

on the w@terfront



Nr, 2 February 2000

VISTAS OF THE POST-INDUSTRIAL CITY

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INTRODUCTION

Waterfront development has become a sign for the post-industrial city. Cases such as Baltimore's Harbor District, London Docklands, Cardiff Bay, and Barcelona's Port Vell represent the transformation of districts of industrial decline into areas of new prosperity, as redundant industrial buildings are re-coded as sites of culture. But if the post-industrial city is a post-modern site of abundance, its benefits are unevenly distributed; centres of affluence construct margins of deprivation. Just as public art lent a veneer of cultural value to urban development in the 1980s, so the re-coding of industrial buildings as sites of culture in the '90s contributes to a continuing aestheticisation of the city which affirms a dominant spatial order. What strategies, then, are appropriate for art in post-industrial cities?

CONTEXT: SIGNS OF POST-MODERNITY

In the travel section of USA Today, in May 1999, it was reported that stations on the Paris Metro are perfumed 'with a musk-citrus-floral scent called Madeleine'. Hotels in Las Vegas are well into the game, with coconut butter in the lobby at the Mirage, and lavender-sage at the Bellagio. Mark Peltier, co-founder of the company AromaSys which supplies the scents adds 'We don't do subliminal scents, you notice' (Grossman, 1999). Yet the association made between scent and place is not always direct: the coconut-citrus-spice-vanilla of the Mandalay may complement its Indonesian-style decor (though this, too, is a sign for an artificial world, explicitly not a site in the geographical Indonesia); but musk-citrus-floral has no necessary association to the allegorical (or Proustian) Madeleine, and the column lists other affinities such as bakery smells in shopping malls (where no bread is baked), and jasmine and rosemary in the furniture departments of large stores. These signs are disconnected from their sources - as mediated scents rather than produced smells, their purpose is to conjure dreams of lifestyle and consumption.

The model of a division of signifiers from signifieds was elaborated by Roland Barthes in the 1970s; for Barthes it emphasises the ideological determination of meanings, always plural and contended within systems of difference (Barthes, 1982). The semiotic model was avidly absorbed, also, by the creative staff of advertising agencies, as a separation of image from product enabling anything to be marketed through association with anything else. The scents, then, are signifiers floating in a territory far away from bread and scented gardens. In a similar kind of juxtaposition, in spaces such as Battery Park City or London's Broadgate, modernist art signifies affluence, whilst at La Défense it is national identity which is lent the universality of cultural value. Similarly, waterside vistas have come to denote an affluent lifestyle in developments such as London Docklands and Port Vell, contrary to the histories of toil and struggle which clearance of such sites renders no longer visible. In the postmodern surface-world of the post-industrial city, then, things are as they seem, the critical idea that they might be not as they seem being banished to a past of modern naivety.

The disruption of an easy relation of signifier to signified, however, upsets other certainties of modern thought, including the relation of (signifying) cause and (given, or signified) effect. One application of this rupture is to question the assumption of modernist planning and architecture that a new society might be engineered through design. To an extent, this utopianism was already shattered by the rise of fascism and emergence of critical theory (in the work of the Frankfurt School); but this did not prevent post-war planners and designers from assuming that, for instance, the design of social housing would be instrumental in the creation of a new and more socially just society. The failure of this utopia is demonstrated by Edward Robbins in a study of the Thamesmead development in south-east London (Robbins, 1996). Thamesmead is not a high-rise estate, but includes much high-density low-rise housing and open space. Robbins concludes, however, that the high degree of functionalisation of space in Thamesmead derives from a professional ideology in which the poor are seen as unable to organise their own lives, so that design is privileged over occupation, architectural form over social process. An ordering of space (and life) is thus handed down to the poor, relocated from homes re-designated as slums, in a project the underlying aim of which is to produce a disciplined public. But Thamesmead has not transformed the poor into middle-class citizens, and the spaces of the South Bank are co-opted by skateboarders as well as the cultural elite. Contradictory outcomes, it appears, can be co-present, as the concert-going elite file past the homeless on their way home.

