This article is co-authored by an artist and an architect, both also teachers. Part of it was used for a presentation at the Public Art Observatory’s conference, ‘Waterfronts of Art: Art for Social Facilitation’ on 2-4 September 1999 in Barcelona. Its point of departure is Public Art as a newer transdisciplinary field influenced by urban aestheticisation processes and it highlights the increasing importance of the symbolic economy for the city in general. Public Art has become part of urban regeneration schemes such as waterfronts and is increasingly used to raise the value of real estate property and large-scale projects. In several presentations this problematic role was discussed. In order to avoid a superficial decorative role, Public Art will not just need the involvement of artists in urban design projects from their very start, but artists will increasingly have to operate as facilitators of local civic participation. This in turn means that knowledge about the dynamics of contemporary urban development becomes a necessary ingredient for Public Art education.

Starting, perhaps, with Battery Park City in Manhattan 1979-1980, a new and different role for Public Art as an element of the city opened up. Two aspects are important here: Public Art became an integrated part of the urban master plan – a general zoning plan that regulated the public spaces. The quality of the public spaces that were built before the buildings became a tool to regulate the quality of the buildings themselves. It forced developers towards a higher degree of architectural quality. A historically interesting point is that it started with a series of land art projects on the unbuilt site of the landfill for Battery Park City as Art on the Beach:

Constructed since 1980, Battery Park City is a mixed commercial and residential complex on ninety-two acres of landfill along the Hudson River in lower Manhattan. Developed by the Battery Park City Authority, a public agency created by New York State legislature, the site was organised in accordance with a 1979 master plan prepared by the architects and planners Alexander Cooper and Stanton Eckstut. [...] Within this overall plan, in which the whole was more important than any of the parts, parcels were leased to a variety of private corporations for development. Although the 1979 master plan did not specially mention art, it called for the creation of a number of ‘special places’ all along a mile-and-a-quarter-long esplanade [...] the plan suggested punctuating the esplanade, which runs beside the entire length of the site, with specially designed parks and plazas. The landfill was completed in 1976 but not built upon until 1980, was the site for several years of a series of temporary installations called Art on the Beach. Given this history, it is not surprising that in 1981 planning began for a permanent incorporation of art into Battery Park City. (Beardsley 1989)

It marked the new ambition of the city and its emerging symbolic economy. This symbolic economy has become the driving force of the aesthetic processes in our urban environment. A master plan of the city nowadays consists of strategic elements or projects that are detailed in a new aesthetic manner of which Public Art has increasingly become an integrated part. There has been a shift in urban development that abandons the traditional all-encompassing master plan of a city with social housing at its core and instead creates strategic projects connected by new infrastructure. At the same time we are also witnessing the symbolic economy of the city, fuelled by a gentrified image of tourism, taking aesthetic command over public space and often using public art to do so.

The Role of the Artist in Public Art

The situation of the artist engaged in public art practice has therefore undergone significant alteration. Twenty-five years ago and more – throughout the period from the end of the Second World War until the reassessment of urban planning imperatives in the mid 1970s – the artist had no avenue of input into shaping the urban environment. At most he or she could be a voice of protest, a commentator from the outside. Artists with a real concern for and vision of the urban environment, such as Isamu Noguchi or Constant, found no takers for their ideas among planning professionals. The present condition is quite different in many instances, however. The artist is no longer the outsider clamouring for a seat at the

---

1 The Public Art Observatory is a network of educational institutions, organising workshops and mapping public art. It is available at http://www.ub.es/escult/a.htm

2 As Public Art, Fine Art not only leaves the gallery, but it becomes increasingly teamwork and the boundaries between the professional input of artists, architects and designers become blurred.
planning table, but is often an invited participant. It is possible for an artist to maintain a studio based upon public art practice, and there are examples of artists, Vito Acconci for instance, who maintain a studio and staff of several people.

Despite the concern that Public Art can be and often is used as an element in gentrification schemes, most artists who are thoughtful about it still see their role as that of framing the critique of the urban development process, of posing the questions that elevate the ambitions of the whole. There is another, more radical approach than that of a critique staged from within the development and design team that has come to be employed by many artists. As in the well-known example of the ‘Culture in Action’ exhibition curated for Sculpture Chicago by Mary Jane Jacob (1995), artists might assume a role more akin to that of the community activist than that of the architect or planner. Here the coalitions formed are not those with other design professionals seated around a conference table, but with members of the lay community who might have a completely different sense of priorities for economic and physical development. The result might be process or event oriented rather than oriented towards object, structure and surface. The goal might be to expose the underlying political and economic ambitions of a development project rather than to assume any effect on its aesthetic quality.

In either case, the artist assumes a new sort of role, not only, or in some cases not even, that of form-giver, but of a mediator between developers, property owners and the municipality, or between residents, their municipal agents and developers. This has interesting implications and provides new opportunities for the education of artists and designers with an ambition to enter this arena. But it becomes necessary, perhaps, to understand the nature of present urban development projects and the shifts in planning that have occurred in the past thirty years.

