Limits to Culture

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Urban Regeneration vs. Dissident Art

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Cultural Turns: A De-industrialised Estate

The strangeness of cities becomes familiar. Perhaps it began in the 1900s, with the frenetic ambience of electric light and tramcars, and the crowds which thronged metropolitan cities. But this was an optimistic world, soon to be fractured by an industrialised war that would redraw the map of Europe. In the inter-war years, European cities became sites of democracy as well as technology, and of growing diversity through migration. The whole continent was devastated again, with the bombing of civilian targets to an unprecedented extent, before a sense of renewed civic values and humanism prevailed in the post-war era. There was austerity, and bomb sites remained; yet there was a renewed hope in the 1950s and economic expansion in the 1960s, culminating in the prospect of really changing the world in May 1968. That failed. Europe, and the rest of the world, has moved politically to the Right and economically to free market irrationality ever since. It sometimes seems as if the project of Enlightenment became tenuous in the 1930s and 1940s but has finally been encapsulated in an unrecoverable past in today's neoliberal realm of de-industrialisation: a new wasteland characterised by corporate greed, human rights abuses and environmental destruction. If there is a post-industrial state of mind, it is produced by an economic system but as much enhanced by design. The steel and glass corporate towers, non-places of travel, labyrinthine malls and new art museums in cool industrial sheds amid signs of gentrification, all contribute to a new, post-Enlightenment sense of the sublime. It is characterised by both scale and visual language: the 800,000 square metre Euralille and the 20-hectare CCTV building in Beijing, for instance, both designed by Rem Koolhaas, are daunting;[1] and the steel, glass and pale grey cladding of post-industrial urban sheds and towers creates an other-worldly coldness, a feeling of alienation which is

as much a source of awe as the Alps were for eighteenth-century travellers on the grand tour.

The new centres in their shiny splendour produce new margins. What was ordinary becomes marginal and residual. Contrasts deepen, real or imagined barriers emerge. Cities split. Owen Hatherley describes the redevelopment of Salford in Greater Manchester as generating a new, 'dead centre' in this enclave of wholesale reconstruction, entered from one side by an elegant bridge designed by Santiago Calatrava but from the other by bleak dual carriageways, dreary retail parks and old office complexes in down-at-heel Trafford.[2] Salford houses two flagship museums, the Lowry and a branch of the Imperial War Museum, and Media City, where parts of the BBC have moved. Walking in Salford Quays, Hatherley co-opts the weather:

> Looking out through torrential rain … at this, the most famous part of the most successfully regenerated ex-industrial metropolis, we can't help but wonder; is this as good as it gets? Museums, cheap speculative housing, offices for financially dysfunctional banks? What of the idea that civic pride might mean a civic architecture … ?[3]

Yes, but civic pride is a nineteenth-century value, the last flowering of which occurred in the 1950s (as in the Festival of Britain). These towers contain rather than house their occupants, as cheap housing warehouses the poor; and Hatherley imagines, 'barricading oneself into a hermetically sealed, impeccably furnished prison against an outside world … assumed to be terrifying'.[4] As digital communications systems link the enclaves of the immaterial economy of financial services, media and public relations along never-closing electronic highways, the city becomes a sleepless world where humans operate in systems more extensive than their imaginations. Sleep is, in any case, according to art theorist Jonathan Crary, no use, 'given the immensity of what is at stake economically'.[5] Manchester is a city which never sleeps, or which cannot because the night-economy of alcohol and clubs is as important as its day-time commerce. Permanent consumption compensates the operatives of late capitalism for routine alienation; it is the only game in town, the sole (if soulless) remaining imperative, enforced by the soft policing of the news-entertainment-culture sector.

Time!

If Slavoj Žižek is accurate when he says that these are the end-times,[6] the question is what is ending. Perhaps it is modernity and the values it espoused of freedom and human happiness. In the nineteenth century, this was translated into efforts to ameliorate the material conditions of the poor; the improvements – sewers, clean water, housing – were genuine, and culture in the form of new public art museums was one of them, but the strategy was always repressive: the prevention of revolt. Since the 1980s, culture has been co-opted to urban redevelopment, first as public art – since institutionalised to the point of offering a choice between bland new public monuments, corporate logos or visual pollution – then as the participation of artists in the design of environments (from over-designed parks and piazzas to wobbly bridges) and of publics in projects aimed at dealing with the new category of social exclusion. Following the 2007 financial services crisis (the crash) the regeneration industry has emerged in a more brutal guise, looking less to culture for an aura of respectability as it gets on with postcode clearances.

