

# on the w@terfront



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## Regeneration X. The Artistic Factor

The eminent architect Richard Rogers, in a recent lecture, gave his predictive view that; **"buildings, the city and its citizens will be one inseparable organism... and our present concern for single objects will be replaced by a concern for relationships"**. Thus with public art in the regenerative context. Our concern for the art object should be replaced by a concern for the relationship of artistry and imagination to the urban design process.

I am an artist and an art programme producer. As an artist I work mainly with light, graphics and the digital image. Currently I am making images for large-scale public place projection and investigating sensor driven interactivity in my light sculptures. I collaborate with architects as a matter of course and I enjoy the symbiotic nature of the relationship. As an art programme producer I conceive public art programmes for capital schemes, almost exclusively within the context of urban regeneration programmes. I assemble the cast of players and I design in methods of involving the public. I like this work.

I have many years experience in the public art field. In 1986 I founded the public art agency for the UK's Yorkshire region, and I served as its Executive Director for twelve years, but my professional involvement with public art really began in 1984 when Yorkshire Arts Association, a regional arm of the Arts Council, appointed me as the region's first Public Art Officer. Prior to that my artistic practice was mainly in the fields of photography and printmaking and quite a bit of what we then called community art. But I got the job, I believe, because of my enthusiasm for the enlivening role of art, and of the artist, in the built environment and the notion, perhaps amusing to some, that in an urban design context artists could be the first authors of form and that architects, engineers and other design professionals could use their skills to help realise the artistic vision. Now I appreciate that this needs a considerable amount of qualification. I know for instance that arguments about professional primacy and hierarchical distinctions of the status of artists, architects and engineers are self-defeating. I know also that the opportunities to be truly artistic in the built environment are few and far between and, in the UK at least, I think I know some of the reasons why.

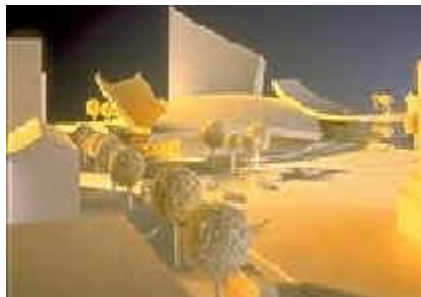
My contention is that the ambience and the social prospects of our towns and cities would benefit greatly from an injection of bold imagination such as that displayed here in this interactive neon project for the Miami Light Rail System in 1984. In this work, by American artist Rockne Krebs, the neon activates in response to the movement of trains crossing the bridge.



This ingredient, imagination, has been removed from our thinking by, on the one hand a profit driven private sector more than willing to compromise good design for short term gain, and on the other hand, by a timid public sector scared senseless by the prospect of frightening development away and paranoid about an imagined public disapproval of contemporary art and innovative design. These factors and groundless fears have produced a design mentality that is risk-averse within a culture of institutionalised dullness. To break free we need to enlist the support of our most imaginative artists as conceptualists at the earliest stages of design. This can be achieved through application of simple low cost techniques. For instance, in the UK the process of local authority development control for most major schemes should include provision for artistic thinking to be applied to design issues. Creative ideas generated within this **artistic potential review** process could then be put to the developer informally or, if necessary, formally via Section 106 'planning gain' agreements.

Who really designs our buildings? Not architects. They are too frequently merely 'space accountants' whose aesthetic parameters have been pre-set by the cost driven dictates of their clients or, more likely, by those, such as pension fund managers, who provide development funding and whose agenda is cost-driven. One US fund manager recently wrote, in 'Fortune' magazine, **"I'm not sure office buildings are even architecture, they are really mathematical calculations, three-dimensional investment"**.

Depressing isn't it. Particularly when we see the rare outcome of commissions from bold clients such as the Guggenheim in Bilbao with which we are all probably familiar or the wildly exciting proposal by Daniel Libeskind for the Imperial War Museum of the north in Manchester. A proposal so far too wild, too imaginative, for the UK National Lottery.



But I digress and I want to show you some of the amazing projects that artists are involved in around the world. I shall begin in England with a completed project in Manchester.

On behalf of the Trafford Park Development Corporation I commissioned this landmark work, 'Skyhook' by Brian Fell. Made in steel Skyhook is representative of the heavy engineering heritage of Trafford Park, an industrial area that had been in sharp decline since the mid 60's. 'Skyhook' now provides a metaphor for the regeneration of the dockside area and is the centrepiece of an art programme that includes works by SITE and by Adrian Moakes.



This year and next I will be managing 'Chesterfield Suite', my programme of new art and new music that forms the core of Chesterfield's regenerative 'percent for art' programme. Chesterfield is a small city in the North of England, where the Council prioritises public art and uses its powers under Section 106 of the Town and Country Planning Act to ensure that developers support its public art policy.



