

EDUCATION

# taking centre stage

Land Securities has linked up with schools, theatres and a charity to enable children to widen their experience of the arts world while exploring social and environmental themes that will influence their future decisions. At the same time it has opened up some of its properties for community use

A baker's dozen may be unlucky for some, but not, it seems, for the 13 Land Securities-owned shopping centres working with 13 theatres and 13 secondary schools on an innovative theatrical arts project designed to build up the company's community links and inspire local children.

The British schools, shopping centres and theatres are taking part in a project called TheatreQuest, adopted by Land Securities, to interest young people in the arts and the environment.

In all, 1300 children, from Portsmouth in the south of England to Livingston in Scotland, are working with local theatres on producing a specially commissioned play, *A singer from the desert came*, based on environmental and social themes. The children are invited to design costumes and sets, write music, and even help to develop the script for their production.

While the aim is to develop self-esteem, confidence and new skills among the participants, the play – written by Whitbread Children's Book of the Year award winner Jamila Gavin – also has social responsibility themes. Set in the future, it carries a dramatic warning of disasters to come if global warming is not tackled, and may intrigue children for another reason: it depicts a world entirely without adults.

Land Securities' partner in the venture is the London-based Prince's Foundation for Children and the Arts – previously the Prince of Wales Arts & Kids Foundation – which was established to introduce the arts to children who would not otherwise have the opportunity to enjoy them.

The schoolchildren's involvement in TheatreQuest begins with a visit to their local theatre, accompanied by teachers, where they meet actors and staff and find out what goes on behind the scenes. Back in the classroom they continue the work in teams: some producing a definition of a theatre's role, another group designing sets and costumes made from recycled materials, and others writing alternative scripts and music.

The children's activities peak this December when they begin performing their interpretation of the play on stage. Meanwhile, the rest of the pupils will be responsible for displaying the set designs and costumes at the local shopping centre, as part of an exhibition in their honour. All the participants will then come together for a grand, national finale at the Unicorn Theatre in London in January 2008, to celebrate their work in its entirety.

Altruistically, Land Securities, which owns

## the company

With a £14.8 billion (\$30.5 bn) investment portfolio and 1500 employees, Land Securities is one of the UK's largest property groups. It owns and manages around 7.6 million square metres of commercial buildings and provides property services to more than 2500 private and public sector clients. It:

- helped found the UK Green Building Council, an umbrella organization designed to help construction and property companies develop sustainability programmes over the next decade
- encourages all employees to volunteer in the community, offering two days paid leave per person each year to assist a local charity
- runs the Capital Commitment Fund, which has expanded threefold since its launch in 2004, and now supports more than 8000 residents in deprived areas of London
- is a member of the Working Group on Responsible Property Investment, a United Nations initiative that aims to apply socially responsible business principles in the sphere of property investment.

■ teachers and children work together to create costumes and set designs out of recycled materials, further emphasizing the play's environmental themes



commercial property all over Britain, including 28 shopping centres, has supported the project at a total cost of £100,000 (\$211,000) because it wants to make a contribution to the education of the next generation, and to develop their interest in the arts. But it also thinks this is an excellent way to strengthen links with the communities in which it operates, especially as staff are involved as volunteers.

‘We see our long-term relationship with the local residents as very important in maintaining the vitality of their town or city, as well as our shopping centres,’ says Melissa Winsor, the company’s corporate communications manager.

‘It’s not just the schools and children that our centres interact with, but other stakeholders such as the local theatre, the council, the mums and dads and others.’ Because the children and their families are often customers of the company’s shopping centres, existing loyalties are strengthened by these relationships. The children’s exhibitions also directly bring in new customers and create a sense of community. The company hopes one side-benefit may be a decline in anti-social behaviour around the centres.

Another benefit Winsor identifies is an increased public relations exposure from the programme ‘because the project is supported by a national campaign and often involves celebrity participation.’

Penelope Keith, best known for her British TV role as Margo Leadbetter in the comedy series *The good life*, is one of the actors to have lent her support.

The adaptability of TheatreQuest makes it ideal for the company. ‘Until 2005 all our shopping centres were doing their own community projects,’ says retail business manager Karen Saunders. ‘We thought it would make more sense, financially and for our centre staff, if we could find a project that allowed a template approach to be used nationally.’

The company felt that using the shopping centres as a venue to present some of the work done by the schoolchildren worked well with its general policy of allowing its properties to be used as a public resource.

‘That said, things need to be flexible,’ adds Saunders. ‘Our centres are often very different in character. Some are open-air, some are traditional malls. And the time, commitment and enthusiasm of our staff varied from centre to centre. We needed to find a corporate responsibility project that would meet all these criteria and lend itself to national and local promotion.’

Winsor says the choice of theatres and schools to take part in TheatreQuest was also important. ‘Getting the logistics and geography right was key, but it was just as important to pick theatres that had the time to mentor teachers from participating schools and to find creative ways of inspiring the children. And we wanted

**existing customer loyalties are strengthened by the new relationships forged via TheatreQuest**



■ author Jamila Gavin (left), who wrote *A singer from the desert came*, has worked with groups of children on interpreting her play

to work through an organization with credibility and experience in this area.’

TheatreQuest is not the first project the company has worked on with the Prince’s Foundation for Children and the Arts; two years ago they got together with the well-known artist Quentin Blake on an illustration project for schools, and last year they promoted the ‘very nearly lost art of story-telling’ in the same sphere.

Emma Blanksby, the foundation’s project co-ordinator, says the partnership has worked well, allowing each partner to achieve its aims. Crucially, she says, Land Securities has been ‘open to new ideas’ in the arts. If this openness has been sufficient to entice just one young person into the magical world of theatre, then she believes it’s a job well done.

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## ibe comment LAND SECURITIES

The ‘magical world of the theatre’, children, shopping centres, teachers, staff volunteers as well as mums and dads – not a mix that immediately springs to mind when discussing community relations programmes. But Land Securities has combined them, with the help of a national charity, to ‘make a contribution to the education of the next generation’. As a landlord of 28 UK shopping centres, it has realized that the communities in which its properties are situated need to develop socially as well as economically. This project involving 1300 children is impressive in both design and execution.

Outstanding features include:

- linking schools, shops and theatres
- hands-on involvement of children
- the inclusion of local staff in a volunteer programme
- introducing school staff and children to the meaning of social responsibility.

SIMON WEBLEY, INSTITUTE OF BUSINESS ETHICS