



Moments not Monuments

Craig Martin

Within the literature on urban regeneration much has been made of the role played by the culture industries in fostering an increased visibility for deprived urban areas, resulting in the growth of economic and social traffic into these areas. Key to this strategy is the acknowledged seductive power of cultural practitioners and cultural capital to attract economic capital. Phil Hubbard (1996) understands the changing focus of urban growth as the move away from localised governmental provision toward outward investment, and the key role that culture plays in this equation is to facilitate investment through the projection of a value system based on dynamism, creativity and progress. With such a situation, for Hubbard “the focus of much urban governmental activity is no longer the provision of services for city residents, but a concern with the prosperity of the city and its ability to attract jobs and investment” (1996:1441). Given the historical moment of this statement areas such as Docklands were paradigmatic, but in more recent times the role of culture has increased to a much greater degree with the clear precedents of Bilbao, Glasgow and Gateshead.

In these urban contexts the function of culture as intimated above has been ‘image-based’, whereby the work of prominent architects, designers and artists serve as beacons for the input of private (and public) capital, alongside the ubiquitous retail environments and corporate architectural styles. This shouldn’t come as a great surprise given the surfeit of the image economy that typifies the post-industrial ‘landscape’. In this scenario the strategic impetus of urban regeneration is premised as much on “image construction and advertising” (Hubbard, 1996:1442) as it is on actual physical transformation with culture’s role in this instance being both external and internal; firstly, where ‘beacon’ artists or architects are ‘flown-in’ to focus media attention on a particular urban area; and secondly where the indigenous artistic and cultural population are utilised as signifiers of the economic potential of a given area, with the situation in east London being a clear example of this. Wansborough & Mageean view this as being indicative of what they call ‘place-marketing’ (2000:183), whereby the ‘individual’ qualities of competing cities are purportedly highlighted through their specific cultural wares. At the centre of this debate is the role of the cultural practitioner in producing this individuality of place, with the architect and artist being a dominant player. For those artists, musicians, architects etc. who are willingly called upon to produce signature works for urban areas around the globe Stuart Wilks-Heeg has coined the phrase “mobile regeneration force” (Taylor, 2007). Under a strategy like this artists become a model for the ideology of urban entrepreneurialism (see Hubbard 1996:1443). However, many practitioners are critical of the tensions involved in the urban regeneration process, notably that of being complicit with the interests of private capital, as well as the increase in studio and residential rental costs that inevitably occur in such a process.

To consider the place of cultural practices in terms of how regenerative strategies operate and the ensuing tensions created, one recent project that critically interrogated the function of the artist within the framework of urban regeneration will be utilised. It will be argued that this project helps to illuminate the debates surrounding the operation of culture in the context of urban regenerative practices. Arcade, conceived and curated by artist Andrew Dodds and arts facilitator Ben Eastop, was an exhibition of works by a variety of artists and writers held at Westbourne Studios, London in September and October 2006 (www.arcade-project.com). The exhibition, according to the press release, “draws on strategies and materials often used by redevelopment agencies”. Although this description suggests that the exhibition remit sought to engage with these strategies in a positive manner, the reality was different. It will be argued that as an exhibition and as a critical strategy in its own right Arcade investigated the implicit tensions of urban regeneration through cultural practices. To set the exhibition in its original context, the organisers were invited by the sponsors, London Westside, under the auspices of ACAVA (the visual arts educational charity), to develop an exhibition or event that demonstrated the diversity of artistic practice in London primarily in the electronic and new media fields. London Westside was established by Paddington Development Trust as part of the London Development Agency’s strategy to develop Creative London, a network of ten creative hubs, that would promote the creative industries in London.

