



## Public Art and Urban Regeneration: advocacy, claims and critical debates

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**ABSTRACT** *Public art has been increasingly advocated on the basis of a series of supposed contributions to urban regeneration since the 1980s. A wide range of advocates have claimed that public art can help develop senses of identity, develop senses of place, contribute to civic identity, address community needs, tackle social exclusion, possess educational value and promote social change. However, these claims have been subject to very little serious evaluation. This paper critically reviews these claims along with salient theoretical critiques of public art's contributions to urban regeneration. It concludes by raising questions that might frame a research agenda for public art within this context.*

**KEY WORDS:** public art, urban regeneration, advocacy, evaluation, critique

### Introduction

The advocacy of artistic intervention in the public realm shifted radically during the 1980s. Public art became increasingly justified, not in aesthetic terms, but rather on the basis of its supposed contribution to what might broadly be termed 'urban regeneration'. The contributions of public art, it was argued, could be economic, social, environmental and psychological. Such advocacy was in line with a broader shift towards 'cultural' means to address the problematic legacies of deep-seated structural adjustment in cities. While this wave of advocacy can be traced back to the Arts Council's 'Art into Landscape' initiatives of the 1970s (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1974, 1977), it was not until the late 1980s that any extensive body of literature began to emerge outlining the claims of public art in this context. Influential examples of this early advocacy included the self-explanatory *Art for Architecture* (Petherbridge, 1987) and *The Economic Importance of the Arts in Britain* (Myerscough, 1988).

In institutional and policy circles, the realization that the arts did not occupy an autonomous aesthetic realm but rather were part of the material relations and reproduction of society (Selwood, 1995a, p. 24) took hold at broadly the same time. Such beliefs underpinned much subsequent public-sector advocacy, spon-

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sorship of the arts and urban policy. The significance of the arts as a route to urban regeneration was first enshrined in policy in the UK with the 1988 Action for Cities programme, where they were regarded as a means to “deal with the problems of unemployment and alienation in the country’s inner cities, as well as contributing to the creation of a classless and tolerant society” (Department of National Heritage, 1993; cited in Policy Studies Institute, 1994, p. 38). Subsequently, widespread provision has been made for the arts in a range of urban (and rural) regeneration budgets (see Cairns, 1998; Forpad, 1998; Taylor, 1997; Thackara, 1994).

The 1980s also saw an expansion of the arts infrastructure in the UK and the USA, linking it more directly with the public sector. In the 1980s in the UK, for example, the Arts Council’s policy expanded beyond the mere promotion of the interests of artists. Rather, in the 1980s:

Arts funding was frequently justified in economic terms and the need to create greater parity between the provision in London and the regions was acknowledged. So was the need to expand audiences for the arts ... to support non-traditional art forms, evaluate projects and acknowledge the interests of the market. These concerns were widely promoted as arts funding bodies assumed the roles of advocates. (Selwood, 1995a, p. 25)

One of the key outcomes of this was the Arts Council’s attempt to develop ‘percent for art’ policies amongst British local authorities, drawing on widespread American public-sector models (Arts Council of Great Britain, 1990). These were policies where a percentage of the costs of new developments (often 1%, although the percentage varied between different authorities) was devoted to the provision of public art. The subsequent expansion of public art in the UK has been public-sector led to a large extent. In the UK, approximately three times as many public art commissions stem from the public sector compared to the private sector (Roberts & Marsh, 1995, p. 195). Recent surveys have confirmed the influence of ‘percent for art’ policies within the public sector. The vast majority of local authorities are aware of ‘percent for art’, with 48% of all local authorities and 70% of urban local authorities having such policies (Policy Studies Institute, 1994, p. 48; Roberts & Marsh, 1995, p. 195). Local authorities who have commissioned works have felt public art able to address a number of their strategic priorities concerning: “the quality of the built environment ... , public access and awareness of visual arts ... the need to stimulate economic regeneration and to develop positive identities for particular areas ... and to foster civic pride” (Policy Studies Institute, 1994, p. 43).

A survey by the Public Art Forum revealed that between 1984 and 1988 124 UK local authorities (24% of all local authorities and 43.5% of those responding to the survey) commissioned some 333 pieces of public art. This included a range of artworks (although sculpture and murals dominated) costing some £3.5 million (Public Art Forum, 1990). The percentage of local authorities commissioning public art rose to 53 between 1988 and 1994, with 21% employing a specialist public art officer or agency (Policy Studies Institute, 1994, p. 42). A large number of independent commissioning agencies, largely established during the 1980s and playing a liaison role between commissioners and artists, have also become key agents in the development of public art in the UK, often acting as regional catalysts to its development (Public Art Forum, 1990). However,

public art advocacy and commissioning is now an extremely widespread activity in the UK, as well as in European and North American cities.

The positioning of public art in the social, rather than the economic, realm has generated an extensive body of literature from advocates outlining the potential contributions of public art to urban regeneration. While critical and evaluative writing has begun to emerge, there is as yet little by way of developed procedures or critical theoretical frameworks. This paper aims to outline and examine the specific rhetoric of public arts advocacy and subsequently to interrogate broader critical debates that impinge on the question of the evaluation of the impacts of public art on the revitalization of urban lives.

### **Types of Public Art in Urban Regeneration**

The types of public art involved in urban regeneration programmes depend very much on the type of regeneration programme. While a comprehensive review of the range of examples of public art in urban regeneration schemes is beyond the scope of this paper (for various accounts, see Cork, 1991; Goodey, 1994; Jones, 1992; Miles, 1997, 1998; Public Art Forum, 1990; Selwood, 1995b; Wollheim, 1998), we can recognize a broad distinction between flagship, or prestige, regeneration projects and communal regeneration projects.

