URBAN
Stories
ROOMS

Urban Room Blackburn

Location:
Blackburn Town Centre.
Primary address, 65 King William Street.

Run by:
Initiated by Claire Tymon, Blackburn is Open Project Director for Blackburn with Darwen Borough Council.

Commissioned by:
Blackburn with Darwen BC.

Date:
2014 to present.

Timing:
Blackburn Urban Room was part of the Blackburn is Open creative regeneration programme that ran from January 2014 to July 2016.

The Urban Room hosted intensive month-long event programmes, that took place on three occasions between 2014-2016:
> October 2014
> May 2015
> July 2016

Space:
Activities took place across the whole town centre including the bus station, Thwaites brewery (now demolished), Cotton Exchange, Leeds Liverpool canal.

Description:
Blackburn is Open (BIO) had a permanent space which consisted of two empty shop units on the high street, opposite the Town Hall and Blackburn Museum and Art Gallery. The space was managed by the Cultural Planner and BIO Project Director Claire Tymon, employed by Blackburn with Darwen BC. Whilst the space wasn't officially an Urban Room (the term UR was not widely known when the BIO project launched), it included many features and roles which have now been adopted by the URN.

For Blackburn, the Urban Room also took the shape of an annual month-long festival of ideas, animation of derelict spaces and artistic interventions, including Blackburn Open Walls - an annual artist-led street art festival.
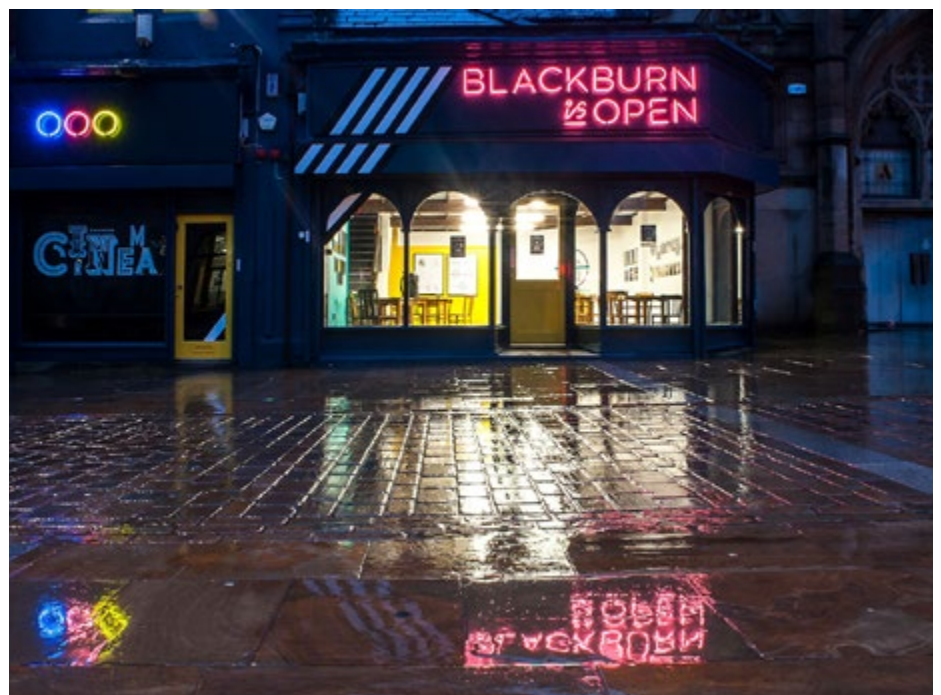

Image and Credit:
Urban Room Blackburn

Aims of the UR:
The aim of Urban Room Blackburn (URB) was to increase an awareness of, and participation in the future design and functions in the town centre, whilst creating a space for conversation about heritage, design and placemaking. URB provided a mechanism to commission artists, makers and students to respond to, and reimagine the built environment, in particular the empty derelict buildings, the brutalist architecture and the former Thwaites brewery site, which has since been demolished. URB also provided an opportunity to showcase borough-wide architecture and design projects including the Building Schools for the Future programme.

