Advances in Art & Urban Futures Volume 1
Locality, Regeneration & Divers[c]ities
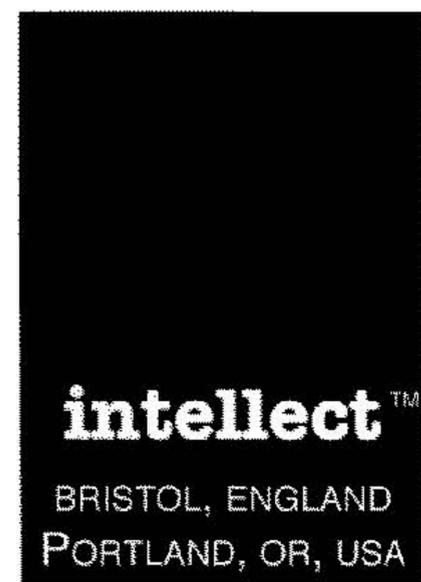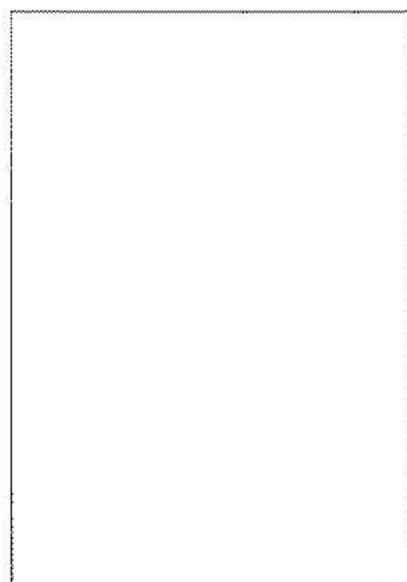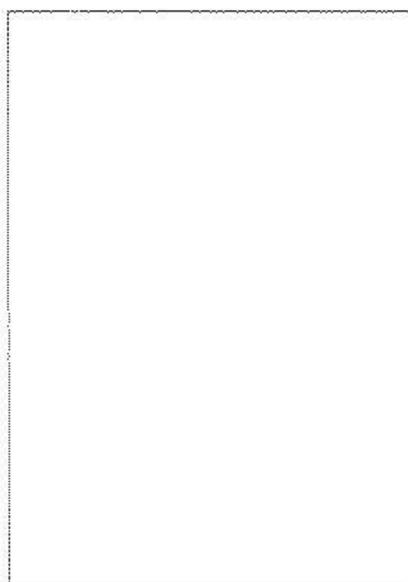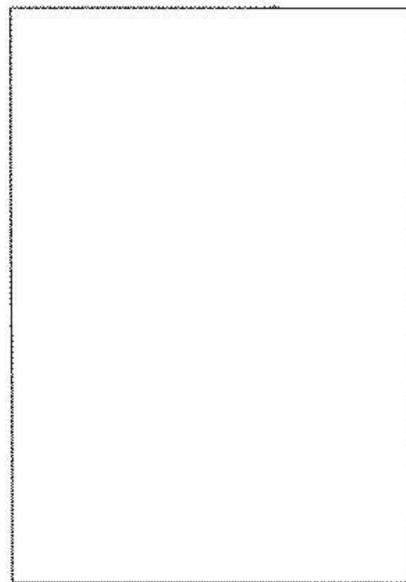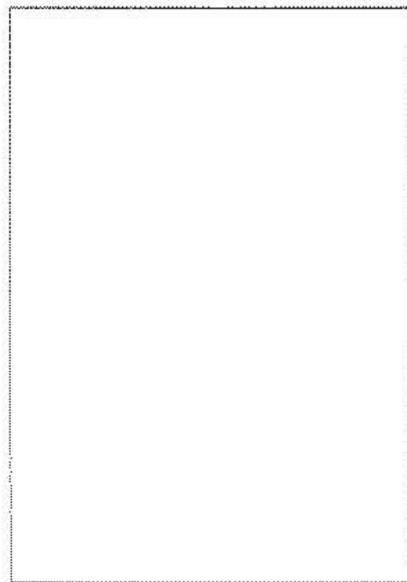
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Introduction

