

A Place for Words

The Role of Creative Writers in the Process of Regeneration

Sarah Butler



Sometimes it feels like regeneration is another one of those words which is losing its meaning through overuse. Yet it is a concept which, for me, as a writer and as a creative producer, is rich with associations and potential. Regeneration hinges on the concept of change and transformation, as does writing, with its bedrock of

metaphor, narrative, and its search for language that makes us look afresh at our world. Regeneration and urban renewal, whilst slowing in the current economic climate, is taking place across the UK. Millions of pounds of government money are being spent on improving existing places and communities, and creating new ones. I established my literature consultancy, UrbanWords, in 2006 to explore – through research and specific project work – the role creative writers and creative writing can play in this process. I am interested in how writers can contribute to making our UK towns and cities better places to live, work and play in, and what it is that writers can offer that other art forms and individuals perhaps can't. I am also interested in how working in this field can challenge and develop writers' own practice. My passion is for creating, and advocating for, participatory community work that is developed with an understanding of what it is that writers do; work where writers use their specific skills in writing as well as in community facilitation or teaching.

So, what is it that writers might offer the world of regeneration? I propose three principal areas where writers can positively contribute to successful place-making: by helping to create or uncover a sense of place,

by consulting creatively and effectively with communities, and by finding ways to communicate the complexities of urban change. Writers concern themselves with relationships: between individuals, communities, places and politics. A writer strives to understand the connections between things, to listen to what is not said, and to find a form and a language to make these issues accessible and understandable to their readers. Writers recognize and work with the fact that place is inextricably linked with the people who inhabit and use it. As such they are uniquely placed to deliver participatory projects that reconnect communities with place, tease out existing relationships with and aspirations for places, and work to improve and enhance our towns and cities.

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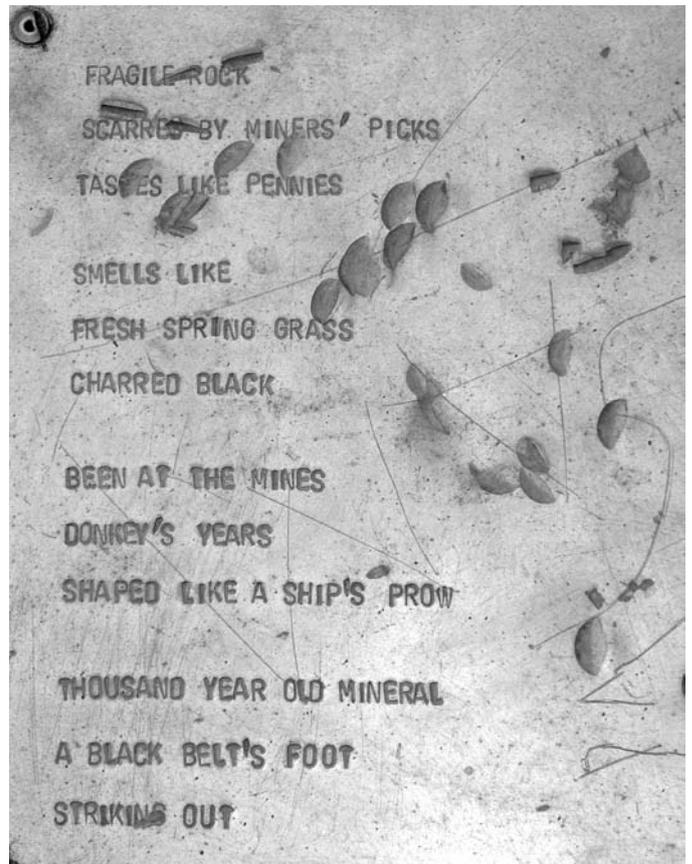
A Sense of Place

The Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (CABE)'s 2007 report, 'A Sense Of Place' states that people "like homes in developments with character that create a sense of place", but signals that a high proportion of people living on new developments feel these developments lack just that. People want to live in or visit places that are unique, they want places that offer up surprises and possibilities. A 'sense of place' has become the new holy grail for councils and

developers, but how do you get one? I would argue that often it is about uncovering rather than creating a sense of place; recognizing that every place has a unique history, ecology and 'feel' and working to capitalize on the positive aspects of that. The fear and suspicion that surrounds many new developments is often the fear of the past being obliterated and a soulless development being plonked down in its place, the fear that developers will come in and treat a place as a blank canvas. As any writer with an interest in place and location knows, nowhere is a blank canvas. The complexity and joy of living in a place is created by these historical layers, the endless possibilities for discovering new things. From this standpoint, writers can work alongside communities to discover and articulate the uniqueness of a particular place, which can then be embedded into the fabric and collective memory of a development through permanent or temporary project outcomes.