One of the artists that I have persuaded to work in Chesterfield is David Mach, well known in the UK for his monumental brick train and for this piece, 'Sumo', seen here outside Euston Station in London.



The community involvement in 'Chesterfield Suite' comes mainly from the work of Nicola Atkinson-Griffith who's art requires the contribution of reminiscence from local people and from composer/musician Stuart Jones who is writing a piece of new music to be performed simultaneously by four brass bands.

One of my speculative projects, this time in Leeds, is 'Signs of the City'. This is an ambitious attempt to re-write the visual iconography of a major city. To create a new visual identity of signs and symbols through the agency of three aesthetic masterplans for the three main highway corridors. These masterplans are to be drawn by artists who blur the distinctions between the professional practices of art, architecture and landscape, such as Daniel Libeskind, Martha Schwartz, Richard Goodwin and Kathryn Gustaffson. The masterplans will include major sculptural events in the landscape and a number of smaller scale commissions for local artists.

These are examples of the type and style of work that has inspired my thinking for 'Signs of the City'.



In Sydney the leading Australian sculptor Richard Goodwin made this sound reduction wall for a new suburban highway. The imagery looks abstract but in fact it draws directly on the engineer's schematic for the city's highway system.



In Florida, Martha Schwartz has produced an undulating, mile long sound reduction wall for Miami.



Pietr Kowalski's wonderful sculpture occupies a roundabout on the outskirts of Paris.

I devised 'Signs of the City' to be a key component of the city's 'Gateways and Corridors' regeneration strategy and the city made nearly £ .5 million available as the matching-money requirement for a bid to the National Lottery for £4 million. However, at the time of writing 'Signs of the City' is too ambitious, too daring, for the National Lottery whose assessor drew the absurd conclusion that "**artists would be overburdened with the ambitions of the project and that the Lottery's money might be at too much risk.**" What, I ask you, is the Lottery for if not to support artistic ambition and to take risks. My thinking was also influenced by the fact that many major aesthetic and procurement decisions in the city [any city] are routinely taken by junior technicians in the city's highways department. For instance, a £1million can easily be spent on standard items from a street furniture catalogue but nothing can be found for an artist to design a small family of bespoke items that will raise the aesthetic stock of the city.

Here are some more good examples of contemporary public art developed within the regenerative context.



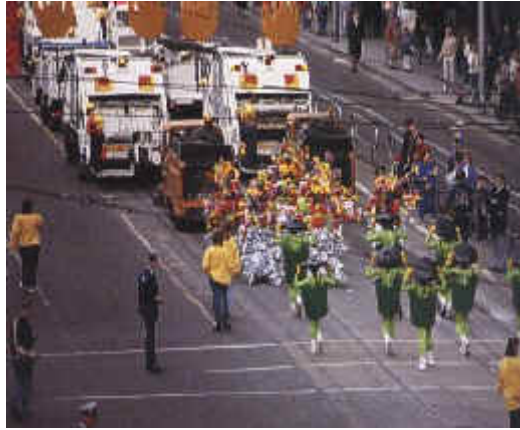
Marilyn Zwack's designs for bridge support were created in consultation with the Native American community, whose Phoenix, Arizona homes were close to the new freeway.



Similarly, Judith Baca's delightful LRT station was created with the involvement of local Los Angelino youth.



In Melbourne, the Australian city where 'percent for art' operates better perhaps than in any other city, the downtown area benefits from works as sophisticated as Akio Makigawa's 'Time and Tide' sculpture and from Simon Perry's marvellous 'Public Purse' which sits outside City Hall, posing a wry question about the use of public funds on public art.



Also in Melbourne the 'percent' allocation is pooled up and each year the city departments discuss an art project that will serve their own departmental agenda. Here the cleansing department worked with a choreographer to devise the Trash Tango, a cavalcade of garbage trucks that promoted the services of the department and provided, in their opinion, the most positive publicity for the department. They are now 'full-on' 'percent for art' because the art served the public agenda.

We would all accept that successful regeneration addresses matters beyond the merely physical. We need to work with the regeneration **X** factor – the imagination of artists. This will add value to the process of regeneration and will make our towns and cities more interesting, more exciting, more liveable places.

When urban fact makes dismal reading, we need the urban fiction of artists to raise our spirits. To show us what might be. And we need the help and co-operation of many others to make it real.

*This paper has been adapted from a talk that I gave at The Building Centre in London in 1998. That talk, entitled 'Urban Fiction', was a part of the Creative Collaborations series devised by AXIS.*

*Most of the images in this paper are from my own photographs. Colleagues in Australia and the USA have supplied others.*