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, what are the possibilities for an art of urban engagement, which takes a position on issues such as democracy and power, or social justice, which is committed? It is not a question of mapping past avant-gardes onto today, not because there is nothing to be learned from history, nor even because past avant-gardes fail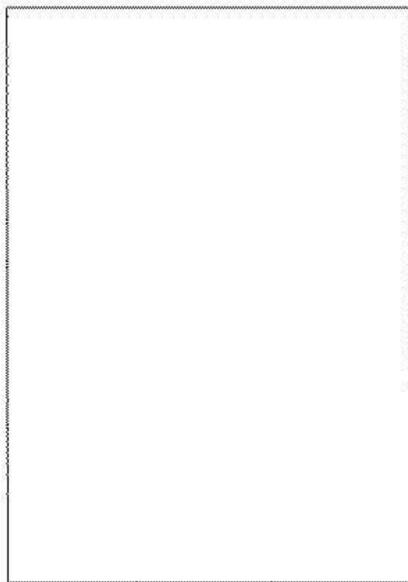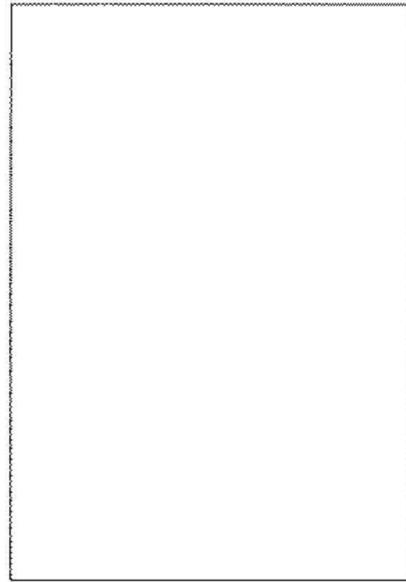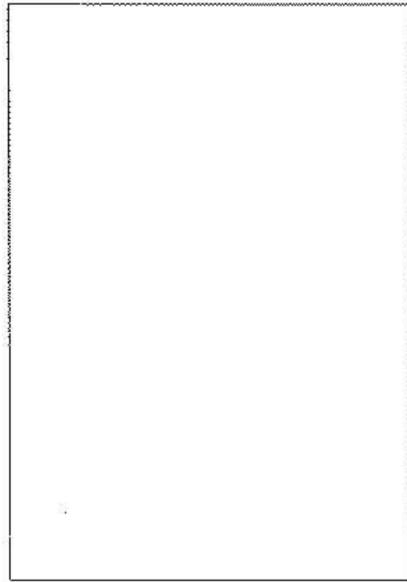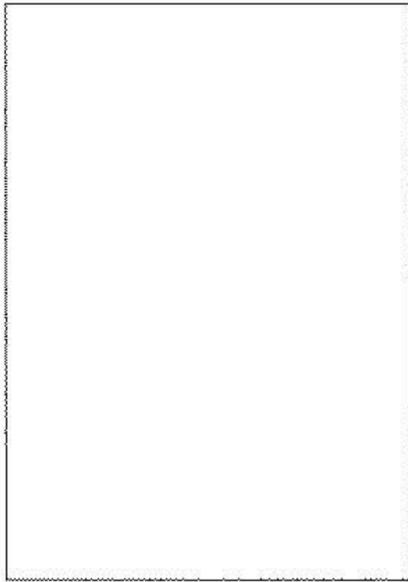ed to deliver a new society, but because history is change. What is understood from past conditions may lead to insights into those present or future conditions most likely to bring about a particular direction of change; but present realities also require understanding if strategies are to be effective.

