

Narrating the City

Sarah Butler, UrbanWords

*Transcript of paper delivered at **Playing In Urban Places: a seminar**, Leeds Metropolitan University, Friday 3rd October 2008*

I'd like to start with a quote from *Schoolboys and Idlers of Pompeii* (Belfast Confetti), by the Northern Irish poet, Ciaran Carson:

“On an almost-blank wall where East 46th Street intersects Avenue A in the area called Alphabet City in New York, New York, is this graffito in three-foot-high black letters, saying BELFAST, with the cross-stroke of the T extended into an arrow pointing east, to Belfast. I have a photograph to prove this, but it's lost. In New York, no one that I ask seems to know the meaning of this careful scrawl, whether it's a gang, the code-word of a gang, a fashion, a club, or the name of the city where I was born; but the latter seems unlikely, though Alphabet City – barricaded liquor stores, secretive tobacco shops and elaborate Russian Orthodox churches – resembles Belfast, its roads pocked and skid-marked, littered with broken glass and crushed beer-cans.

And on the back wall of Gallaher's tobacco factory in North Queen Street in Belfast there has recently appeared this New York underground graffiti mural – coded, articulated, multi-coloured spray-gunned alphabet – pointing west by style and implication.

At times it seems that every inch of Belfast has been written-on, erased, and written-on again: messages, curses, political imperatives, but mostly names, or nicknames – Robbo, Mackers, Scoot, Fra – sometimes litanised obsessively on every brick of a gable wall, as high as the hand will reach, and sometimes higher, these snakes and ladders cancelling each other out in their bid to be

remembered. *Remember 1690. Remember 1916. Most of all, Remember me. I was here.*"

I understand place to be inextricably linked with the people who live in and pass through it. I understand place to be something that holds an infinite number of stories, and that has the capacity to be changed and transformed by those stories. The philosopher and writer Michel de Certeau posits that "Every story is a travel story – a spatial practice." For him, stories have the transformative power of metaphors; they "traverse and organise places; they select and link them together; they make sentences and itineraries out of them."¹ The extract I just read from Ciaran Carson's collection, Belfast Confetti, also articulates this link between people, writing and place. Whether it is as literal as graffiti written on a wall, or the stories we tell, hear, invent and hold about place, I would argue that our relationship to the places we know is imbued with and constructed through narrative.

I am biased. I'm a writer. I also run a consultancy called UrbanWords, which I set up in 2006 to explore and initiate projects where writers deliver work which meaningfully engages with the process of regeneration and urban change. This paper sits somewhere along the journey of my search for a critical, and practical language to talk about the kind of work I do.

I want to use this time to explore these links between place, people and story. I am interested in whether literary theory can offer a way in, to connect the art form I work with to the current politics of urban places. I am interested in two opposing ideas of the construction of place: as something created by planners, developers and architects, or as something created by the everyday actions and expressions of the people who operate within it. To me, as a writer and English graduate, coming to ideas of place and regeneration in my late twenties, there is a clear link between these ideas and literary theories of authorship – is a text created by a single person who exerts complete control over its consumption and interpretation, or is the reader the one in control, is it the reader who is, ultimately, the writer?

¹ *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau

I want to see what I can take from such theories and ideas that is helpful in thinking about the participatory community work I do. I want to see if there is a theoretical space somewhere in between these two ideas of place and text, which can provide a framework or an understanding of how professional writers can collaborate with communities to harness the power of stories in relation to place; and in doing so can effect positive change in the way we plan, design and experience our cities.

A very practical and specific example of how literary theory, or at least thinking about the structure of stories, can be applied to space is the work of the organisation Snug and Outdoor, a group of artists who design dynamic and imaginative playgrounds. The poet and writer, Chris Meade, who works with Snug and Outdoor at the consultative stages of their projects, suggested they could use the key elements of narrative within their designs. So a play space would have a pathway, a threshold, a sanctuary, an arena (to perform in), and a destination. These elements would be 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.

Can this idea be widened to the creation and experience of our cities? Can we see cities as stages or settings in which stories unfold, in which roles and experiences are played out, as places where those stories interact with and change each other, and their settings; and as places which are inhabited by characters who are, ultimately, the basis and lynchpin of all narrative?

I was drawn to this seminar's theme of 'navigating places, paths and barriers'. The Oxford English Dictionary defines *navigation* as "the art or science of directing a ship, boat etc." To navigate is to direct, which suggests the existence of a *directed*; so navigation is something which is done to an individual or a group of people. This got me thinking about writing, and the concept of the author and I started to wonder whether we might see writers as navigators: people who, through narrative, direct

their readers along certain paths to certain ends. And then I started thinking about cities and whether planners, developers and architects might also be seen as navigators directing people how to experience urban places.

