

Wide Open Space: art in the public realm, localism and rural regeneration

A Dorset Design and Heritage Forum conference

26th May 2011, 09-45 to 17-00 @ The Exchange, Sturminster Newton, Dorset

The Lure of Creativity: art, localism and the land

Malcolm Miles (University of Plymouth)

A sense of place can be elusive. It might be thought to belong to those who have lived in the same place for a long time: a pattern of continuity associated with rural places - in contrast to the mobility of urban life. Early sociologists drew a distinction between what they saw as binding ties to land and family in villages, and the free association and formation of interest groups (or elective communities) in towns. The history of modern art shows, too, that new movements were formed in urban societies, often among migrants.

But the village is sometimes romanticised. It may not always be home to a happy, integrated and comfortable community, but is likely now to house a range of longer- and shorter-term residents, of different backgrounds. The village and the country town have, too, become the minority type of settlement following a drift of population in the nineteenth century which resulted from the introduction of machines in farming, or agricultural revolution (as earlier from the enclosure of common land). A majority of people, in the UK and globally, are now urban dwellers, in inner-cities, suburbs, exurbs, and a range of transitional zones (as inner-cities become urban villages). Urban dwellers, and urban planners, reinvent the land in parks and gardens, or allotments, and seek to rediscover what may be a vague memory of another kind of place or another kind of life in the countryside.

Richard Hoggart, author of *The Uses of Literacy*,¹ recalls his excursions to the Yorkshire Dales as a youth in Hunslet, near Leeds: he asks, 'why did some of us, almost as if by instinct, spend weekend after weekend in those hills and dales? [...] an adolescent from those back-to-backs had become as familiar with curlews and pipits and hares and drystone walls and wild thyme as he was with corner-shops and working men's clubs [...].'² This had nothing to do with calls for healthy living, nor the sub-cultures of climbing or pot-holing; he had, 'not all that far down [...] a strange, unexamined but powerful sense of the land.'³ Of course, that is an urban view. The majority population now is urban. That expanses of land are conserved as national parks, National Trust holdings, and so forth is due to the efforts of urban dwellers who value the countryside as Other to the city; and to a planning system called – uniquely in Europe – town-and-country planning. This has both advantages and disadvantages: the green belt is retained; but what takes place in rural areas is subject to a set of urban assumptions.

As someone born in an outer-London suburb, now an academic in an ivory tower – remote from what the managers are pleased to call real life - I may not have much sense of place. If I do have one it is recent, because I have begun to feel, or cultivate, an attachment to the narrow lane which runs past my house in a quiet Devon town (and similar scenes), and because, like Hoggart but later in life, I was drawn to walking in rural areas, mainly the coastal path. I do, however, remember as a child visiting cousins who farmed a small holding in Kent, and waking to the chalk escarpment with its amazing view and sense of space. The

attraction is (as it was then) solitude. The rural or coastal footpath is an extension of my mental space. Yet I am reminded, as geographer Jay Appleton writes that, 'practical landscape aesthetics is [...] about people and their interaction with their environment.' He adds that school children are capable of working out their own games, so the role of the teacher, or by allusion the landscape designer, is 'just to ensure that the children do not get in each other's way' or to break up fights when they do.⁴ This is a challenge to professionals, used to designing environments as a way to engineer behaviour, or a better society.

Perhaps there is a radical otherness in a sense of place: a refusal of the functionalism which was always the flaw in modernism's utopian project. In contrast to solutions based on a largely technical expertise, which is an urban model invented to be politically neutral in face of contested claims to space, perhaps there is an alternative based in local knowledges, and an acceptance that people produce space, just as they produce meaning, all the time, and are fully competent in doing so. The dweller is an expert on dwelling just as the planner is an expert on planning; but the former knowledge is tacit, intuitive, and easily dismissed. The challenge is to construct an equilibrium.

Art critic Lucy Lippard writes, in *The Lure of the Local*, that she likes looking at landscape paintings, 'though not as much as [at] landscapes themselves.'⁵ I see what she means. When I lived in London in the 1980s I would take a train to Wool and walk along the coastal path towards Weymouth. I sought escape, and to experience moments of wonder – when, after turning a corner, or a shift of light, a view suddenly seems extraordinary. Journalist Gillian Darley writes of the 'thrill of sudden revelation' in a landscape, which is 'available to anyone'.⁶ Such moments are fleeting, like moments of grace in theological terms, yet they are transformative. They do not belittle the spectator before nature (like the Sublime), nor render nature as an object of a colonising gaze (like the Beautiful). They happen anywhere, in ordinary places, and (like the Messiah) are always unannounced.

