

Reclaiming Lost Ground – Urban Picnics & Forgotten Pools

Feature by Dany Louise

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On a raw grey day at the end of October, I found myself in a corner of inner city Liverpool I hadn't previously had cause to visit - the "Greta Street Public Open Space", a neglected piece of land next door to a grim looking pub, and surrounded by the pebble-dashed houses of a 30 year old housing estate. This is a patch of green in the inner city, but it is unloved and strewn with the remains of long forgotten activity: broken and graffitied walls, rusting metal frames, puddled concrete, weeds, nettles, old scattered bricks and litter. It's a densely populated but hidden area and the latest project of Site-Sight, the umbrella organisation through which artist Jean Grant works. Jean is with me, along with a cross section of the community who live around this derelict "pocket park", and we are devouring saucepan of delicious homemade tomato soup.

I am here to witness Jean's latest "urban picnic". These are collaborative creative consultation gatherings that take place on various urban derelict spaces, organised by Jean Grant, and a group of colleagues (Dr Robert Macdonald and Professor Maads Gaarboe of Liverpool John Moores University, and Professor Tony Bradshaw, the founder member and Chair of The Groundwork Trust). The idea, Jean says, "is to look creatively at how we can transform underused or derelict land into friendly places...we pool ideas and all learn together." Her aim is to research and develop understanding of "pocket parks" and emphasise the need in a healthy city for accessible open spaces of various sizes. "I want to excite them about the possibilities for action", she says. "I want to use art as an experiential, creative and flexible urban planning device".

For these picnics, all houses in the area are leafleted, inviting anyone and everyone who is interested to pack some food and come along. Then, in a quiet and non-invasive way, discussion is encouraged to develop along the general theme of "how would you like to see this space used? What problems and issues do you associate with this area?" Helped along by the delicious soup, Jean gently explores the comments that are made, pointing out contradictions, helping the participants to think through ideas. There are residents of all ages here, ranging from Michael, aged 8, to Olive, aged 65. Some of the residents remember when this was a real community space. Tommy Calderbank recalls, "I used to play football here when I was a kid, it was a great area. We had five-a-side football". Nowadays, it is used as a cut through to Park Road in Toxteth. Someone else points out the corner which men from the pub use as a toilet. Glasses are also left out and get broken. It is agreed that railings are required to separate off pub activity. There is some discussion as to whether addicts use the area – someone says they've seen discarded

needles, while others say they never have. Three teenage boys would like to see a properly built skateboarding area. The idea of a water feature is floated. Amongst all the discussion, everyone agrees that whatever is done, security will be an issue – something “supervised and lockup-able is required”. The surrounding estate itself is respectable; the trouble happens when “kids from outside” come in.

Jean and Tommy collate the comments, and will summarise the discussion. They are considering submitting an application to “Living Spaces” (www.living-spaces.org.uk), an initiative from the office of the Deputy Prime Minister with Groundwork Urban Parks Forum. It is a fund set up for “enabling communities to transform local spaces” and offers grants up to £100k. So far, this is familiar community consultation and development work, but what is unusual about this activity is that it is artist-led. Jean is progressing this project on a voluntary basis and is not employed by any local arts, youth or community organisation, and this particular space, while nominally under Liverpool City Council jurisdiction, seems not to be anyone’s particular responsibility. Also unusual is Jean’s style of working, based upon a commitment to creative consultation and involvement at all stages, as a vehicle for social change. So far, Urban Picnics have taken place at 11 derelict spaces over the last 18 months, in addition to October’s event.

The Urban Picnics project is part of a bilateral approach to localised physical transformations within the city. On the one hand she works with members of a local community, inviting them to picnic with her on a derelict site just begging for some creative intervention. Simultaneously, the core group has instigated an alternative form of the “power lunch”, inviting local movers and shakers to informal lunchtime meetings that are an attempt to reach a broad consensus that will actually influence planning decisions in the city. These meetings have been attended by people such as Louise Hopkins from the Merseyside Waterfront Regional Park, Sally Medlyn, when she was Asst Executive Director of Culture for Liverpool City Council, and Paul Domelo, Deputy Chief Executive of the Liverpool Biennial of Contemporary Art. Also regularly attending are city council appointed consultants whose brief is to look at various aspects of the public realm. The aim is that of cross-pollination and, to an extent, co-ordination: that as a result of ongoing discussions, each participant will bring mutually useful skills, knowledge and influence to the others’ agendas. It becomes part of a creative process and will – hopefully - allow for an improved multi-dimensionality to projects.