Public art has undoubtedly become an important part of both publicly and privately funded flagship developments such as convention centres and office developments (see, for example, Rosehaugh Stanhope Developments, 1992; International Convention Centre Birmingham, no date). It has also been a high-profile component of other regeneration initiatives such as garden festivals (see for example, Stoke on Trent National Garden Festival, 1986) and, more recently in the UK, Millennium projects (Miles, 1999). Public art has been posited as fulfilling a number of functions in this context, including aesthetic improvement and enhanced building design (Dunlop, 1995; Eaton, 1990; Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990; Public Art Forum, 1990), either through the mere presence of art or through the involvement of artists in design teams (Baker, 1992a, p. 38; Clifford, 1990, p. 13; Corner, 1992; Dean, 1995, p. 7; Lewisham Borough Council, 1990; Powell, 1998, p. 6). Public art is seen as contributing to an 'aura' of quality (Selwood, 1992, p. 21), emphasizing uniqueness and lending distinction to developments (Stoke on Trent National Garden Festival, 1986; Swales, 1992a). Further, public art plays a significant promotional role providing 'cover shot' images circulated through local, national and international media (Goodey, 1994; Hall, 1995). In addition it has been argued that public art can contribute to the resolution of a range of broader physical, environmental and economic problems. These have been summarized by the Policy Studies Institute as:

- contributing to local distinctiveness
- attracting companies and investment
- having a role in cultural tourism
- adding to land values
- creating employment
- increasing the use of open spaces
- reducing wear and tear on buildings and lowering levels of vandalism. (1994, p. 38)



**Figure 1.** *Spirit of Enterprise*, Tom Lomax, fountain, bronze, 1989–1991. Located in Centenary Square, Birmingham, adjacent to the International Convention Centre.

Budgets for art in flagship developments, drawn from ‘percent for art’ policies, and/or from corporate sponsorship, are routinely large: £800 000 in the case of the International Convention Centre, Birmingham (Figure 1) and £6 million in the case of the Broadgate development in London (Selwood, 1995b, p. 105). The overly economic rationale underpinning the provision of art in this context typically necessitates the employment of nationally or internationally famous ‘blue chip’ artists. Broadgate, for example, includes works by Richard Serra, Fernando Botero, Bruce McLean and George Segal (Selwood, 1995b, p. 104).

Despite providing a major impetus for the development of public art, such art works and projects, dubbed ‘corporate baubles’ by one critic (Selwood, 1992, p. 11), have drawn heavy criticism. This has ranged from doubts over the contributions of flagship development to equitable economic development (Bianchini *et al.*, 1992; Policy Studies Institute, 1994; Selwood, 1995a,b) to art’s endorsement of environmentally damaging and socially exclusive development. Both Darke (1995) and Miles (1997, 1998), for example, criticize the involvement of artists in the official public art programme of Cardiff Bay Development Area, where the construction of a barrage as part of the regeneration process was predicted to result in serious damage to local wetland ecologies (Figure 2). Others have produced pessimistic assessments of the likely economic and social impacts of the Bay’s development (Imrie *et al.*, 1995; Rowley, 1994).

By contrast, a range of public art, permanent and temporary, object and event- or process-oriented, has been employed widely in smaller-scale communal and neighbourhood regeneration projects. These have originated within both the public and the voluntary sectors, as well as from a range of social activist groups committed to communal regeneration (many of these are detailed in subsequent sections). In being advanced on social rather than economic bases, the practice and budgets of such art differ greatly from those of public art in



Text on reverse: horizon contemplation prospect perspective vista open divulge  
reveal discover unfold acknowledge allow unveil extend stretch reach spread  
distant far remote yonder clear around.



Text on reverse: barrage hinder impede prevent bar inhibit scotch squash cramp  
restrain check thwart frustrate balk stymie spoil mar curb shackle fetter stonewall.

**Figure 2.** *Lost Horizons* and *No Barrage*, postcards and billboards produced by the group 'Art and Place' in 1994 in response to the proposed construction of a barrage across Cardiff Bay.

flagship developments. The development of much public art in this context follows the broader advocacy of the cultural, rather than a purely property-led or economic approach to regeneration, and follows a strong tradition of community arts dating back to the 1960s.

While the injection of art into everyday life through public art has been advanced as inherently good in itself (see Barrett-Lennard, 1994, p. 34; Douglas, 1993; Duffin, 1993; Selwood, 1992), we might identify several areas of social concern which, advocates have argued, might be addressed by public art. The following review is based largely on published accounts of public projects, and identifies and examines seven broad claims advanced by advocates concerning public art's supposed contribution to the regeneration of urban communities.