Meanwhile Beauty is radically other to the world produced by capital.[7] Like art's uselessness, or the autonomy claimed for modernism, Beauty is not productive but convulsive. It is met in unexpected moments and encounters which fade before they can be grasped, yet lingers in the mind, and is not at all confined to art. Beauty fractures capital's routines, breaking the chains of consumer culture in the awareness, suddenly, of 'the incommensurability of the voice of poetry'.[8] And the moment, however ephemeral, is transformative.[9]

To speak of such moments is utopian, and always has been. But utopianism was the content of modernism, which became (at some point in the late twentieth century) encapsulated in a no longer accessible (hence mystified) past. Art historian Tim Clark argues that modernism and socialism ended at the same time: 'If they died together, does that mean that … they lived together, in century-long co-dependency?'[10] I must leave that for another book, saying here only that globalisation renders both modernism and socialism as obsolete as old wireless sets.

Globalisation concentrates capital in companies which appropriate powers previously vested in states, and produces super-elites. When national regulation is an obstacle, companies go to transnational bodies; the super-rich enjoy unlimited mobility and avoid the inconvenience of paying tax. For sociologist Martin Albrow, no single sovereign power

can claim 'legitimate authority' over transnational institutions, so that the 'decentred and delinked' structures of the new world order become a 'vacant discursive space' where, 'people refer to the globe as once they referred to the nation, hence globalism'.[11] Zygmunt Bauman writes that, as states are 'no longer capable of balancing the books', they become instead 'executors and plenipotentiaries of forces which they have no hope of controlling politically'.[12] Peter Sloterdijk reads capital as aiming to put 'working life, wish life and expressive life … [all] within the immanence of spending power'.[13] In this context, some of the systems employed by global capital reproduce the practices of the eighteenth century: journalist James Ridgeway reports that: 'Children are traded in large numbers … [as] a source of low-cost labour' in the sex industry.[14] The global oil industry looks to Arctic exploration now that burning fossil fuels has melted much of the ice, just as colonialists previously pillaged rainforests. After 9/11, an older pattern of private security has been revived, and Naomi Klein writes of 'the Bush team' devising a role for government, in which the job of the state is, 'not to provide security but to purchase it at market prices',[15] Again, design plays its part in the production of a fear which serves the security sector, which has little connection with genuine safety. And design is central to the gleaming images which compensate for money's trashing of the city, reproduced in glossy tourist brochures and the promotional material for waterside redevelopment schemes, employing star architects in de-industrialised sites 'to sprinkle starchitect fairy dust'.[16] The signs of change are highly visual, sometimes but not always economically successful, and often socially divisive.

Conspicuous division

The chasm between wealth and deprivation is especially visible in redevelopment zones next to neighbourhoods of residual poverty. David Widgery, a doctor in Limehouse, watched the building of Canary Wharf in London's old Docklands, observing that, '[It] remains curiously alien, an attempt to parachute into the heart of the once industrial East End an identikit North American financial district … a gigantic Unidentified Fiscal Object.'[17] A UFO, a strange object from another world, the design style which characterises enclaves of the global city of financial services, replicated in any city seeking world status.[18] Steel and glass towers tend to be strangely opaque, despite all the glass, using surface design to redirect

attention from the dealings which take place inside them. Widgery notes a similarity of design in the towers of Canary Wharf and the World Financial Center, New York (both designed by César Pelli), and compares work in the health service with the ethos of Canary Wharf:

> Proletarian decency over monetarist efficiency; one driven by compassion and the solidarities of work and neighbourhood, the other by the simpler calculation of profit and loss. There is no physical monument to what generations of decent working-class East Enders have created and given and made and suffered. But César Peli … tells us that 'A skyscraper recognises that by virtue of its height it has acquired civic responsibilities. We expect it to have formal characteristics appropriate for this unique and socially charged role.' Now that would be interesting to see.[19]

Since the redevelopment of London Docklands in the 1980s, the rhetorical allusion to a civic sense has more or less disappeared. In Docklands, near the ExCeL event space and two chain hotels, a bronze sculpture, *Landed* by Les Johnson (2009), reduces the story of labour militancy and trade union organisation in the docks to the modelling of two day labourers under the foreman's eye. This is a successor to the naturalistic, bronze likenesses that proliferated in urban squares and parks in the late nineteenth century to remind citizens of the values they should espouse, represented mainly by white men of the ruling class. *Landed* is entirely competent and I have no wish to pick on it, yet I wonder what else could have been made to convey the histories of work and workers' solidarity which took place here.