UrbanWords is interested in a participatory, collaborative model of working. There are brilliant examples of projects where a writer's own work is used to create a unique sense of



(above left) one of the touchplates at Hawthorn Cokeworks, and (right) text by a project participant; (below) detail from one of the six large poetry sculptures (opposite) designed by blacksmith William Pym



place, some of which are included as case studies on <www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords>, but our focus is more on projects where writers work alongside communities to create work that is owned by those living in a particular place. It is a tricky thing to pull off: there is a real risk of projects resulting in writing-by-committee, with watered down outcomes of a questionable quality. However, done well, they can be truly magical – for the writer and for the participants. Two examples of this model of working are a project managed by New Writing North in Murton, Sunderland, with the poet Linda France, and another managed by North Cornwall Arts in Tintagel, Cornwall, with the poet Amanda White.

Linda France's brief in Murton was to spend a year working with five local groups to create a series of permanent pieces of work for a new public space on the former Hawthorn Cokeworks site. The site is bleak one: vast swathes of grassland, and a biting wind, with one corner dominated by an electricity substation. Through spending time in the place, and with the people she had been asked to work with, Linda chose the theme of the elements to connect together the different groups and

their work. She chose the four western elements - earth, fire, water, air - and added the Chinese elements, wood and metal. Six poetry sculptures were created. Each poem was written by Linda, who drew together and created a form for the work done by each of the five groups. The text for the sixth sculpture was entirely her own. Linda took the poems to the groups for approval, and it is testament to her skill as a poet that all the participants felt a real ownership of the final pieces of work. Extra material by individual participants was also incorporated in small touch plates installed around the site.

In Tintagel, Cornwall, the poet, Amanda White, worked alongside public artist, Michael Fairfax, on a regeneration project that created a new public space in what had been a car park, and aimed to create links between the village and the area's main tourist attraction, Tintagel Castle. Her work encompassed creating a picture book about a newly created local legend with primary school children, and writing a piece of work to form a wall of words in the new public space. The poem was written through walks, conversations and workshops with local residents. Amanda's mission was not to articulate her own response to Tintagel, but to somehow encapsulate the voices of the village's residents and the 'essence' of the place. This was not writing by committee, but it was about the writer using her skills and experience to find a way of speaking for the place and its people. It is indicative of Amanda's skill at articulating the voices of the local people and giving that voice an artistic form, that the forum of local residents involved in the wider regeneration of the village said that, when Amanda presented the poem to them, "It was the first time we have all been in agreement over anything at a Forum meeting."

Individual stanzas of the poem Amanda White wrote in collaboration with the residents of Tintagel 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





(above) The Wall of Words in Trevena Square; (above right, & below) details from the Wall of Words

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 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.

Creative Consultation

Effective consultation is a key aspect of successful regeneration, but it is a notoriously difficult thing to get right. It is easy to be cynical, seeing developers and councils as paying lip service to the idea of community consultation but not being genuinely prepared to take the ideas and needs of local people on board. Certainly, many communities claim to be suffering from 'consultation fatigue', having been asked what they want so many times without seeing any positive change, that they have lost any desire, or motivation, to offer their opinions. It is also clear that many traditional consultation techniques exclude some communities and individuals. Consultation is difficult: ask a hundred people what they think about something and you will get a hundred different answers. Ask the same person the same question in a range of different ways, you'll get more than one answer. Creative consultation is becoming increasingly popular as a way of engaging

those who find it difficult to respond to traditional techniques. Hattie Coppard, Director of Snug and Outdoor – a group of artists and designers who predominantly work on new playgrounds and who regularly work with a poet as part of their consultation process – is adamant about the benefits of creative consultation. "It's about exploring imagination, not gripes," she says. "It's about getting people to express something they haven't imagined yet."

I would argue that writers are uniquely placed to deliver this kind of consultation. Writers look for what is not said. They are interested in character motivations and the causes and consequences of actions. They want to explore the complexities of people's responses to themselves, each other, and the places they inhabit. This interest is part of a writer's practice and is also key to successful consultation. In addition, writers can articulate and find a form for the myriad of responses that will come from any consultation. They can turn messy, complicated issues into tight forms, dense with meaning, which can become a powerful, transportable medium able to take the voices of the people directly affected by a process of regeneration to the people making the decisions about land use, housing density, public space, etc.





Words from Amanda White's poem on a touchstone in the place that inspired them

In 2000, writer Paul Shephard, visual artist Martin Richman, and landscape architects, Gross Max, ran a project to consult local young people in Hackney Wick about their relationship to their area and their aspirations for a new park. The project was part of a five-year arts programme aiming to engage local residents with the regeneration of the area (commissioned by Hackney Wick SRB).

Paul ran workshops in two local schools. He wrote a poem born out of his conversations with the young people, which capture their personalities, hopes and fears. He took one group to Greenwich, and, watching the children roll down the hill from the Observatory, made the connection that there are no hills in Hackney Wick. Paul fed the work he had created through conversations with the young people, and his own observations about their thinking and behaviour, back to Gross Max Architects. Additionally, he connected the children's behaviour in Greenwich, and their obsession with football, with an image of a football field with a



Hackney Wick project: Greenwich Hill (above) workshop participants (below) (photos © Michael Franke)

raised ridge around the pitch. The result was a design for the new park which incorporates a circular ridge suggestive of play, that also protects the quiet green space of the park from the busy road nearby.



