

## **Backwards and Forwards: Public Art and Strategic Thinking in Birmingham in 2015.**

Twenty-five years ago in a city not far, far away, an International Public Art symposium was held. Context and Collaboration aimed “to review the practice of public art and the practice of collaboration between design professionals.” For a while, the city became a proud focus for intelligent, knowledgeable and influential thinking. The symposium called for immediate attention to be drawn to “informal contact between artists, architects and landscape architects”; demanded “well thought out briefs”; and a need for “practical, creative application and interpretation of percent for art and other funding mechanisms”. It finally concluded that “these areas must be addressed in Britain if we are serious about investing our future with the best talents of our artists and architects.”

Context and Collaboration had contributors such as Conrad Atkinson, Tess Jaray, Marta Pan, Kathryn Gustafson, and Seattle's Jack Mackie who, as the accompanying publication states, had by 1990 “collaborated with artists, engineers, architects and urban planners in the art of making places public”.

### **[1]**

In 1993 Patricia C Phillips echoed a lot of this thinking: “Public art is about the free field, the play of creative vision. The point is not just to produce another thing for people to admire, but to create opportunities, situations that enable viewers to look back at the world with unique perspectives and clear angles of vision. This image embraces the instrumentality, intimacy and criticality of public art. Public life cannot be decreed, but has to be constantly reinvented. Meaning is not missing in action. It becomes a prolonged, collaborative pursuit of public life through public art. Public art is a sign of life”

### **[2]**

In 2015 Birmingham is to create a new Public Art Strategy, “reflecting the current economic, social and political context”. It is intended to “sit alongside other key Planning Strategic Documents” and last till 2019.

No more than in an age of austerity measures does the baggage of public art become so apparent; those obvious past sculptural solutions are often seen as the extent of art-contribution and ultimately unnecessary 'nice-to-haves'. So perhaps this current initiative is long overdue. Does it have the capacity to finally refute the gallery-slippage and egocentrism that are symptomatic of other major British Cities? Can it shrug-off the baggage of past mistakes, build on past triumphs and inspire new funding mechanisms and procedures? Can Birmingham truly grasp this moment to get it right, and even be world-leaders in how their artists are nurtured to become prominent city-shapers?

The draft vision currently states: *Birmingham is a world-class city of culture and artistic excellence, and public art plays a key role in the cultural life of the city. Birmingham's vision is to have world-class public art that is relevant to, and celebrated by, Birmingham's residents; is reflective of Birmingham's identity; and contributes to the creation of distinctive places in both the city centre and in local neighbourhoods, setting Birmingham apart as an international cultural destination.*

On the first viewing of this vision, it seems that Birmingham might be in danger of slipping backwards further than twenty-five years. The notion of the city 'having' world-class public art suggests public art is a commodity that is measured in weight, volume or even media controversy. Is this objectification of practice deliberately designed to refute the symposiums of the past or the world-class thinking of Patricia Phillips? If this is new thinking, why does it echo the Big City Plan of 2010 that got things terribly wrong, treating the City as a kind of externalised gallery to be filled with private interests and all the unnecessary curatorship of artworld-art?

On second glance this is worse than just redundant terminology. There is clear evidence that artists around the world are finding new ways of working to contribute to the culture of sustainable city-building practices. They continue to transverse disciplines and hybridise practices for the public good. Why wouldn't Birmingham follow suit, instead of regressing and aiming to separate art out from everything? It demonstrates everything that isn't world-class. Worse still, artists have been, and are still

trying to develop these new approaches with others *in* Birmingham. Surely we are braver and better than this?

So on the day of the Draft Strategy Stakeholder Consultation last December I wasn't the only interested but jaded sceptic sat around one of the five tables. As an advocate of creative input shaping the city, I believe serious artists have an important role to play in many different ways. I believe that public art is about possibility, not definition.

Discussions opened with each person presenting an image of what they thought was “a successful public artwork” or what they wanted Birmingham to *have*. Predefined by this opening request, most were stand-alone objects or out-of-context gallery-artworld forays into public space. Rather than trying to portray design team work and interdisciplinary practice on my sheet of A4, on reflection perhaps my image should have been Raymond Mason's *Forward* in the moments of its fiery destruction in Centenary Square. What better image could illustrate the impossibility of trying to capture a city in its entirety and the lack of understanding of art input into the “urban texture and lives of the people?” [3] What better could illustrate the failings to involve such a brilliant artist as Raymond Mason in the creation of the city? ( Even he, himself, had doubts about the work). What other image could serve as some symbolic funeral pyre to the sense of exclusivity and politicised histories imposingly plonked in our public spaces to give us a sense of formal identity?