With money comes mobility and a dissolution of allegiances. Bauman writes: 'If the new extraterritoriality of the elite feels like intoxicating freedom, the territoriality of the rest feels less like home ground, and ever more like prison … more humiliating for the obtrusive sight of others' freedom to move.'[20] Planner Peter Hall argues that, 'less fortunate groups are likely to be increasingly damned up in the cities, where they will perhaps be housed after a fashion' but will 'find themselves in but not of the city'.[21] Bauman reads communication technologies as radically separating the mobile rich and the grounded poor: 'The database is an instrument of selection, separation and exclusion … [which] washes out the locals.'[22] Meanwhile in far-away places, the mobile class plays. Sociologist Mimi Sheller writes that Caribbean islands have become a new Garden of Eden

accessible by international flights, with inclusive holiday villages and the added frissons of piracy and marijuana.[23] The holiday brochures simulate the Land of Cockaigne,[24] yet these sites of far-away consumption offer only another imperative to work to pay for their exploration.

Similarly selective narratives were used to market London's Docklands redevelopment, with pictures of a sparkling Thames and water sports. For art historian Jon Bird, Docklands in the late 1980s was where multinationals swallowed up the generous offers of land available in enterprise zones to 'spew out' various types of architectural postmodernism and 'high-tech paroxysms of construction that are as incoherent as they are unregulated'.[25] The publicity material showed:

> harmony and coherence, a unity of places and functions not brutally differentiated into respective spheres of work, home and leisure, but woven together by the meandering course of the river into a spectacular architectural myth of liberal *civitas*. Canary Wharf is indeed a fantasy of community: a city within the City populated by a migrant army of executive, managerial and office staff serving the productive signifiers of postmodernity – microelectronics, telecommunications and international capital – along with the relevant support structures and lifestyle accoutrements, from food to culture …[26]

Bird also wrote on oppositional art in the form of changing billboards telling other stories of Docklands, produced by the art group The Art of Change.[27] The billboards soon disappeared while the imagery used for Docklands went global, as in the promotion of Gdańsk after the demise of state socialism (Figure 1.1). Bird summarises the familiarly strange scene, 'We look from a distance … each scene suffused with a gentle light which plays upon the towers and the water. Nothing is un-harmonious or out of place – these are viewpoints that allow us to possess the City in imagination.'[28] Looking in one direction along a redeveloped waterfront I might see iconic buildings: a skyline for the symbolic economy of city marketing; in another direction I might see zones of cultural consumption in the sites of redundant industries. These iconic towers and the designer bars and boutiques which cluster around the new art museums represent renewal, but perhaps they do this only for the elites who use them, or in ways which are more simulated than material. Sociologist Steven Miles remarks on the role of imagery in a consumer society as a new kind of social currency which, 'creates a demand for illusion which we pay others

to produce for us'.[29] Citing Marc Augé,[30] he writes that: 'The non-place is the opposite of a utopia' since it has no organic social content but is defined economically and 'by a lack of community, a lack of unpredictability and a lack of difference'.[31] I suggest that something similar can be said of signature architecture.

Figure 1.1 Billboard for Gdańsk, Kraków, Poland

In a digital era, space is less important because people can operate anywhere that has a wifi connection, but images generate prestige. Journalist Aditya Chakrabortty writes of the Shard, by Renzo Piano, at 72 storeys London's highest building to date, that it, 'stalks Londoners everywhere they go'.[32] Visible from everywhere, it should be familiar. Close-up, it is evident that this structure with a seemingly broken tip is not an efficient use of space; its floors taper, wasting airspace but this does not matter: the prices are high enough. To take space here is super-conspicuous consumption: apartments cost £30–50 million. Chakrabortty reads the Shard as extending the ways in which London 'is becoming more unequal and dangerously dependent on hot money'.[33] He continues:

> This is a high-rise that has been imposed on London Bridge despite protests from residents, conservation groups and a warning from Unesco that it may compromise the world-heritage status of the nearby

> Tower of London. What's more, its owners and occupiers will have very little to do with the area, which for all its centrality is also home to some of the worst deprivation and unemployment in the entire city. … its developer … talks of it as a virtual town, comprising a five-star hotel and Michelin-starred restaurants.[34]

He quotes a spokesperson for the property's agent who says that, since there are only 25 to 50 potential buyers globally in its price range, they can all be telephoned and advertising is not necessary.

Culture and redevelopment

In this divisive scenario, the arts play a role like that of design. Susan Buck-Morss writes,

> The artworld has flourished in the warm climate of the new globalisation. It is exemplary of the new business model, boasting a cultural universality that seizes on the market potential of a recently massified global elite. The new post-art … is omnipresent, spilling out of museums and exhibitions, migrating in multimedia forms, its web-links advertised on multiple e-mails in your inbox.[35]

Broadly, at risk of over-generalising, there have been three overlapping strategies: the use of redundant industrial buildings for cultural institutions; the demarcation of inner-city cultural and heritage quarters; and the insertion in de-industrialised or inner-city districts of flagship institutions such as new museums of modern or contemporary art (or whole arts districts).