* * *

Utilising some of the strategic tools developed by 'Institutional Critique' practices from the 1960s onward the actual focal point of the exhibition looked to be the 'problematic' role of the artist in promoting cultural regeneration in these specific urban locations. There was a two-fold approach to the project; firstly, whilst Arcade was the exhibition title, it also referred to the container that housed and displayed the works on show; secondly, the works featured in the exhibition were a mix of newly commissioned and already extant ones, none of which were permanent in their exposition. Both approaches will be read here in terms of their critique of urban regeneration practices. The title – Arcade – is an obvious reference point to Walter Benjamin's *Arcades Project* and is clearly acknowledged in the literature for the exhibition as a generative device. Given this it is necessary to read the exhibition in terms of Benjamin's book's focus, but also its structure. Benjamin famously envisioned the shopping arcades of the nineteenth century as microcosms of modernity, an admixture of technological achievement and the growing spectacular culture of consumption. The arcades themselves were transformative, both in terms of how they changed people's perceptions of consumption practices but more importantly for our own discussion, the space of the city. Where previously the street had been an unwelcome obstacle course, the arcades offered refuge from inclement weather and a space to stroll amid the commodities on display in the shop windows. Crucially though, the 'regenerative' and transformative role of the arcades was entirely dependent on the commodity and the 'image-based' nature of capitalist society. In her own sprawling tome, *The Artificial Kingdom*, Celeste Olalquiaga rightly acknowledges the implicit bond between the arcades as social spaces and their role as spaces of capital:

"A product of capitalistic development and bourgeois investment (they were financed by the businessmen of the time), arcades profited from the real estate speculation that followed the French Revolution and placed extensive properties on the market for very low prices" (Olalquiaga, 1999:20).

In utilising the moniker of 'Arcade', one means of qualifying the exhibition in question is to see it as an acknowledgement and awareness of the 'implicit bond' between transformations of urban space and consumer capital. Alongside this recognition of the historical legacy of urban development, there is the structure of Benjamin's book to be considered. For *Arcades Project* remained an expansive, unfinished book due to his death. Again, the literature on this exhibition articulates the fact that the project as a whole is ongoing and will be sited over time at a variety of geographical locations, thus "enabling commissioned artists to respond materially and critically to specific sites". Rather than the typical role of the "mobile regenerative force" of artists as discussed earlier, Arcade as a project could indeed be described as a mobile force, but one that leaves no lasting signature works or permanent testaments to the regenerated area, instead it leaves the trace of a critical voice that expands over time. Through this gesture the strategy behind this exhibition at least appears to take on board the open structure of the book itself.

In also giving the name Arcade to the container that houses the exhibited works and travels to other sites, the organisers could be said to be adding a further layer of complexity to the exhibition's relationship to urban regeneration. The container in question is identical to those storage containers and site accommodation offices that are often



Arcade
Installation view at Westbourne Studios, London, 2006.

seen on building sites, housing both equipment and workers. Although this may be read purely in practical terms such as security and ease of transportation, the clear allusion to the process of urban regeneration in the form of construction work suggests that the notion of urban renaissance is not premised entirely on the sheen and seduction of finished buildings or permanent monumental works of art, but just as much on the labour of the construction site. In a similar vein other iconic reminders of urban regeneration projects such as saplings and scattered Play Bark also featured as aspects of the overall exhibition design.

Perhaps the strongest function of the exhibition in terms of a questioning of regenerative ideology is precisely its ability to *reveal* the implicit operations of urban regeneration in the form of a negative critique. The works exhibited as part of Arcade obviously operate under a similar mantra to the underlying structure of the project and as such the curatorial strategy places them directly within the discourse of regeneration. The collective message generated by the works was that of imminent rupture and failure, with many of them suggestive of a teetering precariousness, as opposed to a bright new future which is all too often the message from works commissioned as part of the regenerative process. Alexander Costello's pre-existing work *All You Need to Know Right Now 1, 2 and 3* was a clear testament to the dialectic of destruction and rebirth within regenerative strategies. In these three video-works the artist is shown in the foreground facing the camera whilst in the background high-rise social housing is destroyed in the spectacle one associates with the destruction of neglected tower blocks. Costello here deals with a historical context of ruination that depicts the failure of an earlier regenerative project, but one much more utopian in its social possibility than the present phase. Lessons can obviously be learnt from these events: for the grand gestures of contemporary regeneration are of course entropic and destined to a fate not dissimilar to those that Costello presents. Of the other works on show that were previously exhibited elsewhere Shezad Dawood's *Real Estate & Urban Planning* (2005) is perhaps the most appropriate to the present debate. A complex video work, it conflates two narratives: that of the assassination of Crazy Horse, the leader of one of the Native American tribes in the nineteenth century, with the regenerative strategies effecting the Diorama Arts Centre in London. Both stories converge around the struggle for land; Crazy Horse's with the imperialist US Federal Government of the time; and Diorama with the changing face of west Euston and Kings Cross in London. Kings Cross is itself one of the most visible regeneration projects in London at present and is typified by a mass of homogenised architecture. In Dawood's tale progress sadly appears inexorable, if only to advance progress itself.