Sociologist David Byrne argues that in the post-modern 'dual city', modern, linear causality and post-modern chaotic urban theory (which references chaos theory in science, and is an extended intricacy rather than a lack of connection between event and aftermath) can be integrated in what he terms a 'post-postmodern programme' (Byrne, 1997:51). In other words, layering Byrne's ideas on Barthes', cause does not lead to given effect, but, also, it does not not do so. Byrne adopts a 'butterfly

attractor' model, in which the outcome of any urban policy can take opposing forms. His aim, though, is to reclaim a possibility for intervention through what he terms a 'taxonomy of possible urban futures' which assists urban policy to modify the direction of development for the public good (Byrne, 1997:60), whilst recognising that outcomes cannot be predicted and that a meandering path - the 'drunkard's walk' to Birmingham via Beechey Head - is also likely. He summarises his position as follows:

"What this means is agency. It is precisely the human capacity to imagine and seek to construct a future which is so crucial to understanding the potential of trajectories within a complex world. Of course, this does not guide us towards 'blueprints', towards the imposition of centrally designed plans ... neither does it leave us with only the market as a method of information processing and decision making. Instead, a participatory democracy has the capacity for collective realisation of urban ... futures." (Byrne, 1997:67)

For artists, at least for a reconstituted and re-politicised avant-garde (if there is one), this offers a strategy of intervention through, for instance, the creation of transparency in the urban process, drawing attention to the divorce of signifiers from signifieds, and the ideological construction of meaning in place, in urban development. Engagement, then, means working in the crevices of the dominant city, understanding the processes of re-coding which characterise the post-industrial urban landscape.

RE-CODING THE CITY

The re-use of redundant commercial and industrial spaces for cultural purposes (which then re-code their environs as cultural districts) is a frequently encountered element in urban development programmes, in keeping with a symbolic economy of culture, heritage, fashion and tourism through which cities are re-presented in a context of globalisation. Examples include the Tate Galleries at Albert Dock in Liverpool and Bankside in London; the Arnolfini in Bristol; and the Baltic flour mill in Gateshead - all waterside locations. On a slightly different model, Castlefield in Manchester has been re-coded as a culture and leisure quarter, with bars and clubs occupying canal-side ex-industrial buildings [1]; and Temple Bar in Dublin as an arts quarter by the Liffey.

Such sites are promoted through ersatz place-identity, co-opting selective local histories, whilst conforming to global, market-led patterns of development. And it is in sites such as Docklands that the post-industrial city of re-coded sites of culture and the global city of trans-national financial service industries, which drives most urban development, are contiguous. The global city is composed of enclaves, within cities such as New York, Frankfurt, London and Tokyo, linked more closely to each other by 24-hour information super-highways than to adjacent geographical neighbourhoods which they construct as margins. The enclaves of post-industrial cities are linked by less formal networks, through assumptions of cultural capital and the internationalism of affluence. Collectively, the museums and marinas, and the designer-bars, restaurants for new or exotic cuisines, health clubs, boutiques and florists denote an aesthetic environment, extending the model of gentrification (in which culture played a key role) which affected neighbourhoods such as SoHo in New York in the 1980s [2]. But the diverse publics of a city do not have equal access to the new abundance, nor do they mix with each other. Jon Bird notes that lofts in London Docklands were screened from sight of nearby social housing by '... all the contradictory signifiers of uneven development' such as rebuilt picturesque dock walls, and the façades of offending council estates renovated (Bird, 1993:125). And Rosalyn Deutsche, like Sharon Zukin, has written on the divisiveness of urban development in New York and its link to a rising rate of eviction (Deutsche, 1991a; 1991b). But, if advocacy for cultural re-use of redundant buildings, or for 'creative' cities [3], is advocacy for a dualism of wealth and deprivation, is it possible for art to reclaim the right to the city for all its publics [4]?

AESTHETICS AND ART-INTERVENTION

The development of strategies for art in post-industrial cities faces three difficulties: the separation of art from everyday life which underpins the association of culture with affluence in an aestheticisation of cities; the uncertainty of linear sequences of cause and effect, and failure of the modernist project to engineer a better society through design; and the need to reconstruct ideas of place and community within postmodern discourses.

