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Wiard Sterck

Tale of Two Cities

"Public Art", just these two magic words, appear in a checklist of design issues under the heading "Urban form and public space" in the report "Towards an Urban Renaissance" written by the Urban Task Force chaired by Richard Rogers (Lord Rogers of Riverside; page 74). It is also included as a condition in planning consents for commercial developments in Cardiff, usually as "Public Art should be part of this development", but lately also as "the developer should demonstrate a mechanism for the involvement of a professional artist in aspects of the development, before construction commences"(1). This latter phrase is an interesting one, though it still does not quite resolve two important questions: "What is Public Art?" and "What function does it have in Urban Regeneration?" In other words, why is it written into masterplans, since, in my experience not everyone is convinced of the benefits of Public Art and few agree on its manifestation.

As a result of the Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay, the Urban Development Corporation in charge of the regeneration of Cardiff's former docklands - Cardiff Bay Development Corporation - implemented in 1990 two important recommendations, to ensure that Public Art would become an important part of the new urban space. It required commercial developers to pay 1% of their development budget towards Public Art, through a condition included in the contract for sale of development land, and it established Cardiff Bay Arts Trust to manage these funds. The strategy document is still worth reading, if only to get an idea of the economic optimism in Britain in the late 1980's and the accompanying expectation of an enlightened approach to urban regeneration. It demonstrates a clear commitment to the integration of original works by living artists into the regeneration process, and how to provide the sums to pay for these works. It did not answer the question of what and why, other than in the broadest of terms.

The way those questions were resolved, as so often in cases where there are unclear or disputed answers, was through the various constraints: limitations on budget and time, availability of a site, physical constraints of that site, imagination and expectation of the client body, presumed reception by the general public and anticipated response of the planning authorities. Oh yes, and it must be durable, vandal proof and maintenance free. And because the function of art in the new urban infrastructure was unclear, it became often functional in other ways; seating, lamp standards, landmarks, landscaping, memorials, gates or railings. In fact, this became an easy way to make art in the public realm acceptable and understandable for the general public, the developers and their accountants alike and convinced them of the merits and benefits of accepting or funding these projects. It was often commissioned as a problem solver, to enhance a badly designed public space, to resolve social problems, to enhance unsightly utilities and to provide a marker of quality in a development otherwise lacking good design. The "art" of public art however was somewhat ignored or taken for granted.

I have to be honest here, there are many projects in the public realm carried out under the banner of public art, in which for me the aesthetic is not always the prime importance. I remember a discussion with a developer who considered one particular project in Cardiff Bay not to be art. He was surprised to find that I was willing to agree, but that I felt it was an appropriate, amusing and memorable marker for a particular road junction. He then confessed

that he had always directed his clients to his offices, by telling them to turn right at the junction marked by that particular work.

The fact that I, an arts professional, was willing to accept his reading of the work as a mere orientation point, made him reconsider his view and accept the work also as art. It successfully and imaginatively fulfilled a function because it was a unique and bold creation and a good response to the complex nature of the site. He had unwittingly found access to the work and his perception of art had changed. Understand me well, I don't deny the artistic value of the work, but I am willing to accept that a public work adopts many functions and meanings, often beyond the intentions of the artist (2.).

While this provides us with one answer to the need and function of public art in urban regeneration and some definition of what it is or could be, this kind of art only responds to a very specific aspect of the urban framework: the physical infrastructure. Of course, in an area of the city that is to be recreated, where the previous structures, social and physical, are no longer prevailing and new master plans are being implemented, this is all the artist is given to respond to. This art becomes a feature of the new infrastructure just like drains, pavements or traffic lights.

