

Artist 'Bewildered' by Sculpture Debacle

by Darinagh Boyle

Six years after it was commissioned in a blaze of publicity, a sculpture honouring the contribution female factory workers made to this city - is gathering dust in storage, where it is likely to remain for at least a further 18 months.

Following an extensive advertising and tendering campaign by the Department of Social Development, the commission was awarded to artist Louise Walsh in January 2006.

The public art work, funded by public monies, was originally designed for a gateway site at the King Street roundabout close to the former Ebrington Barracks.

However, the project has been mired in delays and confusion - including the decision to abandon the designated location in favour of another site.

According to a council spokesperson the logjam is "due to major ongoing development and improvement works in the city".

But it has also emerged that planning permission had not been approved on either site - although the artist was instructed to continue with her work.

Advised of the new site requirements, Walsh adapted the work, at further expense, for its new home identified as Harbour Square [known locally as the back of the Guildhall].

Following landscaping and redesign plans of the area, the art work now incorporates a stage and amphitheatre with stepped seating fashioned into a 'shirt collar' structure as well as a giant wheel and wrought ironwork in the style of the iconic Singer sewing machine.

But despite the fact that the main parts of this composite sculpture are complete and in storage ready for assembly - the delays do not end there.

Derry City Council insists the public art project has not been canned - claiming that "subject to planning approval" the work will be located in Harbour Square.

But neither council nor DSD have set out a clear timeframe for the erection of the sculpture.

For the artist who was commissioned to create the monument and

who has invested years of work, effort and resources in it - it has been a long wait, with as yet no end in sight.

Local Women contacted Walsh, who is clearly bewildered and distressed by the vacuum.

"I have been trying to find out what is going on," she said.

"My finished proposal for the Harbour Square was interrupted before I was able to sign off on it. It has not been signed off by me regarding any planning proposal. I have received some monies for part of the project but have not been paid for all the work to date. I stress I remain committed to completing this work to honour these women and their city. I would welcome contact and communication that would enable me to do so."

It is understood Walsh undertook in-depth consultations with former shirt factory workers and members of their immediate families to inform her creative intelligence.

Local Women has spoken to a number of those contributors who are bitterly disappointed that the much-anticipated sculpture has remained shrouded in secrecy.

We also contacted DSD for comment on a number of queries but no reply was received except to state that the matter was in the hands

of Derry City Council.

'Committed'

The statement from council reads in full: "The Factory Girls Sculpture Project is temporarily on hold for an estimated 18 month period pending the completion of the current Guildhall Restoration project.

"The project was subject to a number of delays due to major ongoing development and improvement works in the city.

"Subject to planning approval, the sculpture will be located at Harbour Square. To date the only costs incurred of the £100,000 budget is £60,000.

"The Council is committed to the project and believes the sculpture will be a fitting tribute to the important role played by female factory workers in this city and will complement the new Peace Bridge and Mute Meadow art piece unveiled at the weekend."

I have been trying to find out what is going on...

Pressure mounts to erect Factory Workers Sculpture

Former shirt factory worker Gretta Matthews from Tullyally, who worked in Welch Margetson and the City Factory

The contribution the women in the factories made to Londonderry should be recognised. I remember all the fuss about the sculpture at the time, it gave the factory workers a sense of pride, and I was very disappointed that it never went ahead. When you think about what the women did - they were the soul of the city.

There was no work for the men in those days



and the women were the breadwinners, they supported the family. One of the best things about the factories was that the two communities mixed in the workplace. In my opinion, the character went out of Londonderry when the factories left.

'Their contribution should never be forgotten'

Joan Kee worked in Kellys in Abercorn Road before moving to Cerdic. She later moved to Ben Sherman where she worked as a manageress. When she left to have her first child, she was replaced by the former Civil Rights veteran Ivan Cooper.

What stands out for me was the skill of the Derry shirt factory women. The shirts they produced were world renowned in terms of their quality. The work was hard because the shirts had to be made to absolute perfection, every measurement had to be exact and the women were quite rightly proud of their work.

That didn't mean we didn't have fun - one of my most vivid memories is the singing as the girls and women got on with their work.

If work was slack in one factory, you went into another. Everyone walked to work or got the bus - if you'd the money for it. At lunchtime and teatime you'd have seen hundreds of girls linked on to each other as they walked home.

There weren't the benefits available then, that are available now - so you had to work.

The girls were principled, they collected for charity regularly, for places like Muckamore House, even though money was tight and a half a crown was a good bit then. And it wasn't easy for women rearing a family and working out.

You really did earn your wages and your parents would have wished for better for you, but on the plus side, you were almost guaranteed a job in the factory.