The circumstances in which an avant-garde might act today include economic factors such as globalisation, and cultural frameworks such as post-colonialism. Economic futures are now determined by trans-national flows of capital, and the industrial base of many cities is replaced by one of new technologies and financial services. This translates into a new urban landscape of enclaved development – office towers and gated apartment compounds, even in cities in non-affluent countries (Seabrook, 1996: 210) – and economic colonialism, as the same logos appear in every city. Following the growth of the financial services sector in the 1980s, more recent trajectories for urban development include the knowledge economy and the cultural quarter, as knowledge and culture become emblems of affluence. But the designation of cultural zones by planners does not mean increased opportunities for art; artists are often the first to lease studios in redundant industrial buildings, but also the first to go when designation as a cultural quarter leads to higher rents. Meanwhile, private development encroaches on public space, and in a world in which there is only one economic system, the operations of capital are set on processing the Earth into dust. The view may seem bleak, but within the dominant society are cracks in which other realities take shape. This essay considers one such case: the *Nine Mile Run Greenway* project in Pittsburgh, which aims to transform a site of industrial waste into a zone of public space and bio-diversity, linking the agendas of democracy and environmentalism. Using participatory processes, the project seeks a negotiated space of change in which an urban future can be shaped through the collaboration of city authorities, developers, environmentalists, water engineers, agronomists, artists and citizens. The essay begins with the context of post-industrial cities, describes the project, then attempts to say why it might be of interest.

New Cities – The Post-Industrial

The planned city of the eighteenth century, such as Washington DC, was set out as a series of spaces for circulation and display. From Sixtus V's erection of obelisks along

the processional routes of Rome in the late sixteenth century (Sennett, 1990: 153), cities become representations of a concept, their form a mirror of an order drawn down, as it were, from above, rather than emerging in the experiences of life at street level. Through planning, cities are conceived, then physically constructed, separating concept and building in a new way. Whilst the mediaeval city grew organically, its streets the gaps between buildings, the new city appears as a design in space, its squares and avenues set out rationally, as if on a *tabula rasa*. This is paradoxical: on one hand, rational thought allows dreams of freedom, and is free from fate; on the other, it objectifies the world as representation, giving rise to fantasy, or idealism. When a concept of the ideal city is projected onto the extant city, the outcome is a dynamic of purification, as elements which seem out of place are excluded or concealed, or, as with the vagrant and insane, confined in institutions. The idea of making new appears at the inception of modernity in Descartes' *Discourse on the Method of Right Thinking* (1637), in which he takes architecture as a metaphor, seeing the buildings designed by a single hand as superior to those to which additions have been made over time. Descartes refers, at the end of the passage, to an engineer (architect) drawing regular places from his free imagining. The planned city, then, begins when an imagined hand traces rectangles in the sand.

But at least, in Charles L'Enfant's Washington, free movement symbolised a free society. According to Richard Sennett, L'Enfant saw the combination of grids and broad diagonals as creating spaces where the social and political might merge, on the model of the fora of the Roman Republic (Sennett, 1994: 267). In The Mall, citizens could move freely in the open air, breathing freely being a metaphor, for Thomas Jefferson, for political freedom (Sennett, 1994: 270). At the beginning of the 21st century, these conditions no longer apply, and, symptomatically, phrases are inserted into the colloquial language of urbanism which retract the autonomy of the Enlightenment city – terms such as 'planning blight' with its image of crop failure, as if natural or inevitable. Yet cities are the most regulated of all spaces, produced through processes of planning and design under political and economic control. The danger, then, of naturalising explanations is that the political is overlooked, as if the logic of progress were to be worked out by 'the powers that be' or its form pre-destined like rain on a bank holiday.