This model of an autocratic system, controlling our reading, and our relationship with place, concerns me. In terms of regeneration, it is a model I recognise. I am a writer, a project manager, experienced in and committed to participatory arts work.

Stumbling, as I did a couple of years ago, into the world of regeneration I felt bewildered by a system whose structures and language I didn't understand. I had an overwhelming feeling that there were those in control – planners, developers, architects etc. – and those who were done to. I also had the sense that many of those in a position of power, didn't have much sense or understanding of what I talked about at the very beginning of this paper: how place is inextricably linked with people and their experiences of it. I would like to insert a caveat here, and recognise that this is a generalisation and to some extent a provocation. There are practices – such as the art/architecture practices muf and PublicWorks, to name just two in London – who have a very sophisticated understanding of the relationship of people to place, and who design spaces accordingly. They are not, however, in the majority. The work I am trying to develop currently is in many ways a response to this perceived power imbalance. I am developing projects which strive to articulate the stories inherent in specific places and communicate these stories, and their understanding of place, to those who are making decisions about how places will change and be used.

My fear of some large developments, which state their intention to be 'clean and safe', is that they aim to bleach out the multiplicity and diversity and danger which make cities, for me at least, exciting places to be in. We've all seen architects' drawings populated by plastic looking figures drinking cappuccinos, I suspect I'm not alone in wondering how these pictures relate to real life. I am also concerned about the erosion of the very idea of public space. I'm currently working on a project on the Greenwich Peninsula in East London. Peninsula Square, which sits between the tube station and the O2, is a space you might assume is public. However signs in the square read: "Peninsula Square is private property. Management reserves the right

to refuse admission or to request any person to leave, where it is reasonable to do so. Anyone creating a nuisance or disturbance or behaving in an unreasonable manner will be required to leave". It doesn't take a writer to recognise that words such as reasonable, nuisance and disturbance are matters of interpretation. So my fear is that the people who live in, and through that living create cities, are being shouldered out of this process of regeneration. I'm worried that those with the power to change our cities are too concerned with controlling and restricting our experience of place, and turning that experience into a homogenous one. We have all been to bland new developments. My understanding is that this desire to control and narrow our relationship to place will only lead to the creation of more bland developments, and that ultimately these will not be successful places.

To return for a moment to literary theory: theories in the 60s and 70s started to question the hegemony of the author. Roland Barthes seminal essay *The Death of the Author*, did what it said on the tin: for Barthes "it is language which speaks, not the author". The natural place to turn, then, is to the reader. For Barthes, the reader holds the text together: "a text's unity lies not in its origin but in its destination"². The reader reception theories proliferating at the same time sit along a spectrum. Barthes is at one end – the reader creates the space where the text exists, but their personal history, culture etc. is of no relevance. We move through Ingarden who gives the reader a more active role in creating a text's meaning, but insists that ultimately texts are organic wholes and there is a 'correct' reading, defined by the author, which a reader must find; and on to Stanley Fish who posits there is no objective work of literature, that the true writer is the reader and that any text contains an infinite number of interpretations. These theories, for all their differences, shifted the power balance by making a place for the reader as an important element in the creation of a text.

De Certeau makes a strong argument for a democratic view of space, and makes the link between city and text which I am particularly interested in. He writes: "... *space is a practiced place*. Thus the street geometrically defined by urban planning is transformed into a space by walkers. In the same way, an act of reading is the

² *The Death of The Author*, Roland Barthes

space produced by the practice of a particular place: a written text.”³ This is a democratic, participatory model which I feel more comfortable with, where it is the walker, the reader, that is in control. It suggests that both cities and texts are places which exist for us to use, subvert, question and create our own versions of.

Yet I am left with a problem: I work with writers. I am passionate about the value to be gained by putting professional writers into places and exploring what happens when they interact with and collaborate with that place and the people in it. So how does this fit with the almost anarchic view of the author as dead and the reader in the driving seat? Equally, critical as I am about many new urban developments, I recognise the need for a structure and a system, a need for politicians, planners, developers and architects to approach urban change in a strategic way.