Girls of both religions mixed in the factories, I can honestly say I never had a bad word with any of the women I worked with. They were the salt of the earth in my opinion.

It's so sad to see Tillie and Henderson demolished and Ben Sherman and Hamilton derelict - there really should be a museum to the Derry factory workers, after all it's a huge part of the city's heritage.

I've always been very proud to say that I worked in the factory and the contribution these working class women made to Derry should never be forgotten.

Where is it?

Asks Inez McCormack, acclaimed women's, human and labour rights activist, who is now living in Derry. Inez was recently included in the Newsweek honour list of 150 women who 'Shake the World'. The role of her life was played by Meryl Streep in a documentary play in New York last year.



Inez McCormack

Six years ago an artist was commissioned through a public process to produce a sculpture for a public space to celebrate the history of women factory workers who lived and worked in this city. These were the women who held the city together in the worst of times. They built the history of social community that is the foundation to shape new times.

So - "Where is it?"

Over seventeen years ago I was asked to unveil a sculpture in Belfast by the same artist. You can find it by getting the bus to Belfast and walking through the shopping arcade to Great Victoria Street. The powerful and extraordinary sculpture is titled 'Monument to an Unknown Women Worker'. It is in the bustling centre of Belfast for all to see.

I remember women from all traditions came to the unveiling to celebrate what their mothers and grandmothers had given to their families, their communities and least of all to themselves. It was an opportunity to honour the stoicism of lives lived in the shadows so that their children could come into the sun.

When I moved to this city a few

years ago I remember feeling excited and pleased when I heard that a sculpture had been commissioned here to honour factory women. I heard that Louise Walsh, the artist was doing what she had done in Belfast. That was to shape her vision by meeting with, listening to and recording the memories and views of many women who had worked in factories and those of their daughters and sons. Her intention was that the sculpture would be the catalyst for a living oral history archive. This could then spark dreams and discussions of a future built on dignity and right.

Her gift is in her ability to transform a vision that resonated from those memories and discussions into girders and steel constructed into a sculpture sited in a central public space. -

So where is it?

Apparently, it was initially to go on a roundabout in the Waterside. Apparently that didn't work for many bureaucratic reasons including planning problems. Then I heard two years ago was that it was to be reshaped and sited near the Guildhall. I was delighted as that meant these women would be honoured in public view in the centre of the City to which they contributed so much.

So where is it?

Apparently, five years on, the reshaped girders and steel are now lying in bits and pieces in various yards waiting for WHAT? Apparently problems of planning and timing are again being cited. These should be the means by which this can be done rather than providing reasons why it can't. When there is a will, there is a way!

So where is it? When is it going to be where it should be?

This is a public piece of work being paid for out of public monies. It has been developed in consultation with and support by women and men who want to publicly honour the contribution of their mothers and grandmothers in the centre of this city.

The moving around from pillar to post for over five years is, to say the least, disrespectful treatment of the artist. It is much more than disrespectful of the women her work is celebrating.

Women who knew how to en-

sure but rarely had the opportunity to enjoy. They held on to their humanity with warmth and laughter as best they could through hard toil and hard times. They never dreamed that they would be honoured by a public sculpture in the centre of their city. How this generation dreams for them, remembers them, respects them will be a measure of how new times are going to be built

There is the opportunity of the talents of this artist to translate some of that into hard steel and concrete. The what, how and when that happens to this sculpture as celebration and catalyst will define the values of what is meant by a city of culture.

So where is it?

I am sad to say at this time if you want to see what it is like to have a public sculpture that celebrates the lives of women workers sited in the full view of a busy city centre - you will need to get the bus to Belfast

So, where is it?

Former factory worker Harriet Hipsley who recently took part in a TV programme paying tribute to the former shirt factory women.

"The factory girls and women absolutely deserve recognition - down through all the generations. I help out in a sewing class in Pilots Row voluntary, have done for years, and the needlework skills that the Derry women have, are incredible. Most of the former factory workers can turn their hand to any kind of sewing.

"When I think of the way we used to gallop home at lunch-



time to put the dinner on and gallop back to work - it was hard going, rearing a family and working full time. But I loved it! The working class women of Derry were the heart and soul of the city when I was growing up - I really believe they should be commemorated."

Former Rocolla worker, Caroline McGlinchey from Rosemount, was the youngest of nine surviving children. Her mother, now deceased, worked as a cuffer in Seledges on Abercorn Road.

"Like many other women in similar circumstances at the time, left to rear a big family on her own, my mother worked from a sewing machine at home to bring in a wage when we were young. By the time I went to school, she'd returned to the factory. Myself and most of my sisters followed her into the



shirt factory industry.

"And when I think back to my mother and hundreds upon hundreds of women like her - I do think their contribution to this city should be honoured."