmer, choice of material. You are welcome to provide an overview of partners involved in the programme*

n/a

6. Audiences & Engagement

- a) If you experienced the work in the presence of other people, how did they react? Was the work intellectually accessible to the intended audience? How long did you spend looking at the exhibition/watching the performance? How many people experienced the work during that time? Any other observations about their engagement with the work? If the work is written, how do you think other readers will engage with it? Is its presentation appropriate for the intended audience?*

As *Beautiful and Brutal: 50 Years in the Life of Preston Bus Station* was situated in different locations within the museum and art gallery it was difficult to gauge the numbers and reactions of other people viewing the work. I did observe other visitors in gallery spaces where elements of the exhibition were shown, but witnessed no particular reactions to seeing the material. I spent over 2.5 hours in the exhibition displays. I would judge that it will have been intellectually accessible to different audiences/to different degrees in relation to the differing dimensions.

b) *Was accompanying marketing and engagement material appropriate and good quality? Was the work well explained on the organisations website? Did social media conversation add to the experience? How did audiences react to the work online? Did the work generate interesting audience conversation on social media?*

Marketing and engagement material (online and printed) was appropriate and explained the exhibition well.

Comments on twitter included: 'Fascinating. Interesting to see how a building has fallen in and out of favour'; positive references to talks given related to the exhibition and seeing the exhibition; ' great to see an exhibition integrated throughout the building' and many other positive comments.

7. Customer care

How good and appropriate was the customer care that you experienced or observed? Areas you might want to comment on are: access, attitude of staff; ACE logo visibility, signage, cleanliness, catering facilities, etc. Was the space appropriate? E.g. Heating, lighting, written material?

Customer care in terms of visitor reception and explaining where and how to see the exhibition was good. Staff were friendly. ACE logo was visible, the site was clean, signage appropriate.

The cafe experience was mediocre. Food choices fairly uninspiring, packaged sandwiches had no descriptive labels to say what they were, I had to ask. The behind the counter area visible was very untidy and did not give a good impression. Staff fairly efficient but not seeming very customer-attuned/engaging. Having said this, the cafe was very busy/clearly popular.

8. Are there any other aspects that you wish to comment on?

9. Select up to three of the following statements that you feel best describe the work you have experienced

Concept: *it was an interesting idea*

Local impact: *it is important that it's happening here*

Relevance: *it has something to say about the world in which we live*