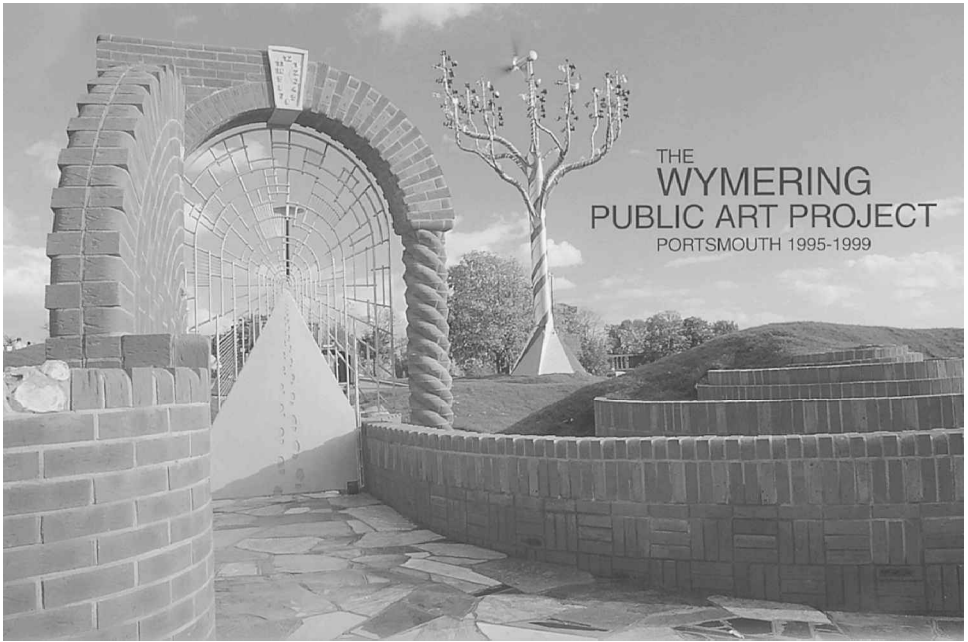
## **The Claims of Public Art**

### *1. Developing a Sense of Community*

Economic decline is frequently cited as creating or exacerbating communal fragmentation: indeed the two are often seen as synonymous. Affected areas are typically characterized as suffering from a lack of social cohesion and of internal ties bonding individuals into larger social groups. Arts advocates have argued that public art can intervene and help rejuvenate severed social connections, both by promoting community discovery and awareness and by directly enhancing social connections. 'The Art of Change', a cultural consultancy run by Peter Dunn and Lorraine Leeson, based in London, recognizes this as a shift in the functions of art in public towards "art works which deal with the aspirational values of the communities and constituencies in which they are placed" (The Art of Change, no date a,b,c; see also Dunn & Leeson, 1993). Public art has, thus, become located squarely in the realm of social development (Figure 3). As Pat Benincasa has argued about her school-based project in Minneapolis, 'The Gathering Place', "it's about community building, not simply building something for the community" (quoted in Skarjune, 1993, p. 19).

Public art projects have sought to articulate and communicate what some have seen as four values fundamental to community development: shared history, identity, needs and aspirations (Swales, 1992b, p. 71). It has been argued that public art can act as a vehicle through which a 'sense of community' can be developed and promoted. We recognize 'sense of community', in this context, to refer to an awareness of a social body occupying a shared space with connections stemming from some common identity, values or culture. Public arts advocates have argued that the articulation or making visible of senses of community is an important step in the emergence of social bodies.

It is claimed that public art can do more than just promote *senses* of community; rather, it can be active in the development of tangible networks and inter-personal links, promoting social development and cohesion (Community Council of Lincolnshire, 1990; Conway, 1989; Douglas, 1993; The Art of Change, no date b). One widely recognized problem of areas blighted by either de-industrialization or poor-quality environments is a dearth of a shared public culture. Public art has been attributed with the ability to revitalize the public cultures of such areas. Advocates have cited numerous ways in which projects are able to



**Figure 3.** The Wymering Public Art Project, Portsmouth 1995–1999. Artists: Peter Dunn (*The Art of Change*), Peter Codling, *Dot to Dot* (Anna Potten and June Heap) in partnership with Wymering Community Association. A community-based project in a deprived neighbourhood which comprises a landmark artwork with windmill references, a boundary wall, earthworks, a narrative pathway, an entrance structure and wall hangings. The works explore the themes of reminiscence, community history and identity and sustainability (see Portsmouth City Council, 1999).

achieve this. For example, it is claimed that public art can improve the spaces of public culture, ‘humanizing’ depressing or prosaic urban forms (see, for example, Duffin, 1993; Dunlop, 1995; Norwich City Council, 1990; Nottinghamshire County Council, 1990; Thamesdown Borough Council, 1990; *The Art of Change*, no date c). Swales has argued that public art “has been promoted as a way of enhancing well-being in cities, improving dismal spaces and uplifting bland lives” (1992b, p. 63). Advocates have also claimed that public art can improve safety and reduce the fear of public space (Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990; Selwood, 1992, p. 11), although there is little evidence to substantiate this.

One aspect of public art’s supposed humanization of the built environment is the claim that it can provide foci for public culture. These might be physical, “monuments expressing or articulating shared meanings” (Swales, 1992b, p. 71), or points of interest and discussion (Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990, p. 31). Alternatively they might be process or event based, for example festivals which might aspire to reflect shared social values (see, for example, the festivals organized by Common Ground; Clifford & King, 1993). Festivals and other arts projects have also been cited as capable of galvanizing communities and generating networks through the process of organization and development (Douglas,

1993). Such foci, physical or otherwise, are said to possess a communicative function, generating and communicating ideas between people and across physical space. The public discourse it is claimed such foci generate is argued to be an important dimension of the sustenance of viable, lively communities (Swales, 1992b, p. 71). Public art is thus argued to act as both a catalyst and a conduit for the generation and communication of public discourse.

Central to many of the social development claims of public art is the idea of participation. This takes a range of forms and can involve many contrasting definitions, from consultation by artists and agencies with the public, to public involvement in the design and production of artworks. Advocates have specifically cited three benefits stemming from public participation in projects. First, they claim, co-operation and teamwork increases awareness of, and respect for, others (Garrard, 1998), developing awareness of a broader social body. Second, participation develops tangible networks between individuals. The intention is that this both positively enhances social cohesion in itself and generates the capacity for sustained cohesion beyond the lives of individual projects. For example, Brian McAvera (1998) has discussed projects in Northern Ireland which created the capacity, networks and skills to allow communities to make applications for national lottery funding for ideas developed in association with artists. Finally, participation in the creation of their own environments is argued to engender senses of pride and ownership in communities, both towards these environments specifically and towards their environments more generally. Practically this is said to translate into reduced vandalism and improved care of environments (see Duffin, 1993; London Borough of Hammersmith and Fulham, 1990; Wolff, 1991).