Today, urban development is complex, comprising at least three layers represented by the global city, the cultural quarter, and globalisation as a pervasive condition of both. Briefly, the global city is a single but dispersed entity comprising financial districts in cities such as Frankfurt, London, New York, Rio de Janeiro and Tokyo. These enclaves, signified by utopian office towers and associated apartments, are more closely linked to each other than to adjacent geographical neighbourhoods by information super-highways along which twenty-four hour dealing takes place in stocks and shares, currencies and futures (Sassen, 1991). Canary Wharf and Battery Park City are cases. Cardiff Bay follows a related model, being a zone of high-rent apartments without a financial district. The Bay was enclosed by a barrage to provide developers with vistas of still water, depriving wading birds of a habitat and, in a kind of poetic justice, creating an ecological imbalance which means the barrier now has to be regularly opened to prevent the smell of stagnant waters wafting into the apartments of the new rich. Waterfront vistas, however, are one of the hallmarks of enclaved development.

If the global city, and associated developments such as Cardiff Bay or Baltimore Harbor area, represent one phase of development which peaked in the 1980s, in the 1990s cultural quarters mark a second phase, as a means to revitalise the economies of cities in decline. The Tate at Albert Dock, Liverpool, was a forerunner, again beside a waterfront, though separated from the city by a four-lane highway. The model seems to be that a major cultural institution funded by the public sector – the Tate Modern at Bankside, The Guggenheim in Bilbão, Barcelona's Museum of Contemporary Art (MACBA) – acts as a flagship, denoting cultural status and gentrification. Private sector development then follows, as property values spiral and new businesses in fields such as communication design move in, along with boutiques, hairdressers, wine-bars and florists, and residual populations are evicted. Although this kind of development, as cultural policy, characterises the 1990s, the earlier case of SoHo in New York, discussed by Sharon Zukin (1982), demonstrates the impact of culture on real estate.

Waterfront development and the cultural quarter, then, are signs for the post-industrial city. Cases such as London Docklands, Albert Dock in Liverpool, Temple Bar in Dublin, Cardiff Bay, the waterfront casino-district in Melbourne, and Barcelona's Port Vell represent the transformation of districts of industrial decline into areas of new prosperity. But the diverse publics of a city do not have equal access to the image of abundance. Jon Bird notes that the façades of council estates were renovated and lofts in Docklands were screened from the sight of nearby social housing by "... all the contradictory signifiers of uneven development" such as rebuilt picturesque dock walls (Bird, 1993: 125). Rosalyn Deutsche, like Zukin, writes of the divisiveness of urban development in New York and its link to a rising rate of eviction (Deutsche, 1991a; 1991b). So the rich get richer looking out on their vistas and enjoying the impression of power such distances lend, while the poor are deprived of visibility. And all this is in context of globalisation, defined as the global mobility of capital:

> In the post-space-war world, mobility has become the most powerful and most coveted stratifying factor; the stuff of which the new, increasingly world-wide, social, political, economic and cultural hierarchies are daily built and rebuilt. (Bauman, 1998: 9)

For Bauman, one of the functions of the state now erased is that of maintaining an equilibrium between the growth rates of productivity and consumption; this stands for a wider erasure of intervention to retain stability in the economy for the well-being of citizens of all classes. Faced with the volatility of markets and ease with which production can be switched from one place to another, there is, it seems, little governments can do to protect the interests of their subjects against those of the directors and shareholders of trans-national corporations and privatised utilities. The economic increasingly takes the place of the political, as some trans-national companies have larger budgets than the smaller European states. But if the state intervenes only marginally, what possibility is there for intervention through art?

To approach the question, it is necessary to move beyond a simple cause and effect model. 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 denotes an extended intricacy rather than a lack of consequence – can be integrated in what he terms a "post-postmodern programme" (Byrne, 1997: 51). In other words, to liken Byrne's model to the semiotic model of Roland Barthes, cause does not lead to given effect any more than signifier denotes given signified, but may lead to seemingly contradictory effects. For Barthes signification is ideological, for Byrne more pragmatic, but the point is that causes produce effects, and these are determined in a history the complexities of which prevent prediction but open possibility. Byrne's aim is to reclaim a space 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 accepting the prospect of a meandering path – the 'drunkard's walk' to Birmingham via Beachy Head. He summarises his position as:

> 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, or for a re-politicised avant-garde (if there is one), this offers a strategy for intervention through, for instance, the creation of transparency in the urban process. Engagement means working in the crevices of the dominant city, understanding the re-coding which characterises the post-industrial urban landscape, and subverting it from within.

