

The Body of the Beached Whale

John Gingell
UWCI

“Ours is an age of a multitude of socially undirected technical advances, divorced from any other ends than the advancement of science and technology...this technological explosion has produced a similar explosion of the city itself: the city has burst open and scattered its complex organs and organisations over the entire landscape...with the result that we are witnessing the sort of devolution of urban power into a state of randomness and unpredictability...our civilisation is running out of control, overwhelmed by its own resources and opportunities.”¹

1. L.Mumford. The City in History. Pelican 1966 (London) p45

As a working freelance artist I have been involved in several public art projects as a sculptor, using glass, steel and controlled lighting, usually in city centres. Since July, I have been commissioned to provide a work as part of the integrated public art strategy being applied to the Baglan Site Reclamation.

The Baglan Project proceeds the strategic growth of a huge conurbation which emerges around the Severn Estuary. This nascent city comprises Bristol, Newport, Cardiff, Barry, Port Talbot and Swansea. These historic centres are linked by 2 bridges across the water and plans exist for a power generating road link barrage. Effectively with the M4 / M5 motorways the scene is set for a megalopolis to arise. It is an area emerging from primary production - coal mining and steel making. Now car assembly, aircraft production and high-tech industry together with chemical processing form the basis of the new economy around two modernised Euro - scale steel plants. It could be Detroit again - a Green Detroit ?

The Baglan site of 500 hectares forms the western tip of the coastal industrial strip of Port Talbot, bordered here by the River Neath at Briton Ferry. The Victorian engineer Brunel worked to deflect the river into a single channel and the site was formed from the drained marshes which previously enclosed the river mouth. A hundred and fifty years of activity culminating in the BP chemical complex of the sixties have left the now largely cleared site heavily toxic.

On site stands the old power station which is being demolished and has one remaining chemical plant yet to go. Central to the scheme of regeneration is the construction of a new steam gas turbine power plant, one fifth the size of that it replaces, producing five times the output, with high efficiency and low emission. This structure resembles a new school or library, and by providing low cost power to the new industry to be attracted, is the key to the new plan.

The toxicity has been eradicated by hugely costly earth processing, and a strategy of environmental enhancement, nature reserves and amenity planting, pathways and a high quality infrastructure layout is underway.

A ten year masterplan encompassing design led architecture, a Public Art strategy and amenity provision to create a place fit for people



to work in, evokes the old notions of idealistic planning to make a green and pleasant land, where once stood the dark, satanic mills.

The idea is invested in a ten year strategy driven under the Baglan Energy Park title, funded by the local authority Neath Port Talbot, BP Chemicals who own the site and the Welsh Development Agency (WDA) using Objective One funds from the EC. The plan is to reclaim this part of the old industrial complex of Port Talbot. Steel production is the main activity; with five large furnaces run by Corus.

The BP site is unique. It is over one hundred years since its creation from the marsh which once was here. In the 60's, BP created a power station run on oil brought into the site as crude, and developed all the main chemical processes on it to produce the industrial solvents residual from the cracking process. Now that whale is beached. The processes have moved to Hull on the North Sea - closer to the current oil source, and the site is almost cleared of its former factories, leaving the remains of the power station which is under demolition. In all, as with the rest of the Port Talbot working community, three thousand workers are displaced. The legacy of the industrial heavy industry of the 19th and 20th Centuries leaves them on the same beach, here by the sea in South Wales. It is typical of a thousand such sad sites in Europe.

Oil, coal, chemicals and power are the vital organs or were, of the great body of the city grown large - the Megalopolis. Men and machines worked together in urban proximity. Now the connection is less. Communities remain, bewildered and unemployed; the machines are smaller, more efficient and largely run themselves. Turing's General Machine - the computer, has replaced the hands of men as well as the minds. So what is new ?

Well, it is new in Port Talbot. This huddled town, built in the mid-industrial age of the late 1890's, squeezed uncomfortably below the hill-line and the sea. The big names here are Corus Steel, and BP Europe. With Objective One Funding, the WDA has declared its vision for the future - "The first Green Industrial Town Of Europe." Can this be realised?

The present publicity states the case and lays the claim:

"Our vision is to create a green industrial town and we're looking to the Energy Park as the magnet to attract high quality, high skilled employment."_ "Building a strong relationship in partnership is crucial. We have such a partnership in the truest sense. We're all driven by the same common goal but we have to be sensitive to local agendas, politics and differences in opinion."

Central to the success they claim for Baglan Energy Park is the unique partnership forged between the local council, the WDA and BP Chemicals. The Energy Park's management board comprises senior representatives of each partner organisation.

