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**The Art of Change**  
by Peter Dunn.

***The Art of Change* is a visual arts and design organisation concerned with issues of change - particularly the transformation of the urban environment and its impact upon quality of life and cultural identity.**

**Our experience in this field comes from ten years work with tenants and community groups in London's Docklands a *The Docklands Community Poster Project*.**

**The establishment of *The Art of Change* came from the realisation that the way our cities are transformed is no longer just a localised or national matter but is governed increasingly by the needs of international markets and networks. This exerts unprecedented pressures upon the needs and concerns of local communities and workforces, dispossessed minorities, the ecology and identity of whole regions.**

***The Art of Change* was created to provide a visual arts and design initiative to assist in the development of new ways of perceiving and addressing these issues.**

**But the transition from a wholly funded community based project to an income generating organisation, aiming to have national and international profile, was not easy. In short, we had to develop an internal 'art of change' before we could move forward.**

The Docklands Community Poster project had been working with the tenants and action groups of London's Docklands for nearly ten years, producing large 18ft x 12ft Photomurals, posters, leaflets, publications, banners, organising events and festivals. We were, and still remain, a Community Co-op. However, whereas the membership of the co-op comprised of a majority of representatives from tenants and action groups, plus the workers, we have now co-opted people from other campaigning and arts organisations.

The primary focus of this work was specific and local and yet it did receive international recognition on a number of different fronts. Initially this was within art contexts, as a model of particular forms of social practice, then later for our innovative use of bill-boards in *The Changing Picture of Docklands* series. Through our Docklands *Roadshow* - a compilation of issue based exhibitions and workshops -and because of the issues central to the work, it began to be used within 'Urban Planning' contexts and, more recently, attracted the attention of a relatively new discipline - Cultural Geography - in dealing with the impact of 'Urban Renewal' upon culture and identity.

In short, the initial strength of the work which was its specificity began to be used in more generalised contexts either as art product, as instruments of planning polemic, or to visualise aspects of Post-modern cultural theory.

We did not mind this, on the contrary we were pleased that the work should have taken on this versatile role. And the tenants and action groups saw this as a means of extending their struggles and the lessons they had learned more widely.

In looking to the future, therefore, we began to see the wider interest in our work not as merely incidental to our 'real work' which was specifically local. Rather, we saw it as an important and vital extension of both our work and the issues it engages into broader networks.

### **The transition**

As with most change, the initial stage was not as positive as this; it was a response to what we perceived as a cul-de-sac in both our funding and the direction of our work. We had to change or die.

The Docklands Community Poster Project had grown during expansion of funding in London during the 80's by the GLC. We grew from a two people, unpaid and working at home, to six people with a relatively large studio, owning six 18ft x 12ft bill-boards that we had built in strategic sites around Docklands with a rolling programme of changing images. After the GLC was abolished, funding began to contract markedly. This did not only affect the arts organisations but the network of voluntary organisations that we worked with. Many simply disappeared. In Docklands, the campaigning -which had been extremely vigorous and at times remarkable its scale and inventiveness - hit rock bottom when the Thatcher Government was returned for its third term. It was clear that all hopes of winning the battles for social housing and development for the benefit of the community had been dashed once and for all. There was a general air of doom and despondency. Among those groups that remained, including ours, there was draining away of both personnel and energy. Suddenly we found ourselves working against larger odds, with less people and resources, in an atmosphere of increased stress among activists, and an air of despair and resignation in the community at large.

By 1989, we came to the painful conclusion that we had ceased to be effective. We were down to three people, all working part time, unable to put images on our bill-boards and finding it difficult to meet even the reduced campaigning need of the community. We had large overheads but little output to show for it. We faced the prospect of closing the project down, with dignity before the funding bodies closed us down, or of finding a way to expand the workforce sufficiently to become effective again. With nothing to lose, we decided to go for the latter option.

Within a shrinking funding situation, the only way forward then was to find ways of generating income. We examined our skill and resources and made some preliminary assessments of which of these could be used for income generation.

Offering a design service was the most obvious. During the more productive period of The Docklands Community Poster Project we had been approached by various voluntary and campaign organisations outside Docklands but had had to turn it down because we had more than enough on our plate in Docklands. We knew there was at least the beginnings of a market there. We assessed that this would require taking on a designer who could pay for their own salary by doing 50% of their work as income generation, with the aid of Desktop Publishing technology. We had the Docklands Roadshow and there were other areas around the country facing similar kinds of developments - in fact Docklands was being used as the model - so there was a potential market there. If we couldn't use our bill-boards ourselves, then we could open them up for others to use. Not commercially, but by putting together funding packages which would include a fee to us, we could apply to bodies that would not fund us directly, either because of our overtly political stance or because a funding body was already revenue funding us and would not increase that. Using our skills and experience at creating exhibitions, we felt that we could offer that as a service more widely.

