

Paper: ENGAGE: Interaction, Art and Audience Experience
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from:

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(paper for presentation with image slides)

Global Town Square (2000- Present)

how new technologies can involve communities in the regeneration process in a manner that is inclusive and transferable.

Project Summary

Global Town Square is in effect a 'social sculpture'. Participants across a broad age range and spectrum of social and cultural backgrounds are involved in visioning 'Futures' for themselves and their communities through a workshop process, using traditional, lens-based and digital media. These 'Futures' become part of the virtual Town Square – a website with a Forum for discussion, linked with other participating communities – and in the Physical Town Square they are projected on an interactive 'mega-screen' and linked to a range of other convergent systems. Elements of the physical environment become interactive, operating like a keyboard or mouse to: access information, discover different displays of futures, use simple voting systems, or just have fun. Importantly, the project works in partnership with regeneration authorities, so visions can become reality. Workshop facilitators are given induction into workshop practices, child and vulnerable persons protection, and special needs issues. Through partnerships with education and training providers, participants are offered 'pathways to learning and employment', thus developing their personal futures while contributing to their communities' futures. This combination of art and new technologies involves people in the regeneration of their towns and neighbourhoods in a new way, with the aim of creating a model which is sustainable and transferable to other towns and communities. As each new site is developed, they are linked via the Forum, opening the possibility for sharing ideas and issues.

The model will provide an innovative bottom up approach to regeneration which is culture led and inclusive, offering new departures in citizenship and community stake-holding. It engages cultural industries in the domain of the civic, and seeks to create a focus of debate for academics, community and youth organisations, regeneration and government authorities, and artists and designers of the built environment to interrogate, challenge and apply to improve upon current practices in the field.

Many of the building blocks of the model are already in place, developed through existing projects; what the current research will provide is the means to pull all these elements together into a coherent transferable model that can fulfil its potential and disseminate its benefits and challenges more widely.

Social context (UK perspective)

Interactive systems in public spaces have the potential to redefine The Civic; to enhance citizenship, tackle cultural and social exclusion and to engage the arts and publics in new and exciting relationships. Convergent technologies are impacting on the workplace, particularly in the Creative Industries, and the markets in mobile communications devices are racing ahead, mainly aimed at the youth entertainment sector through mobile phone and I-pods (soon to become visual). Why then, in our public places, do we see little more than 'smart' notice boards or animated advertising? There appears to be scant evidence of any holistic thinking about how these technologies can be introduced into our environments or how they might impact upon it. Current planning legislation and policies appear inadequately framed to deal with any potential onslaught (as witnessed in the US and Japan). We have a small window in which to research, create alternative models and initiate policy debates.

We believe that this initiative is timely because all the major companies using electronics have labs researching convergence - a range of 'smart' devices from personal to public communication systems, from working ICT tools to home entertainment systems and functional devices emerging across all areas of our environment. Alongside this – and perhaps in response to an increasingly alienated and functionally brutal environment – there is a growing rekindling of interest in the hand-made, craft-based, traditional skills and processes. The fusions created by such apparent contradictory trends have found a sympathetic home in Sustainability - once seen as 'alternative' and now rapidly becoming part of the mainstream. We see these trends also emerging in major Regeneration Strategies (e.g. Thames Gateway which is now also key to the 2012 Olympics Regeneration and 'Legacy Strategy') where the role of Cultural Industries is now being recognised as having key importance, not only in terms of quality of life and environmental improvement but crucially as an economic generator. The concepts of 'life-long learning' and the 'Learning City' are no longer just part of educational parlance but are becoming key elements of regeneration policies and

'citizenship'. There is however a large gap between rhetoric and practice and practice on the ground.

Project Context and History

This project is not a purely theoretical construct, it has evolved from a practice that has engaged with regeneration issues since the late seventies, exploring the social impacts of New Town developments (Ruislip and Peterlee): *The Present Day Creates History*. 1977/8) through the protest movements in London's Docklands (Docklands Project 1979-89) to the public art works of *The Art of Change* ('89- 2000)

The current phase – Global Town Square - developed out of this experience, into more pro-active, culture-led, bottom-up initiatives, utilising convergent and sustainable technologies in the process and production of publicly engaged artworks. Two current projects have aimed to develop this idea since 2000 - 'Futuretown and Beyond', in Gravesend, Kent, and 'Poplar Futures', in Poplar, East London (see www.futuretownandbeyond.co.uk and www.poplarfutures.org).

