

Changing View of Public Spaces Conference

Royal College of Art, London.

Audience & Narrative.

Peter Dunn 1999

I'm go'nna tell you a story.....Once upon a time.....

Once upon a time a famous Film Director walked onto the glittering stage at the Oscar ceremony - two nights ago in fact - the director was Martin Scorscasie - and he paused before the audience, they waited, he smiled,

"I'm go'nna tell you a story" he said....pausing again...."Once upon a time...."

The audience sat amused and spellbound - Ok it was Martin Scorscasie - but it was also about context: he was riding on the wave of Hollywood spectacle, the glitz, the visual feast of it all. But he also knew his audience very well - he was part of them - and he knew exactly how to play them - that's showbiz - and in true Hollywood style he concluded with a happy ending.

Now I'm not saying that art is, or should be like that - although in its more recent excursions into the media, there's more than a little showbiz involved - but nevertheless it is about engaging people and there are some parallels around the importance of context, knowing and being part of the audience.

But now I'm go'nna tell you another story - talking about a number of different ways of engaging with people.

It's about the Wymering Project in Portsmouth, I've chosen this because it gets closest so far to the more holistic approach we at The Art of Change are trying to develop.

Unlike some of the those we'll discuss LATER, it's not a photographic project. But I'm using it as an example of process here.

From there I'm going to raise some more general principles and concerns about the process of engagement, - about interactivity and new narrative structures, how identities are shifting within new relations between the global and local, the impact of emerging technologies - particularly around communications - and finally , I hope, a happy ending.

So here we go....Once upon a time, about two years ago, I was asked to speak at another conference - Portsmouth Tomorrow.

Instead of just asking me to talk about our work, they asked if I'd spend a week working with Wymering Community Association - who had just received sports lottery funding for a new community and sports centre.

At first I was a bit dubious about what could be achieved in such a short period of time - but I thought that here is community already focused on change, and they may be therefore be open to widening the scope of that change.

I was right. They had a lot of energy, commitment and ideas.

The first problem however was that - although they had capital for the building, they weren't sure at that time about revenue to run the place.

So my first concern was to address the economic base - if they don't know if they can run the building they may see involving art as something of a diversion - at least in the first instance.

We discussed (from my experience of working with community groups in Docklands) issues around community economy. And from their into issues of sustainability and Agenda 21
- how the building might be designed, without significant increase in cost , to reduce energy and running costs.

We then went on to discuss other aspects of Agenda 21 - that it concerns issues of community identity, stakeholding etc. and some ways that could be used to give what was essentially an off-the-shelf council building, an identity, their identity.

From there we discussed ways of doing that - thinking about the important 'narratives' of the place around its past, present and future. How different generations they perceive their identity. How that particular community fits into and is perceived by the rest of Portsmouth and how it linked, as a port, to the global in the past and it's painful transition into the future- (closure of the docks, unemployment etc.)

We also talked about things such as how you would approach the physical site, what they wished to be seen at what stages to project the images, the statements they wished to make.

It was also useful that there was an enthusiastic Agenda 21 officer at the council who took the project to heart and helped in all kinds of ways. AND A COMMITTED ARTS OFFICER - CHRIS CARRELL - WHO PUSHED THINGS THROUGH IN THE COUNCIL

To cut a long story short, the ideas were presented at the conference, the Arts Development Officer was enthusiastic about them and I was asked back to develop them further;
After more discussions with the Community Association - "We want it all" - it was decided to develop an Arts lottery bid.

Once the project - the opportunity - was created other artists were introduced into the process through a weekend of brainstorming where it was decided

who would further explore the sites and concepts developed with the community.

The artists, as we recommended, were funded by City Arts to further develop these ideas themselves, directly with the Community Association and through a series of workshops involving the wider community, changing and developing them as they saw fit.

The artists were actively encouraged and funded to develop their ideas and if necessary change the initial brief - the only condition was that they did this in consultation with the community. And there was agreement that where possible Agenda 21 principles should be adopted.

VISIT TO MACyNLLETH - CENTRE for ALTERNATIVE TECH -
COUNCILLORS, COMMUNITY ASSOCIATION, ARTISTS, DESIGN SERVICE
- CONSULTANCY TO REDESIGN OF BUILDING ACCORDING TO AGENDA
21 PRINCIPLES.