But I want to avoid a mystique of the land. In Dorset and Wiltshire, the land has been made as it is through millennia of use, cultivated since before the time of Avebury and Stonehenge.

These monuments, with countless earthworks, barrows, and field systems, a few white horses from different periods, show that the land was figured throughout history as a series of land-scapes: marked out by lines of sight, the monuments acting as calendars and gathering places for a settled, agricultural society. In these isles there is no wild nature; even national parks are managed in specific ways, framed by cultural attitudes which evolved mainly in the nineteenth century (when Englishmen of a certain class walked long distances, if possible in atrocious weather, as a right of passage). Artist Tania Kovats says, 'Nature is where I go on holiday. Particularly ancient places that have been given a top dressing of modernity and turned into wilderness parks.'⁷ Indeed, the rational modernisers of the eighteenth century, who built new towns in Bath and Edinburgh, cleared away the remains of a past they saw as dark and superstitious. Then the historicists of the nineteenth century put the ruins back, and preservation is now vital for the cultural and heritage tourism on which some rural areas, like the Lake District, depend when farming incomes are marginal. The land, then, is increasingly aestheticized.

Lippard remarks, 'Like tourism, painting formalises place into landscape.'⁸ That is, while the land is produced according to specific needs and values, the selective framing and adaptation of a landscape in a painting conveys the values of a society – or of a class within society able to exercise artistic patronage (and employ landscape designers). In the seventeenth century, landscape was a setting for classical myth (as in the work of Claude Lorrain – popular with the English gentry); in the early nineteenth century, John Constable introduced an unprecedented realism in his depictions of the agricultural working class and the sites of their frequently arduous labour. But the real is relative. For James Ward, in 1811-13, a limestone landscape in Yorkshire was the basis for representation of the Sublime – an aesthetic of super-human scale, the alternative to Beauty. But in 1948, for W H Auden a remembered limestone landscape stood for a necessary equilibrium – neither fascist granite nor communist clay. He writes,

When I try to imagine a faultless love / Or the life to come, what I hear is the murmur / Of underground streams, what I see is a limestone landscape.⁹

Perhaps landscape is always an abstraction. I do not know whether Peter Lanyon's painting *Dorset Green* (1958) refers to Dorset, or a place elsewhere simply called Dorset Green. But looking up Dorset Green on the internet I found a proposed zero-carbon business park in Purbeck: 'Dorset Green will be a place where business success is achieved through hard work and a respect for the natural environment rather than a need to exploit it.'¹⁰ Directions to the site included mention of two regional airports, and several A roads, which rather dented its credentials. Still, Dorset Green's website shows a man in a white shirt sitting at a table with a pc in a wheat field – very nice. In our urban-industrial (or post-industrial) society, the land implies the open space, fresh air, and perhaps also the optimism we lack in greyer, urban spaces. For many city-dwellers, however, the rural is a view through a car windscreen on a wet bank holiday, perhaps on the way to eating sandwiches in the car looking at the beach. At least it is a day-out. And being remote, the land can receive any projection the viewer wishes to employ. This is not new. Thomas Hardy depicts a rural Wessex which had disappeared by the time he wrote about it, denoting a pre-industrial England as unattainable as happiness in love (in his miserable universe).

But what is the relation of town thinking to rural life? The problem with town-and-country planning is that it tends to apply town planning, backed by town money and power, to the countryside, affirming the countryside as a garden for (recreational extension of) the town. Hence the countryside provides food, raw materials, and leisure for the growing mass of urbanites. A report for the Council for the Protection of Rural England noted that while 700,000 people were employed in agriculture in 1950, by 1994 the number was 200,000.¹¹ Agri-business replaces small-scale farming, young people move away, and rural areas depend on tourism. Then, as city-dwellers purchase rural second homes (if possible in villages featured on postcards) at which they arrive with a car-boot filled with supplies from an out-of-town superstore, villages die: the shop, the pub, the post office, the school, all depend on a community of permanent dwellers, not on visitors.

Is it possible to construct a new relation between the land and the city in which the rural is not a foil to the urban? It seems a vital starting point. Are there values implicit in rural life which can be reclaimed? Do these include craft values, as explicit in thatching, dry-stone walling, blacksmithing, but also pottery and artisan food production?