Herbert Marcuse traces the separation of art from ordinary life to Aristotle's privileging of the philosophical knowledge of beauty, leisure and peace over the useful knowledge of business and war (Marcuse, 1972:88-9). In his early writing he sees this as affirmative in bourgeois society of a realm of culture - in which compensation is found for the contradictions of the mechanisms of exchange - set apart from the realm of actuality in which such contradictions are produced. Like the hollowness of consumption, compensation in the form of a beauty elsewhere (like a joy just departed) appeases but does not change. In his later writing, however, despairing that radical social change is imminent, Marcuse sees art's autonomy as a critical distance enabling a rupture of the surfaces of the dominant reality (Marcuse, 1978). The question for art is whether autonomy can be integrated with embeddedness in everyday life, to counteract the co-option of culture as a remote signifier of the affluent society.

This is a very different project from the creation of place-identity of conventional public art, such as Richard Leicester's Cincinnati Gateway (1988). Whilst place-making followed the model of designing spaces which condition behaviour [5], the unpredictability of outcomes, and a right to the city which includes participation in the determination of the concept of the city which buildings articulate (Lefebvre, 1996; Zukin, 1996), suggest a model of agency in which publics are enabled to produce their own spaces. This includes the association of meanings with place, and readings of the city which are not dependent on the visible. Similarly, the project of agency as advanced by Byrne goes beyond complicity in the re-coding of city centres as cultural districts (in Birmingham masking the construction of a central business district on the Burgess concentric ring model) [6]. As a strategy for art, agency offers a more interesting route than confrontation, the prospects for which are seen from road protest to be limited (though not without effect and generating a distinctive culture, but doing so by direct action not by art) [7]. But, if art is

to create a new transparency in the urban process, giving form to dreams of reclamation, not only is an understanding of the operations of capital which produce the post-industrial city required, but also a re-thinking of the notion of community.

Perhaps there are three problems: to subvert the re-coding of the city from within the language of signs; to construct models of practice which involve the participation of diverse publics with professionals, in a forum in which art ceases to be linked to authorship; and to recognise the fluidity of patterns of sociation in a post-industrial city, which render notions of community linked to place as obsolete.

The free floating of signs allows endless appropriation; Zukin writes that the culture industries are agents for a new language of difference: '... a coded means of discrimination, an undertone to the dominant discourse of democratization' when styles which emerge in street culture are appropriated by mass media as 'images of cool' and claims for social justice are in turn re-directed as 'a coherent demand for jeans' (Zukin, 1995:9). Is it possible, then, for art to work in the other direction, subverting the codes of the mass media and consumption from within? The work of Barbara Kruger suggests so; as in a different way does that of the Docklands Community Poster Project, using digital imaging to tell an alternative history of the development.

Similarly, new models of art practice, termed new genre public art (Lacy, 1995), involve the participation of publics in processes which do not aim to produce permanent or object-based art. An example is the work of Mierle Ukeles with the New York Sanitation Department, including the projected Flow City (at the pier where New York's waste is loaded into barges to be taken to a landfill site on Staten Island), which reminds New Yorkers of their production of waste at levels which are unsustainable. Another category of new art practice is the reclamation of sites damaged by industrial pollution, such as Mel Chin's Revival Field in Minneapolis (1989). This used hyper-accumulator plants such as maize, in a circular field within a toxic waste dump, to draw out toxins from the soil; the toxins, such as cadmium and zinc, could be reclaimed by incineration of the plants after harvest. In Pittsburgh, another, larger reclamation initiative begun in 1996 - the Nine Mile Run Greenway project - is co-ordinated by the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University.

Pittsburgh is a post-industrial city with two new art museums in redundant industrial and commercial buildings; parts of its have been waterside reclaimed for jogging and cycling trails. Artists Bob Bingham, Tim Collins and Reiko Goto at the Studio act as negotiators and facilitators between city authorities, citizens' groups, developers and other professionals, seeking to reclaim part of a 230-acre site of steel industry slag as a post-industrial landscape - defined as integrating public space with a zone of protected bio-diversity. Along the stream bed vegetation is quite lush, and the valley was identified in 1910 by Frederick Law Olmsted Jr as 'the most striking opportunity' to create a public park. The Greenway project combines practical measures, such as the spraying of a mulch containing nutrients and grass seeds on the steeper slopes to green them (for aesthetic effect, as a way to encourage people to value the site), with workshops through which citizens can gain information and engage with professionals and developers on equal terms, using the methods of action planning. The project has no predetermined plan for the site, though it seeks to create through broad participation a design which can be implemented by the city, the developers and other professionals in due course. This development is not natural, in that to return the site to its pre-slag condition is not an option; like all managed land, the post-industrial landscape will emerge from the juxtaposition of a set of conditions and a series of interventions, reflecting Byrne's idea cited above that participatory democracy has a capacity to realise collectively imagined futures.