Pittsburgh

Pittsburgh, set in the rust-belt, is not a glamorous city. The steel industry which produced the wealth of nineteenth-century art collectors and philanthropists such as the Fricks and the Mellons has gone, leaving a legacy of brownfield sites as much as museums and libraries. The city has three major universities – Carnegie Mellon, Pittsburgh and Duquesne – and a growing cultural infra-structure which includes the Warhol Museum and the Mattress Factory, in redundant commercial and industrial buildings, respectively. Parts of its waterside have been reclaimed for jogging and cycling trails, one of which will reach to Washington. Pittsburgh is not a metropolitan city, though the first view of it for visitors emerging from the tunnel on the airport freeway is of a skyline as dramatic and architecturally interesting as any. Its population is declining, as graduates move elsewhere, and much of its strategy for a new identity is aimed at reversing this through construction of a knowledge-based economy and an attractive environment.

One of the city's brownfield sites, called Nine Mile Run, is a 238-acre wooded valley adjoining Frick Park to the north and the Monongahela River to the south, used over a period of 50 years, for part of that time illegally, for slag dumping. The site is now re-zoned for housing, subject to a planning partnership between the city authorities and

Pittsburgh: part of a parade of dogwalkers passing a demolition site – photo: Malcolm Miles

the private sector through an Urban Redevelopment Agency. Since 1996, a team based at the Studio for Creative Inquiry at Carnegie Mellon University, a research centre attached to the Fine Arts School, have worked with the city, environmental experts, citizens and the developers in an effort to reserve around a third of the site – the *Greenway* – as a zone of public space and bio-diversity, which they term a post-industrial landscape. The team – artists Tim Collins, Reiko Goto, Bob Bingham and Richard Pell, and lawyer John Stevens – see their role as facilitators, bringing together groups and individuals who may have widely differing interests and agendas, ensuring that all parties have equal access to information, using walking tours to draw attention to the remaining bio-diversity of the valley, and one- and two-day workshops to go beyond confrontation to a working through of problems and possibilities. The artists are advocates of community needs to the developers, and of a wider city viewpoint to local citizens' groups. They state their strategy, which owes much to Habermas, as:

