In March and April 2012 members of the public were invited to construct a giant Lego town at the Great North Museum (Hancock). This project explored the role of planning in addressing some of the major issues which affect people’s everyday lives.

Almost 10,000 visitors came along to the exhibit and 110,000 bricks were used to create the ‘mini-city’ whose size, scale and purpose was determined by the public working with University researchers. Graduates were recruited to help prepare the exhibition and to prompt the general public to think about what makes a well functioning city or community. Our ‘city developers and planners’ were bold and ruthless. Buildings that were judged not to work or to be poorly located were demolished; new shopping areas sprang up; ministries (including MI6) were relocated from London to generate employment; a wave of crime was met by the development of a high security prison; an airport was built.

In addition, every day the public were faced with a new, realistic, challenge such as: “Department of Health research has revealed that our city has a high incidence of heart disease, how can we get people taking more exercise?”, “A major employer needs to expand but that means building on green field sites –how do we balance our need for jobs and our need to protect the environment?”, or, “There is a continued decline in the physical and social conditions of social housing to the south of the city. Do we do renovate or sell the land for new, private residential development?”. These questions prompted the public to think of responses to real life challenges, and highlighted that there are tough decisions to be made when trying to create a good place to live. The Great North Build project facilitated greater public understanding of planning and architectural issues. It was a hugely successful method of illustrating research in an accessible way, and creating a melting pot of fun activity and knowledge - based on specific real life questions and scenarios.