

Waste Spaces, Wasted Spaces, Wasteful Spaces; New Strategies for Artist Led Projects in the Public Realm

Planning for the Unknown

Post industrial conditions and the legacy of post war reconstruction and inadequate planning have created urban open spaces which are either problematic or no longer suited to their function. Whilst various national and local authorities have developed and implemented regeneration strategies, these often follow traditional approaches and are primarily driven by economic considerations, their model and justification based on tested principles and conventional thinking in economic and urban design practices. In spite of the glossy, sunlit and smiley-peopled photographs, they seldom fully deliver on the inflated expectations. Because the makeover is mostly cosmetic, stagnation can soon return and the effects of the regeneration undone or diminished through the prevalence of incongruous pressures.

The recent regeneration effort of the former docklands of Cardiff is now 15 years old. Since 1990 CBAT operates as independent public art consultants and project managers, initially integrating a programme of artworks into the steadily and erratically renovated and rebuilt urban framework of Cardiff Bay. Its role however changed, as masterplan was replaced by opportunism in the face of recession in the property development sector. CBAT, then Cardiff Bay Arts Trust, now the Arts & Regeneration Agency, grew from an implementation mechanism for the Strategy of Public Art in Cardiff Bay, to an organisation with a strategic and catalytic function in the continued development of Cardiff's public realm. As a result of developing extensive local knowledge, an acute awareness of the different motivations of parties involved and the ability to act independently, it was able to forge partnerships that otherwise would not have been established. It now operates UK wide, with projects in the West Midlands and Lincolnshire, as well as the South Wales region.

In its practice, CBAT shifted its role from being led by the progress of development and the opportunities presented, to leading elements of the regeneration process by exploiting its knowledge of local processes for decision making, identifying common interests, maximising relationships with various parties involved and creatively applying the mechanisms it was handed through the original Strategy. This meant that projects changed from commissions driven by a single budget for a single private or public sector client, to projects with multiple sources of funding and responding to different demands. From following development projects and integrating artworks where requested, CBAT now initiates projects which in themselves shape the public realm and address issues left unresolved. It has moved from a role as consultant, to a role as initiator, securing clients for projects already fully funded or, in some extreme cases, taking on responsibilities as client and developer itself, to facilitate the projects progress. In one particular instant it even engaged the services of one of its clients, reversing the professional relationship.

New strategies will call for new and unconventional partnerships and more radical models and can no longer rely on a formulated approach. They will require a willingness to engage on various levels and flexibility in the implementation of projects. Sustainability and fluidity are guiding principles. Contemporary alliances in the engagement of artists in regeneration and reclamation of the public realm can no longer follow the masterplan approach, but has to be opportunistic and should seek partnerships relevant to the circumstances of each project and site.

Art in the public realm cannot just be art; artists working in the public realm can not just be artists. No space is devoid of meaning. Cultural constructs will be applied to every open space, commonly owned and/or accessible to the general public. Artists working in the public realm need to engage with a complexity of issues, sentiments and practicalities, which do not exist within the rarefied environments of studio and gallery. Public art solely as object is no longer relevant in these circumstances and a different kind of artist is required.

With north Wales based artist Howard Bowcott this comes down to a good understanding of the principles of urban design and the patience that is required to realise projects within a political climate that can be fickle and contradictory. His “Quaystone” project was realised over a period of 4 years, following cancellation, redesign, budget amendments, a further cancellation and the expedient exploitation of insider knowledge as well as the ability of CBAT to pull together a budget from various sources not necessarily available to others. The project was initiated by CBAT and we felt obliged to complete this project, to prove that it was possible in spite of a lack of interest by those that were charged with the overall responsibility of the development in Cardiff Bay.

We had also become aware of the work by the Dutch artist Jeroen van Westen and his colleagues Serafijn and Hans Snoek and project co-ordinator van Wesenmael. In Rotterdam they took on the transformation of a neglected and problematic urban space under a motorway flyover, locally known as Muizengaatje or Mouse Hole. Besides the intimidating barrier it provides to pedestrian traffic between neighbourhoods, it also acts as a sewage overflow at times of heavy rainfall. Rather than hide its cave like character, the artist trio transformed the space into a celebration of its qualities, created a cathedral like space by highlighting the architecture and installed a reed bed environment to filter the contaminated water. They also realised this was not an issue that could be dealt with in isolation and they proceeded with examining the entire 10 km stretch of motorway flyover, dissecting a large part of the largest city of the Netherlands. That project, called Restruimten Waste lands or Leftover Spaces, explores the nature, functioning or non-functioning of those spaces in cities that are uncared for, of no particular commercial use, undeveloped because of conflicting interests that cannot be resolved, undesirable or in transience; between different uses.

The project is complex and speculative in that it counts on a change in thinking on how cities operate in a post industrial society, and on speculative economic principles related to the demand and value of inner-city spaces for

commercial and residential developments. I will not expand on this, it is not my place to do so, safe to ask you to consider what determines the value of land in an urban context and how the seemingly costly removal of a four lane inner-city motorway can free up land, which, through the absence of that negative influence, suddenly becomes of great value. Whether the thinking is economically sound is irrelevant, the posing of the question is relevant and important. If we are looking for new solutions within the urban framework, the seemingly impossible needs to be explored.