A Shift in Urban Policies and the Restructuring of Master Planning

In the late 1980s and early 1990s it started to become clear that our cities are caught in a new stage of development that seems to outdate many of the previous planning concepts. This new stage of development is a consequence of the economic and cultural changes in society that started to manifest themselves in the 1970s and that have culminated in today’s economic and geographical instability. Instability was a practically unknown phenomenon during the post-war boom period of 1945-1975. The economic restructuring and social and political readjustment process of society after this period are radically transforming cities. Not only have whole industries disappeared (shipbuilding, textile) and has large-scale unemployment arisen in almost all advanced countries, the internationalisation of production and financing that followed is completely changing the economic and social life of the cities we live in.

Consequently far-reaching changes have occurred in urban policies over the past years – the post-war political consensus upon which planning and urban policy were based has fractured. There has been a general shift away from a consensus on the need for public sector led, master-planned development based on the principle of local democracy to an emphasis on economic regeneration with private-sector financing (Brownill 1990). The move in policy to shift the boundaries between the public and private sectors has led to the creation of public-private partnerships or the facilitation of direct market-forces-led relations. The move to a greater reliance on the private sector was generally accompanied by an ideological emphasis on rolling back the state in official urban policy. This notion of rolling back the state to allow the private sector to redevelop inner city areas has swept away the earlier planning tools and ideologies concerning how to plan the future of cities.

Culture-driven urban renewal

In the last two decades the usefulness of arts- and culture-driven urban regeneration has generally been acknowledged. Following the American examples of specifically Boston and Baltimore and their waterfront redevelopment, which included new convention centres, aquariums and the invention of festival shopping centres, the European cities also started initiatives driven by cultural policy (Landry et al. 1996). They developed policies encompassing cultural animation, festivals, pedestrianisation, revivalisation of the evening economy, the creation of cultural centres, etc., generally to attract tourists and local residents alike.

The transformation of historical and/or waterfront areas into retail/leisure and residential developments was based around ‘upmarket’ consumption with a high cultural input. This could include cultural animation programmes, artists’ residences, subsidised workshops and a public art that fitted well with a new ‘postmodern’ aesthetic. (O’Connor 1999)
But as Landry et al. (1996) point out in their study of urban renewal through cultural activity, many of the resources allocated to culture initiatives were commonly side-tracked into building programmes that actually supported the construction industry rather than cultural activities. Further, the ongoing funding of the initial investment into building arts centres is usually inadequate, so that gross understaffing and under-maintenance follow — meaning that the buildings rarely develop their potential. Particularly in the UK, the community arts movement developed a different cultural perspective based on socially motivated art and cultural activity. It has taken the lead in developing people’s interest in the local environment and is using the arts to create a forum for discussion between urban planners and residents.

The cultural sector has grown remarkably since the beginning of the 1980s in terms of the economic importance of this sector for the cities. Zukin (1995) draws attention to the new symbolic economy of culture for cities:

As a set of architectural themes, it plays a leading role in urban redevelopment strategies based on historic preservation or local ‘heritage’. With the disappearance of local manufacturing industries and periodic crises in government and finance, culture is more and more the business of cities – the basis of their tourist attractions and their unique, competitive edge. The growth of cultural consumption (of art, food, fashion, music, tourism) and the industries that cater to it fuels the city’s symbolic economy, its visible ability to produce both symbols and space.

(Zukin 1995: 1-2)

In the meantime urban culture has taken on industrial proportions similar to tourism, which became an industry because of its sheer size and mass character – tourism has become, for example, Manhattan’s main source of income before banking and financial trade. Increasingly tourism can no longer be separated from culture industries — art and culture are a mega-industry in New York City with an annual economy of $8 billion. Art and tourism combined constitute one of the largest generators of tax revenues (Zukin 1995:110). But ‘aestheticisation taken up by urban boosterists had limited cultural resonance, and especially among those whose labour would be crucial to the transformation of the centre into cultural landscape – the cultural intermediaries. They were deeply cynical’ (O’Connor 1998).

Cultural intermediaries that can mediate between the world of the authorities with their technocratic and deterministic planning models and the needs for Public Art, for example, need a close knowledge of the inner dynamics of the cultural field.

This implies a knowledge of the local, but also a deep understanding for these specific forms of consumption. It is this knowledge that allows cultural industries to both innovate in the local sphere and extend their operations beyond the local. [...] Local economic development increasingly depends on the mobilisation of this knowledge, but the ability to do this depends on a range of historically specific social, economic, cultural and political factors. As a particular kind of knowledge intensive industry, and as one especially dependent on a negotiation and articulation of a local place based cultural milieu within a ‘global space of flows’, the cultural industries sector represents an important indicator of the ability of particular cities to respond to the challenge of global restructuring.’ (O’Connor 1999)

For education in the arts, Public Art is a challenge to cross boundaries between the disciplines. A societal engagement of education beyond the traditional art practice or placement is necessary, because professional skills increasingly demand a creativity of being able to synthesise, to see and understand holistically. Increasingly the public artist will need the skills of the broker, the connector that sees opportunities and can write his/her own brief - most commissions will no longer be controlled by single clients, but by coalitions of actor networks.

References

