

Curating in Cathedrals – a precis of report by Julia Porter-Pryce for the AEC

English cathedrals increasingly use contemporary art as both mission and strategy. Installations can invite sacred encounter, renew perceptions of the building and explore themes such as justice, creation, memory and belonging, while also supporting audiences, income, partnerships and profile. This can create a productive tension between worship, mission and enterprise.

Most cathedrals lack dedicated arts teams or secure budgets, so programmes rely on existing staff, volunteers, clergy and departments. Specialist curators can raise ambition and strengthen artist relationships, but need time to understand each cathedral's spiritual, architectural and organisational context.

Decisions are shaped by mission, values, quality, audience appeal, finance, worship, fabric, capacity and strategic fit. Formal arts policies can clarify choices and support refusals, while some cathedrals prefer case-by-case judgement. The strongest plans link arts activity to wider institutional aims.

Touring installations, including those by Luxmuralis and Luke Jerram, are frequently used because they are well-established, have existing audience recognition and a track record of generating income. They can increase visitor numbers, media coverage and reach new audiences, but also involve cost, operational disruption and a degree of repetition across venues.

Sense of place is crucial. Major-city cathedrals may connect with festivals, tourism and civic events, while smaller or rural cathedrals often emphasise worship, sanctuary and local relationships. Successful projects explain why the work belongs there and use proportionate interpretation and activities to deepen engagement.

Arts programmes can increase visitors, donations, shop income, partnerships, skills, reflection and profile. They can also strain worship space, staff, volunteers, budgets and communications. Controversial work requires careful interpretation, pastoral sensitivity, volunteer briefing and visible senior support.

Evaluation is uneven. Cathedrals track visitor numbers, ticket sales, donations, surveys, visitor books, steward feedback, social media and testimony, but often prioritise financial outcomes. Shared case studies, costing models and evaluation frameworks are needed to capture commercial, missional, spiritual, social and cultural impact.