However, there is another underlying force that demands further analysis and explanation. While public art is now written into most urban regeneration strategies set up by local and national governments, following the good examples of cities such as Barcelona, Boston, Rotterdam and even Cardiff, the funding for these major infrastructure projects is often secured from the private sector, and Pension Funds are increasingly the source of this finance. Traditionally in Britain Pension Funds have funded housing and office developments, but they are now increasingly involved in infrastructure and hospital projects through Private Finance Initiatives, or PFIs. Pension Fund trustees are cautious investors and seldom take the lead on a project (Clark, Gordon L. and Evans, John); they are the investing partner rather than the project developer, but they tie their partners in the project into detailed contractual arrangements, to protect their investment. This means that the project developer has limited room for manoeuvre and will have to demonstrate the return value for every expenditure. For their Quantity Surveyors, Public Art is hard to quantify, the artist is seen as a liability in the construction process and the commissioning agency as another party that wants a slice of the cake. Although the enlightened investor will be convinced of the quality and value that original and artist designed objects can bring to the development, they will need to see proof of this before they commit. The planning authorities may be committed to public art, but this comes way down the list of public benefit investments they seek to obtain from the developer and is, in Britain at least, often the most difficult to sell politically. I broach this subject at the risk of boring you rigid and I know these may not be the things art is made of, but if Public Art is or becomes a standard feature in urban regeneration processes, then indeed, these are the issues that the commissioners and artists have to deal with.

Now let us consider an other aspect of regenerating urban space. Most of the time urban regeneration is concentrated on brownfield sites; former docklands (Baltimore, London, Gateshead, Rotterdam, Cardiff, Barcelona) or sites of massive heavy industry (the IBA projects like the Emscher Park, Duisburg and other major cities in the German Ruhr region). Once these sites were buzzing with the activity of industry and trade, which steadily declined until little of its former glory was left. The regeneration programmes are intended to revive their fortune, but in a contemporary concept: trade becomes retail and leisure, industry becomes office and multimedia business, storage becomes housing.

The benefits to the existing and often disenfranchised communities of neighbouring residential districts are mostly indirect: jobs as "cleaning personnel, catering and security services" (sic.) (Mutual Benefit Project Team Publication, Kop van Zuid Development, Rotterdam), improvements to the surrounding infrastructure etc. But they have also to put up with the noise and the dust of the building work, while their marginal status is maintained and re-enforced. Jobs are often relocated from other areas, new residents (more affluent than the occupants in existing communities) move into the new housing and visitors are attracted by the hype, the new leisure facilities, retail outlets and entertainment centres. The area is reinvented and, to

promote the regeneration, needs to be realigned in our imagination (Hall, Tim). This becomes another function of Public Art: "to commemorate the past and celebrate the future" (3.). In other words, to declare the traditional character of the area dead and buried and to hail a new king.

Cardiff, Baltimore and Barcelona have reunited their cities with the waterfront, Rotterdam is aiming to "relocate" the southern bank of the river Maas in the city centre on the opposite bank. Public art is seen as one of the mechanisms assisting this "relocation" and reconnection, which, after all is a perception, not a reality, or a "re-imagination" of that space (Hall, Tim). But does this mean that all public art commissioned within these regeneration projects is automatically implicated in this deceit? Malcolm Miles certainly thinks so in the case of Cardiff Bay. (Miles, Malcolm) In Rotterdam the advisory committee of artists refused to give advice regarding artworks to be commissioned by the City Council in the Kop van Zuid development, because they could not find a meaningful response to the sanitised, well designed, well planned area, which includes a number of landmark buildings designed by major, international architects, but from which is removed most of its recent history and former character.

Controversy surrounds every major infrastructure project, because it is bound to destroy, displace and obliterate. Every regeneration programme is aimed at uniting or reuniting two halves of a city; the undeveloped with the developed, the downtrodden with the well off. This could be seen as a colonial act, whereby the affluent city centre creates a new district for business and leisure, providing prosperity for the city as a whole and enhancing its national and international status, while marginalising the existing community, its culture and its character. But is not every act of creation also an act of aggression? Is this not the character of a city, that it will renew itself from time to time, either following acts of war, political change or severe economical decline?