The month-long annual events programme created a platform for conversation, celebration, education and PR - co-designing a positive narrative for the town, its achievements and opportunities and the communities that make it so unique and interesting.

How was the UR funded and resourced?
Arts Council of England, BwD BC, sponsorship and partnerships.
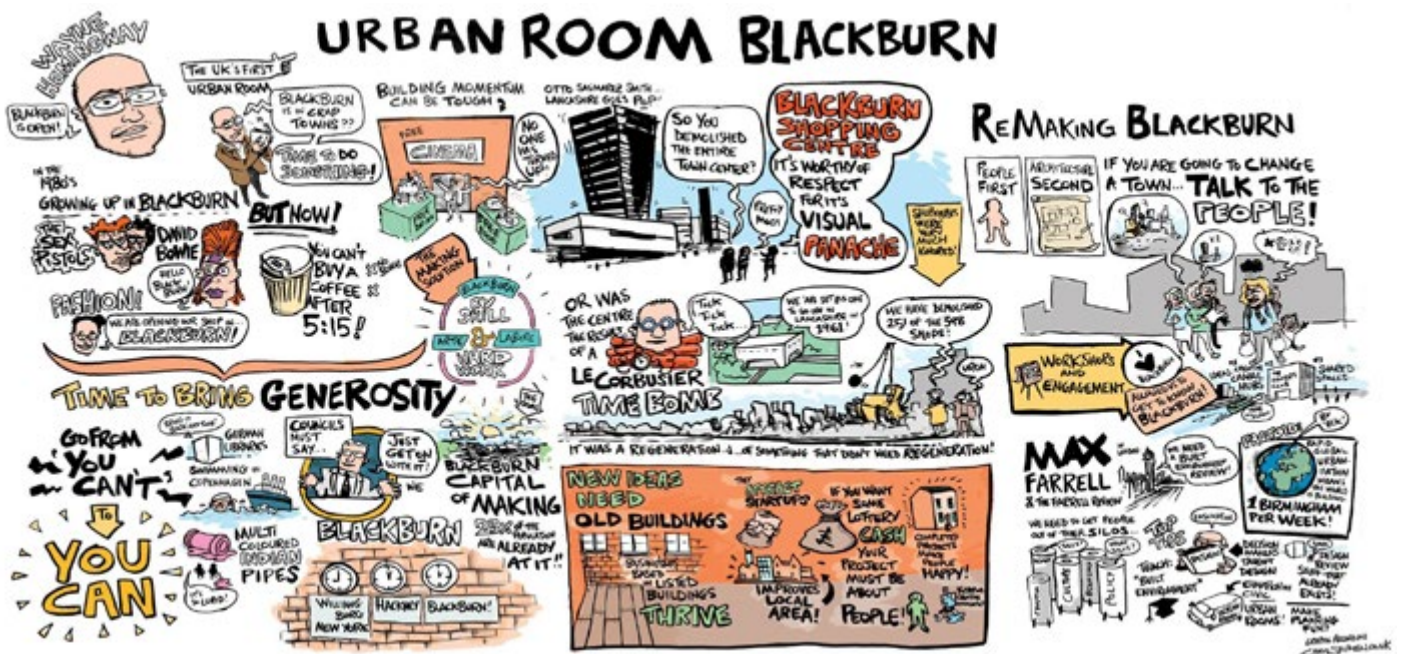

Image:
Urban Room Blackburn
Credit: Urban Room Blackburn /
Chris Shipton

Activities of the UR:
Urban Room Blackburn was a temporary space, open 3 days a week for local residents, businesses, artists and young people to pop in and experience exhibitions, engage in conversations about the town and share any ideas to help improve the town. It was also a space to host Council meetings and advocate for the Blackburn is Open manifesto - its aims and ambitions, and achievements.