> Our process is based on the philosophy and ideals of democratic empowerment through discourse. We are a culture that has fractured the complex experiences and understanding of life into specific disciplines ...We have learned to leave our decisions in the hands of experts, yet at the same time we have learned to mistrust those experts depending on who is paying for their opinion. The [Nine Mile Run Greenway Project] team would argue that brownfield sites provide an ideal environment to reclaim the individual's role in the discursive public sphere. We need to reclaim our relationship to complex public issues.
> (Simony, Brodt and Pryor, 1998: 6)
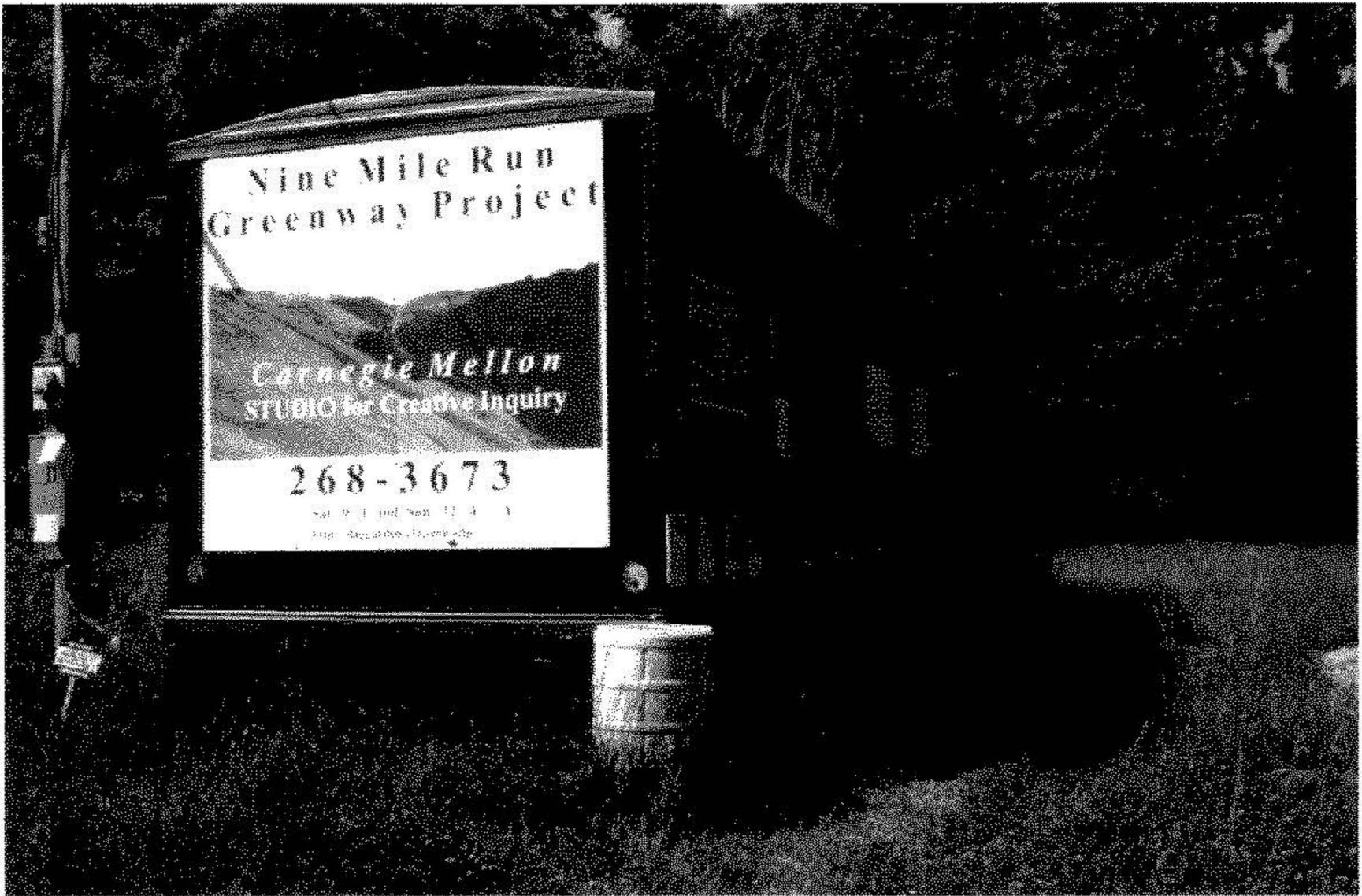
Pittsburgh – Nine Mile Run Greenway project, the trailer on site – photo: Malcolm Miles

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. One specialist input made by the artists is in visualizing ideas which emerge from the workshops, using digital image technologies.

The slag mounds are arid, not especially toxic but highly porous, so that vegetation grows only in pockets where other debris, such as rubble from house demolition, has been deposited. In public perception the site is a dump for old tyres and televisions. To give a greener aspect, some of the steep slopes have been sprayed with a mulch containing oat and other grass seeds. This is not so much to reintroduce growth, which it will do only superficially, but to make the site look green and be seen as a space worth valuing. 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. Wild turkeys still live in some of the trees, and fish survive in the stream despite the input of sewage from storm drains. The proposed re-development for green public space is not natural, in that to return the site to its pre-slag condition would mean relocating 17 million cubic yards of material, causing environmental destruction elsewhere; like all managed land, the post-industrial landscape will emerge from a series of interventions within a set of conditions. The team carry out research on plants most likely to flourish, based on adjacent sites such as Frick Park, itself a managed landscape from the nineteenth century; trial plantings are carried out, and species which have invaded excessively, notably Japanese knotweed, removed from selected areas. This offers opportunities for public participation, and a trailer parked

where a road crosses the valley acts as a focal point for meetings, walks and planting sessions, and a store for tools. Assumptions that the site was beyond salvage have been shown to be wrong, and an education programme in schools has drawn attention to the causes of pollution. To date, the project has achieved significant shifts in city policy, including agreement that a third of the site will remain green.