Artists deal with these issues, highlight them, question them, offer alternatives or make positive contributions in the hope of connecting past, present and future with respect and understanding and on an equal footing. Karin Sander in Münster during the Skulptur Projekte '97 demonstrated how a city centre is located in the mind and the experience of the city and its life, yet does not constitute a geographical reality (Bußmann, Klaus, et al.). This perceived centre can only be shifted by a relocation of the experience of that city.

Krzysztof Wodiczko views the city as a massive creative process, to which the artist should contribute. He contrasts the opposite sides of the social construct of the city; the haves and have nots, the indigenous resident and the newcomer, the dominant order with a new and emerging order. Many of Wodiczko's projects aim to give a means of expression to the outsider, assisting them to cope and to communicate on a more equal basis with the dominant culture. Immigration, by the way, is a hallmark of urban regeneration. Docklands are traditionally the domain of the sailor who settled in a port he visited, initiating the establishment of an immigrant community, which attracted others of similar cultural background. Cardiff Bay for instance still houses the oldest multicultural community in Britain. Those that move into the new housing developments in the regenerated district are the next wave of immigrants, or, to come back to an earlier analogy, settlers in a new world.

Andrew Leicester creates new infrastructure, creates physical space out of a social construct, while Mags Harries re-enforces and extends those social constructs in most of her work, offering a new experience of a familiar environment. In this paper I do not intend to discuss their work to any great length, because that would require more time than is now available and at this point I merely want to demonstrate that artists contribute, are part of, enrich and expand cities on all their manifestations and can respond to the complexities of regeneration, without alienating or ignoring the extant social complexity, the history, culture and character of the regenerated district, without merely placing pleasing and useful objects in urban open spaces. However, my question at this point is, will those responsible for the delivery of these regeneration projects dare to support this kind of contribution from artists? Within the realm of Private Finance Initiatives, Masterplans and Urban Planning I think this is quite unlikely; the functional object will prevail because this object can be drawn into a plan and quantified, even if it comes in rather expensive in some opinions.

However there exist a number of regeneration projects where artists are brought in specially to help planners, scientists and engineers resolve problematic issues. The province of South Holland in the Netherlands invited Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison to assist in developing a policy on the preservation of the "Green Heart", a large area of open and agricultural land, enclosed between several of the largest cities in the Netherlands (Oerlemans, Hans et al.). They were asked to put forward a strategy that would protect this area from the urban sprawl and to maintain it as a natural resource and providing the area with a strong identity that would help it withstand the onslaught of urban development.

And with such artists as Josef Koudelka, Olaf Nicolai and Auke de Vries together with a group of scientists from various backgrounds, the Harrisons were invited by the state of Sachsen in Germany and the cultural programme of Siemens, to look at a massive area stretching from Leipzig south into the Czech Republic, which was devastated by Browncoal and Uranium mining (von Kraft, Predita et al.). The enormous open cast mines - abandoned not because the need for the raw materials had diminished or the mines were exhausted, but because the reunited Germany could politically no longer justify the destruction of its landscape on such a grand scale - will fill with water over a period of 30 years. A new landscape will emerge, dominated by large lakes and the artists were asked to give their vision of how this landscape should be given form and provided with a new identity, replacing the one that was obliterated with digging machines that seemed to come straight from the imagination of George Lucas.

The title of my paper is a Tale of Two Cities, an overused analogy. However it seems to me that the major role of the artist in any regeneration process is in highlighting a divide and thereby suggesting ways of bridging this divide. The divide can be between many aspects; rich and poor, old and new, conventional and revolutionary, real and imagined, coded and re-coded, limited and full of potential. "Of course", you will say, "art is intended to communicate". But while it is a conduit for communication, art can also negotiate on its own terms

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Notes

1. Planning Consent for building development by Stradform, 24 Windsor Place, Cardiff
2. The work in question is Pierre Vivant's Landmark sculpture for the Tyndall Street, Ocean Way roundabout
3. Project Brief, Cardiff Bay Arts Trust