The most dramatic change is the current demolition of the former power station. In its place, and under construction is a combined Gas Turbine Power Unit funded solely by BP. This Power House is one fifth the size of the one it replaces and will produce five times the



output with minimal emission. The site as an industrial park will be supplied with power 30% cheaper than normal supplies. This combined with the low rates (taxes) will be the foundation of the Project ; to attract high intellect technology businesses, housed in well designed buildings, set in a working environment built to prestige levels of detail. BP itself is developing its production of renewable energy as a major subsidiary business.

So that is the story. Is this a viable model for a socially modified, well invested, imaginative scheme? Can it build continuity and provide a realistic hope for the community? The question is relevant when virtually all the operations at this scale in the past have left the community dependent on primary single industries abandoned to a patchwork of re-training to the service industries or investment from abroad for components. Will this address the re-direction of high engineering skills now abandoned to a new form of demand - precision high technology assembly? South Wales has seen the loss of mining in the past 25 years and remains an area of derelict towns strung along the old mining and steel valleys.

The comprehensive Public Art strategy will levy 3-5% of inward investment to the provision of interventions by artists from the UK and Europe, principally to create a grand avenue which will connect the entrance to the sea coast with commissioned works using aspects of self-generated energy signals to the non-cynical, a hope that the ambitions and thinking in this case is of a different order. This will take ten years and the work will extend to art projects which will work with wildlife reserves and plant restoration projects. This Champs Elysee once created will be quite dramatic - an avenue of light and action. This will provide for those who work here a heady delight in the past reserved only for grand parades or city centres. The whole program will be a long-term correspondence by artists who have been chosen because of the way they work, with imagination and sympathy to the integral aims of creating a sustainable environment ; one within which the art reacts to and enhances areas of ecology and technology alike. Rather than a crude imposition of structures, they will be working 'with' the environment.

*"The traditional patterns of Industrialisation at Baglan and other 20th Century sites, created an historic sense of isolation from surrounding communities. This strategy establishes a means of solving the problem by providing increasing public access and by the formulation of a public realm which can act as framework for an ongoing series of collaborative artworks....The role of art will not be merely to act as decoration - artists should be seen as co-inventors, to be able to articulate change, and to uncover the special characteristics of place."*²

This dramatic project is meant to identify the function of the site to attract innovative high tech developing industry. The site itself is being detailed to a university campus level, with broad-spectrum planting, nature reservations and sea coast sand dune enhancement. Environmental artists and ecological works, ponds, lakes etc. are included.

The plan by the development group has all the right components. The time scale is sufficient - ten years' essential funding



2. Ken Sawyer, Chief Executive of Port Talbot, quoted in a BP publicity release Summer 2001.



is present - BP is committed to massive investment in combination with generous EC Objective One Funds - and the government both local and national is at the heart of the strategic planning team : Team Baglan.

My sense is that this project provides the first model which stands alone against the re-generation schemes of the past which have ignored the continuity of skills of an older workforce and the needs of the host community and have operated only at the level of market demand and exploitation. This typically involves speculation and the development of badly designed off the shelf responses to the exploitation of the old docks and waterfronts as new suburbs of glamorous condominiums and office situations in the private field led by speculative construction companies.

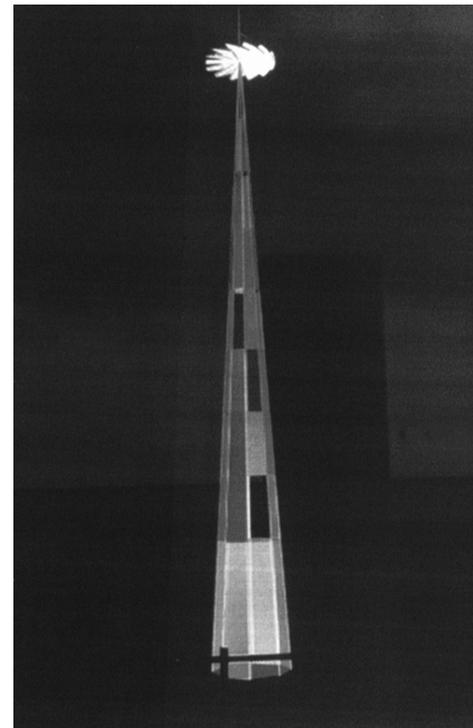
Most industrial parks are as boring as housing estates, developed with minimum outlay as the object and development of maximum profit - unrelated to social and community aspects, and beholden only to the Annual General Meeting of shareholders and to the creation of 'shareholder value'.

Public Art has usually been brought in as dressing up of such enterprises, to decorate and placate and to be a token of some higher purpose - a cynical high-jacking of the perceived nobility of Art to speak to higher human sensibilities. It has largely been an added decoration, good for artists who need the work, but contributing often only as a sweetener to the low level of the projects they adorn.