The project involves people in a process of imagining their 'futures' through a range of images - drawings paintings models, lens-based and digital media - and texts and to create a dialogue with regeneration agencies. It is key that this dialogue is pro-active rather than re-active (as it was with the Docklands Community Poster Project for example) because we are not fighting a rear-guard action and on the defensive but putting the communities ideas onto the agenda before the developers have completed their proposals. GTS is the space where these 'futures' are published, is both archive and active resource, and a structure through which that dialogue can take place. This can be broadly divided into a two stage process.

Stage 1: Visions, Networks, Partnerships.

The first step in the process (initiated in Gravesend in 2000) was to set up a steering group representing all the main partners¹. This group gave us our initial networking and through their contacts, mailings and news-letters, together with the Council's lists of tenants and community organisations, we publicised the project and invited participation. During the first month we contacted 27 local schools and made presentations. Later we repeated the process with community groups. We circulated draft briefing notes for teachers and workshop facilitators, followed by an 'inset day' where we worked through the workshop processes with them and refined the briefing notes.

¹ In Gravesend this comprised: a Kent Thameside (Regeneration) representative and former Gravesham Borough Council (GBC) Chief Exec; GBC arts leisure officer, English Heritage Education Officer ; TownCenTRIC (Tourism, Regeneration Information Centre) Education and Events Manager; and TownCenTRIC & Kent Thameside Committee Member; the Town Centre Manager; Environmental Regeneration Manager for GBC; Observers from the funding bodies.

The core process resides in the 'visioning' workshops where experienced artists and communicators work with participants to develop ideas for the future of their area, are encouraged to go beyond initial stereotypes, critique the issues and refine ideas in order to communicate their 'visions'. Workshop participants are asked to identify and explore a 'site' somewhere close and of significance to them – e.g. around their home or a place they see as a central focus for their community, the town centre or market area. They are asked to think what they feel is 'not working for them', or 'missing', and from there to establish options for change. They also undertake a series of 'blue-sky' thinking sessions to see if there is an idea, an aspiration or desire that had not been recognised or expressed so far. Participants are encouraged to start from their own experience, then develop their idea more broadly by thinking about the impact of the environment on other people (for example, the elderly or differently-abled). They do not have to take cost into account in developing their idea, though in some cases – particularly with more experienced participants - they may be encouraged to think about whether it might be expensive or take a long time to implement. Having established their preferred option for change, they then explore the best way of presenting this, to communicate as clearly and precisely as possible:

- What they want to change
- What it will look like
- How will it make things better
- How will people behave or benefit as a result.

Workshops have inputs from local colleges and training agencies so that participants may see opportunities for further learning and training – pathways for their personal futures is developed alongside their contributions to the communities visions. During the first workshop phase, over 400 participants took part in Gravesend and over 300 in Poplar, and similar numbers have participated in the two successive phases.

We began to explore these 'pathways' more intensively this year with smaller 'hard-to-reach' groups from the Bangladeshi and Somali communities in Poplar. This was done through workshops at the 'Ideas Stores'² and other localised venues in the network; included 'taster sessions' in collaboration with arts and cultural industries courses; with 'buddying' and peer-mentoring with students from partner institutions; workplace placements or exchanges through partner organisations³.

² The 'Ideas Stores' are a new initiative in the London Borough of Tower Hamlets. They are effectively a 'library for the 21st Century'. As well as lending books, CDs, DVD's Videos etc, they are an 'internet café', have learning labs where they run courses for their constituent communities and where organisations can run workshops.

³ This is a 'Pilot' funded through the Flexible Discretionary Fund, Department of Works and Pensions UK. We have established commitments of involvement from: Tower Hamlets College, the Curriculum Co-ordinator for the Idea Stores, and the Life-long Learning Co-ordinator for

Participants, from a range of ages and backgrounds, upload their 'futures' onto a specially designed website in each area – currently in Gravesend and Poplar. Visible Local Identities become the key to locating these virtual spaces, each group designs its own cyberspace 'portal', and the sites are linked via an electronic forum, so that ideas from different areas can be compared and debated. There is also a digital postcard facility that enables participants or visitors to the site to select an image, add a message, and email it. In Gravesend, hard-copy exhibitions were also exhibited in the Town's Information and Regeneration Centre, annually after each phase, and were attended by the Mayor and key department heads.

A range of Regeneration and other partners are involved in sponsoring the project, either financially or through participation⁴. As part of 'signing up' to the project, these authorities agree to develop or implement proposals, wherever practical or possible.

We plan to extend the project to other areas of East London where four new 'Ideas Stores' are opening over the next three years and by extending our Network of Partners. We also aim to develop partnerships with 2012 Olympic Cultural Action Plan via their core themes: 'Community and cultural engagement', 'Building capacity and forming partnerships', 'Securing a desirable legacy' and 'Connecting the Gateway – integrating the cultural component of Thames Gateway regeneration.