Nine Mile Run is contextualised by the complex and interlinked issues of community, democracy and sustainability; and the relation of local initiatives to the process of globalisation. In brief, the project demonstrates that participatory democracy has a capacity to realise collectively imagined futures. 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. The publics of Pittsburgh include nineteenth and twentieth century immigrants from several European countries, as well as people of colour whose first origins are in Africa and Asia. There is no such thing as the community of Pittsburgh, though residents of specific districts may feel some commonality, whilst their links through work may be city- or state- wide, and through family world-wide. Leonie Sandercock sees narratives of community as in any case 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 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 rather than support democratic exchange. As a model of a sanitised (and anti-democratic) re-invention of community, she cites 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 design and hence styles of living, down to details such as the colour of curtains 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's 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). But does this mean that people no longer share concerns? Or, that, as Byrne argues, agency is still possible in complexity?

Unlike the community architects and community arts groups of the 1970s, for whom neighbourhoods and their supposed communities provided a kind of art – or architecture – zoo, the Nine Mile Run Greenway project begins from diversity. In part it learns from a pre-history in the politicised happenings of the late 1960s, and, like them,

refuses the convention of the art object and with it the sculpture trail. The work is the social process, for which visual material is a tool, made available for conviviality. The project does not seek an easy solution to the problem of community definition, opting instead to see tensions between viewpoints as a creative territory, which can be investigated through dialogue. But why, apart from its benefits to people in Pittsburgh, should this matter? One response to the question begins in a consideration of publicity, as the space of visibility in society, where people meet and contend.

Thresholds and Boundaries

Cities have always been sites of boundary. From the earliest settlements in Anatolia, around 10,000 years ago, the city has stood distinct from the surrounding land. Henri Lefebvre sees new economic conditions in Tuscany in the thirteenth century as the ground for a new form of perception imaged in linear perspective, and a new form of spatial production, as perspectival order is projected onto reality, translated from description to prescription in the design of buildings, arcades and open squares. This adds internal boundaries to that of the city wall. Lefebvre terms the new spatial process "representations" of space, and sets it in a complementary relation to the "representational" spaces of bodily experience and emotive attachment (Lefebvre, 1991: 38-9). He is careful to point out that the cerebral does not, for villagers and townspeople, drive out, but does dominate, the sensual mode of spatial apprehension (Lefebvre, 1991: 78-9). Perspective, like rationality, can be seen in two ways. Sennett, curiously, writes of it that: "Conventional wisdom usually describes the cultural values motivating perspective as those of a Renaissance version of Hannah Arendt's politics" (Sennett, 1990: 155). The aspect of Arendt's political thought to which he refers, in The Human Condition (1958), is her idea that people become themselves through awareness of the perceptions of others. Maybe, in the Renaissance piazza, citizens are seen and see others in a free association in open space like that of L'Enfant's Washington. Yet who, historically, are the citizens? In Athens it was around one in ten; in late eighteenth century England one in eight of the male population. Today, only half the electorate in the USA vote in presidential elections, and the inhabitants of ghettoised neighbourhoods feel no common ground with the residents of gated apartments. Perspective space, then, with its fixed viewpoint, which Lefebvre sees as the language of the dominant culture, may be not so much a site of freedom as of an ordering of society which involves the exclusion of the majority of people, and the construction of a public realm which excludes diversity – as the idealised city, after successive purifications, excludes dirt.

