

The Public and The Private in Public Art. Some case studies of recent and current projects in Cardiff Bay

*“... public art should make an integral and important contribution to the creation of a vibrant new area within the City.”*¹

*“... (Public Art) projects such as Cardiff Bay, where contemporary art becomes the sign of ‘success’, whilst obliterating the political and ecological development.”*²

Wiard Sterk
CBAT

The Public Art programme in Cardiff Bay originates from the regeneration initiative of Cardiff Bay Development Corporation (CBDC). This QUANGO or quasi autonomous government organisation was set up in 1987 by the then Conservative UK Government under Margaret Thatcher, to revive the economic fortunes of the Cardiff Docks area, now known as Cardiff Bay, and to create a new urban landscape, reconnecting the City with its waterfront.

The Chair, Chief Executive and Board agreed that in order to create a new and good quality environment for Cardiff Bay, public art should be an integral part of this new public realm, and investors in the area should be asked to contribute. They commissioned a panel of experts³ to produce The Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay, published in 1990. The framework of this document ensured the establishment of Cardiff Bay Art Trust, the forerunner of CBAT The Arts & Regeneration Agency, and the completion of a programme of over 100 permanent projects and several temporary works, some incomplete and abandoned projects and some studies and reports by artists. This programme is documented in the book Decade: Ten years of Public Art in Cardiff Bay, published by CBAT⁴.

It is from the strategy document that the first quote is taken and it is to the strategy that Malcolm Miles responded in 1997, in his book Art, Space and the City. Public art and urban futures. Miles has confirmed that his words were a response purely to the content of the Strategy document, and should not be seen as a criticism of the subsequent programme of works developed by CBAT, in particular in recent years. Whilst the ambition of CBDC expressed in its public art strategy may have been genuine and well intended, it could be seen as blighted by the perhaps more contentious aspects of urban regeneration development corporation style. However, to make the art complicit in every real or perceived negative aspect of the Corporations activities and to suggest that the regeneration of Cardiff Bay is substantially suspect, is an unjustifiable simplification and ignores the genuine and positive transformation of a long blighted area of the Capital City of Wales.

I will not linger on the nature of urban development corporations under the successive Tory governments in Britain, or on their relative merits. Suffice to say that not all was rosy and some were

1) Public Art Consultancy Team; The Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay.; Cardiff Bay Development Corporation, Cardiff, 1990. Page 5.

2) Miles, Malcolm; Art, Space and the City. Public art and urban futures.; Routledge, London and New York 1997. Page 114.

3) The study team was chaired by Vivian Lovell, then Director of Public Art Commissions Agency and included Robert Breen, Lesley Green, Andrew Knight, Tamara Krikorian and Alison Scott. It was the first time in the UK that such a team was established for the purpose of undertaking a feasibility study for a large-scale scheme.

4) Decade: 10 years of art and regeneration. Cardiff Bay Arts Trust 1990-2000. CBAT The Arts & Regeneration Agency, Cardiff 2001

short-lived, others downright ineffective and blighted by suspicions of malpractice. CBDC however, did achieve a great deal in Cardiff and whether you disagree with its remit and philosophy, and while inevitably it left much unfinished, causing controversy over some of its projects, the city can now boast a vibrant waterfront development that sets the tone for many other improvements to the public realm in Cardiff as a whole. It has also stimulated substantial inward investment, improved property prices, the economy of the city and employment opportunities for its residents. CBDC was also the only Development Corporation which did not have planning control and which was therefore obliged to obtain permission from the local authorities for its developments, as were all property developers who established projects in the Bay. This ensured a high level of involvement from the local authorities, who retained a strong element of control.

With the adoption of the Strategy came a “Percent for Art” mechanism, mostly enforced through land sale agreements between the corporation and private sector developers, but also imposed by CBDC on their own infrastructure projects. Whilst this mechanism was useful, since it provided a benchmark for the value of the art element within a site and set this budget apart from the overall development cost, it also encouraged a tendency for commissioning free-standing works, placed at a conveniently out of the way place, rather than an integrated approach in line with contemporary developments in public art practice.

Around 1998, with the demise of CBDC imminent, CBAT began to implement a change in its approach to commissioning, to prepare for a future where it would have to negotiate its funding and the finance for projects independently and within a wider geographic field⁶. The quality and potential scope of projects could no longer be defined through a budget: benefits, real or perceived, had to be demonstrated. It is this justification that forces us to venture into interesting, difficult and sometimes contentious terrain.

6) CBAT is currently involved in projects in Wolverhampton, Blaena Gwent and London.

Whilst artists, art critics and art historians are happy to justify works amongst their peers in artistic and aesthetic terms, justifying the arts in terms of the public benefit, or even worse, economic benefit to a commercial client, goes against much that is held sacred in the art world outside the gallery system. This is the murky terrain between the position set out in the two opening quotes, where the commissioning agent tries to promote the expertise and skill of contemporary artists, bridging the divide between these opposing views. It is in the careful balancing of these that CBAT has found fertile ground

The projects I describe here come forth out of the legacy of The Strategy for Public Art in Cardiff Bay, but the opportunities have been achieved through a process of negotiation and a careful balancing of aspirations, expectations and pragmatism. The projects have also developed a new practice for CBAT, and are more likely to highlight political and ecological processes, than to obliterate them, although I also question whether public art has the power to disguise and distort to the extent implied by Miles.