## 2. *Developing a Sense of Place*

A central component of the notions of community that enjoy currency amongst many public arts advocates is that of place. Aspects of areas' histories or identities are commonly incorporated into projects in attempts to articulate shared senses of belonging, both to places and between people. This was the case, for example, with the *Power of Place* projects in Los Angeles (Hayden, 1995, 1996) and Common Ground's various projects in the UK (Clifford, 1990; Clifford & King, 1993; Morland, 1988).

Public art interventions into community development are primarily, although not exclusively, concerned with the rejuvenation of geographical communities. This has translated into an advocacy of public art on the basis that it is able both to articulate and to strengthen links between communities and places (see *The Art of Change*, no date c). Such advocacy draws on the equation of homogenizing urban development or modernist planning and the erosion of senses of place. Public art is cited with the ability to replace a quality that has vanished from a place or has been ignored; this is achieved, it is argued, through commemoration of events or aspects of local history (Himid, 1994, p. 30).

Senses of place that public arts advocates aim to develop typically contain two elements. First, the development of an awareness of tradition or identity unique to place is considered to be important. For example, John Dungey of the multi-arts organization 'The Company of the Imagination' has argued:



We ... believe that our relationships with places are as important as our relationships with people. And because places, like the arts feed our senses, our emotions and our spirits and fire our imaginations, we, in turn, want to nurture places and do all we can to ensure that what we value is not destroyed. (1990, p. 12)

These sentiments are echoed by Common Ground:

In encouraging people—landowners or local communities—to commission craftspeople and sculptors to crystallise feelings about their place in a public and permanent way, we are emphasising that our feelings about our everyday landscapes are important and should be taken seriously, that our moment in history has something to offer and that in setting our imagination free to explore place we can help initiate new cultural touchstones worthy of our time. (Clifford, 1990, p. 15)

Projects which address this concern would include art works with a distinctive 'local' iconography, the building of archives, and the preparation of special texts or related materials. Common Ground's 'New Milestones' and 'Parish Maps' projects<sup>1</sup> have both been concerned with producing monuments (although Common Ground would avoid such an ideologically loaded term) to community feelings about 'ordinary' places (see Greaves, 1987; Morland, 1988). Such projects have, on occasions, been employed directly within planning disputes.

The aim of public art in this context is to articulate and strengthen the bonds between people and place and, in so doing, to strengthen the bonds between people. Consequently much public art attempts to promote consensual readings of place around which communities might come together. However, in a few cases alternative approaches have been attempted which have sought to highlight the fractured nature of social space and the range of claims different publics have on places. For example, the group 'muf', working in London, attempted to map conversations with a range of publics about common spaces in order to create an archive of their conflicting claims on and hopes for those spaces. This formed the basis of their artistic interventions into those spaces (McCormac, 1999). However, such archaeologies of conflict are a rare exception in this context and their influence on the finished work might be questioned.

The second way in which public art is deployed in developing a sense of place is by furnishing places with unique physical identities through the creation of artwork unique to sites. Again, such advocacy draws on a supposed association between physical distinction and enhanced senses of place. Incidentally, this is an important rhetorical justification for artworks in prestige developments (Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990, p. 21).

### 3. *Developing Civic Identity*

Public art is part of the process by which a city acquires a sense of definition: what kind of a city it is and what aspects of its history are to be preserved. Public art creates a community and a community point of view. (MacKie, 1989, p. 44)

Public arts advocates claim that art is able to enhance civic identity, and in turn this is said to produce a number of positive social benefits. Like 'sense of place', 'civic identity' is a widely deployed rhetoric in public arts advocacy, but

particularly in the advocacy of high-profile public art in prestige developments. Like 'sense of place', it is again difficult to define. However, we might recognize three distinct interpretations and uses of the term by advocates. First, a social interpretation might involve the awareness of individual communities' positions within wider civic bodies. Second, a discursive interpretation, by contrast, might refer to public art's supposed ability to generate a common civic discourse around particular pieces or programmes of work. Such a notion is captured by MacKie's allusions to a city's "sense of definition" and "community point of view" (1989, p. 44). McCoy describes public art as "civic discussion", albeit in a more pluralist sense: "Art that raises viewpoints for inclusion in the public debate can support a vibrant cultural, social, and political atmosphere that is essential to meaningful civic discussion" (1997, p. 6).

Finally, civic identity has also been equated with cities' public identities (Cork, 1991, p. 135), their internally and externally projected public images (Goodey, 1994; Hall, 1995). Such advocacy posits a supposed link between physical identity (townscape) and cultural aspects of civic identity (see Baker, 1992b, p. 59; City of Glasgow District Council, 1990, p. 31). Projects often attempt, for example, to provide artworks that allude to or "reflect the history and character" (Morris, 1998, p. 16; see also Harrod, 1991) of towns and cities. In the case of Birmingham, Vivian Lovell, then the director of the Public Art Commissions Agency, stated that a public art commissioning strategy for the city should aim: "to develop a public art programme that is unique to Birmingham reflecting its history, resources, industries, international links and multicultural heritage" (1989, p. 73) (Figure 4). Of such a strategy Graham Shaylor, then director of Development at the City Council, stated:

The City of Birmingham firmly believes that artworks contribute to the environment and unify a city, bringing together a populace. Although art cannot be the focus point of the city, it can help in defining that focus. (1989, p. 73)

Such rhetoric that denies the multiple histories of cities is common to much prominent public arts advocacy, echoing the ideological claims of modernist art criticism. Clearly, public art can contribute to the assembly of a unique civic 'cultural stock' and hence visual identity; however, its broader claims to the creation of a unifying civic voice are more questionable.