The implication of this latter work is precisely the drive of change, but all too often the projects that fall under this policy do not appreciate the singularities of specific environs; they fail to comprehend a form of urbanism that is not solely predicated on specified patterns of usage. Much of the recent work in the academic fields of urban studies and social geography has dealt with this same issue. Steve Pile has commented on how the “unresolved puzzle of the city lies in its shifting perspectives, in the way it shifts perception” (2005:15). This is at odds with attempts under the banner of regeneration to resolve the city entirely, to manage and order people’s perceptions. This is at the core of the critique invoked by Arcade – the multiplicity of experience on the one hand, but more fundamentally a suggestion of the complicity that culture plays in shoring up the values of regenerative order. In a similar gesture to Steve Pile, Doreen Massey discusses the ‘unexpectedness of space’ (2005:111-114). Where space for some is constituted by an ordered, planned and controlled configuration, Massey extols the “multiplicity of trajectories” (2005:111). However, although Massey sees the importance of chance, she at the same time does not fall into the trap of a naïve, overwhelming belief in ‘possibility’. For whilst we may revel in unexpected spaces and sites of supposed transgressions of order, these same sites have a logic of their own. Critics of regenerative order do not simply desire the mélange of chaos and fragmentation but rather appreciate the complexity and diversity of historical layering over time.

Of the other works featured in the exhibition the theme of inverted regenerative strategies continued. The writer, Maria Fusco, produced a series of short textual narratives, entitled *Doom Knots* (2006), transmitted daily via Bluetooth onto mobile media devices in the surrounding area. Immaterial in their delivery, the texts themselves were decidedly materialist in their descriptions of rifling through bins in search of forgotten fragments of news media, discarded instructions for consumer electronics. In the course of the story people were dismayed at the narrator’s attempts to find solace in those oft forgotten objects consigned to nothingness: “I observed that most people were revolted by my daily habit. It seemed that they were disgusted with the notion that such discarded matter could still be read and still hold meaning”. A rich analogy for perceptions of unwanted, un-tolerated spaces, and for the need to look again at the values of existing environs (and objects) before the heart is ripped out and the manicured edifices of regeneration erected. By comparison, in the way that *Doom Knots* concerns a deeper search for meaning both ontologically and physically, the work of Thorsten Knaub, *GPS Erasure (The Royal Borough of Kensington & Chelsea)* (2006) puts forward a ‘pointless’ task, that of cycling the streets of the London borough during the course of the exhibition. Pointless does not suggest here a failed project, quite the reverse. By utilizing GPS technology to map his travels through the streets and to subsequently create a visual index of these journeys, GPS Erasure highlights the ordering processes of urban regeneration. But the power of this work lies in the implications of its subsequent obliteration of the mapped journeys; for as the expeditions multiply across the borough and on the screen, the visual order becomes more and more fragmented as any semblance of a regimented landscape is lost.

* * *

Two further pieces of work compounded this overwhelming sensation of loss within the exhibition. Andrew Dodds’ *Adrift* (2006) casts an additional feeling of absence – this audio work takes BBC Radio 4’s Shipping Forecast and removes all the words except that of “falling”. This word punctuates the long silences left through the deletion of the other elements of the original broadcast leaving a trace of collapse, not dissimilar to the works mentioned above. Delivered in the evocative tones of Received Pronunciation, issues around class, decision-making and power are brought to mind. By referencing early minimalist compositions such as Cage’s 4’33” one can deduce notions of silence as the difficulty of ‘speaking’, or perhaps silence as disavowal. As such *Adrift* mirrors and reinforces the overall curatorial remit of Arcade itself. Alex Baker’s *Autonomous Drumkit* (2006) – whilst essentially a slick exposition of a technological tautology (the drum kit plays itself) – pointed to the dominant themes present in the exhibition, that of disappearance, but more profoundly for the debate on visual art’s role in urban regeneration, that of a shadowy presence. Baker’s work with its absent drummer stood as an ‘anti-monument’ to the figure of the artist having disappeared – implying both the lack of engagement the ‘mobile regenerative force’ has with the social realities of areas where culture has been used as a regenerative tool, but also illustrating the ghostlike, shadowy figure of the artist that emerges via the feeling of doom which resonates throughout; there is a trace of the artist having once been present, but no longer so.