Our concerns, however, were firstly - how do we prevent the income generating tail from wagging the dog - and secondly what new skills do we need to develop both in terms of marketing and finance to make this work efficiently, without too much disruption of our main aims and objectives. We decided we needed help in this. And one of the features of funding bodies in 1990 was that they would give you extra money for consultancies but not for producing work. So we took advantage of that and did some research into what kind of consultancy we needed and fundraised for it.

The consultancy we opted for comprised an examination of our skills, resources and structure, and an appraisal of the kind of markets we wished to develop, in order to construct a three year development plan. In looking for the right consultant we felt it was important to have someone at least broadly sympathetic to our cultural and political objectives, but hard-headed enough to know what we were actually up against.

It is important to recognise at the outset, however, that consultants don't do it all for you. Firstly you have to invest a lot of time in the process. Secondly, you must be clear about which direction you wish to go in; if you are confused about this you can find yourselves being pulled into areas you do not wish to pursue by default. The survival instinct can blind you to contradictions very easily. It is vital that you give the consultants a firm brief. It is also crucial to be honest about your failings or areas of ignorance; it is too easy to slip into a tenancy to either 'present yourself in the best light' - a habit acquired by dealing with funding bodies - or to become defensive - the results of being demoralised and under resourced. We also took a series of short training courses aimed at voluntary organisations such as: Managing Crisis and Change, Time Management, Marketing and income generation, using computer technology and the new financial management techniques that income generation would require. I have to admit that I was at first somewhat skeptical of some of these - what did all this have to do with art - but in the event they proved very useful. After all, if you can become more efficient in doing

the essential but less creative tasks, you have more time to work creatively. This also armed us with additional tools to ensure that the consultancy developed in the direction we wanted to pursue. We also discovered that you have to stay on top of the financial planning when it comes to drawing up the development plan because most arts organisations have their own particular needs and processes born out of specific visual practices that may not exist elsewhere.

Armed with a three year development plan we were not only in a much stronger position to negotiate with our existing funding bodies, we were also able to approach the Arts Council for incentive funding to invest in new technology, to research and develop new areas of production and carry out a more targeted market appraisal. The result of this was an increase in our base funding - the first since the abolition of the GLC - and an award from the Arts Council that will go a long way in helping to consolidate our development plans.

### **The Art of Change**

Since we were no longer just operating in Docklands, and because we never were just a poster project we decided to change our name to reflect our new direction.

As the name implies, the new organisation utilises skills and experience both in visual production and the *issues* of change. This provides a vehicle for using the specificity of the knowledge we have gained while extending it into other contexts.

Central to this theme of change is the transformation of the urban environment and its impact upon quality of life, 'community' and cultural identity.

What we mean by 'community' here is important, since the word often associated with nostalgic or highly romanticised images of 'place'. This in our experience is not very useful, indeed it is counter productive within a dynamic of change. All communities are essentially communities of interest. The fact that this 'interest' may attach itself to a specific location in certain circumstances is not unimportant since this may involve issues of identity, especially when an area is undergoing major demographic change. Nevertheless, we do not regard this as the primary factor in defining a community. Community - as its root *communis* implies - is inextricably linked to communication. It is an identifiable 'sphere of discourse', with codes of inclusion and exclusion - a micro-culture - which is of necessity meshed with other spheres of culture and society, and engaged actively with them in a continual dynamic of change. As Raymond Williams says,

*"the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change".*

It is therefore this dynamic view of 'community', which may extend far beyond any particular location, engaging and interconnecting with other 'spheres of discourse', that we are concerned with developing in *The Art of Change*.

The impact of 'Urban Renewal' upon cultural identity is, as we have said, no longer just a localised matter. This is because the way our cities are transformed is no longer governed by local or even national interests, but increasingly by the need to facilitate international networks - what we have called 'The Digital Highways'.

Digital Highways are the Corporate lines of communication that crisscross the globe, spanning time zones, national boundaries and cultures. They link the financial centres of the world, dealing in electronic money transfer, carrying the information and value systems of multinational culture. Along these nodes of power come the technological hardware, the business practices and the steel and concrete infrastructures that support them. In short, they have a profound impact upon the communities and work places that immediately surround their nexus points and have a ripple effect in terms of the development or underdevelopment upon whole regions of the globe.

The perspectives of the Digital Highway are those of a minority, but a very powerful and increasingly internationalised one. They are undemocratic in their operations yet exert a major influence upon the democratic institutions, the "free markets", local culture and ecology of many nations. There is little place for the needs and concerns of local identities, disenfranchised minorities (or majorities for that matter), for non-western thinking, for difference of any kind. Its whole ethos is that of Western Modernism. And far from being "dead" as some Post-Modernists claim, it is currently engaged in major projects of Regeneration in cities around the world. To paraphrase Habermas: Modernism may be dead but, behind its facades of post-modernist architecture, it is certainly dominant.

What this means is that *The Art of Change*, if it is to visualise issues of Urban renewal and its impact upon cultural identity with any relevance, must broaden its focus, not only in terms of its products but in their distribution. As stated earlier, this process had already begun during the latter years of the *Docklands Community Poster Project* but as a 'secondary effect' of work done upon a primary site of production and distribution in London's Docklands. While it is important that we maintain our roots in this primary site as a direct source of experience and information, it is essential that we actively target the national and international arenas where these events are being played out. And not simply present oppositions but positive alternatives.