#### *4. Addressing Community Needs*

Some advocates have argued that public art, and arts activity generally, can address community needs (Duffin, 1993; Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990, p. 30), helping communities understand their problems and facilitating their solutions (Clarke, 1990, p. 18). This is part of a call to replace the narrow perception of artists as suppliers of objects by a more holistic perception of them as equally problem solvers (Eaton, 1990, p. 73). The community needs that public art is said to be able to address are numerous and include aesthetic improvement of environments, functional needs (for example, through the provision of street furniture) (Peto, 1992, p. 38), contributions to environmental regeneration (Allan *et al.*, 1997), improvement of city ecologies (Guest, 1992, p. 35), and individual and communal empowerment (Baker, 1992b, p. 46; Clifford, 1990, p. 13; Cross, 1993, p. 20; Walwin, 1992, pp. 102–103; Willett, 1984, p. 11). Public



**Figure 4.** Detail from *Forward*, by Raymond Mason (1991), Centenary Square, Birmingham, adjacent to the International Convention Centre. The narrative statue represents episodes from Birmingham's history.

art has also been extensively deployed to address the needs of specialist communities such as those within healthcare (Artist's Agency, no date; Baron, 1995; Duffin, 1992; Malkin, 1990; Miles, 1994).

### *5. Tackling Social Exclusion*

Some have argued that the arts provide a means of addressing social exclusion. Sheffield City Council, for example, drawing upon the Sheffield Labour Party's advocacy of the arts as a vehicle giving voice to marginal groups, has advocated public art in the city as a "positive artistic, social and economic force" (Sheffield City Council, 1990, p. 20). Blaney has argued that the arts (including public art) are able to tackle social exclusion in two ways. First, participation in arts projects is able to extend the participation of individuals in the broader social life of urban areas, as noted earlier. Second, Blaney argues, the themes, contents and concerns of arts projects are able to "give affirmation to diverse cultures and traditions" (1989, p. 83; see also Lovell, 1988). Blaney concludes, "art can be a stimulus for alienated people and can serve as the first step in the ladder toward their full participation in society" (1989, p. 83). There is little doubt that art can provide stimulation and interest and might also foster capacity for broader social participation. Further, projects might draw attention

to issues of local concern within excluded or marginalized communities and communicate them externally; for example, the needs of children in deprived neighbourhoods (Henderson, 1998).

The role of public art in promoting alternative or excluded histories or voices is exemplified by the much discussed 'Power of Place', a multimedia group working in Los Angeles (see Hayden, 1995, 1996; Miles, 1997). The idea of 'art about difference' includes:

art made by people of colour, including native peoples in North America and Australia, which seeks, as a first step to reclaim histories, which have been obliterated by dominant culture. The reclamation of such histories is seen as the beginning of a wider process of empowerment, in that it establishes a cultural identity through which members of these groups build self-recognition. (Miles, 1997, p. 177)

'Power of Place' have been involved in the excavation of figures excluded from conventional histories of place. An example is their monument to Biddy Mason, a black ex-slave and midwife (Hayden, 1995, pp. 169–187; 1996; Miles, 1997, pp. 177–178). Popular and excluded memories of place have also been employed in the conservation of historic districts. Suzanne Lacy's 'Full Circle' (Lacy, 1993) in Chicago is similarly concerned with the inscription of hidden identities into the commemorative landscape of the city. 'Full Circle' is a project of 100 rock monuments installed on the sidewalks of central Chicago. Each rock acted as a monument to Chicago-area women. It provided both an antidote to the exclusiveness of the masculinist commemoration in the city's landscape and a vehicle attempting to make visible the histories of women (Lacy, 1993, p. 29).

## *6. Educational Value*

Public art, it is argued, can promote educational benefits. Public art projects can be accompanied by educational programmes (Hampshire County Council, 1990, p. 5; Kent County Council, 1990, p. 14; Public Art Consultancy Team, 1990, p. 31), and specific art works themselves can be claimed to have an educational capacity (Swansea City Council, 1990, p. 13; Thamesdown Borough Council, 1990, p. 10; Veerman, 1993). The Public Art Consultancy Team, for example, has outlined the educational benefits they see stemming from the public art programme in Cardiff Bay Development Area: "appropriation of the artworks, acquisition of new skills, creation of a greater sense of identity with a neighbourhood and community point of interest and discussion" (1990, p. 31). These, they argue, "are all direct benefits of a community and education programme" (p. 31). Many have argued that educational programmes are essential for the successful reception of public art programmes. Evaluations of such educational claims are limited, although many cite the enthusiasm of participants as evidence. Education in this sense involves both specific links to educational institutions, for example, through artist-in-residence schemes (City of Wakefield Metropolitan District Council, 1990, p. 32; Skarjune, 1993; Sunderland Metropolitan Borough Council, 1990, p. 28), or more general educational benefits to non-institutional communities.

## 7. Promoting Social Change

James Peto has noted the commitment of a number of artists to a “provocative” public art, one “questioning accepted versions of history, illuminating hidden functions of public institutions and disturbing preconceptions about systems that govern public life” (1992, p. 32). Public art, for such artists, is a means for promoting social change or is an active agent in that change, revealing fundamental social contradictions.

