



A detail from the Wall of Words, which was created by poet Amanda White to link a new public space in Tintagel, Cornwall, to the village's primary tourist attraction

# The words on the

Why would an urban design or regeneration professional pay a novelist, scriptwriter or poet to support the process of place making? **Sarah Butler** explains

The 2007 report *A sense of place*, by the Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (Cabe), 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 they lack just that. People want to live in or visit places that are unique, places that offer up surprises and possibilities. One way of achieving this is finding ways to make connections between the past, present and the future of a place.

An area's physical, social and cultural heritage, its ecology and its future offer rich seams that can be explored creatively. Writers can work with communities to uncover and even create a unique sense of place which can be embedded into the fabric of a development. Such work helps bring communities and individuals on board with change and fosters a sense of ownership and pride which contributes to the continuing success of a place.

Urban Words, a literature consultancy, has spent the last two years researching and considering the role creative writing can play in the process of regeneration. This month we launched a web resource ([www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords)) which showcases critical thinking and best practice in this field. We propose three principal ways

in which creative writers can make a positive contribution to the process of urban change and renewal:

- by helping to create or uncover a sense of place
- by consulting creatively and effectively with communities
- by finding ways to communicate the complexities of urban change

## Creating a sense of place

The poet, Amanda White, worked alongside public artist, Michael Fairfax, on a regeneration project in the village of Tintagel in Cornwall. The project 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. This was not writing by committee, but it was about the writer using her

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skills and experience to find a way of speaking for the place and its people.

Individual stanzas of the poem Amanda wrote in collaboration with the residents 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 in the places that 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 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.

The key reasons for the success of this project were:

- Strong project management by North Cornwall Arts, which brokered relationships between the artists, community and builders
- Appointment of a writer with appropriate community engagement skills
- Clear project brief and aims

### Creative consultation

Creative consultation is becoming an increasingly popular way to engage communities and individuals who are reluctant or unable to respond to traditional consultation techniques. Working in a medium familiar to all, writers can turn messy, complicated issues into tight forms, dense with meaning, which

# street

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.

In 2000, writer and architect Paul Shephard, visual artist Martin Richman, and landscape architects Gross Max, ran a project to consult local young people in Hackney Wick, east London 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 worked with two local schools and created a long poem born out of his conversations with the young people, which capture their personalities, hopes and fears. Additionally he was able to convey his own observations about their thinking and behaviour back to the architects. He connected the children's delight with rolling down a hill on a trip to Greenwich (there are no hills in Hackney Wick), and their obsession with football, with an image of a football field with a raised ridge around the pitch.

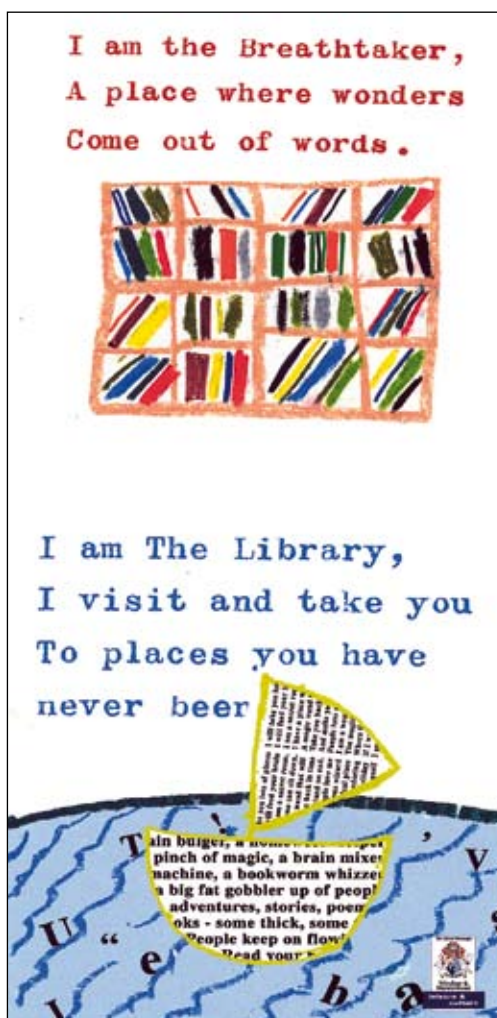
The result was a design for the new park which incorporates a circular ridge suggestive of play, that also protects the quiet green space of the park from the busy road nearby.

The key reasons for the success of this project were:

- A subtle approach to consultation, creative exploration of the possibilities of a space
- A partnership between a writer, visual artist



Paul Shephard consulting with local young people in Hackney Wick about their relationship to the area



A detail from the design of the Borough Breathtaker project undertaken with Maidenhead's mobile library

and architecture practice that allowed real communication between both partners

- A dedicated arts manager who brought together the creative practitioners and enabled them to work with all interested parties (local residents, council departments, schools, funders etc)
- The writer had the freedom and trust invested in him to follow his own creative response to the place and the young people he consulted, thus becoming a creative part of the process rather than merely a conduit for information

### Communication and articulation

The process of regeneration and urban change is complex and with such a wealth of different partners and agendas, good communication is both crucial and extraordinarily difficult to achieve. Writers are well-placed to play a role here. We are not suggesting they will 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, a writer might be uniquely placed to find ways of communicating across these gaps.

One example of this is work artists and designers 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. 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. Even more significantly, the poem also ended up renaming the library, which is now known officially as The Borough Breathtaker.

### Conclusion

Working with the right writer at the right time in the right way can make a powerful contribution to the process of making UK towns and cities better places in which to live, work and play. Well planned, creative projects that give writers and communities the space and support to explore, question and celebrate a place, can offer those who work in regeneration and urban design another way of thinking about a particular place and how it might be developed. Such work can support sustainable community development, and help to give voice and form to the myriad of opinions and agendas involved in any regeneration scheme. A writer can offer another perspective, passionate and detached, informed by an interest in and understanding of the complexities of human relationships, which can manifest itself in specific solutions to the challenge of creating successful places.

### ► find out more

Sarah Butler is a writer, arts project manager and consultant. She runs the Urban Words consultancy, which manages literature based projects that engage with regeneration processes. Visit: [www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords](http://www.urbanwords.org.uk/aplaceforwords)