NAME ARTISTS AND WHAT THEY DEVELOPED: 7 projects

TREE OF LIFE

WYMERING WALL/EARTHWORKS - PETER CODLING

PATHWAY AND BRIDGE - JANIS SHALES

WALL HANGINGS/REMINISCENCE - DOT TO DOT - ANNA POTTERN/JUNE
HEAP

The team of artists all learned from each other, from the input of the Community, and Agenda 21 specialists - which is why we regard it as a basis for future ways of working.

A Project Co-ordinator from the community was employed to act as liaison, organise workshops, venues, publicity etc. during the R & D phase.

(The Art of Change prepared cash flows and schedules on information provided by the individual artists, co-ordinated materials and wrote the Lottery Bid, liaised with City Council and arranged 'milestone meetings' between artists, Leisure Services and Design Services to ensure that what the artists were planning could be fitted in with Building schedules and written into contracts, health and safety conditions etc.)

From the outset it was established that the Community Association was the commissioner; the lottery money goes to them and they pay the artists (including The Art of Change).

Evaluation is being done by Commedia - Francois Matarasso - who entered into the spirit of the whole thing and - through a series of workshops - established what indicators for monitoring and evaluation should be drawn up to measure success, qualitatively, in terms seen as relevant to all those involved at various stages. For example, on an individual/personal level, at group level - the Community Association - the impact upon the wider

community of Wymering, how the artworks may impact upon their own perceptions of their community, how it might affect how other communities - Portsmouth - might regard them. How it might link to the Portsmouth Harbour Millennium. If the project may have any national or international ramifications. It's being monitored at various stages, and concluding a year after the works are installed.

And now for the Happy Ending:
the project Scored 10 out of 10 for Community Involvement from the Lottery Board - a first nationally - and we got nearly half a million quid. It's still in progress, and it's not been without its ups and downs, but we're still hoping for the happy ending in the autumn of this year.

Now, what was going on in this story - can we draw some general principles from it:

The way we involve people is of course customised according to the particularity of each project, however some common threads can be identified

Structuring engagement : what we call a 'New Narrative' Approach (not quite back to "Once upon a time").

This is an approach derived from debates around photography and new media, an approach based upon non-linearity and customisation.

Whether it is a Billboard Project, a CD ROM, an net project or a Public Art Project like Wymering , our approach is - through consultation - to create a framework, a matrix of information related to an overarching concept or theme

- in this case Agenda 21 pulled together the local and global, with interweaving narrative strings from history, future aspirations, the relationships between generations - a whole range of identity issues.

This matrix then becomes the vessel for specific inputs from other participants - these may be other professionals, artists, or those who have specialist knowledge or first hand experience of the issues or themes being explored

(i.e. active members of a constituency or 'community of interest' - in this case the community of Wymering)

These participants input in a 'site specific' way - site specific in this sense is not simply physical or geographic but more in the Foucault's sense (as a node or 'position' in spheres of intersecting discourses, of the particular, the social, ideological, of local and global ripples of power).

(REF TO DIFFERENCE BETWEEN PHOTO DEBATES & CONVENTIONAL PUBLIC ART APPROACH TO 'SITE')

It is this specificity that introduces the lived, complex and changing representations and signifiers which provide 'meaning' and a sense of the 'authentic' for those participating.

Those who interact with this matrix, whether they be directly producing or consuming are nevertheless actively engaged in customising their 'journey' through the matrix, in making their own 'sense' of the narrative which they create or navigate for themselves - either in the making of the work or visiting it after completion.

In our work we have identified THREE MAIN LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT

1. Primary - those involved quite closely in production processes
-either in intellectual production - constructing meanings in consultation/collaboration
- or involvement in the physical construction of the work or elements within it or indeed both

2. Secondary - Wider public who may interact directly with the work but more in the role of 'consumers' either actively or passively

3. Tertiary - through different medium:
trade/art mags, through forms of documentation, slide-talks,lectures, conferences etc - usually with specialist audiences

There is also an issue here about 'communities' and constituencies - some definition is called for.