Involved as I am at an early stage, I report a completely new sense within this project. It feels good and has all the components in place for an innovative development which could succeed where others have signally failed. It could be the exemplar Europe needs to address the complex problems of regenerating communities, abandoned as relics of our heavy industrial history. The struggle is to find a way for such communities to have a future in a changing world of rapid communication and lightweight technology. This is the challenge not only for the UK but for many communities within Europe itself. This cannot be met by political rhetoric alone, nor by cosmetic re-directions to the service and leisure industries. The problem is complex and needs a complex and subtle response.

Energy and its provision is the key question of the 21st Century. It is the fundamental conundrum - you have to have energy and have more of it, but the damage caused by resulting emissions rival those of arcane manufacturing technologies now defunct. It's a question of the survival of the planet and the key relationship of the developed world and its ever expanding needs to the inherent necessities of the Developing world.

One swallow does not make a summer. But as a practitioner in the Public Art field, to be engaged and involved in a project which addresses the list of desired criteria for intelligent realism in solving the complex problems of regeneration and the community, I am impressed, inspired and hopeful that this massive experiment will achieve its stated aims.



The publicity issued by the Baglan Energy Park project sets out the aims and objectives. It is at the heart of renewable energy research. A work force drawn from the nearby Port Talbot community will be retrained in a comprehensive programme. The strategic planning of site, environment, infrastructure at this stage is matched by the quality of the buildings being constructed and the detailed care of the environment. The place in itself will in large measure be better than home. Most people locally live in houses built to accommodate the burgeoning workforce of the old industrial revolution. This is a Campus - a place fit for old industrial heroes to be. Could this be a kind of Utopia? Is this how Heaven appears - slowly before your eyes? Kyoto hangs in the air here: restoration, the greening of a toxic tabula rasa is deeply exciting when men and women are as important a species to protect as are the lapwings. The task really is the turning of what has always been a site - into a place - in which memory connects to the present in the dynamic reconstruction of a demanding 'campus of life' possibility.

Wind, water, solar are the new slogans which fill the public relations broadsheets. The site itself has been facelifted like the visage of an old actor. The woods are being planted, the soil has been washed down to 2 metres, a lake restores the aspect of the former marsh from which the young engineer Brunel created the site in the early 19th Century. People will be able to get to the restored sea coast by the walkways and cycle tracks meandering through young saplings on their way to becoming woods. Ecology, environment, community, finance, strategic planning, investment, art, small businesses, intellect, re-training; these words are the words attached to this enterprise and are already present on the ground as visible signs. The new power station looks like a local library; the small business buildings like university halls. The gateways will resemble those of Welwyn Garden City, in twenty years time.

For the first time in my working career as an artist involved with the public art domain, I feel involved with a project which encompasses a whole approach to the complex issues which attend the changing of a working environment as a considered industrial, social and aesthetic process. Perhaps it is the unique combination of public and private capital, driven by the idealistic parameters which attend to European Funding which seems to guarantee the sustainable nature of the venture.

This is a community centred enterprise. The site will be a verdant park integrated into the local community rather than cut off from it. It will be a good place to spend one's hours. It will provide demanding jobs involving skill and commitment. Provision for training and extended education will be on site. The history of industrial re-deployment in Britain in the last 50 years, has been marked by traumatic closure of single employers with little real regard to the social and economic factors affecting local working communities.

It is early days for this project. But as I write, the signs are positive. The plan is there; it is imaginative, responsible, achievable, and may indeed prove to be the beginning of the first Green Industrial Town in Europe. In the 1960s, Mumford wrote of a new pattern of Urban development:

“Here is a pattern for a new urban constellation, capable of preserving the advantages of smaller units and enjoying the scope of large - scale metropolitan organisation. In a well ordered world, there would be no limits, physical, cultural, or political to such a system of co-operation: it would pass through geographic obstacles and national barriers...no organic improvement is possible without a re-organisation of its (the city) processes, functions and purposes and re-distribution of its population in units that favour two-way intercourse, I and thou relationships, and local control over local needs. The electric grid, not the stone-age container, provides the new image of the invisible city and the many processes it serves and furthers. It is not merely the pattern of the city itself, but every institution, organisation, and association composing the city, that will be transformed by this development. In this radical innovation, the great universities and libraries and museums...might lead the way , as did their predecessors in creating the ancient city.”³

(He goes on to warn that:)

“The prospect of a massive extension of our present mechanical - electronic facilities without any change in social purpose or any attempt to translate the product into higher terms of Human association remains ominous.”⁴

3. Simon Bowen, BP Works General Manager quoted in the same BP publicity release.

4. Baglan Energy Park, Public Art Strategy Document. Drawn up by 'APART-APART: Robin Campbell, 2000

Does the development constitute an effective approach as a partnership between government, local authority and private enterprise ?