Public art has been employed in three ways in the promotion of positive social change, although there is a significant degree of overlap. First, artists have made public art integral to the opposition to a range of issues. This has involved integrating public art into specific oppositional projects and/or protest events. The most well-known example in the UK is The Art of Change, who produced a series of posters opposing the London Docklands Development Corporation (LDDC) during the 1980s. The London Docklands Community Poster Project acted as a conduit for community fears over the threats posed by the development. Production and display of the posters was an active constituent of widespread community opposition to the LDDC (see Dunn & Leeson, 1993). Such activist public art is not restricted to the opposition of urban development: Dolan (1998), for example, discusses the use of performance art to oppose the production and sale of genetically modified foodstuffs. In other instances public art has been employed to raise general awareness of issues of social concern such as homelessness (Duffin, 1993; Peto, 1992, p. 38), AIDS (Douglas, 1993), domestic violence (Phillips, 1994), or the negative environmental impacts of urban development (Darke, 1995).

Second, arts can be used to re-semanticize or subvert the dominant meanings of spaces or buildings. Examples from the Polish-born artist Krzysztof Wodiczko illustrate this potential. A large part of Wodiczko’s work has involved projections onto well-known monuments with the intention of either emphasizing the problematic ideologies they commemorate or inverting their symbolic meanings. Wodiczko has, for example, projected the image of a missile onto Nelson’s column (1985) (see Baxter, 1993; Miles 1997, pp. 80–81), a Nazi flag onto the South African embassy in London and images of homelessness onto Boston monuments. James Peto has argued of the latter:

Krzysztof Wodiczko’s *Homeless Projections* of the late 1980s question the perceived meanings of architecture and give new significance to the monuments of city streets and those who live in their shadows. (1992, p. 38)

Evaluating social activist public art is not easy. Indeed, the notion of such an objective is one many artists would reject (Lacy, 1993, p. 33). We might point to the undoubted visibility of the genre, particularly given the publicity many projects generate, and the effects this has on raising awareness of excluded groups and problematic social issues as a sign of their success. This might well be so but it is important to attach caveats. Awareness of issues explored in the projects mentioned above and others like them is undoubtedly high among international groups of educated elites such as curators, critics, teachers and students. These projects have been circulated widely through international exhibitions, publications and research projects. Further, they are frequently cited sympathetically in classes on a range of art and urban issues. However, this

should be regarded as incidental to their immediate social aims rather than a gauge of their success. The extent to which they have been incorporated into the local geographies of, for example, Little Tokyo in Los Angeles or the Chicago Loop is both less apparent and less investigated. Further, the impacts of such projects on the groups responsible for the reproduction of exclusive histories or abject practices remain largely unexplored in the literatures of social activist art. The success of such projects is often assumed and subsequently justified on the grounds of inappropriate criteria that obscure a lack of empirical evidence. Advocates are typically guarded on this issue and tend to cite the efficacy of symbolism, for example, in justification of their claims.

## Discussion

There is insufficient space here to consider in detail all of the claims of public arts advocates. However, in evaluating the claims of public art we would like to explore four broad critiques:

- the lack of satisfactory evaluation of the claims of public art and of a rigorous critical apparatus;
- the essentialism of much advocacy;
- the lack of critical intervention in much public art practice;
- the fundamental flaws of the technocratic advocacy of public art.

Public art's advocacy during its recent renaissance has predominantly been on the basis of a supposed contribution to the alleviation of a range of urban problems. However, very little satisfactory evaluation of these claims has taken place (see Selwood, 1995b, for a rare exception). Patricia Phillips recognized this some years ago: "just at the moment when so much apparatus has been assembled and oiled that might aid in the development of a rigorous critical foundation for public art, there is a growing feeling of—well why bother?" (1988, p. 96), a situation that still appears to hold true today. We can identify four reasons for this. First is the relative scarcity of funding, particularly in the community arts sector. Where funding is available it has tended, understandably, to be directed towards implementation rather than evaluation. Second is a widespread and uncritical acceptance, particularly among its main commissioners, that putting art in the public realm is inherently a good thing. This posits public art either as an essential component of the cultural stock of cities (Sargent, 1996), contributing to the enhancement of city-centre environments and the externally projected images of cities (Hall, 1995; Miles, 1998), or as a panacea for a range of social problems. Third is a wariness of the relevance of social scientific criteria to the evaluation of public art, indeed a questioning of the notion of evaluating it at all (Lacy, 1993). Finally, there is no adequate critical paradigm in public art research through which to satisfactorily evaluate the claims of public art.

The two prevailing critical paradigms in public art research are productionist and semiotic, commonly employed in some combination. Both of these paradigms are flawed as a basis for evaluating the regeneration claims of public art, although both have been employed to this end. The productionist paradigm has sought to evaluate public art through the examination of its practices, structures and procedures of production. Much public art criticism, although avowedly about the reception of public art, is actually written from within a

productionist framework. The productionist critique is typical of much writing stemming from advocates, artists and arts administrators, reflecting their roles and their concerns with quality in the production of artworks. While it is understandable that these concerns will influence the framework within which they write, there is a tacit assumption in much of this writing that quality in the production of artworks equals successful reception, interpretation or consumption of works. Clearly, this significantly downplays the complexities of consumption. The semiotic paradigm, by contrast, has employed the techniques of iconographic deconstruction, typically locating public art within the ideological realm of the post-modern city, part of an apparent projection of a false consciousness upon urban publics. While offering sophisticated methods of saying a great deal about art, these paradigms are able to say very little about the public. That is to say, they fail singularly to capture anything of the subsequent impacts of public art projects or of the public's experiences of public art. While astounding, this silence permeates even the most sophisticated critiques. Neither the intentions of the producers of public art nor its iconographies necessarily correspond to the incorporation of public art into the experiences of the public's everyday lives. While our understanding of the growth, production and intended meanings of public art is undoubtedly good, our understanding of its impacts, and the substance of advocates' claims, is much less concrete. If public art criticism is to move beyond this impasse its critical apparatus needs reconstruction. In reviewing critical writing on public art it is apparent that the voices of the public are almost universally absent. It seems not unreasonable to suppose that the origins of a new critical paradigm in public art research lie in the fragments of the few public voices that are admitted into the debate.

