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## Playing up

Gillian Nicol explores the nature of collaborative and creative processes involved in making artwork in the public realm.

Collaboration is at the heart of work that is generated within the public domain. Collaborative processes necessarily involve addressing differences of opinion, genuine consideration of multiple viewpoints and the challenging of assumptions on all sides. Such an environment creates the creative friction and critical tension necessary to drive real collaboration. Creative collaboration is not intended to be an easy process, neither are its results easy to realise – and working in the public realm and with other professionals brings added pressures to bear. The expectation of achieving art work that solves problems, involves communities, acknowledges its environment, looks good and is critically challenging; negotiating the agendas and involvement of multiple partner organisations; dealing with the seemingly bureaucratic and drawn-out machinations of ‘due process’ within the public sector, mean that the progress of public art projects is unavoidably slow and excitingly fraught with complexity.

As forging strong, interactive relationships at the outset is crucial, in order to stand the test of time and weather problems encountered along the way, David Patten recommends that artists keep their attention primarily on that, as opposed to defining any possible outcomes: “Build the relationship first, then identify the differences, and then create the space”. He feels “Katherine Clarke got it right when she said, “Collaboration is the making of a relationship not an object...”<sup>1</sup>. Clearly who is in the relationship is key, as Jane Watt describes: “All too often, artists and architects are brought together in what the American writer and commissioner Tom Finkelpearl calls ‘forced marriages’. Although the architect may have had a glimpse of the artist’s previous work at the shortlisting stage, the artist usually enters the ‘marriage’ semi-blind”<sup>2</sup>. But according to Patten, this is doomed to failure: “Don’t enter a forced marriage – it will end on the rocks. Fall in love first.”

Jes Fernie suggests that successful collaborations involve “artists and architects asking unnerving questions of each other, challenging the foundations of their knowledge”, and that, “Artists who are not wedded to the object and who can let go of the need to claim an element of a project for their own, are ideal working partners”<sup>3</sup>. David Patten points out: “Just because you are an artist doesn’t mean you can collaborate. The collaboration, and the ability to collaborate, come first –and it doesn’t matter much whether you are the artist, the architect, the client or the girl next door”. It isn’t an attractive proposition for everyone either warns Jes Fernie: “It is absurd to suggest that more than a handful of artists and architects are truly interested in working in this way.”

Collaboration has been articulated as: “A condition, a state of mind, a mechanism for investigating and articulating a multiplicity of issues, a means to an end: [in which] artists are not limited by the historical rituals and properties of art practice and the outcome is the product of professional interaction and experience”<sup>4</sup>.

The difficulties of working within drawn-out timescales is something of which artists are well aware. Dalziel and Scullion observe that “Beyond the initial period of creativity there follows a much longer period of management, diplomacy and tenacity”<sup>5</sup>, highlighting some of the ‘soft’ skills required to see things through to completion. Finding strategies to maintain energy and enthusiasm can also have its challenges as Samantha Clark describes: “The long duration can mean that your thinking has moved a lot faster than the work itself. I find the need to work on smaller, quicker projects at the same time to keep things fresh, which can mean you end up spinning an awful lot of plates at once”<sup>6</sup>.

With Jem Finer’s *Longplayer*, an evolving piece of music with a 1,000-year lifespan, the five years spent creating the work seems little compared to the time it will be running. Finer had the benefit

of Artangel as collaborator, bringing advantages such as “money for research and people to bounce ideas off”, a thinktank of expert advisors “helped to take the project off in ways I couldn’t have predicted”, and the organisation helped set up a trust to ensure the work’s future: “I thought that was it when the project went live, but it turns out that it was only the beginning”<sup>7</sup>. Of Artangel’s collaborative relationships, co- director James Lingwood says: “things tend to start off with an informal conversation from which possibilities emerge and a climate of trust is established. It is important to build from the beginning a sense of shared belief so that when things don’t always go right – which inevitably happens – faith can be sustained.”<sup>8</sup>

As a commissioner, Artangel is unusual in that it starts with the artist’s idea for the artwork, rather than working to a site or situation that requires an artwork. Although there are still occasions when artists are brought in at the late stage of a scheme to add some tokenistic ‘wall candy’, organisations promoting good practice in this arena – CABE, ixia, schemes like RSA Art for Architecture and Project: engaging artists in the built environment that followed it – have gone a long way to pointing the direction of innovation and excellence in public art practice. We increasingly see artists involved at the initial thinking of building projects and lead artists taking a role within the overall vision of public art schemes. The role that public art can play in regeneration has been widely exploited and is evident in the proliferation of city-wide arts festivals with temporary interventionist work and the visible involvement of artist-run initiatives.