### **Income Generation Strategy**

We now have our new mission statement and aims, and the means - in terms of staffing, skills, organisational structure, facilities, policy and production objectives - to carry them out. But what does all this amount to in practical terms? Especially when we need to generate income and will therefore have to respond to 'demand led' pressures in a very different way than we have previously.

We have always been a 'demand led' organisation in the sense that it was in response to a direct request by community leaders in Docklands that the

*Docklands Community Poster Project* came into being. Similarly it was the demands of those communities that shaped the nature of our production and, by the presence of their representatives on our co-op, shaped our structure and policies. But those communities, while through their rates and taxes contributed to the public purse which funded the work, never paid directly *at the point of use*.

Now income generation requires that a significant proportion of our work should be paid for 'at the point of use'. What this means is that if we simply offer our visual skills to an amorphous market, responding to anyone who wants our services, then we shall lose our unique focus - and in market terms our Unique Selling Points - and become just another visual art & design service agency. In order to avoid this, TARGETING has to be the lynch-pin of our strategy. It also requires that we can effectively target, not only those interested and involved in the above issues but those in a position to pay for our services.

There is no doubt that such organisations and institutions exist and indeed some have already expressed an interest in our work. However, the largest and more established - and therefore those best placed to purchase our services - already produce their publicity and campaign materials in-house or have an existing arrangement with design agencies. Our strategy therefore must be three pronged:

1. We need to target the 'up and coming' organisations who have expanding needs and are open to new approaches.
2. We need to be aware of 'gaps in the market' which the more established organisations have not yet developed, so that we can offer our services as a new development that compliments their existing arrangements.
3. In the long term we need to develop a secure client base within the established sector that can provide regular and steady income.

It is clear that all three of these are 'developmental' strategies and will therefore take time to bear fruit. In the meantime we still need to generate income. In the short term this will mean that we shall have to risk a temporary diffusion of our central focus - effectively take what work we can get within limits - and engage in a degree of calculated risk and 'loss leading' to enable us to gain footholds in the more established markets.

## **Where we are now**

We currently offer our services under the following categories:

### **Design**

We offer a comprehensive design, layout and typographic service - from a letterhead to a complete book, from a logo to a billboard poster. Our in-house facilities include Apple Macintosh Desktop Publishing systems with a wide range

of software and typefaces, image scanning and PMT production , and the ability to translate IBM compatible material. We can also offer copy-writing, photography and illustration.

After a rather patchy start design work is now flowing in and with the kind of clients we wished to develop, such as Amnesty, London 2000, Anti-Racist and Rights organisations, Voluntary groups and Local Authority work, and a years publicity programming for the Gill Gallery.

### **Public Art Works**

We have ten years experience in producing large scale public art works, including giant photomurals, painted billboards, and bannerworks. We can also offer, through our *Community InSight* scheme, the use of our 18ft x 12ft billboard sites, together with use of workshop space, technical advice, community liaison and image consultancy. We are running a number of these schemes currently in local schools.

### **Campaigns and Events**

We have accumulated a great deal of experience in producing work for campaigns and events, utilising all the skills and media above to create an integrated approach from concept to final production, customised to suit the needs of the organisation and issues to be communicated. Whilst visual arts and graphic elements are common aspects of our work, we are also familiar with the organisational skills and, with *Place Designs* (see below), are able to create all the spatial and constructional elements that are integral to making a dramatic impact for a large event or festival.

### **Place designs**

We have a long standing working relationship with *Place Designs* who have a substantial track record in architectural design and can undertake the design and supervision of all special elements connected with the built environment, interior refurbishment and community architecture.

### **Exhibitions**

We have experience in the design and production of exhibition materials, ranging from small portable panels for display stands through to large installations. We are hiring out the *Docklands Roadshow* - a large exhibition documenting the lessons of ten years struggle in Docklands - to other areas affected by redevelopment. We can organise workshops to go with this, so that tenants can talk to other tenants groups, planners can talk to planners etc. And we have in fact just completed a major installation on the theme of "Digital Highways" for the Agnes Etherington Art Centre in Kingston, Canada, as part of an international conference - "Fragmented Power: Art Voices for 2000". The exhibition includes Photomurals and other elements from the Roadshow, and we were commissioned to do a new installation work that extends the whole length of the gallery ( 65ft). This installation includes the use of laser beams, moving pixel

message boards, live TV monitors suspended from the ceiling, floor drawings, a 9ft x 12ft Photomural produced on computer, a 5ft x 12ft free-standing image, slide projection and a 4-track sound piece.

In conclusion, we have turned the very gloomy scenario that existed two years ago into one which, at the moment, looks very optimistic. There is still a great deal of hard work to be done but we now believe that *The Art of Change* is firmly on its way.

┆Peter Dunn Dec 91