- as far as we are concerned there are only 'communities of interest'.

Classical sociology divides communities into three types:
geographic communities
communities of identity
and communities of interest

However, we believe - with Raymond William's - that 'community' is a dynamic process inextricably bound to the process of communication

- just because people live in the same geographic location doesn't make them a community, and just because people are ascribed an identity - for example black or gay - does not make them a community - not until they choose to engage with others in exploring, challenging or redefining that identity.

As Raymond Williams says in *Culture & Society*

"The process of communication is the process of community: the sharing of common meanings and thence common activities and purposes"

- (these are the sustaining elements which nurture and consolidate meanings, norms and values);

- - "*the reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change*".

(these are the transformative elements - "the reception and achievements, leading to the tension and achievements of growth and change - which generate aims and goals - direct its becoming.

This concept of community is not sited in neighbourhoods, although 'place' can be a focus for it.

It is a dynamic of interlocking and overlapping spheres of discourse. A tension between inclusion and exclusion.

It is also important to *implicate ourselves* in this process..... we need to implicate ourselves because there is a lot of 'they' terminology used when discussing 'community' - from this view communities are euphemisms for those who are a problem, the marginalised, disaffected, deprived, incompetent.

It avoids the fact that the communities or constituencies we may belong to are in competition for resources with those 'other' communities; that we win, they lose.

It's more comforting to regard 'them' as being in a different category: a more simple, less sophisticated, sometimes even in a kind of 'noble savage' category that we can feel sorry for, do-good to, but not implicate ourselves in....

The process of implicating ourselves is quite simple to say, less simple to do:

- 1) recognise what communities or constituencies we actually belong to,
- 2) those we want to belong to or ally ourselves with,
- 3) identify other constituencies or communities who may be open to dialogue and exchange - to network.

This means making choices and being clear about them. You can't please everyone. If you are an artist working in the public domain, it goes without saying that anything that you do which is in any way challenging is going to generate hostility from some quarters.

One community's celebration can be another's provocation.

And this brings us to the thorny issue of identity

The question of Identity is crucial. And identity has to be distinguished from the usual questionnaire approach which focuses on roles, economic banding and simplistic tick boxes of ethnic origin and the like (which brings us to evaluation which we've already touched on).

Roles (worker, mother, union member, militant, conservative - these can refer to the same person at different times). Roles are about organising functions (forgrounded by industrialisation), identities organise meanings. (meaning defined (by Castells) as symbolic identification by a social actor of the purpose of her/his action)

For most, identity is organised around a primary identity - an ID that frames all others - but does not exclude other miscellaneous, strategic or contingent identities.

As Manuel Castells says in *The Rise of the Network Society*:

"In a world of uncontrolled, confusing change, people tend to regroup around primary identities: religious, ethnic, territorial, national....

...In a world of global flows of wealth, power, and images, the search for identity, collective or individual, ascribed or constructed, becomes a fundamental source of social meaning.....

..identity is becoming the main, and sometimes only, source of meaning in a historical period characterised by widespread destructuring of organisations, delimitation of institutions, fading away of major social movements, and ephemeral cultural expressions.....

..Meanwhile, on the other hand, global networks of instrumental exchanges selectively switch on and off individuals, groups, religions, and even countries, according to their relevance in fulfilling the goals processed in the network, in a relentless flow of strategic decisions...Our societies are increasingly structured around a bipolar opposition between the Net and the Self".

The construction of identities uses building materials from history, geography, biology, productive and reproductive institutions, the apparatus of power and religious revelations, from collective memory and personal fantasies

- We rearrange these building materials according to social influences and cultural projects rooted in the social structures and time/space co-ordinates we occupy

- the crucial issue is how these identities are constructed, by whom and for what purpose

Manuel Castells in *"The Power of Identity"* distinguishes 3 main areas of ID building:

1. Legitimising identity - by dominant institutions or power bases to extend, rationalise, their domain vis a vis social actors - see theories of nationalism (for e.g.: why ACE or LAB may argue for arts funding within their perceived territory to be routed through them - project themselves as the legitimate body for handling this)

2. Resistance Identity - grounded in opposition to the rationalisations of domination - in positions/conditions that are perceived as marginal, devalued or stigmatised by the dominant legitimising means. ID built on principles distinguished from and opposed to the dominant, defined as a polarisation from but in relation to the dominant forms of legitimisation. (e.g. various groups coming together in an 'umbrella ID' to voice and project their dissatisfaction about their marginalisation or exclusion in ACE or ACE or LAB priorities)

3. Project identity - often grows out of resistance ID - this is about building a new identity that redefines a position (e.g. 'I'm black and I'm proud', 'glad to be gay') and by doing so, seeks to transform the whole structure of society or an institution (e.g. campaigning to transform or abolish ACE or LAB).

