

Meshworking Cultural Well-Being, Part 2 (draft DPv#3_23.12.2013)

"Nothing is unthinkable, nothing impossible, provided it comes out of the needs of life and is dedicated to life's further development."

– Lewis Mumford: 'The Culture of Cities', Harcourt Brace & Co, 1938

In concluding our previous Opinion Piece [1] with this quote from Mumford, we were asking 'how brave can we be?' The inclusion of 'cultural well-being' in the National Planning Policy Framework (NPPF March 2012) can and should be seen as an opportunity to think the unthinkable and imagine the impossible. To hint at a possible 'something' in response to Mumford's "Nothing is unthinkable, nothing impossible", we proposed Jonathan Vickery's invitation [2] "to consider the real meaning of the term 'public culture', and how a genuine public culture can exist as an integral part of city governance."

A year after that text, it would be comforting to say that things have moved on, but that isn't the case. The harsh reality is that nothing much has happened, because nothing much can happen while Mumford's "the needs of life [and] life's further development" are so completely ignored.

So, when it comes to NPPF, how brave are we? Maybe we can be brave enough to ask two questions:

- A. the inclusion of cultural well-being in NPPF should be celebrated, and rightly so. That was an important achievement. But won't it remain an unused and unworkable aspiration if it can't be acted on and delivered?
- B. are our assumptions about public art denying us the opportunity to find relationship with cultural well-being in terms of NPPF? If so, we need to move on from those assumptions. And quickly.

Both questions interpenetrate in the current void created by government to allow foot-loose capital to promote private interest. The current state of affairs permits only the antithesis of meaningful public art in relationship to notions of cultural well-being and/or "genuine public culture".

It may be useful to understand the current void in the terms Raymond Williams [3] gave us some thirty years ago. What confronts us is not "some unavoidable real world" but "a set of identifiable processes of realpolitik and force majeure, of nameable agencies of power and capital, distraction and disinformation."

It is a difficult business, though, this need to be brave with NPPF. The opportunity to deliver against the 'cultural well-being' Framework obligation will remain unachievable while the Planning responsibilities of local authorities are sacrificed to the needs of Austerity (or Darwinian) economics. This is not just about the loss of public art's 'friends and allies' as more and more Planning processes are out-sourced and in-house Planning Officers are lost along the way, but is very much about the lack of opportunity to put in place the understanding and working procedures that supported the 'By Design' agenda [4] at the start of the millennium.

Without doubt, the Coalition Government's commitment to 'cultural well-being' in NPPF will require similar levels of intelligence and infrastructure that the encouragement of better design needed in 2000. In the 'unavoidable real world' of the current budget gaps faced by local authorities [5], it is more than likely that the Framework's cultural aspiration will get lost in the significant repositioning and consequent withdrawal of local government from issues of well-being and quality of life.

As to our holding too tightly to our assumptions about public art, we have to be very honest about things. Of course we all sighed with relief when the 'Public Art Commissions' listing on ixia's eNewsletters began to advertise anything that paid more than pocket money, or was not so cluttered with distracting expectations that any chance of doing anything of value had not already been murdered by the clumsy hand of the client, commissioner and/or curator.

But do any of us really want to return to the public art of the last ten, twenty or thirty years? The sort of stuff that Vickery summarised as attempts “to convert the public into art spectators.” Is this the best we can do? Perpetuate the same old mediocrity because that’s what we do in a situation where, as Pavel Büchler has noted [6], “The artist’s ‘old’ job [has been] taken over by the intermediaries who ‘deliver’ the art to the public, who facilitate public access to art – curators, critics, arts administrators – and whose role it is to negotiate the practical and ideological terms and conditions of the ‘services’ provided by artists in society.”

