BOURNEMOUTH’S STREET-ART TAKEOVER

The Green Man - This piece of art by Krishna Malla in Chaplin’s Bar was one of the first commissioned pieces in Boscombe.

Bournemouth’s urban change sees them as the new gallery for stand-out street-art.

BY LIAM BALDOCK
PHOTOS BY LIAM BALDOCK
On a bright day on Lansdowne Road, there are a handful of tourists shadowed by a vibrant, modest house side – 50 feet in height. Whilst hundreds are seaside, some are here, patiently shuffling between themselves to take the perfect spot. Occasionally, a camera flash would add to the sparkle, as murmurs overplay the passing cars. On the wall, a mural reading “Bournemouth – a history of shaping the future”. Innovatively graphitised onto a coloured pallet of creative landmarks Bournemouth can boast of, Rick Walker’s street-art stands out amongst this once non-progressive town.

“We want them to come to Bournemouth and think ‘ah this is cool, this is what Bournemouth do’ and this is the direction we are heading” Walker, who wore a shoddy hoodie, with paint marks like a canvas, expressed. Thirty-five years ago, Walker visited England’s daintiness and traditional sea-side town with his grandparents, but he has now returned to an urban community grafting hard to reach the pinnacle of street-art. He is not the first to put his work on a 15 x 1m local building, but he is the artist spearheading Bournemouth’s urban advert for its historically creative community.

Street-art was pioneered in the United Kingdom by teens in the 1980’s, a time when hip-hop music and break-dancing soared high as the national phenomenon. Tagging walls in Bristol and London seemed the norm in that day, but a break-through wasn’t seen in Dorset until Boscombe took to the stage.

It was Krishna Malla, and it was 2014. Malla never saw things as 34 years too late, but he saw it as time for a start in an evolving town crying out for some modernism. “There was always a strong hip-hop community here, but it became unfashionable for a long time. Now kids are starting to think ‘ah graffiti is cool’ and there’s a new energy coming through.” Malla said this was his inspiration for the wall-art ‘The Green Man’ in Boscombe’s Chaplin’s Bar, one of the first commissioned pieces painted to bring a run-down area a stroke of light. Backing onto Rumelia Lane, this forgotten, dingy street holds a hidden portfolio of Malla’s early work. This was the council’s first project, experimenting in the shadows of the high street before making the jump. It was baby steps in the beginning, showing a forgotten town with hanging on outcasts they can paint the walls of their town for urban promotion.

The thing that held Bournemouth back from emerging as a street-art competitor to other painted towns was the council and their overriding lust for protecting their clean community. With street-art comes graffiti, and reporting it to the Bournemouth Borough Council comes a £100 reward. Since 2013, Southbourne has been the hotspot for illegal graffiti, with it being the one area in Bournemouth’s sphere yet to emerge with commissioned work, but artist Walker believes “graffiti is always going to happen, it’s the biggest art movement the world’s ever seen.”

Batting with the council is something Bankoy never imagined he’d have to do in the street-art capital of Bristol. Instead, he’s a wanted man showcasing his work as Bristol’s biggest tourist attraction. In the smaller leagues, Bournemouth finally have their foot in the door through Rick Walker’s latest mural. Painted in February 2016, Bournemouth’s biggest wall-art to date was the third in a three-piece scheme around the UK, inspired by the consumer education initiative Get It Right, also featuring in street-art hotspots Birmingham and Cardiff.

The street-work, painted to celebrate Bournemouth’s creative industries, features Robert Louis Stevenson’s eponymous characters Jekyll and Hyde and world champion breakdance crew Second to None. Whilst there is delight in the recognition of these figureheads from Bournemouth’s artistic past, the main enchantment comes straight from the council. “This mural was the key in the ignition because the council took a big gamble and backed it. Their foot is in the door now, so they can’t pull out. If we can do one, why can’t we do more” said Walker.

Getting ahead of themselves is something a local council won’t do, but attaching themselves to a successful project is not abnormal, shown valiantly through Walker’s mural. Street-art is a luring risk the Bournemouth council are taking, but let’s not underestimate the influence of the vibrant community in which it is surrounded by. “In comparison to London, Bristol and Brighton it’s clean here. We’re not just colouring in a shit hole, we are painting with thought and intent” Walker concluded.

It’s now time for Bournemouth to make a leap that no one really saw them making a mere year ago. Upfest is no stranger to those involved in the industry, Britain’s largest street-art festival mixing the most creative artists at a convention in Bristol. It’s not quite Upfest yet, but there’s a huge support growing in the Dorset town, aided by the Bournemouth Emerging Arts Fringe – Bournemouth’s largest arts festival who promote what they believe as “a strong, vibrant movement that has a place in any environment we work in.”

Alongside B-E-A-F, promotion is coming from an original source. Krishna Malla has himself to thank for getting the wheels spinning for street-art becoming appreciated in Bournemouth. Malla has introduced the art battle, Secret Walls, to Bournemouth, and one that is competed in across Europe’s elite. With 16,769 followers on Facebook, Malla wishes for Bournemouth “to push artists into the public domain and show support of what they do.” His scheme alone has built the ladder they need to climb and with figures like Malla, SOAP and Walker in and around the spray-painting scene “it’s leading to more work and larger commissions coming into the community in order for us to compete.”

Blackpool and Margate are two locations about to paint their town with new colour and energy, but the focus is purely on Bournemouth. When Malla was asked about his former work places London, Bristol and Birmingham, he replied: “I couldn’t name another place I’ve worked that has shown such a fast growing appreciation to good street art.” Bournemouth’s future proposal is different to the other big-dogs. Rick Walker confidently assured me “this time next year we will be sat here and leading in a different way to other street-art towns. You can come back here and get an even better piece.”