Another example on a smaller scale - As the Docklands Poster Project back in the 80s - as part of a campaign - we were obviously primarily involved in Resistance Identity, though at times beginning to move into Project Identity in constructing alternatives - the People's Plan for the Royal Docks.

As The Art of Change however, our interest has shifted to the transition from Resistance Identity to Project Identity, to try where possible create new models.

In most industrial societies Project Identity was constructed from, or in relation to, civil society (and its legitimising ID) - e.g. socialism on the basis of the labour movement, based very much of roles and functions within the capitalist structure.

But in the transition to the globalised network society, the construction of subjects at the heart of social change take a different route.

SUBJECTS ARE CONSTRUCTED LESS AND LESS AROUND ROLES OR PROJECT IDENTITIES DEFINED IN RELATION TO CIVIL SOCIETIES (BASED IN THE 'FICTION' OF NATION-STATE AS THE LEGITIMISING IDENTITY) BECAUSE THEY THEMSELVES ARE IN THE PROCESS OF DISARTICULATION AND DISINTEGRATION

- WHAT WE SEEM TO BE SEEING DURING THIS TRANSITION (ACCORDING TO CASTELLS) IS A PROLONGATION OF RESISTANCE IDENTITY.

AS STATED PREVIOUSLY PROJECT IDENTITY USUALLY GROWS FROM RESISTANCE IDENTITY.

BUT IF RESISTANCE IDENTITY DOES NOT HAVE A GLOBAL DIMENSION - AND AT THE SAME TIME THE MAINSTREAM LEGITIMISING IDENTITY IS BEING REDEFINED, DECONSTRUCTED AND CONTINUOUSLY TRANSFORMING AS A RESULT OF GLOBALISATION

- THEN RESISTANCE IDENTITY CAN BECOME STRANDED IN THE TURBULENT EDDIES OF THE GLOBALISING MAINSTREAM AS IT RUSHES BY.

(New IDs being constructed by fundamentalist movements for e.g. are not - as mistakenly held - simply returning to traditional values, they are reworking traditional materials in the formation of a new Godly, communal world, where excluded masses (from Capitalism and Socialism) and disaffected intellectuals are seeking to reconstruct meaning in a GLOBAL ALTERNATIVE to what they see as an exclusionary Global order) - LORAIN WILL BE TALKING ABOUT A PROJECT LATER - BETWEEN FAMILY LINES - WHICH WE DID WORKING WITH WOMEN AGAINST FUNDAMENTALISM .

IN CLOSE RELATIONSHIP TO THE WEAKENING OF EXISTING NATION STATES AND THE COLLAPSE OR SCEPTICISM ABOUT SUPRA-NATIONAL STATES (SOVIET UNION, European Union)

- WE SEE THE EXPLOSION OF CULTURAL NATIONALISM'S (sharing of linguistic, territorial, ethnic, religious, and historical narratives)

"CULTURE IS MORE OFTEN, NOT WHAT PEOPLE SHARE BUT WHAT THEY CHOOSE TO FIGHT OVER" Eley and Suny "Becoming National'

CULTURE IN THIS CONTEXT IS SPOKEN IN IMAGES OF COMMUNAL LANGUAGES WHOSE FIRST WORD IS WE, THE SECOND IS US, AND UNFORTUNATELY THE THIRD IS THEM.

WITH THE EXCEPTION OF A SMALL ELITE OF GEOPOLITICIANS AND ECONOMISTS, PEOPLE ALL OVER THE WORLD RESENT LOSS OF CONTROL OVER THEIR LIVES, OVER THEIR ENVIRONMENTS, THEIR JOBS, ECONOMIES, GOVERNMENTS, THEIR COUNTRIES AND ULTIMATELY OVER THE FATE OF THE PLANET.