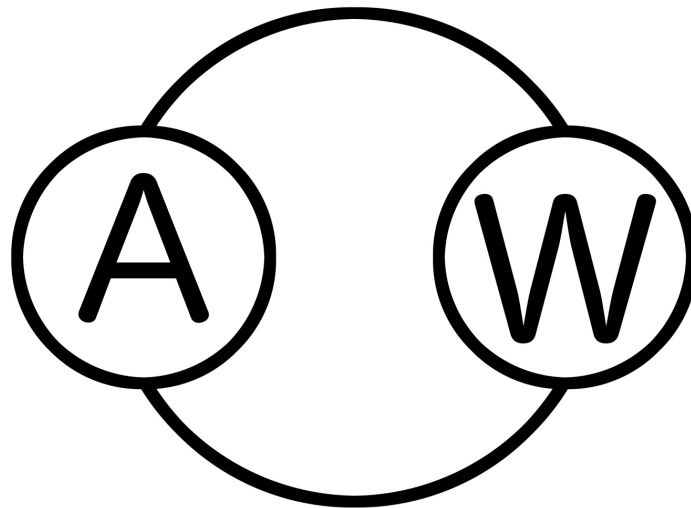
It may be useful to reflect on what Büchler means by the “artist’s ‘old’ job”, and perhaps this can be framed as summary diagrams.

The starting assumption is that there is some relationship between the artist and the world. This might look like the following, in which A is artist and W is world.

Skipping over some missed opportunities along the way, by the time Courbet painted ‘The Painter’s Studio: A Real Allegory of a Seven Year Phase in my Artistic and Moral Life’ in 1855, the artist was positioned at the centre of things, bridging the intellectuals (to the right of the painting) and the world (to the left). In this arrangement, A is artist, W is Pavel Büchler’s term society, and I is intellectual. We might suggest that I is now institutional, as in the tick-box and rule-setting containers that currently bugger and blight the open possibility of public art.

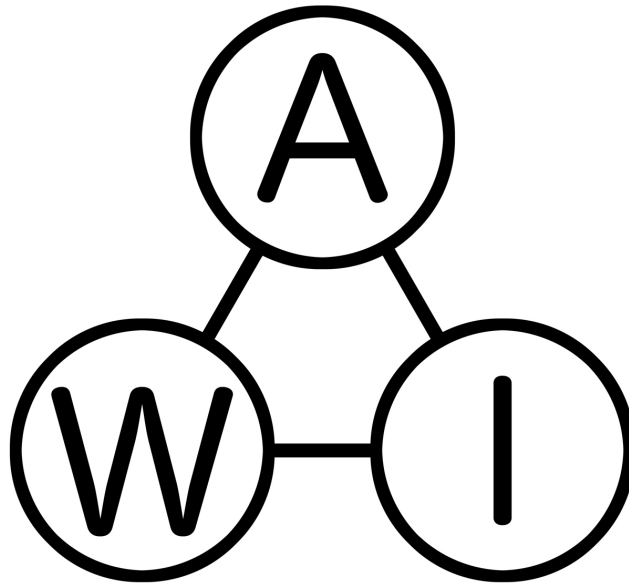
In more recent times, and following the loss of confidence in Courbet’s statement that “The world comes to be painted at my studio”, any relationship between A (artist) and W (world) is assumed to require third-party mediation. This third-party is C, which may be curator, commissioner/commissioning agency or charabanc (i.e. the arts festival, biennial, triennial, etc.).

Next, and as Pavel Büchler suggests, the ‘C’ word becomes the only vehicle for “the practical and ideological terms and conditions of the ‘services’ provided by artists”, and the artist finds his/her connection to the world channeled by the curator, commissioner, etc.. This is why, in very recent times,



we have seen the rise of the ‘artist/curator’ – the artist who still wants to talk directly to the world, but can only do so in the language of the ‘C’ word.