The structures required seem to be in place, the investment is enormous. Eventually this pilot at Baglan will be encompassed by the largest sustainable regeneration of the whole industrial strip that comprises Port Talbot - the core of this future Green Industrial City of Europe. At least the planning is comprehensive, socially inclusive and given over to a proper timescale. It is actually about the reconstruction of an historic working community around the new concepts of integrated financial, environmental and social planning with jobs provided by new technology.

Is this really innovation, or again another showcase for multinational corporations? Can we believe the rhetoric - or is this a true fore-runner of what must come if Europe is to sustain its civilisation, now centered largely on the cities and to re-generate the industrial remains of cold war Europe.

To conclude I extract from a BP house magazine called 'Horizon', from an article called 'Looking towards a Sustainable Future¹' by Michael Rook. His review is a reflection on the Reith lecture given by BP chief Lord Browne on businesses and sustainable futures.

Watch any film or TV show and the chances are the villain will be a businessman. Whether it's Citizen Kane building monuments to vanity in Orson Welles¹ masterpiece...the businessman is seen as the archetypal outcast, the despoiler of Eden. While such films peddle little more than cliches, they are based, however tentatively, on truth. Bhopal, Exxon-Valdes, Love Canal, Three Mile Island, names that have become bywords for the sometimes disastrous relationship between big business and the environment.

Devastating as these disasters have been, they pale beside the more profound environmental and social challenges to which the business world must respond around the world...

However it is the need for optimism that lies at the heart of the term sustainable development - a phrase that first entered the national vocabulary in 1987 when the UN's World Commission on the Environment and Development published *Our Common Future*.

Also known as The Brundtland Report, it contains the most widely used definition of sustainable development : *“development that meets the needs of the present without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs.”*

The report highlights three fundamental aspects of sustainable development: environmental protection, economic growth and social equity. These three have come to be known as “The Triple Bottom Line” ...in other words, the concept of sustainable development, as it has been developed since 1992, rejects the idea that environmental problems - water shortages and climate change- and social problems which affect the developing world such as health crises, famine and regional conflicts over resource use can only be exacerbated by technological innovation and globalisation...

On the contrary, Browne points out that historically, fears of shortage have been met time and time again, by technological advances. Just as technology has continued to improve crop yields, provide drinking water and increase vehicle efficiency, so technology is behind the latest revolution : *“The Connected Economy...The simple fact is that business needs sustainable societies in order to protect its own sustainability”*, says Browne. All these concerns are issues for us too. many businesses have begun to organise around the concept of sustainability as a starting point for integrated thinking and for understanding the strategic elements of their environmental and social behaviour. Whether or not this is an impossible task at an operational level remains to be seen. But, in an interconnected world, it does point towards the need for partnerships at many levels to address the challenge that sustainability poses.

As we can see from this internal discussion of the idea of sustainability, this is a key issue for Big Business. Whether or not the impetus has been governed by notions of protecting its own survival as part of an increasing awareness towards social responsibility is perhaps not the issue. They are taking this on. With the participation of outside objective agencies such as the WDA in this case, the idealism inherent in sustainability is maintained as central to the practice of development as a social concern.

The Project Baglan is now at phase 1 and is underway as I described. At the operational level, all the managers and employees involved have struck me with their possession and passion for the big idea, which reaches beyond their normal business concerns and obviously infuses their practice with the concept of the greater good. The role of the artist representing “Culture” is part of a bigger understanding it seems of culture in its broadest sense - the restoration of a site into a place of the active present and the past of memory,

connecting an ongoing community with its need to emerge and take up life and hope.

“...significant improvements will come only through applying art and thought to the city’s central concerns, with a fresh dedication to the cosmic and ecological processes that enfold all being. We must restore to the city the maternal life-nurturing functions, the autonomous activities, the symbiotic associations that have long been neglected or suppressed. For the city should be an organ of love, and the best economy of cities is the care and culture of Men.”⁵



The driving philosophy behind Baglan Energy Park is environmental enhancement and sustainability. Phase 2 is being generously landscaped using predominantly indigenous species and managed Eco-environments. An on-site ecologist, David Clements has been appointed to ensure rare plants are preserved and to protect the ecology of the area. Saltmarsh and sand dune areas are recognised as future managed nature reserves.

Pictured above on the recently completed Phase 2 area are Geoff Marquis and ecologist David Clements.

5. L.Mumford, op cit p655