THE LOCAL MUST BE LINKED TO THE GLOBAL - THE OLD ADDAGE 'THINK GLOBAL ACT LOCAL' NEEDS TO BE TRANSFORMED TO ADD ' AND, AT THE VERY LEAST, COMMUNICATE GLOBALLY'.

AND IT'S NOT ALL DOOM AND GLOOM

- RESISTANCE DOES EVENTUALLY CONFRONT DOMINATION, EMPOWERMENT ACTS AGAINST POWERLESSNESS, AND ALTERNATIVE PROJECTS CHALLENGE THE LOGIC'S OF LEGITIMATION IN THE NEW GLOBAL ORDER
- INCREASINGLY SEEN AS GLOBAL DISORDER BY PEOPLE AROUND THE PLANET.

AS HISTORY SHOWS.

REACTIONS AND MOBILISATIONS COME IN UNUSUAL FORMATS AND PROCEED THROUGH UNEXPECTED WAYS

(ref. the Soviet Union both in its formation and rapid dissolution - and Zapatistas in Mexico - 1st informational guerrilla movement 95/96)

Anyone who knows anything about our work at The Art of Change, or our previous incarnation as the Docklands Poster Project, will know that we don't have a rosy view of a future dominated by the increasing globalisation of capital.

But I want to talk about technology and globalisation in a positive light for a moment (HEADING FOR THE HAPPY ENDING):

For the first time (at least since industrialisation), culture - as the symbolic processing of meaning and communication - is integral to the creation of a new social and economic infrastructure.

To quote Castells again,
" There is a specially close linkage between culture and the productive forces in the informational mode of development... (and) modes of development shape the entire realm of social behaviour.. it follows that we should expect the emergence of historically new forms of social interaction, social control and social change"¹.

In short, culture will be the main arena where the forces which shape our culture will interact in conflict or collaboration.

And we - as shapers of cultural forms - like it or not, will be implicated.

There are opportunities as society moves out of the fetters of industrialisation. It should no longer be necessary to occupy the narrow boxes of time and space organised and encultured around industrial production processes; to work from 9-5, to travel en-mass into large overcrowded conurbations on overloaded transport systems,

where these tightly packed physical spaces leave enormous ecological footprints which are ultimately unsustainable.

Artists in the post-industrial culture can leave behind the constraints of Modernism - industrialisation's cultural child - dispense with the narrow boxes of style and hierarchies which squeezed out diversity, downgraded crafts and skills, pictorial narrative forms, anything non-western or related to popular culture (unless reprocessed and repackaged in a very particular way).

We can of course retain what we perceive to be the useful things that emerged from Modernism.

To some extent this is already happening: our culture is being revitalised by not only by the forms, but the processes and concepts of other cultures. We

¹ ibid. as note 1.

are witnessing a beginning in the growth of diversity, new fusions of the craft based, hand made, and emerging technologies. The cross-over between older technologies, including the photographic with new digital forms.

I also believe we'll see a huge rise in post-gallery art. I don't mean galleries as spaces will disappear, although what goes in them will I am sure diversify quite considerably, but the dominance of an institutionalised system with its focus on the market.

These historically specific modes of transaction, meritocracy, and economy, will I believe become even more specialised and less significant to the mainstream of culture.

Post and extra-gallery work is already beginning to create new relationships between the local and the global, and - along with a new wave of cultural theorists like Castells - are beginning to recognise that new forms of communication will radically shape the development of our culture.

IN CONCLUSION:

Issues of audience, identity, engagement and evaluation are not fixed, cannot be addressed by simple formulas.

They're problematised, complex and changing - particularly with the effects of globalisation, new communications technology just to name just two factors.

It's vital for us - at The Art of Change - to regard each project afresh while constantly re-assessing our experience and over-arching principles, through both theory and practice.

A critical practice is not simply about a critique of what is, the point is to construct new models, to begin to create stepping stones in the pathway to a different future

OR

As a very famous and now somewhat discredited old philosopher once said - it's not enough to describe the world, the point is to change it!