The issues go beyond what art, or art-craft, can do, to areas such as housing, transport, energy, and taxation. In fact, there are significant demonstrations of localism in, for example, new housing in Dorset. On the edge of Abbotsbury, a cluster of new stone-built, thatched cottages tone in well with the existing, distinctive village fabric – the right scale, the right materials, maintaining local skills in construction. Similar clusters have appeared in several villages across West Dorset as a council initiative. This contrasts with Poundbury. Using pseudo-Georgian building types (from the days when children were hung for stealing bread) and uncanny stylistic inventions, but the concrete-block building system of mass housing, Poundbury becomes a suburban fantasy. Part of the problem is that Poundbury, which I accept was well-intentioned, indicates an urban view of land use. Reacting to scares and urban myths of insecurity in cities, it tries to recreate a semi-rural middle-England which never really was. Like what was called actually-existing socialism in the GDR (before 1989), the village idyll didn't actually exist. The attraction of villages is their organic growth reflecting shifting values and circumstances. This cannot be created out of air.

Well, where does culture fit in all this? In the 1990s, urban redevelopment (or regeneration) was led by the insertion of flagship cultural institutions – like Tate Modern – in declining inner-city areas. There were cultural and heritage quarters, new kinds of monument, and socially-engaged or community-based art (sometimes in opposition to redevelopment). The results were mixed: success in Glasgow, Barcelona, and Newcastle- Gateshead, less in Bilbao where visitors to the Guggenheim tended to go only once, not repeatedly, and failure of the popular music centre in Sheffield. The outcomes show that a single model cannot be mapped from one place to another because the conditions and the infrastructure differ, so the outcome differs, too. But culturally-led regeneration was an urban strategy, and may be inapplicable to rural areas. Perhaps more to the point are smaller, broadly cultural projects such as the new orchard in Dorchester. Oliver Letwin writes, 'This wonderful little project symbolises just about everything that is best in our society.'¹² He describes the transformation of a patch of scrub near the South station by volunteers equipped with gardening skills, the good will of Network Rail (after his intervention), and lack of call on the taxpayer to meet the cost. I agree. Local projects of this kind demonstrate that dwellers can empower themselves to make a difference. The effects are cumulative, each project setting a precedent and raising confidence. This is in contrast to the mega-development of the old brewery site across the road, which images on hoardings depict as yet another mall, brashly colourful but in terms of what will be there – the chains, and so forth - like those in city after city lured by the elusive prize: regeneration. But regeneration of what - the developer's profits or the local economy?

Within this scenario, the regeneration industry has let slip its cultural mask post-crash. Art is less often called on to lend a veneer of universal cultural value as sites are targeted for gentrification. Examples include the Heygate Estate in Elephant and Castle, and Gibbs Green in West Kensington. According to Sally Taylor of Gibbs Green, 'We are the wrong sort of people in the right sort of postcode.'¹³ In cities, the regeneration industry may be the greatest threat to community in the Big Society. In rural areas the threats include house price inflation, poor transport, and lack of jobs. On the other hand, a survey of craftspeople carried out at City University in the 1990s found that many choose to live in rural areas because, as urban migrants, property is affordable, and though they have a low income (but can manage) their quality of life is high. And, internet communications mean that rural

dwellers in, say, Maiden Newton, can run small businesses from home, in contact with Los Angeles more easily than going by bus to Bournemouth.

Much can be done to improve local amenities. In Maiden Newton, the old branch line railway route to Bridport has been turned into a cycle path. Much of the track-bed remains, but is on private land. I wonder, though, if cycle paths, which are like small roads, represent the best solution; or whether reviving the branch lines for heritage rail and community transport is better, with higher economic return (though higher investment). According to a recent report by the University of Central Lancashire, the West Somerset Railway, which carried 214,000 passengers last year, brings £6 million to the local economy of Minehead.

In Dorset, the Swanage railway provides a service for locals and enthusiasts, and plans an extension to link to the main line at Wareham. The Mid-Hants Railway is investigating the use of a low-energy people-mover for community transport from Alton to Arlesford. Perhaps there could be realistic scope to reinstate the line from Bridport to West Bay: the track bed is there, so is West Bay station (now a café).

Heritage railways have a distinct culture (in the anthropological sense), and are run almost entirely by volunteers. They seem a good example of a big society at work – self-organising, drawing on existing skills, with no call on the taxpayer – before the Big Society was invented. But the scope for further lines is limited. And I turn to micro-interventions such as the craft-designed seat on Gold Hill, Shaftesbury (a town I regard as Shangri-La). Such interventions are not spectacular but enhance the value of ordinary places for what is, in relation to most other areas of expenditure, a modest outlay.