This group gathers to discuss the “Tidal Memories” strategy and project, Jean’s other current major concern. She is interested in finding ways of marking and symbolically renewing the tidal pool that gave Liverpool its name. This used to be a major geographical landmark, a significant inlet of the Mersey, running from the Albert Dock up Canning Street, and heading north to finish at what is now the Queensway tunnel entrance. It encouraged the development of Liverpool as a commercial harbour, and eventually allowed the loading and unloading of ships regardless of tidal

movements. This area is all now prime real estate, but the tide still ebbs and flows below ground. "The peninsula and tidal area has remained a walkable space with a specific character. I want to know if this can affect the transport decisions and also the understanding of the need for recreational and tourist space?" asks Jean. She would like to see public artworks and ongoing multisensory participatory activity as a way of bringing this hidden pool into public consciousness and to develop "long term projects that will enable creative ideas to develop and embed themselves flexibly in the cities routines". She has already devised the "People Powered Boat Flotilla" which is in its third year - a kind of "wacky races" of DIY vehicles that runs along the original route of the tidal inlet. Other ideas include that of an incised resin-filled mapping of the high tide line, public lighting projects and a celebratory naming of the tidal pool. All of which is very compatible with the Capital of Culture agenda for 2008: the zeitgeist is receptive for big capital projects within the city.

Jean Grant's strapline is "Art Action Change - Contemporary art engaging with the city" and this is a succinct summary of the principles on which she has based her practice for many years.

Her practise develops from the rise of social activism that gained international currency in the 60s, 70's and early 80's but that have become mainstreamed and – sadly – often hackneyed in the last 10 – 15 years. While many statutory and charitable organisations employ artists to work with their communities, it is inevitably with short-term budgets and therefore fixed term contracts, a situation often in conflict with the long-term aims and requirements of the communities involved. Unfortunately, despite genuinely sincere intentions, many community based arts projects become an exercise in box ticking and auditable outcomes.

To her credit, Jean Grant has managed, for the most part, to avoid this. With an enviable tenacity and persistence, she looks for site-specific interventions that can be developed to create visible and sustainable change within a clearly bounded local area. Her planning and thinking always involves the medium to long term - her projects operate over a minimum of two years - and the involvement of the surrounding community in all aspects is key. She is unusual in that she retains her sense of creative poetry while still managing to work through the dry bureaucratic worlds of arts funding and statutory decision making. She is concerned with the survival of the collective human self, that bit of ourselves that still wants the world to be sweet, kind and ideal, and which often struggles to find expression. As she says, "I am trying to tap into what people want when they allow themselves to dream."

Her current practice is embedded within the physicality of the city, with an emphasis on pockets of lost and abandoned spaces, historical meanings and unheard people. Always intertwined is an attempt to bring the subtext to the surface, an honouring of the past to influence the present, a

melding of the old with the current. She concentrates on changing the living experience for individuals with visible outcomes – her projects work variously with the aims of introducing new city walks, reclaiming derelict space, making functional and vibrant the grey areas that make for grey life and grey people, drawing attention to and combating post-industrial pollution. It's a hard and deeply unfashionable area to be working in: unglamorous, anti-monumental, anti ego.

Over a period of years, she has developed and led projects through processes of multidisciplinary and collaborative working. In fact, the way she works corresponds in many ways to the current vogue for “action research” projects. Perhaps as a function of maturing, and maybe becoming less radical (it happens to the best of us), she has opted to work with our current civic and arts funding infrastructures, rather than reject them. Thus she has become engaged at the corporate level of over-arching strategic frameworks, multi-agendas, and slow moving bureaucracies, areas that do not generally come naturally to arts practitioners, who often work in isolation and become, in effect, marginalized from civic process. She is clever enough to know that she gains credibility and increases her chances of success if she works strategically with the people who can help her achieve her objectives. This strong pragmatic streak updates what might otherwise be criticised as the outmoded dogmatic activism of the seventies and early eighties, and a consequence is that Jean Grant has become very skilled at creating good working relationships and forums with the people who, on a local basis, matter.

Like most of our activities, Jean Grant's practice is engaged in trying to find and/or create “a meaningful current reality” using what Dr Malcolm Miles has called “...A concept of cultural development in which people empower themselves to shape and sustain the built, social and cultural environments in which they live.” (Malcolm Miles, *Seeing Through Place: Local Approaches to Global Problems*). Her emphasis on reclaiming lost and hidden spaces easily translates into a metaphor for the reclamation of lost and hidden people, and this is really where her attention lies. As she eloquently puts it, in the context of the Pool project, “To be a person or a stream without a proper name is to be invisible”.

She is an example of independent working that has allowed avoidance of some limitations inherent in the present structures, which at best encourage short-termism in projects and at worst, have the effect of strangling and straitjacketing the best ideas. She has maintained her independence and this enables her to stick to the principles that underpin her practise, of which local sustainable changes is a major tenet.

The Greta Street Public Open Space is no-one's responsibility to reclaim, it appears, and there are many places like it all over our cities. It is the power of art perhaps, that allows a single person the

faith in her ability as a catalyst for transformation to take it on, and make something of it with the consent of all affected.