

## Writing the City

### *What role can writers play in the process of regeneration?*

*On 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008, Sarah Butler from UrbanWords and six panellists came together with an audience of 35 at a roundtable discussion, which asked: what role can writers play in the process of regeneration? This piece presents and expands upon the presentations and discussions that took place that day, and offers some thoughts on where we could go from here. The piece is co-authored by Sarah Butler and the panellists: Inua Ellams, Subhadassi, Melanie Abrahams, Sophie Hope, David Ogunmuyiwa and Paul Shephard.*

Words are powerful things, capable of creating change. “If words hit, they stick ... An offering in language is a powerful thing,” Subhadassi, a poet and artist, claimed in his opening statement. The poet Inua Ellams, picked up on the theme: “Africa is known for its rich Oral heritage; story tellers, griots, would go from village to village performing to the locals and this is how history, folk lore and traditions were preserved. They believed that the sounds of words have power and in speaking something, you called it into existence.” Language, used effectively, in a way that strikes a chord and makes a connection, has the potential to create meaning, and to create change: to change people, to change perceptions, to change places.

Words are a writer’s medium: used to tell stories; to illuminate moments; to articulate emotional ‘truths’; to explore connections; to communicate complex ideas; to show us the world afresh; to delight; to surprise; to question. Sarah Butler from UrbanWords initiated this roundtable discussion because she believes writers are uniquely placed to use their skills with, and passion for, words to make positive contributions to the regeneration agenda. Such a contribution may be to critique that agenda, it may be to make that agenda understandable outside of the ‘regeneration world’, it may be to find genuine, creative ways for people to think and communicate about place. For Sarah, the crucial issue is how writers can connect with people living in places undergoing change, and find ways to usefully communicate the stories of a place to those who are making decisions about how a place should be changed.

### **What can writers contribute to regeneration?**

#### **Observation and articulation**

Paul Shephard, writer and architect, described his perception of what writers can do in relation to regeneration and place. For him, the world can be seen as a complex and confusing place, “full of stuff”. Writers help make sense of the world. They pick things out and link things together. They make contexts, and by making contexts, they make meaning. He went on to talk about how, in the past, people used to be more attached to coherent, collective narratives, such as aboriginal songlines, but

that today we exist in a multi-disciplinary world; we are bombarded by stories, images, and demands, and it is hard to find a common narrative. Paul claimed that writers have the potential to create or to find a coherent narrative for a place which can help us navigate and situate ourselves in the modern world.

Writer, architect and former housing officer, David Ogunmuyiwa, talked about how writing can interrogate the process of change and regeneration, can frame and observe and reflect on the process, but he signalled a warning, picked up on later in this piece, that writers need to be careful that these narratives do not obscure or disenfranchise.

An audience member, during the wider discussion, commented on the writer's power to observe and describe a situation with great clarity. She perceived a real role for writers working to understand, observe and articulate the intricacies of communities in a way that can then be responded to by architects and planners.

### **Translation and Communication**

Good and effective writing communicates in a direct and powerful way with an audience. Communication problems plague regeneration schemes; 'everyone speaks a different language,' is a common enough comment. It is difficult to get involved, to understand, to find a thread through the process that connects to your own particular concerns and interests. So perhaps there is a real role here for writers? To find some kind of middle ground, where the different parties involved in regeneration projects can find a way to communicate with each other. Arts manager, Lucy McMenemy, an audience member who has commissioned Paul Shephard in the past, commented that one of the most valuable aspects of working with a writer like Paul was that he was able to explain and articulate what he was doing, which allowed the project partners to understand, and thereby support, the process. So a writer might start to work in this context as a translator: as someone who can find a form of language that side-steps the jargon and connects directly with the heart.

For Sarah Butler, the key is *story*. She believes that as human beings we respond to and understand things – ourselves, our environment, events – through story. So if compelling and 'real' stories can be told, these can form the start of a genuine conversation about what place means and how we relate to it.

### **Effecting change**

Our conversation touched on different forms of change: social, political, communal and individual, with the point raised that an individual's experience of engaging with regeneration can also be personally regenerative. Our focus was very much on writers working with communities undergoing programmes of regeneration.

Subhadassi talked about socially engaged work and his belief that if you can engage people's imaginations, their hearts, minds and bodies, then they will be able

to find a voice; they can become more aware of themselves and the connections they have with other people and places. In this way, projects which creatively engage people with their environments, and with each other, can have a big impact on individuals' lives and communities.