Stage 2 Site Transformations:

This involves identifying a physical 'forum' for Global Town Square where ideas can be displayed and interactive prototypes tested. In Gravesend this is sited at the Garrick Street Transport Interchange – currently this is where people wait for buses and is next to the train station, but there are plans to combine the two functions. Here we have created an interactive outdoor projection system – a 6m screen with a ground-level 'pod' activated by thermal (hand heat) system to alter displays and to execute simple voting mechanisms. This is run in collaboration with TOWNCENTRIC (the Tourism, Regeneration Information Centre).

London Borough of Tower Hamlets. The 'Buddying Pilot' is funded through University of Westminster 'Innovations & Widening Participation' programme.

⁴ Partners to date have included: ART.e @ the art of change, University of Westminster, Greenwich University Regeneration Dept and Cultural Industries BA, Tower Hamlets College Outreach and Regeneration and Life long learning, English Heritage Education, Electrosonic PLC, Media Projects Associates, British Telecom's Research Unit at Ipswich, Gravesham Borough Council, Kent Thameside, Leaside Regeneration, London Borough of Tower Hamlets (arts, youth, Ideas Stores Co-ordination). We have a participant network that has created over 900 'Visions' in Gravesend, and over 600 in Poplar. East London.

We launched the system with a 'festival of light and renewal', running from Diwali in November through all the diverse cultural festivals including Christmas, the Chinese New Year in February and the Muslim New Year in March ⁵. This created over 300 images, some attached to these traditional festivals but many just exploring the theme in any way they they chose. This was followed by an exploration of the site where the projector was installed – community proposals for the Transport Interchange – these were put along side the draft ideas of the architects commissioned to develop the scheme. Later proposals for a Cultural Quarter around the market and old town were explored. Currently the images used are animated 'stills with text' but the system has the capacity for full-motion video and this will be explored in future projects, possibly through mini-festivals of 'moving image'.

In Poplar we use the Market Square, working with Leaside Regeneration and the Poplar 'Ideas Store'. A similar large outdoor projection system has been established there on the side of a tower block, adjacent to the Ideas Store. This will shortly become interactive (September 06) but with the addition of mobile phone activation and with the ability to download certain materials onto mobiles, or upload materials from mobiles onto the projection system – the latter within a defined project context. We also intend to create a touch-screen activation on the glass frontage to the Ideas Store itself.

While the websites have a 'forum' to aid dialogues across communities, these have previously been under used. We have recently received funding from Children In Need to work specifically to develop this area and have begun work on a project designed around using the forum to get dialogues going between participating groups in the two towns. For child-protection reasons this is restricted to registered participants, so outsiders cannot communicate directly with the young people involved. However, we are also creating a separate open forum for visitors to the site.

These are the first steps in what we see as a more developed Global Town Square in the next Phase, where elements of the physical environment can be activated through a range of convergent systems, pressure-pads, break-beams etc - acting like a keyboard or mouse - to entertain, stimulate, inform and educate through a range of hardware and software prototypes. As well as creating these through the processes discussed above we shall also seek to curate a range of festivals and events foregrounding uses of art and technologies. By demonstrating the potential of this aspect of the model we believe the potential host locations of Global Town Square can be promoted as a place of innovation

⁵ A period that also included: Ramadan (Muslim), the Birthday of Baha'u'llah (Baha'is), Shichi-gosan (Japanese Shinto), Birthday of Guru Nanak (Sikh), Hanukah (Jewish) Bodhi day (Buddhist) through the winter solstice, Advent, Christmas and New year (Christian), Ganjitsu (Japanese new year) through the Chinese New Year (Yuan Tan) and Teng Chieh (lantern Festival) in February, to the Muslim New Year (Al-hijra) in March.

for creative use and democratic engagement with new forms of 'Architechnology' (combining 'place' design with interactive technology interfaces).

Objectives for the next phase

The project thus far has been shaped in a piecemeal fashion by the necessity to develop it within the constraints of public arts project funding for discrete elements, all of which required specific outcomes and emphasised practical rather than research outcomes. For the project to realise its full potential, sound and systematic research is essential at this point in its evolution to refine and refocus the project holistically.

We will evaluate the lessons, strengths and weakness of our twenty years of practice in the art and regeneration realm, particularly in the two models of 'Global Town Square' developed in Gravesend and Poplar, East London since 2000. The next phase will seek to create a customisable and robust model of how citizens can contribute to and promote potential 'Futures' for their communities and town centres in a manner that is inclusive and sustainable. Through this social, virtual and physical transformation of the 'town square', we aim to contribute to debates and action on social inclusion, community development and urban regeneration, and increase the awareness for the creative potential of new technologies in the public realm.

