

# Can Writing Shape Place?

Paper given at *Writing Urban Space*, University of Surrey 23/02/10,  
by Sarah Butler

*“The stories that we tell matter because they indicate how we see the world, and whether we believe we have the power and capacity to shape it for the better. Stories are one of the main ways that we make sense of the world, and understand and interpret our lives and experiences. Stories and engaging people’s imagination are potentially a powerful way to open up the futures of cities in democratic and creative ways.”*

The Dreaming City: Glasgow 2020 and the Power of Mass Imagination, Demos

I am a writer, and also director of UrbanWords, a consultancy I set up in 2006 to explore how writing and writers might intersect with the process of regeneration. I am passionate about stories, and interested in how the stories we are able to tell about a particular place can have a tangible impact on that place's 'success'.

I take inspiration from Michel de Certeau's idea of space as 'practiced place': of the city as a place created by the complex actions and interactions of its inhabitants. My understanding of place is that it is inextricably linked with the people who live in and pass through it. I believe that as humans we understand place, our relationship to it, and to other people, through story: the stories we tell, hear, invent and hold about places. I would argue that our relationship to the places we know is imbued with, and constructed through, narrative.

I run participatory, community-based projects, which look to explore, unpick and articulate communities' relationship to their environment. I partner with local authorities, architects and planners to find ways to bridge the 'communication gap' between urban regeneration professionals and the communities they are working with. I have a particular interest in co-authorship, and how writers might work with communities, planners, architects and developers to create new co-authored stories for urban spaces.

I am not interested in using good writing and storytelling as a marketing tool. I am interested in how we might harness this idea of story, as a way of understanding place, as a way of communicating that understanding, and as a way to help make places better. I am interested in how stories can be unlocked and created by the people who live in and use places, with and alongside, the people who make and change these places. I am interested in how this work can enable people to communicate with architects, planners, and developers, and to can start to feel that they have agency over and responsibility for the places they use.

My paper will address three main ideas. Firstly that writing, and participatory writing projects, can enable people to explore and understand their relationship to space more fully and complexly. Secondly that writing, and in particular creative writing and story-telling, is an ideal medium in which to articulate and communicate that

understanding to those involved in changing and developing our urban spaces. And thirdly, that stories can act as a powerful tools of change and transformation: if we tell a new story we open up a new space, we create the possibility for change to happen.

## **Exploring, understanding and owning place**

Early on in my explorations into the world of urban regeneration, I had a conversation with a planning consultant about how his company put together 'character profiles' of a place. It became apparent that their methods included archive research and walking around the area, but did not include talking to anyone. I was horrified that decisions were being made about the nature of a place with no reference to the experience of living or working there. It also struck me that there was potentially a real role here, for arts projects and artists, who could spend the time, and have the skills, to really get to the bottom of a place, to observe it and unpick it, through conversation and creative work with communities. I recognised too, the potential for this work to be much more complex and in depth than traditional consultation methods.

This work has a significant additional dimension when it is approached in a participatory way. By engaging local people in a creative exploration of their places, their relationship with that place will inevitably change. A couple of years ago I spoke to a participant in a project being run by the poet, Linda France ([www.lindafrance.co.uk](http://www.lindafrance.co.uk)). Linda had been leading creative writing workshops in Durham Cathedral, and the woman I spoke to told me how spending time looking at and creatively responding to the cathedral changed her relationship with it: 'I feel like I own it now,' she said.

In the autumn of 2008 I was writer-in-residence on the Greenwich Peninsula in East London, with the poet Aoife Mannix ([www.aoifemannix.com](http://www.aoifemannix.com)). We ran open and targeted writing workshops, interviewed local residents and employees and wrote our own new work in response to the place. The project had two key outcomes: a sound piece combining our own work with the voices and stories of local people (which can be downloaded from [www.urbanwords.org.uk/urbanwords](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk/urbanwords)), and a temporary hoarding piece by the artist Faisal Abdu'Allah, which incorporated a poem written by myself and year 3 students from the local primary school. This poem was particularly well received by the developers of the site, who printed it in their staff newsletter. The whole project is documented on the project blog: [www.almostanisland.blogspot.com](http://www.almostanisland.blogspot.com).

