

CONFERENCE NOTES:

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This time last week I was in Detroit - a city which gave birth to the automobile, now destroyed by the automobile. Its downtown area is devastated and hideous, a glimpse of some post apocalyptic future. Except the apocalypse was not the result some war or bombing - even though you couldn't be blamed for believing it was - it has been a merciless decline.

The automobile interests which dominated the town, providing most of its public buildings, hospitals, cultural institutions and amenities, refused to allow the development of a public transport system. Instead great boulevards and six lane highways were constructed, carving up neighbourhoods, creating deep concrete ravines.

People moved out to the suburbs and left the centre to commerce and the car. The economy crashed, particularly the car economy, leaving a cracked and potholed concrete desert.

The boulevards and highways are almost deserted and the poor (and immobile) are marooned amid the decay and segregated by these concrete ravines. Detroit is also one of the most racially segregate US cities.

People from the suburbs cruise though these threatening spaces in their 'hummys' - customised ex-military, four wheel drive vehicles that look as if they could withstand a mortar attack. It makes them feel safe and cool, in a Mad Max fantasy-world.

Of course we all know about inner city blight. It's certainly not a new concept, although I have to say that - despite the fact that I have seen many cities and I'm familiar with the phenomenon - I hadn't experienced anything quite like this.

But this is the physical city, the visible city. And what I want to discuss today is the *invisible city*. I'm not just talking about the sewage systems, the telephone lines, fibre optic cables, or even the radio and micro wave signals that weave their invisible web across the city. I'm talking about cultural exchange and the visible signs and symbols of that dialogue.

This is what we might call the Ephemeral City. It is here that new fusions are created that nourish, revitalise and regenerate the city.

From this flux, *visibility* confers value and recognition - inclusivity.

Going back to Detroit for a moment - they have their fine museums endowed by the Ford Family. But all that remains of the thriving black culture that provided the workforce for such economic empires is the Motown Museum

in a little house that was once the power-house of a cultural dialogue that shaped a whole generation.

This is not the place to do it, but there is an argument to be made that the music revolution which Motown pioneered broke through the racial barriers of the segregated music charts, created positive role models - 'say it loud I'm black and I'm proud' - and enabled the dialogue between black and white youth which helped broaden the base of the civil rights movement.

Motown moved out, the many talents it had harvested lost their channels for expression and Detroit slipped back into segregation. As I said Detroit is now regarded as one of the most segregated cities in the US.

Detroit has many lessons, but what I want to emphasize today is that the suppression of cultural exchange and particularly the visibility which confirms its value is to break down the very fabric of the city itself.

These visible signs and symbols are crucial to the quality of urban life, they provide the resonances of how we live and the value of that life. They are as important as economic activity in that they sustain our spirits, give us pleasure in the present and hope for the future.

When they are absent, then economic activity without seeing and feeling the benefits is a promise postponed or taken out of reach - the visible signs and symbols of a dominant monoculture become an insult, heightening cynicism and resentment.

The result is fragmentation, cultural and racial tension, rigidising of social and economic discourse. In short, urban crisis.

The second and equally important invisible part of the city is its ecological footprint. (this is the area outside the city that is needed to sustain it - food production, water, clean air etc.)

I say it is invisible but as the sustainability of our cities move into crisis the ecological footprint becomes visible in a negative sense - food is contaminated, water is poisoned, and air is polluted.

Now I don't have the time to go into the ramifications of all that or to offer solutions - if indeed I had them.

All I can do is to tell you what we are doing in a small way as artists at The Art of Change to try and grapple with some of these issues.

Public art has not had a particularly positive role in the process of regeneration. It is often used as a band-aid for badly designed public spaces or urban deprivation, and is often an exercise in gilding the ghetto.

Regeneration authorities seldom have sufficient funds to truly regenerate materially and economically, so public art is used as a means of creating the right climate for the holy grail of market-led investment, which most people now recognise as a myth of Thatcher-Reaganism.¹

And in most cases, the plonking of artworks usually designed for gallery contexts without holistically considering a site results in bad aesthetic solutions, negative public response, and often contributes to cultural fragmentation rather than dialogue.

(Show Slides here - start with projects about cultural identity through to Public Art Strategies and commissions, end on Wymering Project and importance of Agenda 21)

We believe it is time to move beyond a practice wrapped in the myth of the heroic artist attempting to create an heroic oasis of aesthetics in an increasingly alienated environment.

By their very nature these questions require an interdisciplinary approach and an international dimension.

To this end we are in the process of establishing the *International Institute of Art, Ecologies, Cultures and Change* (working title).

This would initially be an action research think tank of artists, architects, cultural and media theorists, ecologists, sociologists, technologists, and software programmers.

It would use the focus of Agenda 21² to research new definitions and relationships between art and cultures in postcolonial globalism, art and environment in a post-industrial world, and art and society in the age of electronic communications systems.

The aim would be to develop new processes, new materials, new uses, and new ways of relating for the approaching millennium.

The think tank would begin as an Art of Change project with possible financing from Lottery funding. In the long term, however, the institute would become an independent entity, but attached to a university.³

Educationally such an institute would seek to establish new methodologies and structures for learning, utilising multidisciplinary approaches and the tools of new communications technology, linking communities and constituencies of interest, training centres, and academic institutions.

Action Research

This is the key to the whole and is the logical extension of the 'think tank'. The Institute may initiate projects, respond to opportunities or take commissions.

The specific nature of the problems or issues raised will determine what disciplines may be needed for a 'core team' which can draw in other specialists as and when required.

As well as focusing on 'real world' needs and requirements such projects will aim to provide 'models' of approach and practice for wider dissemination, can be used as a vehicle for student placements, research opportunities, and a possible source of income generation .

The international dimension (INIFAE) provides the possibility of extending the boundaries of research and projects, sharing resources and knowledge, providing cross-national comparisons, international exchanges and placements.

Its objectives are:

- ¥ To explore interdisciplinary approaches to change in our environment, culture and communications;
- ¥ To develop a transnational network of organisations, institutions, groups and projects working on these or related issues;
- ¥ To activate and promote creative potential, both in the makers and users of social space whether it be physical, symbolic or virtual.
- ¥ To encourage and explore sustainable practices and processes for the built environment and create 'model projects' of this for wider dissemination.
- ¥ To find new models of communication
- ¥ To address, explore and analyse emerging technologies
- ¥ To develop new working fields, training and educational models which can contribute to the Agenda of the 21st Century.
- ¥ To evolve a critical framework in which such practices and models can be assessed, analysed, more widely debated and disseminated.
- ¥ Central to its goals is an art practice that is sustainable, empowering, and capable of reintroducing "beauty" into our society as we approach the challenges of a new century.

¹We are talking about our experience in Britain, particularly with government sponsored City Challenge initiatives, urban development corporations and housing action trusts, although we believe there are similar examples in the United States.

²Agenda 21 has specific goals and outcomes that the signatory nations agreed to meet. As well as dealing with more traditional "green" issues such as ozone, recycling, and energy conservation, Agenda 21 talks about economic and *cultural* sustainability—identity, stake-holding, and "ownership". A model project is a declaration of good practice in applying Agenda 21 principles, ranging from building materials and techniques used, through to the involvement of the community in consultation and participation in the construction of the project, building or artwork.

³We are currently in discussions with the University of East London, with the University of California (Davis), and with the International Institute of Art and Environment (INIFAE), which is a pan-European training and educational organization.