

Power to the People

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Involving ethnic minorities in environmental participation means working openly, creatively and innovatively to build trust and confidence. This often releases the particular contribution minority groups can make to society. The work of the Black Environment Network accentuates the multicultural context. This goes beyond engaging with the cultures of local ethnic communities. It means:

- recognising that all cultures are multicultural because each has incorporated multicultural elements over time. All cultures are linked to many others but each is nevertheless a unique combination of multicultural elements.
- maintaining an open attitude to other cultures - all cultures express aspects of our common human potential. Contact with other cultural visions can inspire us to find new solutions in our contemporary lives.

Black Environment Network's work with ethnic communities is built on its proposal that "There is no such thing as a pure environmental project. A so-called pure environmental project is one which has rejected its social, cultural and economic context." The BEN Network aims to nurture confidence in ethnic minority communities to enable them to engage in new activities. It introduces new areas of endeavour and promotes inspiring examples of good practice. Community groups are thus connected to information, expertise, funding and opportunities to develop projects. Landscape and building design are rising up the BEN agenda as target themes for development.

Multi-ethnic community groups within BEN have created sacred spaces, drawing on the cultures of their countries of origin and beyond. The following three schemes illustrate the connection to rich veins of knowledge, cultural visions and life experience, so often poignantly marked by rejection and the historical displacement of people. Remarkable efforts are made to create projects which contribute to the richness of society by giving a platform to the creation of understanding between different faiths and cultures, sharing meaning and working for peace.

The Medicine Wheel, Milton Keynes, Buckinghamshire

The Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel in Milton Keynes was initiated by Roy Littlejohn (the adopted son of Native American Hope elder Titus Qomayumptewa) to mark the millennium. Part of a movement to promote world peace, the Wheel is non-denominational and used as a meeting place for people of all faiths and none.

A group of volunteers from different cultures, traditions and religions formed to co-ordinate and assist in building the wheel. They approached the Milton Keynes Parks Trust - next to the first peace pagoda to have been built in the west. MKPT was enthusiastic but stipulated that detailed plans must be drawn up. At that point the group commissioned landscape architect Neil Higson to draw up plans from the first small sketch by Littlejohn. He suggested moving the site nearer to the lake, still on MKPT land. Higson had already designed a labyrinth and a tree cathedral near the Peace Pagoda so this scheme fitted in well. In addition to presenting designs for the site, Higson was also responsible for ensuring that the standing stones were securely bedded into the ground, meeting local health and safety requirements.

Higson's involvement eased fund raising for the necessary £10,000. MKPT funded part of the scheme, with other funds coming from English Partnerships and landfill money. The scheme forms part of this year's MKPT Green Flag submission.

The Medicine Wheel is sited on open parkland used by the public. It has access for wheelchair users as the design incorporates flat stones within two circles for people to enter the inner circle where the fire is lit.

The Medicine Wheel consists of 108 stones positioned in a cross within a circle. There are four large gateways on the outer circle which represent the four compass points, the four seasons, the four stages of life (birth, adolescence, adulthood and elders), four races (yellow, black, red and white), 26 and four elements (earth, air, fire and water). Two lesser gateways are aligned along an energy line and a single flat stone to the southeast of the east gate is known as the Africa Stone - linking Milton Keynes with the Kalahari Bush people who have built a Circle of Hearts Medicine Wheel in the Kalahari desert. The local limestone used came from the village of West Underwood, where 12 years earlier Native Chiefs from the Onondaga tribe in North America spent time praying and smoking their sacred pipe for peace.

The outer and inner circles of the wheel symbolise our outer and inner worlds, the universe and humanity within it. In the centre the sacred fire represents the sacred spirit in all things, all places, all people and all time.

*To visit The Medicine Wheel or use the sacred space, contact the wheel trustees
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Balaji Temple Complex - Tividale, Black Country

The Balaji Temple Project shows that given the right support, and connections to resources and expertise, ethnic minority community groups can take on large enduring projects. The project started with the desire for having a small temple of their own, for the Lord Venkateswara (Balaji). The estimated costs have risen to £10million and continues to grow. The Temple is destined to be the largest South Indian style temple in the Northern Hemisphere. They already have visitors from Europe and expect more from all over the world. It is now a working temple, although many aspects are still in progress.