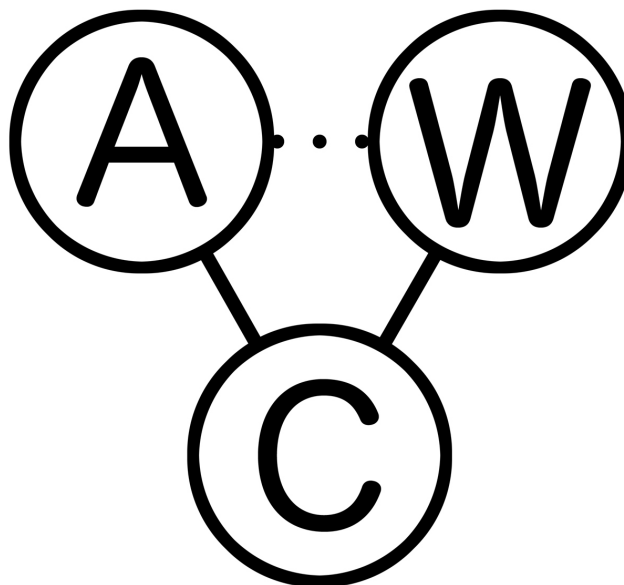
In the final diagram, the curator, commissioner, etc., takes up the ground conceded by the artist, and becomes the only relationship the world has with any sort of art, the artist is cut away and left floating in



a free field no longer fettered by the “set of identifiable processes of realpolitik and force majeure” that currently shape and constrain things.

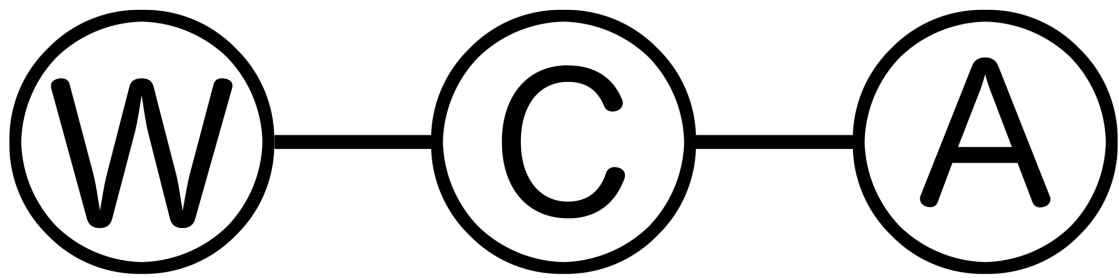
Cultural Well-Being and Public Art

Perhaps we should return to Raymond Williams for a moment as he increasingly takes on pivotal



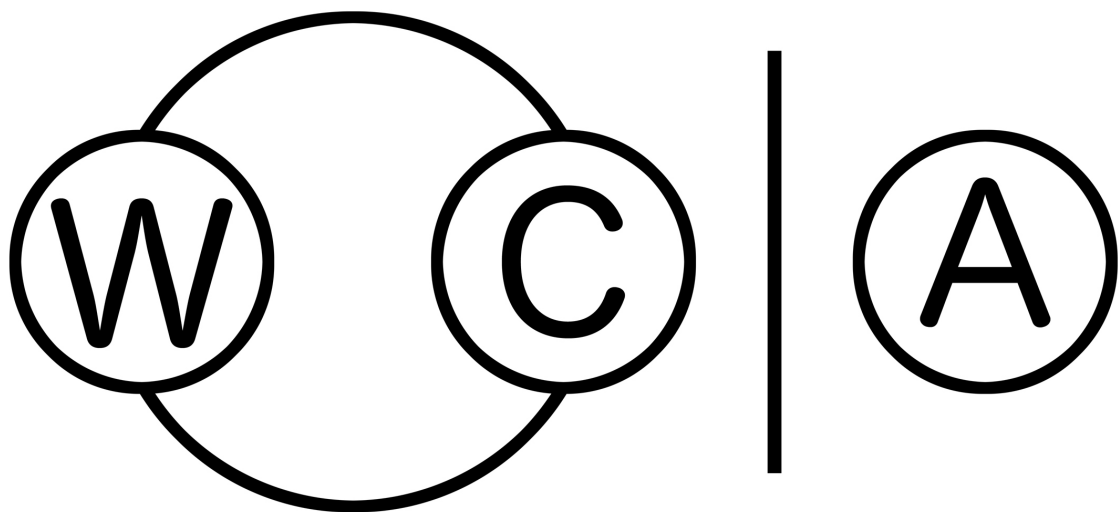
importance in developing any useful understanding of the relationship public art may have to cultural well-being in the context of NPPF.