When Maurice O’Connell undertook a nine-month research fellowship through Visual Arts Projects in Glasgow City Council’s Development & Regeneration Services section, rather than making work, his task was to see what impact he might make on the planning processes and those delivering them: “The key element was to find a space where host and artist might find common ground: to reach a position of mutual engagement, not simply motivated by a desire for equality, but by a shared need for serious critical dialogue”. Frustrating as it was for the artist to devise and plan projects that were never realised, his proposals “acted as a focus for discussions, whilst allowing another more meaningful conversation to be embarked on: one that looked hard at the nature of the work of planning social change”<sup>9</sup>.

However well-intentioned the notion of creating public art ‘models’ as blueprints for regeneration, there is a danger that our public spaces could merely become all tidied up, pleasantly lit and homogenously bland. But why seek a ‘onesize-fits-all’ when our complex and rapidly changing world presents endless challenges and opportunities to be grappled with? Lars Bang Larsen’s comment is pertinent: “How do art and artists work in the unstable and heavily trafficked spaces offered them by contemporary civilisation, where its significance is as fleeting as it is vague and ambivalent?”<sup>10</sup>.

Nils Norman suggests that, “With artists now completely inscribed within the dominant regeneration regimes internationally it could be the moment to insert ‘pockets of disorder’, or genuinely oppositional development strategies into creative regeneration agendas”. This thinking comes from his research into adventure playgrounds<sup>11</sup> – spaces with an ethos of “child-built structures, free unhindered play, ecologically sensitive environments and risk taking”. Norman positions such spaces, “a collective form of architecture and design constructed around notions of play and social interaction set within an ecologically sensitive environment”, as “a model for a totally radical and extremely valuable form of public space”.

Along similar lines, Iain Borden highlights how skateboarding – “one of the most pervasive forms of play in the urban realm” and often seen as a dangerous and disorderly activity and something, like graffiti, to rid cities of – brings architecture and public space to life and “readily demonstrates many questions posed by a truly risky public space: who owns the public realm, who has the right to use it, and with what kind of actions and attitudes”<sup>12</sup>. Jonathan Rabagliati tested some of these questions when, lacking official sanction, he donned fluorescent jacket and work boots and installed a series of pavement artworks around London. The artist neatly, albeit illicitly, sidestepped bureaucracy and generously offered passing pedestrians his brief but “uplifting messages”<sup>13</sup>.

Allowing for ‘risk’ presents a huge challenge for those working in public space in a culture where risk aversion is pervasive. Architect Iain Borden argues that we need to acknowledge and embrace risk in order to create “public space which is always a surprise, a unique place, a stimulation”. Borden posits: “Space that is truly public – acknowledges four kinds of difference.

These differences are all about risk- taking, about allowing for the uncertain, unpredictable and not-wholly programmed to occur.”

The differences Borden cites include accepting that different people “have different ideas of what public space is and that they make their own places to foster their own identities” and “allowing for certain parts of the city to be used differently at various times of the day, week or year”. This resonates with Lars Bang Larsen’s discussion of Michael Elmgreen and Ingar Dragset’s Cruising pavilion, “an innocent looking, labyrinthine rendition of the white cube that by day would welcome families on picnic and at night would transform itself into a place for lovers? [a space that] mobilises several independent functions (artwork, picnic site, darkroom) that overlap and thereby create a scenario for the co- existence of different groups of users.”

Risk – the requirement to take a journey into the unknown, to expose polarisations, contradictions and divergences – is a condition for artistic innovation. However, within the public realm, opportunities for risk or problematisation may be factored out in the expedience of attending to government policy. But as Jes Fernie comments: “Problems are not necessarily there to be solved, but to be radically reinterpreted, laughed at, kicked out or embraced”.

1. David Patten, Remember what Jack said, first published PASW, 2004. Re-published by kind permission on [www.a-n.co.uk/playing\\_up](http://www.a-n.co.uk/playing_up)
2. Jane Watt, Back to school, a-n Magazine, November 2003.
3. Jes Fernie, Architectural dialogues, a-n Magazine, January 2003.
4. From an essay by Susan Jones published in Dangerous ground: sculpture in the city, The Scottish Sculpture Trust, 1999.
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6. Jane Watt, Back to school, a-n Magazine, November 2003.
7. Paul Glinkowski, In it for the duration, a-n Magazine, July 2004.
8. Paul Glinkowski, In it for the duration, a-n Magazine, July 2004.
9. Maurice O’Connell, quoted in Engaged practice.
10. Lars Bang Larsen, Space campaigns and living work, a-n Magazine, March 2003.
11. Nils Norman, Pockets of Disorder: The history of adventure play, first published City Projects, 2005. Re-published by kind permission on [www.a-n.co.uk/playing\\_up](http://www.a-n.co.uk/playing_up).
12. Jane Watt, A very public affair, a-n Magazine, May 2004.
13. Iain Borden, Stimulating the senses in the public realm, first published by CABE in What are we scared of? The value of risk in designing public space, 1 February 2005. Re-published by kind permission on [www.a-n.co.uk/playing\\_up](http://www.a-n.co.uk/playing_up) What are we scared of? The value of risk in designing public space is available as a pdf download at [www.cabe.org.uk](http://www.cabe.org.uk)