The temple sits on a 5ha landfill site. The community had been looking for a suitable site for some time before managing to purchase this site from the Black Country Development Corporation, in the early 1990s. This is a national temple so the fact that the site has good transport links made it attractive. However, the temple is required to sit on pure land - fit for its devotional purpose - so the group had to satisfy themselves that the regulatory actions of the Environment Agency for landfill had fulfilled this aspect. Then, before construction began, the site needed to be blessed in a ceremony called "boomi pooja".

Former landscape architect Tony Thapar is one of the volunteers who were approached by the committee to help on the project. "Initially the plan was only to build the temple," he explains. "But, in common with all landscape architects, I tried to push landscape up the agenda. The National Urban Forestry Unit had already planted a number of alders on the site to see how they would grow and we have kept them. Initially we were just involved in getting the site tidied up, but we were able to go on from there to use the landscape as a tool in community development work. There were some negative reactions to the temple in the early days but we have been able to use community involvement in the landscape as a healing tool. " Despite the history of intimidation, the group is determined to never build a fence. The grounds, the woodlands surrounding the temple, and the temple are permanently open to everyone.

Much of the sacred land surrounding the temple has been planted with newly planted native trees, and there are plans to plant exotic trees sent by Hindu devotees from all over Britain. "There is enthusiasm

to see exotic ferns from South India”, says Thapar, “But obviously the climate is not right. We may look at building some walls to offer some shelter to the exotics.”

Members of the Balaji Project are aware that this combination of native and exotic plants is symbolically about who they are, especially for the young people:” We are British and we have a special relationship to the country from which our ancestors came”.

The soil dug out for the laying of foundations is slowly being shaped into the traditional seven hills of pilgrimage. The Hindus conceptually see the world as Vanavaibhava - “ the forest from which we came and where we find our identity. Hindus believe that the lives of human beings damage the earth and that we have a continuing responsibility to heal the earth. That is why we want to do conservation work, and we want to be shown how to do it well.”

The group has spent some years attending to the initial building of the temple and the development of its grounds. They are now turning their attention to the construction of community buildings in the grounds and to the development of programmes of activities for the Hindu community and the community at large. They aim to offer a meeting place, a landmark of beauty and a recreational facility in the region to be proud of, local employment and trade, and a base for voluntary work. Eventually there may be a library and facilities for study and research.

Overall the Temple complex of buildings and natural spaces aims to be a centre of music, arts, philosophy, scriptural learning as well as a place of worship. They hope to impart their traditions to their children, as well as to be a gift to generations to come. Everyone is welcome to join in their vision.

“When everything is done by fundraising, you have to be flexible in approach,” says Thapar. “It’s no use having a masterplan and sticking to it. All the work is voluntary and although much has been achieved, it’s still early days. It’s constantly evolving.”

To visit the temple and site or for more information, see the website www.venkateswara.org.uk

A Forest of Memory. Cashel Forest. Scotland

As part of its Ethnic Environmental Participation project, which covered Edinburgh and Glasgow, BEN reached out to refugees and asylum seekers to open up existing programmes of environmental activities to benefit the lives of ethnic minorities. BEN designed a programme of free activities for their enjoyment, including workshops at the Edinburgh Botanic Gardens and visits to the countryside. These took people away from bleak surroundings and lives that were without a focus, rife with frustration and boredom. Over time, a sympathetic relationship of trust was formed. They knew that BEN had no ulterior motive but to benefit their lives. One day, a group came to us and said, “Scotland has been kind to us through you, what can we do to give something back ?” BEN then went on to design another series of activities, introducing them to a range of things to do to care for and protect nature so that they can decide what they would like to do. They gravitated to tree planting.

However, because of the richly human context in which BEN works, they did not just focus on doing good to nature. They remained open to their own needs and impulses, and to the expression of their wishes and ideas. They proposed that every tree they planted should be dedicated to someone they had lost or someone who they have left behind. Each person also designed their own ceremony to dedicate the tree, drawing on religious, cultural and spiritual sources. They regularly return to visit and care for their trees in this place which has become sacred to them.

BEN worked with the Scottish Refugee Council and BTCV on the project. BTCV has copper-tagged each tree and logged them in its computer. The "Forest of Memory" is part of "Cashel Forest for a Thousand Years", on a mountain overlooking Loch Lomond - one of many Millennium Forest for Scotland projects.

As a result of the vision of the refugees and asylum seekers, this is not just a forest for the future. It is a forest of memory and a marker of the contemporary history of civil strife, war, oppression that we are all living through.

*This project has now been handed over to BTCV Scotland. For more information, contact:
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