Mel Abrahams, a literature curator and producer and Director of the National Association of Literature Development, talked about her interest in the broader definition of 'creative', which could relate to people who enable stories to be told, who are makers, but would not call themselves, or be viewed as, 'artists'. Mel's aspiration is that this area of work is able to empower people living in places to take on projects of their own and make change happen for themselves. She feels that regeneration stories are often focused on the big stories and projects, and is keen instead to see more investment in the regeneration stories of micro-communities and micro-initiatives. She sees great potential for these projects to build in the development and support of the local community through enabling self-autonomy, confidence and development of micro-businesses, and encouraging purposefulness and long-term engagement amongst the local community who take part.

"Can fiction be activism?" Sophie Hope, an independent practitioner and researcher, asked. Fictionalising experiences of past, present and future urban changes may reveal more than 'evidence'-based reports. The act of writing such fictions can produce less obviously useful documents that might reveal some unexpected sides to regeneration. Fictions that avoid a clear analysis of a place for developers to profit from could instead allow residents to reclaim regeneration for themselves by finding something useful in the words they write and read on their own terms.

Returning to the idea of writing and language as being invested with power, Inua Ellams discussed his interest in the urban evolution of language, and how words pass from common use into slang terms. He gave the example of the word 'Hooligan', coined from 'Hoolihan', an Irish family in London so notorious for their noisy drunken parties, their name became synonymous with unruly behaviour. Inua made the connection from this example to the potential for writers to work with local residents of a place to explore the language used to describe that place and through that investigation to potentially facilitate the reclaiming or reinterpretation of language. The argument being that if the language changes then the perception changes. If the perception changes, the reality might change.

"If someone tells a story – it opens up a space," Mel Abrahams said, echoing Sarah Butler's understanding of how, by telling new stories, we can enable people to imagine new possibilities, to embrace and initiate change rather than automatically react against it. Mel is interested in the power of 'naming', suggesting that the act of organising this roundtable discussion, and exploring this question, involves naming and 'placing' this field of work, and through that naming we give a value to the event.

## **What are the issues we need to grapple with?**

### **Timing – when should writers get involved?**

Sarah Butler suggested that there is a problem with the perception of regeneration as something that is done to a place and has a fixed end point. There might be end points in relation to specific building projects, but places and people's relationship to places, continuously evolve. There are strong arguments for the involvement of artists and writers in the early stages of planning and development of regeneration projects, but Sarah argued that there is an equally compelling argument for creative involvement when the building has stopped and the dust has settled. It is at this point that communities of people start to evolve or rebuild themselves, and here that a creative practice, which aims to facilitate and explore change on the level of a group of individuals living in a specific place, can play a real role.

### **Visibility**

Mel Abrahams noted that a number of writers are already involved in regeneration work, but that they are not as visible or interconnected as much as they might be. There would be value to be gained, she argued in making connections, revealing process and raising the profile of this area of work.

### **Power politics**

Sophie Hope raised the question about how writers might create and maintain an independent critical voice within the politicised context of regeneration. Is regeneration a self-serving industry, she asked? If we are paid by the system, do we sacrifice our right and ability to be critical? She started unpicking the question of whether we are able to be subversive from within, or whether we can, collectively, say no, and what the implications of that might be. Her concern was whether, by getting involved in this world, writers become myth-makers who end up serving a dominant political or economic agenda, rather than questioning and subverting.

David Ogunmuyiwa echoed this concern about how writers might become people who obscure and disenfranchise rather than illuminate and question. David highlighted the fact that the jargon and the discourse of regeneration can be used to exclude and obfuscate, whilst appearing to do the opposite. His concern is that writers, dealing, as they do, with the minutiae of words and language, should be aware of how language is used in these contexts, and ensure that they look to include and explicate, rather than obscure.

### **Ways forward**

We didn't have time to fully discuss and unpick the plethora of issues and ideas raised during the discussion on 24<sup>th</sup> October 2008. However, there was an overriding agreement that there is a real and a varied role for writers to play in the creation and

development of our cities. Below are some thoughts about possible ways to take this conversation and field of work further:

- The creation of a network of interested people from a range of disciplines, who might meet on and off line to explore the ideas presented here in more depth. A multi-disciplinary approach would enable a cross-fertilisation of ideas and approaches, and would also generate potential new projects and collaborations.
- Documentation and dissemination of existing projects in this area, demonstrating the possibilities and the pitfalls and sharing best practice and learning.
- An exploration of routes into policy making and strategic thinking in the arts and in regeneration.

If you are interested in being involved in future discussions or taking these proposals further, please get in touch with Sarah Butler at UrbanWords:

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