An example of the first strategy is Tate Liverpool, in a Victorian warehouse in Albert Dock. It is one of several museums on the site, such as the Museum of Slavery. Tate Liverpool opened in 1988, its interior re-designed by James Stirling. After refurbishment in 1998 the foyer was re-refurbished in 2006 by Arca, whose website describes 'a structured communication of the gallery's offering to people – shifting light platforms visible from across the dock … a re-oriented reception area with a dramatic new desk. Educational areas were overlapped with hospitality suites.'[36] Tate Liverpool has always exhibited part of Tate's collection of modern art, but in the 1990s it evolved a community-based curating policy for temporary

exhibitions. I always wondered if this was because Tate Liverpool was so far from London that it did not matter. The Baltic, Gateshead, is another example of an ex-industrial museum site, converted (again by Arca) from a flour mill on the Tyne. Elsewhere, nineteenth-century railway stations such as the Gare d'Orsay in Paris and the Hamburger Bahnhof in Berlin have been reused as major exhibition spaces, their train sheds transformed into high, light halls very suitable for the display of art.

An example of a cultural quarter is the Rope Walks in Liverpool, near the city centre. This was planned in 1997, and draws visitors into an area associated with popular music among old warehouses and small factories. Cultural historian Abigail Gilmore observes:

> It contained many of the right ingredients for regeneration as a quarter: built heritage assets, traces of its industrial past (the centre for rope making and supply to the shipping industry; merchant warehouses and residences), cheap (in some cases free) workspace for artists, musicians and other creative producers, licensed venues, pubs, clubs and bars that stretched back to Liverpool's musical past, secret spaces – courtyards, alleys and squares – and seeds of organic activity filling these places.[37]

Urbanist Graeme Evans remarks that while the sites designated for such quarters tend to be, as Gilmore says, activated organically, brought to prominence by individual intermediaries, institutionalised planning 'is less well-placed to capture this energy, which limits the viability of municipal or corporate cluster developments'.[38] This indicates a gap between production – artists moving into de-industrialised zones – and distribution – the cultural quarters as tourist attraction – where, as a quarter becomes recognised and rents rise, artists tend to be forced out. One of the first culturally recoded quarters was SoHo in New York, the garment district where artists moved into lofts in the 1970s. Sharon Zukin charted the conversion of this area from a mixed-use, organically developed quarter to a zone of boutiques, luxury chain stores and high-rent apartments.[39] In a later account she looks back,

> The district attracted an enormous amount of media attention in lifestyle magazines and art world journals…. Foot traffic swelled. By 1990 art galleries dominated the storefronts, joined by new, individually owned boutiques and professional services, while manufacturing visibly waned. SoHo was now known as an artists' district, but it was

> also becoming an interesting place to shop for new art, trendy clothing and imported cheese. By 2000 art galleries began to be outnumbered by boutiques, and chain stores of every sort planted themselves on Broadway [nearby]…. Only five years later, with rents dramatically rising, chain stores outnumbered boutiques.… By 2005 SoHo was no longer an artists' district; it was an urban shopping mall.[40]

Tate Modern is a reused industrial building and a flagship cultural institution inserted in a de-industrialised zone. It occupies a post-war brick power station designed by Giles Gilbert Scott which closed in 1981. The building was converted by architects Herzog and de Meuron, following a design completion in 1995. Its Turbine Hall – 35 metres high and 152 metres long – has become a quasi-public space and a temporary exhibition area; the permanent collection is displayed in the upper floors. Tate Modern has two shops, several food and drink outlets of different price levels, and a members' room. The collection was re-hung thematically for the opening, juxtaposing works from different periods and styles to engage visitors in a-historical ways. This has since been revised.

Architectural historian Simon Sadler writes that Tate Modern combines, 'absence and spatial excess' with a vertical circulation route that wends its way through, 'the cathedral-like multi-storey void of its emptied turbine hall'.[41] In 2012, three underground oil storage tanks were converted into additional live-art spaces; and a new ten-storey tower was constructed adjacent to the site (again designed by Herzog and de Meuron) to provide new gallery spaces and several floors of ultra-high-price apartments. Like SoHo, if more unevenly, the London Borough of Southwark has been changed by Tate insertion. Around it are new apartments, boutiques and bars. The waterside is popular with tourists but not quite gentrified. Nonetheless, despite the surviving signs of local culture in Southwark, Tate Modern is an engine of gentrification. It has remarkably moved the cultural hub of London out of the previously elite West End to the south side of the Thames; but it has achieved this – perhaps significantly – by constructing a new axis between Tate and the financial district via the Millennium Bridge in front of St Paul's Cathedral. Tate claims to generate '£100 million in economic benefits' for London,[42] and has received more than 40 million visitors. It is a great success, in sharp contrast to the Dome. Yet, for cultural theorist Esther Leslie, Tate has remade 'the space of cultural encounter' by being a 'simulacrum'.[43] Leslie continues: