

Culture-led City Regeneration: Design Methodologies

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Abstract

The paper addresses the question of trans-disciplinary participation in culture-led city regeneration and demonstrates the value of methodologies, developed for the design of narrative environments. It discusses public space and how we can produce meaningful, engaging and sustainable human environments and economic, social and environmental cohesion.

Existing culture-led regeneration strategies are often over-reliant on signature architecture and/or scattergun strategies to install art works in the public realm. The paper advocates that the design and use of public space combine destination planning and creative, narrative, co-design that includes artists, designers, inhabitants, government and commercial stakeholders. An outline is provided of methodologies for collaborative, participatory, critical design based on the principles and practices of the design of narrative environments, i.e. spaces that tell stories in and through the urban fabric. The aim is to show how literary and performance theories can be applied to activate public spaces.

Proof of concept is supplied through practice-based examples of narrative environments, such as Scott Burnham's Urban Play and the initial outcomes of the EU-PA project, a two-year EU funded collaboration between institutions from four European countries. EU-PA explores how co-creation can revitalize public spaces and produce sustainable cities.

KEYWORDS: participatory design, urban regeneration, narrative environments, public realm, EU-PA

Introduction

'Culture' is taken here to encompass not only fine art, design, music, performance and literature but the history, values and practices of the inhabitants of a neighbourhood. This inclusive concept of culture follows definitions that emerged from Cultural Studies in 20th century (Williams, 2001). 'City regeneration' is acknowledged to be an investment opportunity for property developers and a means to enhance the functional capabilities of a place, for example, improving infrastructure, traffic calming or the provision of a safer, better lit environment for pedestrians. However, it is argued that economic and functional goals can obscure the sustainable social and cultural dimensions of city regeneration. A new building and refurbishment of surrounding pavements and street furniture do not in themselves bring a neighbourhood to life. It is the way they are used, reported and lived that creates a sense of place and indeed, the way people use and regard the place impacts on its environmental sustainability and economic success (Crang, 1998; Low & Lawrence-Zuniga, 2003). The holy grail of the enlightened property developer is to create a thriving, popular neighbourhood. This cannot be done without a vision of its cultural identity and a strategy to include, invite, prompt and engage its inhabitants and visitors from the very start of the process. Culture-led city regeneration advocates prioritizing the "experience" of place as the driver for successful placemaking (Garcia, 2004)

"Experience" suggests a rather subjective, intangible and individualistic impression of place that some may think difficult to link this to practical techniques of urban design, however we can draw upon theories of experience design (Norman, 2003), interaction design and event design that show us that products and images can be designed to prompt physical and emotional interactions between people and objects, people and places and indeed people and people. Furthermore the practice in public engagement has established a trans-disciplinary approach to place making (www.architecture00.net/blog). Here "trans-disciplinary" is taken to mean professionals, such as planners and designers, working with members of the public who live or work in, or visit the space. This is also described sometimes as participatory design, co-design, co-creation and social design. This notion of experience therefore incorporates cultural memories, social behaviours, practical functions, economic drivers and the material world and it is argued here that if these dimensions are considered together these can produce a strategy for sustainability.

The problems with current practice

Existing culture-led regeneration strategies are often over-reliant on signature architecture and/or scattergun strategies to install art works in the public realm. Signature architecture is often commissioned for museums and apartment blocks. Rowen Moore of the Observer newspaper pointed out the problems that can emerge in his critique Museum of Transport Scotland (2011). It seems city councils are searching for the Bilbao effect, imagining that another Guggenheim Museum in their city could elevate their reputation, attract more visitors and consequently more commercial investment thus transforming their economy (Evans, 2003). No doubt commissioning a major landmark building from a world famous architect will attract city wide or even international press coverage and provide construction contracts for local businesses. However a new iconic block of flats, for example, would typically attract wealthy investors, probably from abroad, who may not even use the premises and therefore not contribute to the local culture; in addition, any financial benefit related to the increase in value is siphoned off by international interests rather than bringing benefit to the local city or indeed its citizens. The benefits of signature architecture to a city can be very limited. A new building may well attract some attention from tourists and produce some images for the city website but at worse it could be an expensive walk-in/walk-by logo. Added to these problems

such buildings often have no relation to the specific cultural context as they are more likely to form part of the architect's oeuvre, rather than be a critical and considered expression of the specificity of place. Signature architecture is a very costly strategy. It can be neglectful or irrelevant to, the very issues it should be addressing, the surrounding context.

Scatter gun installation of "public art" has also been used extensively as a strategy to 'improve' the public realm. Public spaces in suburbs, thresholds and centres of cities in Europe and Asia are littered with large anonymous 'public art'. The civic strategy seems to be based on the premise that artists' personal expression will inspire passers-by and improve the environment. However the process often results in a proliferation of large, mysterious objects cluttering up pavements and sightlines. The work is often 'helicoptered' in, not unlike some signature architecture. The practice seems to stretch back to the Renaissance when public space was established as a place to narrate the story of the state to its citizens. The equestrian bronze in the piazza evoked the military power of the city, or, as later in 19th century, city monuments became a device to inspire loyalty to the state and 'improve' the minds of the citizen. Socialist realist sculpture followed this rationale. The practice of commissioning large public sculpture outside the headquarters of large corporations was also adopted as demonstration of status in 20th century. On reflection, it seems public space is not only defined and policed by government authorities and commercial corporations it is also the arena for sending specific narratives to citizens. Artists such as Spacehijackers (www.spacehijackers.co.uk) make active interventions and subvert these narratives through their performative practice. For some artists such as these, public space is not a setting for beautification, it is manifestation of vested interests and is a site for contestation.

From 15th-20th centuries state commissioned public sculpture, all be it paternalistic, was legible to the public at large because communities shared histories and beliefs. Corporate sculpture seems to be unquestioned as communicating 'success'. In the 21st century is that this kind of paternalistic communication is hardly credible. Firstly, many people are informed and critical of paternalistic nationalism and suspicious of multinational corporations, but in addition mobility and emigration in a globalised world means there is less shared history and a single, fixed sculptural gesture is not readable nor does it have enduring meaning. A well researched, more thoughtful and critical response to the specifics of particular urban environments is needed if creative interventions are to be successful.

A critical participatory approach in the Urban Play project

An example of critical participatory cultural interventions is Scott Burnham's Urban Play project created for the city of Amsterdam, developed in collaboration with Droog Design and presented as part of ExperimentaDesign Amsterdam 2008 (<http://scottburnham.com/urbanplay>) Scott describes the approach as 'DIY urban design', or creating 'tools and platforms' for social interaction in the city. He curated and directed 12 interventions and design installations throughout the city that used the city's existing lampposts, bridges, streets, and infrastructure as the starting point to challenge the 'rules of engagement' between citizens and their city. As most urban design is created to prevent physical interaction by the city's residents, Burnham's approach posed the question "what if we created design in the city that encouraged intervention?" As he said in an interview at the launch of the project, "we hear so much about 'the creative city' – Urban Play is a chance to see the creative city in action." The work that appeared throughout the city included a large cube of specially formulated cement that allowed the public that uses the space to carve their own sculpture – a unique moment for public art, created by the public. Another intervention involved putting trees and shrubbery onto wheeled platforms, enabling citizens to move urban greenery around the city and show the city where they felt more greenery was needed in the landscape of Amsterdam. One of the most popular interventions was "Fishes in the Sky", which involved fifty fish-shaped windsocks installed atop high poles along a bridge along the IJ River which relied upon passing pedestrians to always turn the windsocks so that the fish

remained inflated by the wind so they could visually 'swim' in the sky. Pedestrians soon realized that, unlike most design the encounter in the city, the poles could be lowered and the fish wind socks could be removed, to distribute the play to people's bikes, gardens and balconies – or any location where wind could bring them to life. In this way the paper fish "swam" around the city, animating the urban environment through the interaction of the intervention, design and citizens.



Figure 1
Moving forest © Scott Burnham



Figure 2
Sculpt me © Scott Burnham



Figure 3
NOTHING design GROUP-°©FISHES
IN THE SKY ©Scott Burnham



Figure 4
Fishes on Bike © Scott Burnham

A narrative approach in the EU-PA project

Urban Play shows cultural interventions as actively engaging communities of place related to the specific locations, communicating and folding stories onto spaces. Questions then arise: who is the audience, who is the author? What is the story? What is its underlying message? How is it told? How is it framed by its context? What transformation does it bring? These are all issues of narrative: authorship, content, telling, audience reception and context. The argument here is that a narrative approach can be used as a design tool to inflect city regeneration processes so that regeneration is more effectively integrated into the history, material semiotics, the social and cultural dimensions of the locations being redeveloped. In 1980s and 1990s scholars started to explore how narrative might be applied to spheres beyond performance and literature, for example gender studies, multiculturalism, geography, computing, psychoanalysis, history, music, business practice and ecology. (McQuillan, 2000). The application of narrative to space within the practice of design is another example of this trend.

How is narrative applicable to space in practical terms? Developers talk about placemaking and the story of place but they don't seem to have a process to research, develop or implement a story, in the full sense of the word, into the space. Rather they may feature historical facts on their websites or in some of their publicity material. Facts are not stories. Stories are authored sets of events with characters and underlying conflicts that play out over time that excite both the body and the mind, that shift thinking, create memories and define identities. MA Narrative Environments at Central Saint Martins (CSM) has developed a methodology based on the application of literary and performance theory to the design process that enables the folding of story onto and through the built environment and public realm. A narrative approach to cultural-led regeneration of urban spaces is exemplified below through the EU-PA project.

The EU-PA project is a two-year, EU funded, international collaboration among four partners: CSM, based in London and known as a centre for creativity and innovation; the Municipality of Jesolo, which works closely with the cultural sector to develop and promote the town; the Association for Culture and Education (ACE KIBLA) which is the primary presentation and production institution in Slovenia dealing with multimedia and intermedia art; CIANT, the International Centre for Art and New Technologies, a Prague-based organization oriented towards transdisciplinary exploration of artistic and scientific domains in the context of new media technologies. EU-PA explores how co-creation can revitalize public spaces and produce sustainable cities. It aims to encourage sustainable exchanges, dialogue and sharing of experience between European artists, professionals working in cultural fields urban or ICT developers, economic and municipalities stakeholders, through a transdisciplinary and inter-sectorial approach; to support the mobility of artists and professionals practicing urban experiments and the trans-national circulation. Finally, it aims to promote and implement an integrated cultural approach to urban development, leading to a sustainable development coupling economic, social and environmental cohesion.

The partners are undertaking research and installations in each country. The project started in the UK in October 2011 and the site chosen was the new development at Kings Cross in London where CSM relocated in August 2011. Argent is the property developer (www.argentgroup.plc.uk). The site comprises 67 acres of brownfield development. Argent is creating eight million sq ft of mixed use, new roads and squares and parks open to the public. The whole scheme will take another 15 years to complete. As one of the key stakeholders, Argent was invited to participate in the project from the start.



Figure 5 The Kings Cross development area

The EU-PA process comprises of four phases: firstly, mapping; secondly, creative activities to encourage cultural cooperation by means of creative hands-on workshops among all stakeholders coupling art, design and architecture; thirdly the implementation of interventions; finally the evaluation of the interventions and their legacy. We have completed phase one and we are currently in phase two.

The mapping process starts with identifying the story, the audience and the authors. This involves researching the history, materiality and spatial structure of the site; using guerilla style creative interventions to uncover the dynamics of the culture; using crowd sourcing techniques and ethnographical style social research techniques, observing and interviewing users, visitors, community groups and commercial stakeholders to discover their needs, desires and expectations in order to capture the potential and resources available for durable creative programme associated with the urban development programme. The results of this research are insights that highlight, what we call at CSM, the key drama, a concept derived from the notion of dramatic conflict (McKee, 1998; Vogler, 1992). The dramatic conflict might be described as equivalent to the nub of the problem in design conventions or the striking opportunity the designer identifies from research (www.dubberly.com/articles/how-do-you-design.html). The key drama or persistent tension, is the driving force that produces the content of the story.

Theoretical framework

Stories are dynamic and unfolding and this resonates with a number of postmodern theories, namely Actor Network Theory (ANT), the spatial turn in the humanities, and theories of performativity. ANT is associated with Michael Callon, Bruno Latour and John Law. ANT suggests that inanimate objects have a part to play in effecting relations, between that objects humans and ideas. In other words even the smallest entity has agency or the power to effect change within a network. Agency is not just a result of human will but a constituent quality of the material world that surround us. Even inanimate objects or environments have power to change the world. ANT aligns with the design of narrative environments in asserting that all elements in and of the space have a part to play in forming the key drama and unfolding the story. The location or setting as one of the agents at work in the story.