Today, cultural boundaries exclude minorities, on grounds of gender, ethnicity, sexual orientation and disability, from visibility in the public realm, a realm which Doreen Massey argues is a space for men both actually and in cultural representation (Massey, 1994: 233-8). Crossing the street, in some neighbourhoods, may mean crossing from one group's territory to that of another. But such divisions simply extend the boundedness of cities since the Enlightenment. City planning has tended to be a matter of zoning, and zones, until recent moves to re-integrate inner city areas as spaces of dwelling, work and leisure, tend to be mono-functional as well as gendered. Culture, on one hand, enforces

boundaries through stereotypes of family and citizen; and on the other, with television, merges the public and private when world news is instantly transmitted into the domestic sitting room. Zukin writes of another merging, in which 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). Similarly, the art market is adept at subsuming to its purposes any deviant art.

Freedom, then, might entail a re-statement of difference. And difference is the pre-condition, for Arendt, for that kind of mixing in the visible society (publicity) which allows what she terms "natality" – a re-construction of the self through the perception and perceptions of others. Kimberley Curtis, writing on Arendt's political philosophy, draws attention to the dangers which arise when presence in the public realm is denied to one group in society, such as Jews in Germany in the 1930s. She writes that Arendt's theory "is fired by a feeling ... for the suffering that accompanies the injustice of living in obscurity" and that this is "... because of the way it attenuates the power of mutual aesthetic provocation through which our sense of the real is born" (Curtis, 1999:21). Reality, then, is produced in plurality, and a sense of the real through willing exposure to difference.

Where is difference produced, when production implies a cultural and social construction? Not in perspective drawing, which, along with the conventions of cartography and city planning, homogenises space. Not in globalisation, which subsumes all social forms to that of a free market, which is very expensive for the non-affluent majority. Not in the marketing of consumerist lifestyles in which the world, in an extension of Cartesian representation, is reduced to a quite small set of brands and their logos. But perhaps difference and its counterpart of publicity is produced in the processes used by the *Nine Mile Run Greenway* project, and perhaps it is at this micro-level of the local that resistance to globalisation not only begins but is at all possible. When the team state "Our process is based on the philosophy and ideals of democratic empowerment through discourse" adding that "... brownfield sites provide an ideal environment to reclaim the individual's role in the discursive public sphere" (Simony, Brodt and Pryor, 1998: 6), they echo Arendt's desire for a realm of visibility and contention. If the project produces a zone of public space and bio-diversity, it will have environmental benefits. But it may equally matter as a demonstration that a social process, in which diverse publics and interests are able to negotiate possibilities, partakes of dreams of a world which is better, but is not a dream.

Art in the Post-Industrial City

To sum up: the idealism consequent on rationality, by virtue of its distancing from a world reduced, in Cartesian space, to its representation in signs, has not delivered freedom. Its harvest is bitter, as a false homogeneity produces fragmentation whilst suppressing diversity. So Los Angeles burns, but the story is not all of war. It is also of the right to the city as a site of excitement and conviviality for women and people of colour (Wilson, 1991) and of the need to reclaim the urban as a location for the production of

space by dwellers. This space will be sensual as well as rational, and, unless the Earth is to be processed into dust, it needs to be sustainable. The implication of sustainability is mutability, to be prepared to let go of the brittle imagery of utopia and embrace the imperfections (which are imperfect only as the other of perfection) of a critically perceived and complex reality. Agency, as Byrne argues, remains possible. But, as Laclau argues, it does not produce anything so simple as freedom, more what he terms a negotiated zone between freedom and unfreedom (Laclau, 1996:19). In the post-industrial city, with its global culture of surfaces, the cracks are more evident; these, where contradictions become apparent, are spaces for intervention, through the creation of transparency – exposure, access to information, participation in determination – and through giving form to possible futures. That form, however, is not in allegories of abundance, or landscapes of the far-away, and may be not in the art object as much as the process of facilitation, underpinned by social research and critical reflection.

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