The Greenway project works through existing citizens' groups and channels to a range of loosely and tightly constituted communities. But the problem remains as to how notions of community are reconstructed in cities when groups of people are no longer linked by common roots to geographical site [8]. Planner Leonie Sandercock sees narratives of community as nostalgic, arguing that:

"In the light of processes of globalization ... processes which are remapping social relations and giving rise to unprecedentedly complex senses of place and belonging, earlier meanings of 'community' begin to seem naive, if not dangerous".
(Sandercock, 1998:191)

She cites Richard Sennett's discussion in The Uses of Disorder (1970) of myths of community as reinforcements of the values of white suburbia, and notes that narratives of belonging repress difference. As a model of a sanitised re-invention of community, she gives Celebration, the Disney town in Florida designed, as she quotes, 'to look and feel like a Norman Rockwell painting' (Sandercock, 1998:194 citing Katz, 1997:9). Celebration is totalitarian in its regulation of life by design, down to details such as the colour of curtains (white or beige) and type of shrubbery. Dean MacCannell points out that the design of houses eliminates privacy and enables surveillance by drawing a sight-line from the front to the back door, in answer to 'a nostalgia for central authority that penetrates the most intimate details of life' (MacCannell, 1999:113). Sandercock contrasts the conformity of Celebration with its white picket fences to 'communities of resistance' in more deprived areas, but concludes that both state-directed and locally driven planning have transformative and repressive aspects which need to be seen in an unresolvable tension. Further: 'What the new cultural politics of difference signifies is that the modernist norm of a homogenous public has become unacceptable' (Sandercock, 1998:197). Perhaps it is precisely with such tensions, rather than with easy or nostalgic (and often anti-urban) notions of place and community, that artists now need to work.

NOTES:

1. Jan Verwijnen claims that cultural quarters offer a way beyond the restrictions of enclaved development and require new processes of urban planning (Verwijnen, 1998). Monica Degen, however, in an unpublished paper to the British Sociological Association's working group of public spaces, at the University of Westminster (19 June 1999) argues that Castlefield, a case of such a cultural quarter, represents the same kind of divisive aestheticisation of the city as the gentrification of SoHo. Degen further argues that the redevelopment of Barcelona reflects adherence to a northern European model of the clean city, as in the design of new buildings without the balconies from which, traditionally, washing and birdcages are hung, these seen as signs of a (messy) Latin city.

2. Sharon Zukin links the characterization of SoHo as an arts district with its gentrification (Zukin, 1982), notes the appearance of art galleries in disused store-fronts in central Manhattan as a precursor of increasing property values (Zukin, 1995:6), and observes connections between property development and membership of the boards of cultural institutions (Zukin, 1995:118-122).
3. See, for example, Landry and Bianchini (1995).
4. The idea of a 'right to the city' is derived from Lefebvre - see Lefebvre 1996:63-181. See also Wilson, 1991:10 on women's right to the city.
5. Selwood argues that such claims are usually too vague to be demonstrable, and that the reception of projects by publics is not part of the agenda for commissioning agencies (Selwood, 1995).
6. Research in Birmingham shows that public investment in projects such as Centenary Square has produced only low-paid, short-term and insecure employment whilst access to the new cultural facilities is restricted to residents of outlying areas, and resources for the infra-structures of housing, transport and education were diverted into the scheme (Loftman and Nevin, 1998).
7. See McKay (1996); Jordan and Lent (1999); and Wall (1999). Byrne also alludes to ecology in his final two paragraphs, suggesting that there are real limits to, for example, reliance on car-borne transport (Byrne, 1997:69).
8. See Albrow (1997): 'In the last thirty years transformations of industrial organization in the advanced societies, accompanied by the acceptance of the ideas of post-industrialism and post-modernity, mean that the problem-setting for community analysis has shifted. In the last decade globalization theory has brought issues of time, space and territorial organization into the centre of the frame of argument. We have to look again at the way social relations are tied to place and re-examine issues of locality and culture.' (Albrow, 1997:43)

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