Deep Navigation, a project by Stefan Gec, was given a site with a varied context of historical and contemporary urban development

and a potent mix of good and bad social, political and economic fortune. It also contained strong metaphors through the filling, during the mid 1960s, of the Bute West Dock and Basin, with the waste from the notorious Aberfan tip, which during a landslide in 1966 buried a school and obliterated a generation of children in this small South Wales mining town.

The County Council of Cardiff and its planning committee expected some commemoration of mining and seafaring; the architect, though sympathetic to the project and artist, was concerned not to clutter the place with objects; and the client, in this case CBDC, wanted a marker which would justify their expenditure from the public purse. None wanted to make reference to those terrible events in 1966.

CBAT had exhibited Gec's work in its gallery and considered that he was an ideal artist for this job. CBAT was keen not to establish a design competition in this particular case, to avoid the object becoming the focus of this commission and allow the artist to find his own response after a period of research. Although certain parameters were set, these were broad enough to allow room for development of the idea over a period of time. The client bypassed required tender procedures by invoking the powers of the Chief Executive, who was able to approve appointment on a single tender basis on the convincing arguments put forward by CBAT, backed up by terms laid down in the strategy.

Gec regularly visited the archives of the former Industrial and Maritime Museum in Cardiff, the South Wales Miners Library in Swansea and Tower Colliery in Hirwaun, the last surviving deep mine in South Wales. This research shaped his work into a subtle expression of transformation, commemoration and aesthetic. A publication to accompany the project was also prepared. Gec proposed two pillars cast from salvaged metal from two significant sources, the Basin itself and Tower Colliery, which now stand side by side, next to the basin. Each carries a brass collar, one etched with the names of all the deep collieries still in operation when the dock was filled, in the 1960s; the other with all the ports to which Cardiff exported coal. The names have been faithfully copied from records held in the archives Stefan visited. The steel is untreated and coated in rust, which gradually stains the surrounding light grey paving slabs. The work was unveiled by Tyrone O'Sullivan, Managing Director of Tower Colliery in June of this year, to coincide with the launch of the publication with the same title ⁷.

7) Gec, Stefan; Deep Navigation;

Early in the year 2000 CBAT was approached by Nicholas Hare Architects, also responsible for the redevelopment of the Oval Basin, and their client MEPC, to develop a project to be integrated in the colonnade of a prestigious new office development at No. 1 Bute Square. The Square is a major section of new infrastructure in Cardiff, just south of the main Cardiff to London railway line, technically in the Bay, but essentially an extension of the City Centre. The square is also at the centre of a number of development plots purchased by MEPC. Bute Square is part of the Bute Avenue Project, a major urban public infrastructure project implemented under a Private Finance Initiative or PFI. Under this deal MEPC purchased development land around Bute Square and the offices at No. 1 is their first building.

The client was keen to commission a work that would provide an outstanding contribution to their development and had set aside a substantial budget. A colonnade stretching the full width of the slightly curved building was to be the location for the work. With already a good understanding between Nicholas Hare Architects and CBAT, we encouraged the client to offer three artists a significant fee to develop an idea. The new building offered neutral ground and in this case the aesthetic qualities of the work were the primary concern in selection. This process also allowed the client a level of choice and to share the responsibility of this choice with others. CBAT established a panel comprising an independent County Councillor of Butetown and a CBAT Trustee, as well as the client's Project and Development Managers and the Architect. The three artists were Ian Randall, Ron Haselden and Lilian Roosenboom. All had substantial experience of working in the public realm, within commercial development projects, although their media and approach were quite distinct. It was encouraging that the unanimous choice was not for the most accessible work, but for that with the most promise, but which also required further development. The client agreed that Lilian Roosenboom develop her proposal with the architects and CBAT.

The resulting work, which is currently under construction, is a black granite flooring, stretching the full 120 metres of the colonnade. This is dissected by lines of stainless steel insets, with at specific crossings 150 small, round, cast glass elements, some lit from beneath by multicoloured LED units, others reflecting light from fibre optic spots in the ceiling. The work is titled "Tide of Black Diamonds" and again refers to the global trade of coal from Cardiff. In each glass unit are set small pieces of coal; anthracite from South Wales' last deep mine. Tyrone and his colleagues at Tower are indeed responsible for a significant amount of artistic inspiration.

Although not directly connected, this project may have encouraged Norwest Holst, after all with MEPC a partner in the City Link consortium, to commission several artists to work with the Butetown community in developing a project which now stretches almost the full length of the historically significant Bute Street, and inscribes upon it some of their story. Significantly, although bus shelters, fountains, telephone boxes and seats have been subject to vandalism, the artworks have remained untouched.