### **A Walk on the Greenwich Peninsula, by Lichtenstein Class 3 at Millennium Primary School (short version on hoardings light-box)**

*We saw blurry reflections of colourful houses,  
Smelt dark green water and cool fresh air,  
Heard the sound of a plane, and a sound like a bell,  
Felt the breeze, the soft leaves, the smooth silver poles,  
We felt warm, laughing, brilliant, happy.*

**Blog entry, Sarah Butler, 29<sup>th</sup> October 2008**

*We could go for a walk together some day, you and me. I'll show you the secret places, if you ask right. The empty space behind the hoardings in the square, where grass creeps up between stones, and buddleia blooms pink amongst the grey. The field behind Sainsbury's where the skylarks sing. We'll reach down and touch the grass, crunch leaves between our fingers to find out what green smells like. There are treasures on the beach if you take the time to look. If you're not the kind of person who likes talking, we can just sit and listen. The barges sound like thunder. The boats sound like bells. There are birds that've flown half way across the world to be here.*

Consultation is one of those deeply charged words I tend to mumble and feel uncomfortable about, but I think there is a really interesting and important role for the arts and creativity within this field. In the summer of 2009, I was lead artist on a project called *My Place*, working with a number of artists to engage young people in a conversation about a new performing arts space being created in North London. The aims of the project were two-fold – to gather ideas and aspirations for the space from young people and communicate those to the architects and the council, and to build the young people's relationship with the space in the years leading up to its opening. The building is due to open in 2011, and the young ambassadors we worked with are still closely involved in its development.

I recently commissioned the writer Chris Meade to write a thought piece about the creative consultation work he does with the artists and designers *Snug and Outdoor*. Both he and Hattie Coppard, director of *Snug and Outdoor*, talk about the fact that if you ask children what they want in a playground they'll say swings and a slide, and can they be green, or red, or blue. In other words they will describe playgrounds they have already seen. If you take them through a creative process that asks them what is play? What makes you feel safe, excited and so on, then you get very different answers that enable you to create very different playgrounds. The challenge, and I think it is one that artists can particularly rise to, is how to get people to imagine something they have never imagined before. You can read Chris's article on the *A Place For Words* website: [www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords).

## **Articulating and Describing Place**

Any sector has a language and jargon that comes along with it, and Regeneration is no exception. However, I think that this is an area where it is really important that that language – that path to communication – is opened up, because the decisions that are being made impact directly on people's environments and lives.

It seems to me that writers are particularly well placed to play a role here: in finding ways to articulate and describe places. Writers are able, are indeed trained, to capture complex information and ideas and express them in a way that people can connect with.

I did a project with *muf Architecture/Art* in Barking a couple of years ago. Muf were commissioned by Design for London to create an exhibition to inform local residents about the huge number of building projects taking place in their town centre. The exhibition, *Barking, a Model Town Centre*, was a series of architects' models, and *muf* wanted to find a way to make those models accessible and understandable to local people. I worked with the poet, Aoife Mannix, to run workshops with local people, looking at the imagined occupations of these new buildings. The texts they created (example below) were used next to the architects' models, instead of traditional construction information.

*I'd have a café with huge sofas and bottomless coffee pots, sell homemade carrot cake and chocolate chip cookies. There'd be free newspapers and old fashioned ceiling fans, books too. The staff would chat to you about politics and love, tell you that drinking coffee and dreaming are far more important than making money or worrying about what other people think. That life is short but afternoons are long, and good company is priceless.*

It was a small scale project, but I loved the idea that we could use story and creative expression to enable people to look at an architect's model and imagine themselves in that space. Liza Fior from *muf*, commented about this and other projects: "Visions, masterplans and finally buildings begin with an executive summary and end with an Operations and maintenance manual. Sarah Butler explores the pre life, the afterlife and repercussions of change through language - language, far, far, away from the jargon of regeneration and so much more accurate."

## **Effecting Change**

The quote at the beginning of this paper is one which I find particularly inspiring. It's from the book, *The Dreaming City: Glasgow 2020 and the Power of Mass Imagination*, which came out of an 18 month project run by the think tank Demos. *Glasgow 2020* took the idea of story as a powerful tool of change and transformation and applied it on a city-wide scale to Glasgow. From creative writing workshops, to large scale participatory events, thousands of potential stories for Glasgow were collected and then analysed and interpreted into concrete proposals for the future of the city.

I've been thinking a lot recently about whether writing and stories can change a place. I think there are two aspects to consider, the first of which is to do with perception and emotion, and the second with physicality.

Stories can be immensely emotionally powerful, and can leave us with strong responses to places we've never even visited. I remember reading *Brighton Rock* as a teenager and being convinced that Brighton was a dark and dangerous place. It's only in the last couple of years that I've discovered it as a delightful, light-filled city. Look, too, at what *Clockwork Orange* did for Thamesmead. These are negative examples, but I think we can turn them on their heads and explore how through creative engagement and

expression, we can work to shift people's relationship with a place, which in turn can change how that place operates and is perceived.