It seemed then, more of a relief, that Councillor Holbrook described a vision of the city showing its independence from political point scoring, and developing its “own journey and narrative”.

*“Everything should involve public art even the design of our buildings. We should discourage random gifts of statues to the city and work toward a collective vision.”.*

It was also heartening to hear from certain tables that not everyone had forgotten the possibilities. “Public art can mean anything from a walk to a book” stated one table spokesperson. Birmingham was even proposed as a city of a thousand art-possibilities, from the temporary, permanent, and everything inbetween, embracing new technologies. Surely then the vision must become less blinkered and see the benefit of hindsight.

The Draft Strategy Purpose therefore currently continues to be admirably positive, ambitious but also equally off the mark. “To advocate for public art by valuing the role it can play ” doesn't seem enough of a statement of committent and nor does it demonstrate a full understanding of world-wide public art practice. It also doesn't stress that artists *themselves*, as agents of change, should be valued.

It simply isn't enough for a strategy to advocate 'art' as a means to strengthen communities, enhance the quality of the public realm, or enable young people in the city to develop as “creators, audiences, participants and leaders in the creative field.” It has to be both bold and careful that we do not see the same continuing advocacy of public art as city-branding logo, or afterthought-art that aims to break the tried and tested safe tropes of landscape architecture with a tiny gesture of site-specificity proposed on that dreaded red 'X' on a development plan.

It actually needs to *protest* against the strain and sometimes downright ridiculousness of trying to meaningfully involve the public after an allocated space has been designed, built and imposed onto city residents. It has to aim to *eradicate* private interests, those that aim to “displace the resident meanings of a place with preconceptions about art” [4] and *oppose* art as tick-box consultation for design professionals. A strategy must, by now, resist the pressure from others to magically transform or rescue the city from all the mistakes that planning, urban design and architecture leave in their wake. Most of all, it needs to stop this advocacy of co-opted artist difficulty and all the enforced egocentric malaise that the idea of the city '*having*' art produces.

The current draft strategy also has the capacity to do more harm than good, if it simply emulates national cultural policy that, according to Jonathan Vickery is “currently fixated on international contemporary 'artworld art' – of effectively evangelizing on behalf of this artworld and attempting to convert the public into art spectators.”

This 'evangelising' is a product of the old role of artists being taken over by the “intermediaries who deliver the art to the public, who facilitate public access to art – curators, critics, arts administrators – and whose role it is to negotiate the practical and ideological terms and conditions of the 'services' provided by artists in society”[5]

In opposition to this, Vickery recommends that the role of artists in urban regeneration “needs to consider how to turn art spectators into cultural citizens, whose life in real cities can be creative and generative of the non-capital social investment that is the only way to develop an urban 'way of life'. It needs to consider the real meaning of the term 'public culture', and how a genuine public culture can exist as an integral part of city governance.”[6]

In the final half-an-hour of the consultation session, recommendations flooded-in from all tables. They went past the advocacy of art within the draft strategy, leaning more toward embedding “art” within planning policy. Many conclusions were made including that artists should contribute into masterplans and city wide visions, enrich the work that big providers do, and get involved earlier in large developments. Artists could proactively engage others such as local businesses and create long term partnerships. Being brave and taking risks could mean artists get more involved in infrastructure, part of the bigger picture and not be entirely focused geographically on the inner city. To tackle the important social issues of development and change, early participation as consultation was also seen as critical. Interestingly it was also seen that this activity should not be the sole responsibility of the council.

Therefore, if we replace the term Public Art with 'artists' we can also begin to both talk about timing of artist involvement and the purposeful and possibly sometimes *leading* role artists have to play. We might even scrap a Public Art Strategy in favour of something much more dynamic and pragmatic. Could this be something that as one spokesperson said “is ambitious, surpasses requirements and embedded into planning policy”.

Lastly, each one of the six draft objectives discussions fell to each individual table for discussion. Topics covered included management of the existing portfolio of works; funding bases for commissioning and maintenance ; improving the Public Art Gateway Group; information and support for artists; the practice of commissioning and developing public art in Birmingham and improving awareness of public art in the city.

Our table was allocated 'the practice of commissioning and developing public art'. Conversations slipped between the difficulty in getting involved, the lottery of application procedures, the lack of continuing professional education and horror stories of being commissioned at the eleventh-hour. With the draft strategy's vision and purpose under question by most of the room, it became clear that these six objectives might form a continuing focus for the Public Art Gateway Group.

Comments from the room suggested that the PAGG could be developed as both interdisciplinary and advisory, not a policing panel of judges. It could also train artists, evaluate and encourage best practice and most importantly, as one table spokesperson said, “allow things to emerge that work for Birmingham”.

