



21. Robin Dauncey: Pottery, Swan Yard, King Street Festival, David Potter

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I am a potter, making tableware and cooking utensils, mainly to order, for individual and trade customers. I no longer have a shop front; I had a shop in Elm Hill but during the recession of the 1980s I went back to working at home, which has fewer overheads but it is very easy to feel isolated. That is why I am now in a studio at Swan Yard, which is in the centre of the city; it is half the size I actually need, but there is contact with people all the time, which I like. It is stimulating to have other artists around and I have quite a lot of friends who work in the creative industries.

My designs are simple and basic but some coffee suppliers, for instance, want very precise sizes for their cups and I have to make them to within a few millimetres so they can dispense a specific amount of coffee. I have an order for 90 cups at the moment, I can probably throw 25 to 30 cups an hour but you have to prepare the clay, which takes time, then they have to go back on the wheel when they are leather hard to have the foot and handle put on them. So the throwing is only about a third of the work. The clay I use is blended in Stoke-on-Trent. The only local clay is red earthenware clay, which bricks and tiles were made from.

I like King Street. There are some good places to go out and get a cup of coffee. I love Swan Yard, because there are people going past my window all the time and you can stop and have a chat. What I am disappointed with is that for the last few years King Street has been at the mercy of the bloody developers, in that there was a really good "greasy spoon" cafe at the corner of Music House Lane (it was actually very good, freshly cooked food) and it was closed down because a developer bought the site four years ago and flattened it and it remains flattened. That really makes me cross. Also I had a very good garage for my car, did MOTs very reasonably, and similarly because of the damn' developers the place closed down. Both those sites are just laying empty and now there is property recession on, everything is lying dormant. There is a great big flattened area that was the brewery and it is sterile.

We had this thing about King Street being the Creative Quarter, and that lasted a couple of years. We had the King Street Festival. I had a stall outside every year and apart from selling, it was nice to be able to say hello to people you knew. An awful lot of community energy went into setting up that festival, people like Graham Powell next door, the cabinet maker, the people from Community Music East, they put a tremendous amount of energy into getting that festival up and running then after it had run two or three years, very successfully, it was sort of privatised, and when the person who took it over from the City Council found he couldn't make enough money out of it, it died. I

have a certain amount of sympathy for the council officers because they are overworked, but I think this was their fault for putting it in the hands of somebody else and it failing. And so much for the Creative Quarter.

Swan Yard has changed quite a bit in the fourteen years I have been here. David Potter, who owns Swan Yard and developed it, is a very benevolent and philanthropic man and he went to Art School in middle age, came out and realised there were no cheap studios for artists, so he set up Muspole Street Studios. Then he bought the freehold of Swan Yard and tried to develop it in the same way, which it did to a certain extent. However - I think the over-pricing of property, both residential and commercial, is the biggest inhibitor to British business. To have a shop costs you £200-£300 a week and that is why there are so many empty shops in the city centre. David Potter has tried to keep the price of his studios low, but we now have an estate agent here, god forbid, and a structural engineer, and we have applied arts and crafts like public relations.

You get very little passing trade in King Street. Somebody did have a shop at the front for a while but she couldn't make it pay. I think the idea of closing the road off was to stop it being a rat-run for people picking up sex workers. That doesn't happen now, they have gone somewhere else. It now seems to be a walk through for people coming back from the clubs on Riverside in the early hours of the morning. If you leave a car parked out here, sooner or later you will

probably get it vandalised, and there is some anti-social activity out the front, but it is quiet back here and you would not think you were in the middle of the city. Swan Yard is a nice place to work.

Robin Dauncey