Michael de Certeau talks about stories as spatial practices which have "the transformative power of metaphor". I believe that if we tell a new story we open up a new space, and we create the possibility for change to happen. In the summer of 2009, I was commissioned by the architecture practice, *PublicWorks*, to write a new fiction for a stretch of the Leeds-Liverpool Canal, which formed the focus of Liverpool Biennial's 5 day conference, Urbanism 09. The story was commissioned to sit alongside a temporary structure, designed by *PublicWorks*, called the Canal Club – a floating space for conversation and debate. My aim was to explore the potential of a place which is frequently dismissed as a 'wasteland'. The story is called 'Fishing For Stars' (inspired by the star shaped lanterns attached to the 'Club'). It follows three characters, Caib, Rhaw and Bywell (their names are drawn from a mural of ancient tools painted on one of the canal's walls) who all discover their own routes into a magical parallel universe, where their wishes for the canal come true. Vinyl-cut extracts from the story were installed onto the Canal Club itself, copies were hung by the seating areas, and visitors were given copies to take away. You can download the story from my website: [www.sarahbutler.org.uk](http://www.sarahbutler.org.uk).

So, perhaps writing can change perceptions of a place, but can it change place physically? There is an interesting example where the ideas behind storytelling have been transposed into the physical design of a space. The poet and writer, Chris Meade suggested to *Snug and Outdoor* that they might use the key elements of narrative within their playground designs. So a play space would have a pathway, a threshold, a sanctuary, a destination, and an arena, to perform in. His idea was that these elements would provide suggestive spaces that inspire creative play. The built environment would hold the structures to inspire the narratives which help us relate to and understand place and our position within in. Hattie Coppard, Director of *Snug and Outdoor*, says that this thinking has radically changed how they approach playground design. The concept of narrative and its different elements is now key to their thinking when they design new spaces.

## **What's in it for the writer?**

I am passionate about the role writers can play in making places better to live, work and play in. However, I think it is essential that art and regeneration projects achieve a balance between the art and the regeneration. Projects need to avoid becoming solely about the regeneration agenda, with art being 'used' as a tool, rather than respected and celebrated for what it is: art. There has to be a reason for the writer to be involved, it has to do something for their own practice and development.

On a personal level, I work in this area for a variety of reasons. I am fascinated the relationship between place and people: the impact it has on our emotions, our aspirations, and our relationships. I also have a fascination with how place is made, and I think lots of artists working in the field share a fascination with the idea of construction.

Artists make things, builders make things; the Scottish word for poet is Makar. There is a real connection between the process of writing and the process of construction.

Regeneration is about change, and with change comes conflict and drama, which is the stuff of literature. I often teach creative writing, and am constantly talking about finding the conflict, upping the stakes, thinking about what change happens within story, so I see thematic links between this idea of story and Regeneration. It works on a more formal level too: metaphor is about change, and it is the writer's most powerful tool: this ability to transform one thing into another and in doing so find meaning.

I am hugely interested in and nosy about people: their motivations, their relationships, what they say and what they don't say. I think this links interestingly with the concept of consultation. Consultation is about discovering what people think about a place and how they want to improve it. If a writer has been trained to listen to what isn't being said, to discover the motivations behind people's words and actions, then surely there is a way for them to contribute to meaningful consultation?

As a writer, I have a desire to communicate, and an obsession with language, and Regeneration offers a particularly rich field within which to operate. I am interested in, and passionate about the social role of art, and want to be an artist who plays a positive role in society.

To conclude, I see a real potential for writers to meaningfully engage with regeneration and urban change through creative engagement and participatory projects; projects which explore people's relationship to place, and through that process build, change, and challenge that relationship. Writers can find ways to describe and articulate place and people's relationship to it in a way that can be responded to by designers, architects, and urban planners. And finally I believe that story is a powerful agent of change, and that writers can find ways to tell new stories which can open up the possibility of positive change for places and communities.

You can find out more about my work at [www.urbanwords.org.uk](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk). [www.shapingplace.ning.com](http://www.shapingplace.ning.com) is an online forum, hosted by UrbanWords, which encourages discussion about writing and place. Please also take a look at the *A Place For Words* website, which discusses the role of writing and regeneration and has a wealth of case studies and downloadable articles: [www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords).

© Sarah Butler, 2010