If I employ a writer on a project that aims to engage with the regeneration process, that hopes to discover and articulate the stories of a place, where are they left as a writer? As an author? We can turn, perhaps, to post modern and particularly post colonial literary theories, which argued against the idea of a hegemonic, all seeing narrative voice and looked to represent the multiplicity of unheard voices, particularly in relation to re-addressing and re-describing the process of colonisation. But these are still, ultimately, texts created by and attributed to an individual. I think for me, the issue I am currently grappling with is how to find a model of socially engaged, public writing practice, that combines the professional skills of writers with the stories of communities.

I want to look at two examples of projects where writers worked to explore and articulate a sense of place for an area undergoing change, and start to think about how the theories and ideas I have laid out might help us understand what these projects did or did not achieve.

The first project is a development called Westpark in Darlington in the North East. The developers, Bussey and Armstrong Projects, employed the poet Bill Herbert to create an arts strategy and poetry plan for this new development, which, to give you

³ *The Practice of Everyday Life*, Michel de Certeau

a sense of scale, includes 750 new homes; a new park with 46,000 new trees; a primary school; a hospital; a rugby club; a pub and a small complex of shops.

Bill Herbert investigated the history and ecology of the local area, through archival research and conversation. His poetry is embedded into the fabric of the new development. There are sonnets engraved into bridges, haikus cast in iron, and rhyming couplets beneath road names, which Bill himself created. Each piece of poetry is grounded in the ecology and the heritage of the local area. In Bill's arts strategy for the development he states: "The goal would be to present the people moving into Westpark, and those who visit its amenities, with a coherent narrative of their surroundings which has been built into the site, and can be gradually uncovered through interacting with the space."

Bill's influence stretched further than these permanent inscriptions of his work on the site. His initial response to Westpark was to create the motto 'Caring, sharing, daring', and in doing so he established the concept of 'three' as absolutely integral to the Westpark development. There are three arches in the central square; three entrances into the park; three focal pieces of art in the park. Everything is linked through metaphor and imagery. The development itself works like a poem, and what might have been a sea of modern brick homes, a bit of grass and a few shops, has been given a structural and aesthetic integrity through the involvement of the poet Bill Herbert.

It is a beautiful project, realised and fought for by remarkable people with a vision of creating a unique place. It demonstrates the impact a writer can have on a place if brought in early on enough in the process. But does it connect with the reader? I would like the time to go to Westpark and talk to the people now living in the place about whether the writing in the development has any impact at all on their relationship with the place. At my most critical I wonder if this is just another example of an individual trying to author a place, imposing their vision and their narrative upon it. Yes, Bill talked to people in creating his writing for the site, but the outcomes are of his invention, of his authorship. In a more generous mood I recognise that because texts are ultimately matters of interpretation by their readers, the inclusion

of these texts within the site therefore open up more opportunities for interpretation and appropriation by the people who live and visit there.

The Westpark project throws up an issue I keep returning to as I think about the potential for arts involvement in regeneration and community development. This is the difference between the regeneration of existing places, and the creation of new communities and places. Westpark was built on an old chemical works. There was no pre-existing community. So what can you do, except create a structure which allows and encourages interaction and interpretation? It's worth saying that the developers did work with the literature organisation New Writing North to deliver a series of creative projects with young people living nearby the Westpark development, to enable them to explore and respond to the changing place. But I've started to think that there is a real role and need for this kind of participatory work to take place *after* the physical building of a new place. There's a lot of emphasis on the need for the arts to get involved in regeneration at a very early stage, which I totally buy into. But I also think that this work should not just happen at the beginning. I think it should continue once a new development has been built, in order to enable new residents and communities to explore their ability to create their own narratives of a new place.

The second project I want to look at is more rural than urban. As part of the regeneration of Tintagel, a small village in North Cornwall, North Cornwall Arts employed lead artist, Michael Fairfax, and writer-in-residence, Amanda White, to work with the local community to design a new community square for the village. Amanda worked with local residents to create a village poem which was embedded into the square's 'wall of words'. Individual stanzas of the poem were engraved onto 'touchstones' made from local slate which formed a circular walk linking the village to its main tourist attraction, Tintagel Castle. The touchstones are placed within the landscape of Tintagel in the places which directly inspired the words. Many of these contain information about the area's ecology and history:

courting down't Gilla
adders meet

amidst the tab mawn
lover's end

This stanza is placed at the corner of a field which is historically a place where lovers have come to court, and a place where adders are very likely to be spotted. The poem also uses the Cornish name for Sea Daisy: tab mawn, and in doing so celebrates and preserves the local dialect.