If the council should not be solely responsible for enabling public art then perhaps a range of artists should be involved in the PAGG. Or perhaps it should be a wider-thinking city-shaping group that can

take further responsibility in successfully embedding artists into every process possible. That way we might eliminate the upper tier of intermediaries who deliver the art to the public – curators, critics, arts administrators – as well as those design professionals who sacrifice the possibilities of art to private interest. We can finally design-out redundant practices and redirect practice firmly into planning policy, creating opportunities for careful, intelligent and world-class thinking.

As Patricia Phillips said, “Let us remember that Public art is not the grinding, arduous discovery of a common denominator that absolutely everyone will understand and endorse. It actually assists in identification of individuals and groups and what separates them, so that agreement on a common purpose is an impassioned deliberation rather than a thoughtless resignation.” [7]

Perhaps the meta-narrative of the Birmingham Coat of Arms needs to be understood more thoroughly as an objective. Those two figures of art and industry should not be simply seen as celebrating their contributions to the city as *equal* separate entities. This gives Birmingham an inauthentic, fractured and unproductive split personality. The archetypal industriality and accepted heritage of Birmingham is misleading; *industrial* is a confusing term. “Much of Birmingham’s ‘industry’ teetered between what would be defined as industry and art, and manufacturers of finer goods and early graphic design struggled for hundreds of years to be recognised as artists.” [8] The myriad of artisans and innovative processes are more akin to a sense of “industriousness” [8] than a traditional sense of either art or industry.

So those past recommendations of “informal contact between artists, architects and landscape architects” [1] were not simply guidelines for best practice but, in fact, more akin to the very nature of the city. In actuality, those two figures of art and industry coil around each like strands of DNA blurring their boundaries and giving rise to boundlessness. Within the very genetics of the city lies thousands of possibilities under a potential fecund collective vision unlike anywhere else.

Therefore, this current ambition and surge in activity should not simply be about finding ways to give art parity to other city-building disciplines or be prone to the arrogance of separate thinking. Can it also have the guts to try not to emulate other cities and allow Birmingham to finally be itself again?

By the end of the day my faith was being revived by the positive sentiments within the room: a nascent sense of solidarity and purpose. However, capturing this is now critical, otherwise for the next four years Birmingham will be ruefully misguided. In its quest to revive public art by dragging it back within the terminology of the gallery system, a separate art strategy could actually undo the hard work undertaken by many artists over the last 25 years to build upon 'Context and Collaboration.' It could even put artist input further back in its place as a junior partner in urban regeneration.

Back in 1990 Jack Mackie remarked “ I feel it is important to stop telling each other what to do, otherwise we'll get the same thing that has happened before”. [1]

Given that a lot of artists now believe that “art has now integrated literally everything – other disciplines, other materials of all orders – and no longer needs to retrench itself behind borders of any kind” [9] we could now be entering a new era of collectively exploring, unpicking and reshaping the city's “consciously accepted heritage and identity.” [9] However to do this we must cease grasping at the unsustainable creation of city *artworks* that are “autonomous with regard to context” [9] and “displace the creative centre of gravity toward artistic *activity*.” [9]

Artist Tess Jaray's activity from 1988-92 in the design of Birmingham's Centenary Square, led to it being called “a work of art in itself” by the City Council [10]. Currently being redesigned, Is it too late for artists with a renewed vision, to be intelligently and influentially involved as they were last time?

Should we not all, by now, be otherwise currently engaged in the reaffirmation and future development of an-art-of-making places public?

Notes:

1. *Context & Collaboration: The International Public Art Symposium, Birmingham, 27-28 April 1990. Public Art Commissions Agency, published with assistance from the Birmingham City Action Team. 1990*
2. Patricia Phillips: 'Public Art – The New Agenda', University of Westminster, 18.11.1993
3. Marta Pan: *Context & Collaboration: The International Public Art Symposium, Birmingham, 27-28 April 1990*
4. Jeff Kelley: Jeff Kelley: Keynote Address, 'Public Art – The New Agenda' 1993
5. Pavel Büchler: 'Other People's Culture' in 'Curious - artists' research within expert culture', Visual Art Projects, Glasgow, 1999
6. Jonathan Vickery: 'Beyond the Creative City – Cultural Policy in an age of scarcity', MADE, 2011
7. *Public Constructions in Mapping the Terrain; New Genre Public Art, ed Suzanne Lacy, pp69. Bay Press, Seattle, Washington, 1995.*
8. Jenni Dixon – 'Bits of Brummagem and Manufacturing Artists' [unpublished] 2015
9. Stephen Wright: *Toward an Extraterritorial Reciprocity: Beyond Worldart and Vernacular Culture 2008*
10. <http://www.birmingham.gov.uk/centenary>