Moving to the second critique, it can be argued that much public art advocacy rests on essentialist claims to, for example, nature, identity, place and community. Such claims fail to acknowledge the contested, fragmented and mutable nature of these concepts. Despite James Peto's arguments that "since it cannot represent the truth to everyone art in public should seek to encourage the sound of contradictory voices" (1992, p. 43), too much advocacy aspires to myths of harmony based around essentialist concepts. Taking the example of place, an almost ubiquitous claim of public art is that it is able to turn 'space into place', investing the abstract with social meaning. However, such a conception of place appears to echo that of early humanistic geographers that there exists some essential, both transhistorical and unique, quality of place that might be captured and/or enhanced through the practices of planning and design. The argument goes that public art is able to distil and articulate these essences. This argument posits the artist as a kind of research machine into which relevant local data are input and analysed, and from which an 'appropriate' artwork is produced. This is clearly a gross misrepresentation of the process of public art production. It fails to take account of, for example, the interplay of context and the artist's personal artistic trajectory, or the influences and constraints of commissioners or commissioning structures. Further, this fails to recognize that any process by which any essence of place might be distilled will inevitably be contingent upon a set of partial readings by producers (artists, commissioners, advisors, etc.). Finally, readings of the works produced will inevitably be fragmented, multiple and complex rather than universal. The essentialist view of place represents a fundamental misreading, as recent work has shown place to be, for example, permeable, both bounded and unbounded, local and global,

contested, mutable and socially contingent (Massey, 1994; May, 1996), and not reducible to universal essences. Problematization of the notion of place is rare within public art advocacy and practice (although see the work of 'muf' in London (McCormac, 1999)). Similar criticisms apply to advocates' appeals to concepts such as nature, community and identity.

The third point is associated with the work of Patricia Phillips, the author of one of public art's seminal critiques. She has argued that public art has failed to intervene critically in the process of urban development. She has identified two reasons for this failure. First, she argued that the machinery of public art production mitigates against challenging, critical intervention in the public realm. Public art production involves the negotiation of a complex bureaucracy of briefs, budgets, multi-stage competition and selection procedures, health, safety and insurance constraints, and selection committees comprising commissioners, curators, other artists, public art agencies, administrators and community representatives. Phillips has argued that the operation of these bureaucracies is circumscribed by the fears of hostile public and media reaction and by attempts to appeal to the diverse publics who inevitably have claims on any public space. The result of this 'machinery' is the production of largely bland, unprovocative art that offers neither critical disruption nor artistic risk or challenge. Phillips categorizes much public art as "'minimum risk art'; that is, an art that can be slipped quietly into space and somehow manage to engage everyone but seriously offend or disturb no-one". She concludes: "isn't it ironic that an enterprise aimed even at the least, at enlivening public life is now running on gears designed to evade controversy" (Phillips, 1988, p. 100).

Second, Phillips points to public art's relationship to corporate patronage, through mechanisms such as 'percent for art', as further fettering its critical possibilities. The most prominent manifestation of the recent wave of public art, indeed arguably the principal driving force behind its recent renaissance, has been its implication in prominent urban development schemes (Goodey, 1994; Hall, 1995; Miles, 1997, 1998). Such schemes have generated public art's most major budgets and involved its most famous artists. However, its reliance on public and corporate sponsorship and its location in the 'colonized' spaces of the post-modern city centre have precluded any disruptive intervention in the urban scene. Rather, public art has become one of the mechanisms by which corporate finance is able to inscribe difference and exclusion into the urban landscape by lending these spaces auras of distinction and exclusivity appropriate to their corporate contexts. While not suggesting that such meanings are entirely closed, public art in such circumstances derives its 'publicness' from the narrow and questionable publicness of these spaces (Phillips, 1988). Public art, in its most prominent contemporary manifestation, has become complicit in, rather than critical of, exclusive, uneven development (Darke, 1995; Miles, 1998). Rather than seeking acceptance through bland inoffensiveness, Phillips argues, public art should seek to enliven public space through the encouragement of controversy, debate, disagreement and discourse. There is little evidence that this agenda has been seriously pursued, however, except through some limited temporary interventions. Where public art does encourage debate and disagreement it is commonly regarded as a sign of bad, rather than good, public art.

Finally, Phillips' arguments are extended by the art historian Rosalyn Deutsche's critique of the technocratic advocacy of public art. Much of the public art advocacy outlined earlier involved a technocratic view of art. Namely, it



regards art as a means of alleviating certain of the city's social problems. The technocratic view of art holds that:

'the function, activities and imperatives that condition the fabric of city life' are not socially produced, they are, instead, understood technocratically as 'social problems' to be managed by the provision of facilities to fulfil essential human needs ... Artists too, join the ranks of the city's technocrats. Art relinquishes its isolation in order to participate in the urban environment by providing 'amenities', by 'humanising' or 'beautifying' the city. (Deutsche, 1991a, p. 49)

Rosalyn Deutsche's work has been central to the emergence of a theoretically informed art criticism that has problematized fundamental assumptions about the relationship between art and the city, and which has shown the limitations of technocratic advocacy of public art (Deutsche, 1991a,b; see also Barrett-Lennard, 1994; Miles, 1997). Technocratic, or social art advocacy, relies upon the naturalization of the city "as a transhistorical form", propagating the essentialist myth of a good, even ideal, city form, "one that fulfils a coherent society's 'natural' needs or harmonises 'essential' divisions" (Deutsche, 1991a, p. 47). Technocratic advocacy holds the intervention of art in the public realm as a way of contributing towards the creation of such a good or ideal city form. Deutsche has shown that the limitations of technocratic advocacy derive from its failure to problematize the dominant constructions of the spatial form it "accommodates itself to" (Gibson, 1988, cited in Deutsche, 1991a, p. 48) in its provision of, for example, beauty, a community focus, or in addressing functional needs. The desirability of public art's accommodation to its context is virtually axiomatic within public art advocacy. However, the city can be regarded as a spatial expression of the inequality of the forces of capital. In failing to problematize either these forces or their spatial expression, public art can do nothing, Deutsche argues, to intervene in the causes of the very problems it has been advocated as being able to address. Indeed, public art is actually complicit in the obfuscation of its inequitable structural roots and consequences.