The following is an extract from the end of Paul's poem. To read the whole piece, go to <www.paulshepherd.com> and double click on the Hackney Poems icon in the top left corner.

33 My name is Kabul and I'm quiet and short and observant
I think the most interesting thing is the way the rooftops meet the sky
All round you, there's a join between the buildings and the trees and the sky
And it's always there wherever you go
Sometimes it's nearer than further
Have I ever been to the seaside?
No way, man, but I will

34 My name is Mary and my whole name is Mary Elizabeth Margaret Moynehan
I think what we need is tree houses
I think what we need is a tower as high as that electricity pylon
I think what we need is to see all the way across London
Without getting killed.

Communication and articulation

The process of regeneration and urban change is such a complex one, with such a wealth of different partners and agendas, that good communication is both crucial and extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Writers are well-placed to play a role here. I am not suggesting that writers should become willing and infallible conduits of information and ideas, that they will seamlessly negotiate the different agendas and personalities involved. However, we do believe that because of their understanding of and skill in using language, writers might be uniquely placed to find ways of communicating across these gaps.

Excellent writing can change the way people see things. One example of this is work Snug and Outdoor did with poet Chris Meade and young users of Maidenhead Council's mobile library. 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, which is 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 within the local authority.

Linda France – a poet who has worked on numerous public art and regeneration schemes – describes the "wonderful blend of passion and detachment that a writer can achieve". Writers can stand both within and outside of a situation; they can care and yet be objective enough to see the complexities and the connections involved. They are well placed as commentators and facilitators, as people with a specific way of looking at the relationship between people and place.

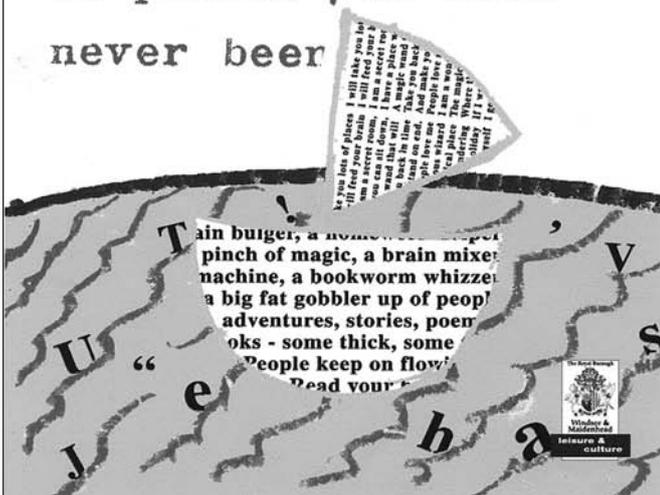
Conclusion

Regeneration and urban renewal is a complex area that involves a huge number of different partners and agendas and a complex process of planning, development and decision making. For a writer working within this field, the experience can be exciting, innovative and unique. If you are driven by a desire to effect real social change and make a genuine contribution to successful place-making, the opportunities are there for the taking. It can also, however, be a complicated and occasionally frustrating process for writers used to working on their own or in community projects with a narrower partnership base. Projects with permanent outcomes are often contingent

I am the Breathtaker,
A place where wonders
Come out of words.



I am The Library,
I visit and take you
To places you have
never been



detail from the design of the Borough Breathtaker
photo © Snug and Outdoor

on funding that may not be completely secured at the beginning of a project. Consultation projects can be problematic if a developer/planner is not genuinely prepared to engage with the outcomes. If projects are carefully planned and expectations and agendas are articulated and explored at the very beginning of the process, the chances for success are significantly higher.

As a writer, it is important to be clear about your own position, and the fact that you can't make promises or effect specific changes, but that you can help to articulate and present issues. It is essential for any writer working in this field – and the partners funding or guiding a project – to hold onto the fact that they are working as a writer, not as a government official, or someone with a commercial interest. Writers should not be employed to do a job that someone else should be doing. Where this kind of project really works is when a writer is employed for their specific skills and experience and is given the opportunity and support to really explore, experiment and take risks.

In July 2008, UrbanWords will launch a web resource at www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords that showcases critical thinking and best practice in this field. The aim of the website is to start a conversation about the role of creative writing and creative writers in the process of regeneration, suggest possible ways of working, and celebrate and raise the profile of existing projects. Please visit the site, see what you think and add your own thoughts and ideas via the blog.

UrbanWords is currently fundraising to continue advocating for and delivering innovative literature projects in this field. I am also keen to develop a programme of professional development opportunities for writers and literature professionals interested in this area. If you are a writer or literature development professional who is already working in this way or who is interested to find out more, please email your contact details and any specific ideas or questions to sarah@urbanwords.org.uk. I am particularly interested in:

- Case studies of existing projects to feature on www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords
- Experienced writers and literature professionals who can offer training, skills and ideas.
- Writers who are interested in working in this field and would like to access training opportunities to help them do so.

Sarah Butler is Director of UrbanWords, a consultancy which actively explores and develops literature projects that engage with regeneration and urban renewal. Sarah has eight years of community literature development experience and is also a writer of novels and short fiction.