“It is only in a shared belief and insistence that there are practical alternatives that the balance of forces and chances begins to alter. Once the inevitabilities are challenged, we begin gathering our resources for a journey of hope. If there are no easy answers there are still available and discoverable hard answers,



and it is these that we can learn and share. This has been, from the beginning, the sense and the impulse of the long revolution.”

Public art as a ‘journey of hope’ is an attractive idea, but is public art a revolutionary activity that



challenges the inevitabilities of easy answers or the impoverished assumptions we still cling to so tightly? Has public art ever been revolutionary, and could it ever be? Beyond a bit of ironic banner waving now and again, it’s certainly difficult to see current public art in revolutionary terms.

Twenty years ago, Patricia Phillips [7] offered some hope in equally impossible times when she said:

“Public art is about the free field, the play of creative vision. The point is not just to produce another thing for people to admire, but to create opportunities, situations that enable viewers to look back at the world with unique perspectives and clear angles of vision. This image embraces the instrumentality, intimacy and criticality of public art. Public life cannot be decreed, but has to be constantly reinvented.

Meaning is not missing in action. It becomes a prolonged, collaborative pursuit of public life through public art. Public art is a sign of life."

The "pursuit of public life through public art" is the right starting point for any understanding of public art's relationship to cultural well-being in NPPF, but, to-date, the possibilities of a meaningful and engaged public art has, and at best, been "absent, silent, indeterminate" in all recent Planning reform [8].

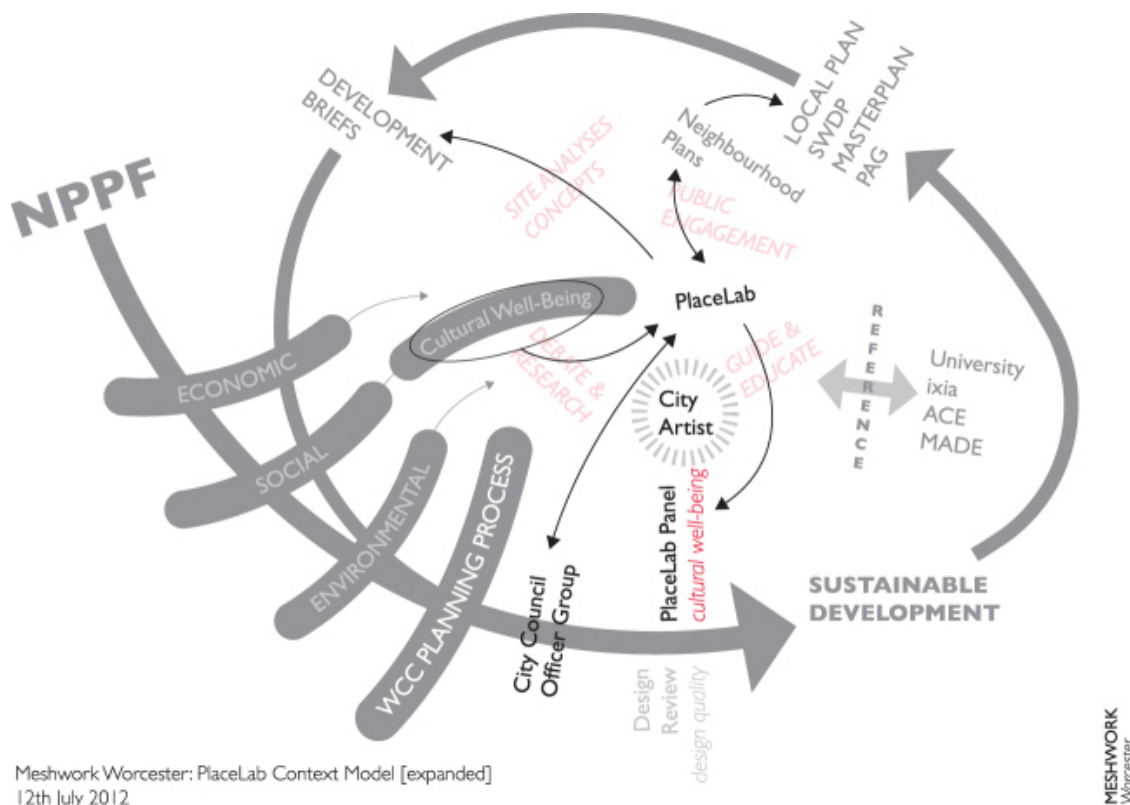
Some years earlier, the artist Siah Armajani [9] gave us the bigger picture understanding at the 1988 Public Sculpture Symposium at the Walker Art Centre in Minneapolis:

"The most important part of public art is that it is the greatest testimony to the nature of democracy. We have political democracy, but we should have cultural democracy and also economic democracy, and then art will be needed and all art would happen...and we are just at the beginning of it."

Yes, we are, of course, just at the beginning of it. So far we have simply been skirmishing with the difficult questions, but now nothing should be unthinkable, nothing impossible, provided it comes out of the needs of life and is dedicated to life's further development.

Meshwork Worcester

"There is no script for social and cultural life. People have to work it out as they go along. In a word, they have to improvise." [10]



The diagram above describes Meshwork Worcester, an artist-led enquiry into anthropologist Tim Ingold's notions of "taskscape" and "cultural improvisation" in Planning processes timed to follow on immediately after publication of Worcester's 2011 'City Centre Master Plan' (David Lock Associates). During the recent period, we have set the working diagram for a new public square, put a marker down for another public square, and outlined a 'When the Right Girl comes along' cultural strategy for the city intended to work within, but also ameliorate, the opportunities and constraints of recent Planning reform.

We have made bold statements and employed trickster tactics in an attempt to both flatten and open out Planning decision making processes to create a virtuous circle of funding opportunity that supports artists and other cultural producers in the city. This was no more than a play with convenient and circumstantial local precedent based on the opportunity the artist Walter Ritchie overlooked in Worcester in the early 1940s, and again, in Coventry, some years later. Although this proposition looks good in diagram form, it has been impossible to 'land' in the current 'nothing much can happen' situation.

Most of all, we have introduced Deborah Jenkins' notion of 'Golden Builders' [11], "people who can move between sectors and groups, weave agendas together, and find common aims without claiming power. Perhaps these people, of whom there should be more and more, could be what Blake called the Golden Builders of the cities."

The unthinkable possibilities that sit behind the inclusion of cultural well-being in NPPF may require the artist to give up on the 'C' word assumptions of public art, and, instead, adopt a Golden Builders' approach to things. Maybe. In the short term, it may be more useful to look at the German word 'rüttler', particularly in its slang form. In less impolite terms, one on-line dictionary [12] defines the word in these terms:

"Heutige Rüttler sind daher in der Lage zunächst die volle Umdrehungszahl aufzunehmen und erst dann durch Verdrehen der Unwuchten ein von null an variables Unwuchtmoment zu erzeugen."

"These days, vibrators are therefore in the position of being able to accept the maximum r.p.m. initially and then generate a variable (from zero to maximum) imbalance."

Sources

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4. CABE/DETR: 'By Design - Urban Design in the Planning System', Thomas Telford, 2000
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6. Pavel Büchler: 'Other People's Culture' in 'Curious - artists' research within expert culture', Visual Art Projects, Glasgow, 1999.
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