The concept of space and place as alive with agency and constantly changing has been explored by geographer Doreen Massey (2005). She makes a case for space not to be seen as static but as constantly evolving, subject to multiple interpretations and contestations. She envisions space as an arena of political collisions and contrasting stories. She describes places as events. This perspective provides very fertile ground for identifying dramatic conflicts that can then be used to develop stories that express the tensions in and of the space.

In addition there is a wealth of theories on performativity (Parsons, 2009). The argument here is that environments invite, offer, regulate and discipline audiences as they play out a narrative. The theories of performativity are theories of social action and interaction. Interaction between people, places, objects and images produce, reproduce, maintain or shift, critique or undermine identity. This is useful to the designer of narrative environments because it highlights the openness of objects, people and spaces as they act upon each other producing constant flux of events and the dramatic conflicts that arise that can be orchestrated as cumulative experiences through arcs of interaction.

The EU-PA project process

In the case of the EU-PA Kings Cross mapping, three multidisciplinary groups of students, architects, spatial designers, graphic and communication designers and artists, investigated the site over five weeks. They first took a two hour 'silent walk' at high speed that revealed the very disjointed character of the area as a whole, from the busy luxury shopping and travel terminus at St Pancras, the noisy the building site and new spotless Kings Boulevard, the 19th century canal with grassy embankments, the wildlife park and the down-at-heal shopping and residential area around the Caledonian Road. Photo documentary and sound samples and video collected on subsequent derives (Debord, 1958) reinforced the impression of a fragmented and incoherent site. The teams made maps of locations, analysis of zones, barriers, levels, sightlines, sounds. They made observations of people flows and behaviours in the

different zones and undertook interviews. They mapped the inhabitants' knowledge of the history of the area. They discovered, for example, one person out of 150 knew who St Pancras was, while all those questioned knew platform nine and a half in Kings Cross featured in Harry Potter. The map below shows the extent of the knowledge of particular locations in terms of the size of the circle.



Figure 6 Flats in the Kings Cross area
© Talking Crest team



Figure 7 The Granary Square steps under construction
© Talking Crest team



Figure 8 Churchyard at Kings Cross
© Talking Crest team



Figure 9 St Pancras Railway station
© Talking Crest team

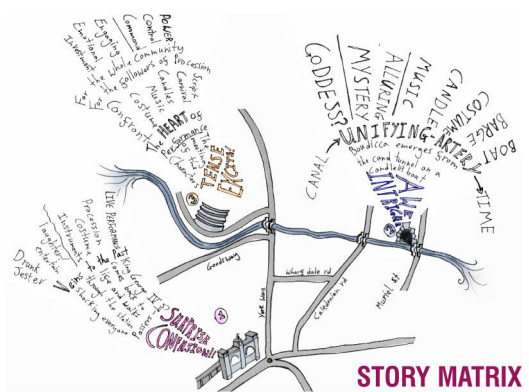


Figure 9 Content overlaid onto a map of Kings Cross
© Talking Crest team



Figure 10 Sticker designed to invite feedback
© Talking Crest team

Through social and desk research the students also discovered the area's chequered history of corruption and prostitution. They noticed a good amount of graffiti and stickers in public spaces. They responded with guerrilla interventions creating their own sticker campaign asking for written feedback. They placed these stickers in public spaces including public toilets. These were generally not well taken up but one reply said 'I hope you fucking choke and die' which reflects some of the more menacing undercurrents in the area. Through this content-driven research the groups identified key dramas of churn and fragmentation.

Throughout the mapping process the student teams worked with community and local businesses to represent all stakeholders: Argent, Kings Place, Eurostar and Team Cally, a community group on the Caledonian Road. The process then moved to co-authoring the creative narrative intervention and developing it through workshops which included all stakeholders and international artists from the EU-PA partners. The group working with the Cally Festival producer and Eurostar developed a story about the space being comprised of different people who come together to form a unity. Travellers form temporary communities as they pass through Kings Cross and Saint Pancras Station, the students at CSM are there for a few years before they disperse across the globe. Historically goods came into the granary building before being distributed throughout the UK via canals and railways. The environment and local community has accommodated these changes and continues to do so as the landscape literally transforms before our eyes.