Certainly then, there are correspondences between the shadowy figure of the ‘artist-departed’ that pervades and some of Pile’s work on the haunted city (2005). He contends that conceptions of the city need to appreciate the fragments, pasts, memory, magic and ghosts of the urban. Such conditions of engagement with urban space rarely inflect the strategies of regeneration that premise their strategies on a homogenised and official view (Pile, 2005:14). The city as dream; the magic city; the vampiric city and the ghostly city are the array of means through which Pile addresses the ‘real’ city. His ghostly city is one that is populated by traces of lives lived, by individuals whose desires and recriminations remain unfulfilled; instead they are suspended in a perpetual state of loss. Citing the sociologist Avery Gordon, Pile notes how the ghost is an entity that signals the notion of loss (2005:131). Within the analysis that Arcade offers it is possible to argue that the artist’s role in the regenerative process is similarly one of frustration and loss. According to the exhibition’s organisers at the heart of their outlook was a way of critiquing the artist’s ghost-like persona: “In many redevelopment and public art projects the artist’s trace is felt only as some phantom-like, spectral presence” (Dodds, 2006). So under these terms the exhibition’s tactic was to see the artist as an often-unwitting conduit between temporal and spatial changes that occur when the regenerative process begins. This highlights the importance of states of change, of histories disappearing, and traces of lives lived being eradicated, an important interpretative model for understanding the figure of the ghost and regeneration alike. Pile argues that “the ghost stands at the threshold of the personal and the social, trafficking feelings and memories across a never clear, and never simply open or closed border” (2005:139). One assertion here would be that the figure of the artist in the regenerative process, and the ghost in general terms, both point toward thwarted legacies.

In the parlance of contemporary urban design and regeneration the spectral presence is admittedly not a common discussion point. But the confluence between Pile's suggestion of the city constructed out of other histories and Arcade's critique of the positivist ramifications of culturally led regeneration projects, suggests that the social and cultural make-up of the urban is not solely premised on the strict management of expectations. The question for many artists and socio-cultural practitioners in general has to be their place in the development of the city, including their complicity in amplifying the above-mentioned value system of creativity and vitality that so appeals to regenerative funding bodies. Overall as both a project strategy and as an exhibition of autonomous works Arcade leads us to a number of conclusions and rightly identifies worrying implications for the role of artists in the process of urban regeneration; most notably that culture's function in some scenarios is simply a form of advertising for the influx of sameness.

References:

- Dodds, A. (2006). Correspondence with author
Hubbard, P. (1996). 'Urban Design and City Regeneration: Social Representations of Entrepreneurial Landscapes'. In: *Urban Studies*, Vol.33, No.8, 1441-1461
Massey, D. (2005). *For Space*. London: Sage
Olalquiga, C. (1999). *The Artificial Kingdom: a Treasury of the Kitsch Experience*. London: Bloomsbury
Pile, S. (2005). *Real Cities*. London: Sage
Taylor, L. (2007). *Thinking Allowed*, BBC Radio 4, 3rd January
Wansborough, M. & Mageean, A. (2000). 'The Role of Urban Design in Cultural Regeneration'. In: *Journal of Urban Design*, Vol.5, No.2, 181-197

Moments not Monuments

Craig Martin

First commissioned by *Art & Architecture Journal*

This expanded version published and distributed by Arcade as part of 'Sacrifice Zone', a series of online commissions by artists and writers examining the links between artists and regeneration agendas.

Text copyright the author. Images copyright Andrew Dodds. Please contact Arcade for reproduction permissions.

www.arcade-project.com/sacrifice