Again, this is a public art project with a permanent outcome. But the model is very different from Westpark. Amanda described her role as putting her ego and her own writing to one side and working to find a form and language that spoke to and for the village's inhabitants. It is indicative of Amanda's skill at doing this that the forum of local residents involved in the wider regeneration of the village said that when Amanda presented the poem and touchstones to them: "It was the first time we have all been in agreement over anything at a Forum meeting."

The settings are different. Tintagel had an existing community with a relationship to the place which made this kind of collaboration possible. Perhaps the two projects are not easily comparable, but looking at them leads me to see that there is a spectrum of work that I am interested in, from one end where a writer is in effect invited in as an 'author' of a place, through to writers working more as curators, to find a form and a structure for text and words created by others. My personal interest is somewhere in the middle, where writers are working in genuine collaboration with people who use a place.

I want to end by going back to the idea of the reader. My work is about creativity, about encouraging people to articulate their stories, about employing writers to respond to places by creating new texts. Whilst writing this paper I started to wonder about readership, and realised that I have never considered that carefully who these new texts are intended for. As I have thought and discussed, and rewritten this paper, I have started to see that I am perhaps developing two different things. The first is a desire to find a model of participatory collaborative working, where a writer works alongside a community of people to explore stories of place. This is about process – about exploring and developing peoples' relationship to the places they

inhabit. So the process of creating new texts, and exploring new stories, allows people to change their relationship with place, perhaps to realise it is somewhere they can play in and play with, that they have agency over. This, perhaps, is realising on a practical level the reader reception theories that argue that it is readers who are the writers, it is the act of walking in and responding to a place that makes *it* real, and *us* powerful within it.

The second strand is more firmly rooted in the idea of the creation of a text whose importance lies in it being read. I want to create work which can become a portable language able to bridge the communication gap that often exists between those making decisions about places and those experiencing those places. Can texts created by communities in collaboration with writers communicate the complex web of a place's stories powerfully enough to influence those who are making decisions about what that place might become? Can these texts act as metaphors themselves? Can they be transformative?

An example of how text can be transformative is a project Snug and Outdoor did for Maidenhead Council, working with children to design the outside of a new mobile library. Part of the resulting group poem, which is incorporated into the design of the library, reads:

I am the Breathtaker
a place where wonders
come out of words

I am an idea encourager
Homework helper
Snuggle down place,
The Brain Sparkler

The process of creating this poem allowed the children to articulate their relationship to the library and what they wanted it to provide. Even more significantly, the poem also ended up re-naming the library, now known officially as The Borough Breathtaker. The poem provided the local authority and the community

with a portable language that became a powerful expressive and political tool and transformed not only how the library users viewed their service, but also how that service was viewed by the local authority. The poem, stuffed full of metaphors – the writer's transformative tool – succeeds in working as a metaphor itself.

These two thoughts or models are not entirely separate, though one concentrates on the process, the other focuses more on the outcome. Done well, they should intersect and inform each other. And I wonder if there is scope too to create work which might be able to fashion out a new space where genuine communication and negotiation about urban change and renewal can take place. So work which is less about creating texts (which, as I've discussed are infinitely interpretable) and sending them out into the big bad world of regeneration, and more about generating genuine connections and communication, which might lead us towards the creation of more successful places.

I am very much at the beginning of a journey to discover how writing, place and people are connected and how participatory work and literary interventions, if you like, might add to, question, deepen and develop our relationship with and understanding of place, and how it might contribute to the creation of successful places through physical design and community development. I have a gut feeling that there is something important, useful and exciting in this field of work. Trying to explore that instinct within a theoretical context has been a difficult and a useful process for me. I guess theories are perhaps a bit like cities. They can provide useful structures for us to subvert, question, pick bits from, and use. I think often people like myself don't have the time to read as much and think as much about what we do and why and how we do it as we might like to. Taking Michel de Certeau's connection between the city and the text and applying that, and a smattering of literary theory, to the work I do with writers in urban environments has helped me to think harder about what I do and recognise the intentions, the possibilities and the restrictions inherent in my work.

I want to end with a plug. This summer I launched a web resource called A Place For Words (www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords). It is the fruits of an Arts Council

funded period of research and development into this field of writing and regeneration, and is a collection of my own critical thinking, and a series of case studies of existing projects. My ambition for the site is that it becomes a place of stimulation and inspiration, a place of discussion and debate, and a hub which brings together a showcase of best practice in this area of work. Please do take the time to have a look, and give any responses to this paper, or to other ideas on the site, through the blog.

© Sarah Butler 2008