

Dyffryn Dyfodol Project Strand Review: *Rhodfa Phil Evans* (by Kristian Evans)

Even though I've been asked to review just one strand of the project, I feel it's important to make an initial comment on the overall ethos of it. I was struck by how transparent and open to unexpected and unconventional ideas, practices, and sources of inspiration everybody involved has been. It's tremendously refreshing and is clearly an important aspect of the project. Increasingly, we seem to be in a sort of cultural double bind – attempting to use tired old methods to get new results, to escape from a sense of impasse, and making no new progress – a “damned if you do, damned if you don't” situation. A glance at our society's attempts to deal with the ecological crisis, for example, reveals a culture unable to make any deeply relevant changes for fear of upsetting economic imperatives – and yet not making those deep changes will eventually inevitably prove ruinous.

This double-bind seems to be everywhere, reflective perhaps of a culture in crisis. Reviewing the approach embraced by Dyffryn Dyfodol however, I found myself encouraged and enthused. There seems to be a real chance for new ideas to emerge from such a transparent and open ethos.

These thoughts were on my mind and came to seem particularly relevant as I reviewed the documents of my chosen project, the work associated with “Strand 7: *Rhodfa Phil Evans* (formerly *Glanrafon*).”

Community engagement and involvement seems to me a vital aspect of any new developments; hopefully fostering a sense of ownership, togetherness, and civic engagement. It's all too common for people to feel alienated from where they live, and to feel divorced from decision making processes that affect them. Reaching out to people directly, inviting them to get involved, rather than expecting them to turn up to often poorly advertised public meetings, or to submit letters to consultations, seems an important step forward. Meeting people where they are, and engaging in creative ways of communication, likewise seems vital. Too often people are expected to speak what amounts to a foreign language when engaging with developers and decision makers: the language of capital and investment, the language of the board room.

It's also important to note that issues of language use can be particularly acute where there are multiple languages spoken in the community. There's certainly lots of scope for well-briefed artists to facilitate discussion here, it seems to me.

The goals outlined in the “*Glanrafon* (internal plans)” document seem to me to be conscious of these issues and to make good use of the available budget, as do the principles and ways of working. It's encouraging that *Cartrefi Conwy* were open-minded enough to embrace this creative approach to development and were willing to work with the community and fund some community projects.

From the information available to review however, it appears that there were numerous disappointments. It would be interesting to hear what lessons have been learned by *Cartrefi Conwy* and *Dyffryn Dyfodol*. It seems that the representative from *Natural Resources Wales* was surprised and inspired by the approach and would be willing to try again.

Were the failings of the project avoidable? How might things be done differently to avoid such projects being exposed to the problems that were encountered? From the available evidence it seems that many of the problems can be traced back to the construction company, which seems to have been in a precarious financial situation. From information available online it seems that residents are still waiting for promised features, such as the park, to be completed (as of Feb 2023).

Ultimately, I found myself reflecting on the concept of “social infrastructure” – that is, spaces provided for people from all walks of life to come together and discuss and explore local matters in a safe, creative, and non-judgemental way. Such social infrastructure can be as simple as a comfortable room set aside for parents to gather in and chat while they wait for their children to finish school, to the more complex and structured, such as the gatherings facilitated by Dyffryn Dyfodol as part of this project.

I was left wondering what a carefully trained cadre of artists could facilitate in this direction. A project that trained such artists and made them available to create such “social infrastructure” might help all of us to recognise that society is not organised from the top down, but rather our politics, our societies, our sense of what is possible, develops along with our infrastructure, and our chosen ways of working. What’s clear is that the old ways, which dreamed of inevitable progress built on use of unlimited fossil fuels, are passing away. What comes next is up to us – but it seems obvious that it won’t be business as usual. It will involve new ways of thinking, working, and valuing the world and each other. I began to get thought-provoking glimpses of it while reviewing the work of Dyffryn Dyfodol.