In its way the coastal path is an ordinary place, a simple track, a quiet edge between farmland and sea, a site of contemplation. It is, paradoxically, set in an extraordinary coastal landscape against which no public monument – Angel of the North or White Horse of the South – could compete aesthetically. But, since they were first sited there, I have always liked Peter Randall Page's three shell forms carved in limestone and set in niches in dry-stone walls built by a local craftsman. Like wayside shrines they give a moment of pause amid the wildness, for which there are no signs or textual explanations. Similarly a later piece in Dartmoor can be discovered by chance. The shells were commissioned by the environmental charity Common Ground, among whose projects is a campaign to enhance awareness of local apple types, and increase their growing and consumption (against competition from foreign agri-business). Art plays a part in these campaigns but the emphasis is on culture in the wider, everyday or social sense. Similarly, in County Durham in the 1990s, a project to remove pollutants from local streams energised the community of Quaking Houses, a rural industrial village of four streets, where most men are ex-mineworkers. Working with a water engineer from Newcastle University, and an artist, a natural (organic) wetland was created, with a wooden walkway over the site. It worked. The mayflies returned, as did the fish.

I wonder if self-build housing might be another rural possibility. Hitherto it has been largely confined to cities – like Bristol – where it offers the time-rich but money-poor an opportunity to acquire housing otherwise beyond their reach. Self-build is a creative option where the architect may need to be co-designer and facilitator. In rural areas, restrictions on land use make such projects difficult, though Tinkers Bubble in Somerset shows that the necessary permissions can be gained and imaginative buildings constructed, in this case for

a small community who own the land and are committed to living entirely without fossil fuels.

I have not said much about art, though most of what I have cited is cultural. I am not sure that artists can solve the range of problems – usually resulting from failures in other policy areas – which arts managers have claimed in order to secure resources. Where I see a role for artists, looking to the radical beginnings of modernism, is in drawing attention to public issues, and as co-producers lending visibility to local narratives and the campaigns of local groups. This may be creatively disruptive of received framings of the land (or of developers' intentions to turn the land into profits). As the Rural-recreation manifesto says, the English landscape has long represented the values of continuity and universality, but the land may now be regaining significance as the population drift to cities is reversed. The problem is that the lure of the local, like the lure of creativity in urban regeneration, is a spectre: sociologist Tony Champion writes, 'the more rural an area is, the more it gains migrants [...]' the quest for a rural idyll is stronger than the negative aspects of urban life.'¹⁴

If the land is no more, however, than a foil to the city, there is little prospect of reclaiming its integrity or creativity. I have no prescription as to how to achieve either, but perhaps, again looking to the utopian roots of modernism, the role of artists is to question why things are as they are, and to imagine, and to give shared form to, how they might be.

¹ Hoggart, R. *The Uses of Literacy*, Harmondsworth, Penguin, 1958

² Hoggart, R. 'Foreword', Berger, V. and Vasseur, I. eds *Arcadia Revisited*, London, Black Dog, 1997, p. 20

³ Hoggart, 1997, p. 21

⁴ Appleton, J. 'Towards an Aesthetic for Norbury Park' in Berger and Vasseur, 1997, p. 78

⁵ Lippard, L. *The Lure of the Local: a sense of place in a multcentred society*, New York, The New Press, 1995, p. 19

⁶ Darley, g. 'Norbury Park – The View Out', in Berger and Vasseur, 1997, p. 52

⁷ Kovats, T. '100% Waterproof Gortex – What to Wear in Utopia' in Berger and Vasseur, 1997, p. 100

⁸ Lippard, 1995, p. 20

⁹ Auden, W.H. 'In Praise of Limestone', *Selected Poems*, London, Faber and Faber, 1979, p. 187

¹⁰ www.dorsetgreen.co.uk [accessed 25 May 2011]

¹¹ Worpole, K. 'Norbury Park: The View From London' in Berger and Vasseur, 1997, p. 120

¹² Letwin, O. 'Dorchester Orchard', *Dorset Echo*, 6 May, 2011, on www.oliverletwinmp.com/archives/690 [accessed 24 May 2011]

¹³ Cited, Hill, D. 'The Battle of Earl's Court', *The Guardian*, Society p. 3, 9 May 2011

¹⁴ Champion, T. cited in *ruralrecreation: access: environment: inclusion*, www.ruralrecreation.org.uk/manifesto.html [accessed 18 May 2011]