All stakeholders jointly interpreted the story into a proposal for a procession. The concept of a procession was appropriate because processions are one entity comprised of different parts or roles. The topography of the Kings Cross area also offered an opportunity to bring three simultaneous processions together from different directions on land to mark a new gathering place by the steps in the new Granary Square near the canal. Each procession will comprise of over 100 people. There are 300 volunteers from the neighbourhood. Each route will commence with walkers putting on printed, colour coded bandanas which they had previously co-designed in workshops. Each procession will be a different colour and each person will wear the bandana as they wish. The processions will all lead to the new canal steps where there will be a choral performance by local choirs who will arrive on barges from each direction on the water. Many different voices will combine in one whole to emphasise the story message. The participants in the procession will change from performers to audience in listening to the choirs but their colour coded presence in the space will produce a spectacle in itself as the three different colours of the procession mix and create a kaleidoscope for themselves and other onlookers. During the procession the walkers are performing in a theatrical fashion (Goffman, 1959), during the choir recital they are performing themselves in a way more aligned to Judith Butler's theory of performativity (1990 and 1993) that is, that you are performing continuously, using your body, citing cultural and social norms, to work on your behalf of to subvert those norms.



Figure 11 Poster for the Talking Crest Event © Talking Crest team

The physical space is a combination of public highway and private land open to the public. The path of the procession walking westwards will take the new green route behind St Pancras showing it as an alternative to the polluted Euston Road, the route westwards from the Caledonian Road will be shown as a bridge between two different neighbourhoods, the route southwards, from CSM to the canal marks the college as a key stakeholder in the space.

In narrative environments terms the procession and the space knits together history, current spatial issues, business and community needs. The objects that the walkers pick up on the way will be designed by local people and express the dilemmas and tensions of the space. The procession is like an open letter by and to those participating and passing by. It is not just a historical pageant nor purely a sensory spectacle. It is hoped it will be taken up on an annual basis and reformatted each year. One important legacy is that it has already enabled community, business and education stakeholders to get to know each other and establish a working relationship.

Not all groups will do such event-based work. One group is preparing a sound gift to the future residents of Kings Cross that will be buried and marked in the space, not to be opened for 15 years. Another is working on a series skills-swap pop up stations. The methodology is still the same, research, story development, co-authorship, design and legacy making.

Co-design as described above does not negate authorship. The co-authors in the EU-PA project mirror literary practice in that they deliberately structured a series of events to communicate a message (Bal, 1997; Chatman 1978; Potteiger and Purington, 1998). The narrative environment developed is not haphazard. It is deliberately constructed by an author/designer or team of authors/designers or a community of author/users. The question of audience as author is an interesting current debate and points to the major shift in design thinking in the past 10 years, away from a focus on the producer or the product and towards the experience of the consumer, the learner or visitor. There is a gathering momentum to involve the visitor not just as passive receiver but as an active participant producing user generated content in physical space and across social media (Stylianou-Lambert, 2010). For many the design task is to produce a platform that will enable people to tell their stories to each other, not to offer one top-down account which the audience will obediently digest or even several contingent stories for the audience to choose from or compare.

Conclusion

Moving back to the folding of narrative onto space, it is important to remember that, in narrative, transformation takes place, for example a character moves 'from rags to riches'. In a literary story this transformation is carefully crafted to carry with it an underlying message. The message is deeply woven into the value system and culture of the designer/author's context. Here the context is the formation of a new community built in collaboration with the existing community and the development of a lived public space with shared memories. The underlying message is that many differences can work together as one. The project is not just about resistance through subversion but change through continual negotiation and alliance between educational, community and commercial collaborations. It is a continuous process of forming and reforming identity driven by colliding and conflicting needs. As people tell and retell the space the story will evolve. So what transformation is produced through narrative design and cultured-led regeneration? The shaping of communal and cultural memory. It enables us to envisage and design spaces as dynamic interactive experiences and reflect upon the specifics of location. The narrative approach harnesses content to action and place combining complexity in message and form in a way that audiences can grasp easily. People understand and remember stories.

Credits

Central Saint Martins College of Arts & Design, Talking Crest team: Alexander Augustus, Radha Mistry, Sara Angelucci, Leticia Lozano, Seung Youn Lee, Alenka Banic, Rebecca Wood, Mia Kennedy

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