Urban Room Blackburn also hosted a series of monthly events including First Thursdays - every first Thursday of the month local businesses would stay open until 8pm and a small event programme

would be programmed, including exhibitions, performances, and artisan markets.

Other monthly events included an artist network event and a Drink and Draw, which soon became too popular to host in the space and moved to an empty church, which soon became a permanent art centre.

The month-long festival programme included exhibitions, workshops, talks, street art festival, guided walks, show and tell activities and symposiums. The exhibitions were specially commissioned, responding to opportunities or challenges in the local area.

URB was part of a wider creative manifesto for the town centre called Blackburn is Open. Open to ideas. Open to Business. Open to You. Therefore, URB was open, inviting, inclusive and popular! Audiences and participants understood it was part of a wider vision and ambition to include more local people and visitors to take part in the conversation and share ideas, to question why things were the way they were, and feel confident to design and deliver projects, events or even new businesses themselves.

Impact of the UR:

On placemaking:
Good design was at the heart of the Urban Room, which reflected the ethos and values of the space and the programme. It also enabled good marketing materials and press coverage, attracting high profile advocates and sponsorship opportunities. URB created a mechanism for local voices to be represented and heard in the future of the town, providing inspiration and creativity to a range of place-makers and decision-makers.

Image and Credit:
Urban Room Blackburn

On participants:
Nearly all the URB events and activities were free of charge, and the majority of the project budget was spent on marketing and communications - ensuring information reached as many residents, businesses, schools and stakeholders. Most activities were co-designed and delivered by the local creative community, ensuring they were accessible, inclusive, relevant and interesting.

On the host organisation:
Urban Room Blackburn was the UK's first urban room and attracted positive media coverage and support from the team at the Farrell Review. The Urban Room concept provided an open framework or brand in which to express the vision and aims, and enabled us to connect our work with a government White Paper. URB was also able to host the Urban Room Network which provided a unique opportunity for critical feedback and showcase the programme to a nation-wide audience.

What was the primary challenge for your UR and how did you tackle it?
Accepting Urban Room Blackburn was a temporary intervention to help demonstrate best practice principles when engaging local communities and businesses in creative ways. Unfortunately not enough was done to ensure its sustainability. Engaging planners, architects, developers and decision makers in the design and delivery of the activities would have helped with this. As a consequence, the programme did not continue once the Project Director left the role.

What advice would you give someone setting up an Urban Room?
- Don't start with the budget, start with the purpose then identify the partners and participants. The finance will follow!
- Ensure there is an ethical framework in place at the start - be open and transparent about the decision-making processes, especially if the UR is being implemented as a consultation tool.
- Pay all freelancers for their time and contribution, and ensure a budget is available to pay expenses to community / volunteer participants. Do not cut corners due to lack of budget - budget can always be found to ensure UR are inclusive and accessible.
- If possible, share all documentation on a public platform like Facebook, Instagram, or a blog so that those unable to participate in person have access to the information and are able to contribute.
- Recruit advocates if possible - people who understand the context and bring new perspectives and can advocate for the purpose of the UR.
- Raise the profile of your UR - decision-makers will most likely listen to the outcomes and open to different perspectives.
- Be as creative and design-led as possible.

More information:
https://www.facebook.com/urbanroomblackburn/photos
https://www.blackburnbid.co.uk/urban-room-blackburn/
https://theshuttle.org.uk/blackburn-open-launches-uks-first-urban-room/

Acknowledgements:

The Urban Rooms Toolkit is a public resource to be used, downloaded and shared by anyone interested in situated creative community engagement in placemaking. If you have any ideas or experience you would like to share and potentially contribute to the Toolkit please join the Urban Rooms Network!

This document is a downloadable, printer friendly version of the Urban Rooms Toolkit which can be found at urbanroomstoolkit.org