Deutsche argues that only art able to disrupt the essentialist conception of the city is truly able to address its social problems. She explores this assertion through her reading of Martha Rosler's New York exhibition of photographs, 'If you lived here ...' (1989). This exhibition offered a critical commentary on the process of redevelopment in New York City, taking the view that such development was socially exclusive and created conditions of abjection for economically marginalized populations within the city. Key to Rosler's project was her portrayal of development as a historical rather than natural process (Deutsche, 1991a, p. 62). In revealing the consequences of development in material terms (housing and welfare), Rosler produced what Deutsche has termed 'alternative space', a problematization of dominant constructions of the city. Thus art, in making visible the hidden histories and consequences of the production of space for exchange, has a role to play in the democratization of space, argues Deutsche.

However, the conceptual sophistication of this critique is in contrast to the empirically impoverished grounds upon which it rests. The recognition of the powerful democratic intentions of 'If you lived here ...' can only be taken as a partial measure of its success. While Deutsche maps the conceptual terrain with much sophistication, she fails to incorporate any sense of the experience of the

alternative space produced through artistic interventions such as Rosler's, or its relationship to the practices of the production of space. Deutsche, writing from a privileged position within the academy, is equipped to read Rosler's work as a powerful critique of urban development, and hence to recognize art's interventionist potential. Such a reading, however, will not necessarily either follow or be available to abjected publics or the public officials and private developers responsible for such uneven development. There is a fundamental silence at the heart of Deutsche's critique concerning the links between the realms of signification (the representation of space) and production and experience of space. Put simply, Deutsche's reading of 'If you lived here ...' is ultimately limited because it fails to give any sense of the ways in which alternative space, once created through signification, might be incorporated into the practices of everyday life or might intervene in the production of space. Such limitations can only be resolved through an empirical project absent from Deutsche's and other Lefebvrian critiques.

## Conclusions

Public art, it has been claimed, can help alleviate a wide range of urban, social problems. This paper has demonstrated, however, that these claims remain largely untested and unproven. Indeed it has shown that the critical apparatus required to address this is largely absent from public art research. Further, fundamental questions have been raised about the ability of public art, in its contemporary manifestations, and of art *per se*, to intervene in the processes by which social problems are generated in cities.

As we have seen, public art research is at something of an impasse. There are those who refute the validity and relevance of social science methods and criteria to the evaluation of art. However, to do so is to deny that art is now part of material reproduction and social relations, the very bases upon which its renaissance has been advocated. Others argue equally forcefully that any project, art or otherwise, that is advocated, funded and sited on the basis of a set of supposed positive social or economic impacts should expect to have these claims tested.

It is impossible, having reviewed such a diversity of public art, of advocates' claims and of critical debates, to argue that this maelstrom neatly points to one framework or one mode of analysis that offers a way out of this impasse. Having said this, we would like to tentatively propose five sets of questions that might be asked of public art projects. The questions broadly move from the immediate and tangible to the distant and ideological. Not all questions will apply to all cases and the relative emphasis will certainly vary between different cases. However, agreeing on a set of questions with which to interrogate the claims of public art is, at least, a start. We do not propose that these are the right questions, merely that they may prompt debate as to what the right questions might be.

- *Empirical questions:* What tangible, measurable impacts does a project have on its locality, landscape, economy, culture and society?
- *Policy questions:* What is the relationship between the public art programme and broader urban regeneration initiatives or policies affecting a locality and what are the impacts of these initiatives or policies?

- *Structural questions*: What limitations do deeper structural conditions impose on the potentials of public art to intervene in the regeneration of localities? In what ways, if at all, has public art impacted on the deeper structural conditions that give rise to the problems experienced within specific localities?
- *Civic questions*: What impacts do public art projects have beyond their immediate localities? What are the natures of these impacts?
- *Ideological questions*: What commentary does public art offer on the conditions that give rise to the problems it attempts to address? What are the tangible impacts of this commentary on key individuals and institutions, and upon these conditions?

## Acknowledgements

Research for this paper was funded by a Faculty of Environment and Leisure Small Research Grant from Cheltenham and Gloucester College of Higher Education and compiled partly during a sabbatical semester (Tim Hall) awarded by the Geography and Environmental Management Research Unit. Permissions for illustrations were kindly granted by Andrew Darke of 'Place' ('Lost Horizons' and 'No Barrage') and Portsmouth City Council (Wymering Public Art Project). Many thanks also to Malcolm Miles, Caroline Mills and *Landscape Research's* two anonymous referees for comments on earlier drafts of this paper.

## Note

1. Common Ground's 'New Milestones' and 'Parish Maps' are both community-based public art projects. 'New Milestones' is a series of (predominantly) rural, carved milestones that are commissioned by communities. They are intended both to express something of the relationship between people and place, and to enhance local distinctiveness (Morland, 1988). The 'Parish Maps' project is a community cartography project where communities are encouraged to come together and capture their feelings for 'ordinary' places through the production of community maps of their local area (see Clifford, 1993).

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