The final project illustrates best how CBAT has been able to integrate artist's practice in the framework of the city and its operations. During the summer of 1999 we were approached by representatives of Cardiff County Council and Hyder Industrial, with a request to develop a commission for an artwork to celebrate the partnership between the County and Hyder in managing a large waste landfill and the extraction of landfill gas for power generation. Landfill gas is produced through the rotting of organic matter in household waste and contains high levels of methane, a gas contributing to global warming. Legislation requires that it be burned, or flared off. However Hyder uses the methane in landfill gas to power generators, producing electricity which is fed to the national grid, thus providing power for approximately 2000 homes per generator. The site particular to this project provides enough gas to power three generators.

The joint commissioners were looking for a work, which would celebrate the partnership and the power generating activities of Hyder and their initial expectation was something that would be a beacon or a landmark, that would indicate the number of houses powered by the gas extracted from the site. CBAT encouraged them to develop a brief, which would suggest a more conceptual engagement with the issues of waste management through landfill, waste to energy, recycling and other associated practices and developments. A strong shortlist of artists was attracted to the commission and Dutch artist Jeroen van Westen was selected from a line up which included Mags Harries, Buster Simpson, Jonathan Ford and Adrian Moakes.

Inspired by the research of Dr. William Rathje in landfills in the USA, van Westen's initial approach was to analyse the landscape as a construct, to look at form and function and to dissect the artificially created hill into its components: archaeology, geology, engineering, management, content of fill and gas extraction. He formulated a response to each and proposed a multi faceted work, which would fulfil the expectations of the client body and provide a resource for information exchange and discussion on issues related to landfill, waste management, waste production, waste mining and many other subjects.

Van Westen provided a new layer of real and virtual landscape. First of all he developed a web site, which would not only visualise the hill in its completed form, but also, through video clips, look at its operation, content and make up. Various partners will be invited to provide pages for the site or to attach relevant links. The site will grow in accordance with developments and interest of new partners. To complement the web site, the public footpath around the site will be marked with blocks of compressed aluminium cans, carrying enamelled plaques, again providing information on various aspects of the landfill.

Within the landscaped grounds itself, the 23 gas wells will each be marked with a small red light, which fluctuates in brightness in accordance with the pressure produced by the well. This will give the impression of a "breathing constellation" when travelling around the hill. Finally the hill will be capped with a large landmark work in glass, recycled aluminium and light. A large eye, glowing in the colour spectrum of methane, gives the impression that the hill is alive, like a giant dragon. A freeze constructed out of recycled aluminium asks us questions about our actions and a greenhouse, extending backwards from the eye, gives us a glimpse of the inside of the hill.

Various activities with local schools and community groups are planned as part of the implementation of the project and a parallel project has been established with Tesco stores, who occupy a site close to the landfill. The additional partnership with Tesco, a large supermarket chain, has enabled CBAT to secure the funding for the project, through the so-called Landfill Tax Credit Scheme. This makes a portion of the taxation on land filled waste available for projects encouraging waste minimisation and recycling.

Each project has been or will be documented in its own right and I have only been able to give a brief overview. What I have sought

to demonstrate however is that within the complex socio-political and economic environment of urban regeneration, an organisation like CBAT can play expectations off against each other and create a legitimate and meaningful role for professional artists. In each of the projects the artists compromised little of their integrity and placed themselves on an equal footing with other parties involved in infrastructure works. Budgets were achieved through a mix of public and private funds, thus providing value for money for all parties concerned and avoiding the “should have been spent on hospitals” argument.

The projects also empowered those who contributed or participated and whose story is told. The participation of the Butetown community, Tower Colliery, those who assisted Gec in the research for Deep Navigation, those who have witnessed the massive transformation of the area and see now celebrated in the works, some of their history to be carried into the future, will find satisfaction in these works. The objection of the community is not to change itself, which is inevitable, but they object to the lack of continuity, the lack of recognition of their historic role in the shaping of the area and therefore their ownership in cultural terms. These works help to provide this continuity and recognition, and, in the case of van Westen’s work, will also contribute to a change in approach and practice in some of the mechanisms of our society.

NB. TO PUT THE MINDS AT REST OF THOSE WHO HAVE BEEN CONCERNED ABOUT THE DEVASTATING EFFECTS OF THE “ECOLOGICAL VANDALISM” CAUSED BY THE CARDIFF BAY DEVELOPMENT AND THE BUILDING OF THE BARRAGE; THE COLONY OF REDSHANCKS HAVE FOUND NEW AND PERHAPS CLEANER FEEDING GROUNDS NEAR NEWPORT. IN THE BAY ITSELF A PAIR OF CRESTED GREEB HAVE RAISED THEIR YOUNG THIS SUMMER AND NUMBERS OF SHELLDUCK, TEEL, RUDDY DUCK, MALLARD, CORMORANT, SWAN AND OTHER WATER FOWL HAVE CONSIDERABLY INCREASED.