The main objectives for this phase are to:

- Develop a working prototype offering a diversity of interactive systems, integrated with art and architectural forms in a holistic design setting that is based around the existing large-scale, interactive outdoor projection systems in Gravesend and Poplar, East London
- Curate festivals and events that bring a range of temporary installations and activities into 'town square sites', including for example moving image, mobile phone upload/download, convergent interactive forms incorporating lighting and sound.
- Consolidate the 'Pathways to Learning' for workshop participants via collaborations from partner institutions in the workshops in order to evaluate and more particularly to identify the processes required to make these transferable and customisable in other contexts.
- Extend the current Network of Partners in the next phase by focusing particularly on the academic, research and development fields where we can draw upon more in-depth involvement with the partners we already have and also research new contacts.

- Produce materials in the form of publications and a resource pack that will disseminate the work of the project widely and enable the model to be transferable.

Schedule for the Next Phase

The following could be compressed with additional funding or a major commission such as the Olympics. We are currently embarked on Year One of this schedule and seeking funding for follow-on phases. The actions outlined in any given year represent when they will become a major focus, though some of these activities may be happening already and may be ongoing throughout the whole period. Indeed the process of testing, feedback and modification, is a cyclical one.

Year One.

- **Hardware Developments:** will focus on upgrading the current GTS on-site technologies (interactive projection system) in order to support the new 'modules' that we will be testing.
- Research ICT companies and research institutions via electronic databases and trade publications – the field of convergence especially – to establish what appropriate new technologies exist and what trajectories their research is taking, to identify possible collaborations
- Conduct a literature review of the uses of communications technologies in public spaces
- Research policy from local authority (planning and Highways particularly) and national government sources to establish what if any impact assessment or strategic thinking there is on the issue of Interactive technologies in public places.
- Fieldwork to determine: how these technologies are being used in public places 'on the ground', what the policy for their introduction is, if any, is there consistency and who is responsible for decisions?
- Assess the process of Visioning Workshops with participating organisations as a means of developing 'Futures' proposals effectively through the technologies used.
- Test the use of the website Forum as an effective vehicle for communications between participants, both locally and between sites.

Year Two

- We will begin bench-testing new hardware systems. including site testing the modules developed in year 1 and - from our research - begin round 2 of bench testing.
- * Review research findings in year one and establish more focused strands of research to be followed in year 2 (within those above categories or if additional ones need to be added)
- Make presentations to potential 'host authorities' to establish interest in the proposed model.

- Hold seminars and discussion groups for appropriate interest areas, for example: regeneration and related issues, interactive methodologies, cultural geography, arts, architecture, design and ICT.

Year Three

- We will finalise bench-testing of hardware and conclude site testing to establish user feedback and robustness of the overall model.
- Create prototype interactive artworks to establish how accessible, flexible, desirable and robust their systems are in public contexts
- Feedback to local authorities and government departments, the results of our research and possible recommendations on policy for uses of interactive technologies in public places.
- Further research and testing to establish the most appropriate website structures and their relationship to interactive modules on site for clarity, use and accessibility of the content generated,
- Focus interviews with both participants and partners to establish if the processes they were involved in provided useful experiences and met expectations, to establish areas of practice requiring improvements.
- Develop and test a prototype introduction 'pack' with potential users
- * Publish our findings within the research community and those engaged in art and regeneration issues

Monitoring and Evaluation

This will be carried out by experienced and respected external monitoring and evaluation experts: Eileen Adams – who has work with major agencies such as the Arts Council and NESTA and Vanessa Bone of Creative Cultures. The findings will be fed back to partners and be part of the dissemination to a wider audience so that it can be used as a tool for improving practice and developing the field. The evaluation seeks not only to witness and celebrate, but also to challenge and question in order to stimulate and support development; it will report on the process of change and development in order to support the activities and to identify learning outcomes that are transferable.

The report will enable participants to see how they contributed, give funders and those responsible for the project impartial feedback on the processes of design and development. An illustrated publication (paper and electronic) will explain how strategies and working relationships can transfer to other settings. This will be of particular value to artists working in community settings, community groups, council officers, businesses and funders.

Methods of evaluation will include strategies and techniques that partners can use to generate evidence, reflect on their practice and comment on their experience.

By using the focus of Art, Creativity and ICT and our 'Visioning Workshops' we will present this model as a 'bottom up' approach to regeneration and contribute our findings and experiences into regeneration debates among local authorities and public sector; to artists, designers, academics and educationalists who wish to research and develop similar kinds of initiatives, and to contribute to new departures for Cultural Industries in the domain of the 'Civic'.