The willingness to get his hands dirty was, quite literally an important aspect for CBAT in engaging van Westen in a project in Cardiff commissioned by a commercial client who, in partnership with the local authorities manages an active waste landfill site. The city council fills the site with the waste discarded by the populace of the city. A constant stream of black bags and rubbish trucks makes its way to the site on the eastern fringes of Cardiff, where it creates an artificial hill in an otherwise flat landscape. The rotting and fermenting of the organic matter creates a gas, commonly known as Landfill Gas, containing a high percentage of methane, which, if left to rise in the atmosphere, contributes to the so called “Greenhouse Effect”, the warming of the globe.

To avoid this harmful effect to our environment, landfills are capped with an impermeable membrane, the gas collected and burned, powering a set of container sized electricity generators. The commissioners’ intention was to use art to celebrate their partnership and advertise this aspect of their business, which they considered to be the exploitation of a source of green energy. Whatever we think of that notion, we cannot be anything else but grateful that somebody attempts to deal on our behalf with a nasty issue that we all just like to dump on our doorstep. We cannot deny our collective responsibility.

CBAT’s philosophy is never to take a commission at face value and we convinced the client partnership to look at the whole complex issue of waste management through landfill and besides creating an interesting artwork also

to explore a rethink of what we do with waste, what we classify as waste and how we can reduce the amount that is going to waste in landfill sites. An expanded brief was produced and promptly taken further by van Westen, when he was selected from a short list of internationally renowned artists, including Mags Harries from Boston and Buster Simpson from Seattle. Van Westen proposed the project *Breathing in; Time out*, which explores the whole operation of the site in all its aspects and not only expresses this in visual interventions at the site, but also proposes a virtual meeting place in a web site where the aspects that are not visible can be explored. This will in turn become a forum, to be expanded by selected parties with an interest in the topics raised.

A two year delay was caused by the minor matter that, weeks after a very successful presentation of his project outline, our commercial client became embroiled in and aggressive and strongly contested takeover battle, which eventually resulted in the breaking up of the company and the disappearance of the source of funding for the project. This was overcome through an application to the Landfill Tax Credit Scheme, a mechanism under which registered Environmental Bodies can apply to landfill operators for a section of the tax payable on every ton of waste, to fund approved and appropriate projects. CBAT happened to operate a subsidiary organisation registered as such a body, originally established to fund artist led projects in local school playgrounds. This enabled us to proceed with the project earlier this year and the first sections of the web site are planned to be on line before Christmas.

The project will create a landmark work, the “Entrance” to the “Hidden Treasures”, appearing as, to stay with the metaphor, an eye of a dozing Dragon. Van Westen draws attention to the fact that this artificial hill is, for all intents and purposes breathing and alive. It expands with the accumulating waste and shrinks again when gas is extracted and the rotting process compacts the waste. It also draws our attention to the form of the hill through a frieze, which will carry a bi-lingual poem composed by Cardiff based poet Peter Finch, suggesting that the hill is the real artwork and the permanent legacy of our activities here.

A set of 23 solar powered lights will mark the extraction wells and create a constellation during the hours of darkness and a public footpath around the site will be marked by blocks of compressed aluminium cans, carrying an enamelled plaque which will draw the viewer's attention to specific aspects of the landfill's form, construction, operation and history.

The title of the work, *Breathing in; Time out* expresses the time we buy through dumping waste in landfill, to rethink the processes of waste management. It is a Time Out, to reassess an aspect of society's functioning and it anticipates its own obsolescence, as landfills become no more than a curious leftover from an inadequate past and a source of research material for sociological archaeologists.

There is a danger in this approach that art is no longer seen and appreciated as art, but becomes a tool for problem solving, a therapeutic process, a learning device, a solution to all the ills of the world. Access to art is seen nowadays as more important by funding bodies than the quality of the art presented. However the process of engagement of the problematic aspects of the public realm by artists does not have to diminish the integrity of the artist and his or her art. The public realm offers a medium that requires a specific approach, not just in physical terms, but also in development of the concept and adaptability of the idea to changing circumstances. Where urban regeneration processes tend to be driven by masterplans, planned for a known outcome and a specific use, denying the changing nature of the urban environment, artists can inject a new kind of thinking about the public realm, aimed at creating foundations for renewal and change; planning for the unknown.

The projects in Cardiff are not unique. Practices such as the artist/architect collaboration muf (see picture) or the Harrisons, with projects such as The Green Heart in the Netherlands and Aufriß, near Leipzig, operate on similar principles. However I do believe CBAT is fairly unique as a commissioning body, extending our boundaries for engagement and developing appropriate

strategies to suit each project. CBAT has proposed a Strategy to the City of Cardiff for the integration of artworks in the public realm. However, and to the consternation of some, this lays down a set of principles and concludes that various mechanisms can be applied to exploit opportunities for commissioning artworks, although the circumstances of these opportunities cannot be predicted. Therefore the outcome is also unknown. This is a difficult concept for civil servants to accept, that planning in the public realm and the development of urban space is, these days, opportunist and ad hoc and that strategies applied to these need to plan for eventualities, not definites.

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