

Re-Visioning Utopia and beyond...

Discussion paper

The Future Is A Dangerous Place

For a brief period following the Second World War until the early 70's the future was exciting. This excitement found form in the design of everything from furniture, fabrics and white goods to automobile design and architecture. The future was espoused on mass through the interiors and architecture of popular TV & Sci-Fi series' which not always embraced a clear utopian ideal but at least looked like the future. That future gradually seemed more sinister, we began to fear technology and as the mass housing schemes of the 1960's began to crumble so did a Utopian dream.

There are many Utopias: as many as dreamers prepared to dream them but few are ever articulated, they remain unspoken, an unrealised intent: a reverie lying behind our innate desire to create scuppered in calm seas beyond the turbulence of society.

In the 80's and 90's we became gradually more fixated on reductive thought processes, we also became post-modern and revisionist: considerations of safety and the litigious society got a strangle hold on design and defined the aesthetic at the expense of visionary thinking: Rocket cars were lost to seat belts and safety cages: becoming reliable air bags on wheels for ferrying our 'incarcerated' offspring from a life-less-risk across the surface of an often vision-less education system.

We got serious about design. Many of us have now retreated into joyless mock half-timbered developer-built suburban housing estates and console ourselves with the latest entertainment technology, the fake imagined comforts of a romantic past which never was and a bottle of Chardonnay to help us forget our day.

This is not an exclusively British problem but there can be no doubt that we excel at it; for our souls were sold to market forces in Thatcher's Britain in a desperate adoption of fated U.S policy.

Original Thought - Original Sin

and the cult of the model in maintaining mediocrity

The notional 'art gene' after which we named our company has always been tarred with the same brush as the 'criminal gene' - defining both artists and criminals as irregularly non-conformist thinkers yet each finding their expression in different kinds of often obsessional 'unregulated' activity. Certainly original thought is non-conformist and to that extent it can be seen as a threat to the status quo. Artists and original thinkers have long been viewed by society as bohemian and have been ascribed a place on the fringes of society where they can be safely secured with the other lunatics, radicals and 'mad geniuses' so that the rest of society can get on with safely managing business as usual.

Following a recent brush with 'municipalisation' a colleague, architect Charlie Mackeith paraphrased Lance Nobel in an email:

"The British produce the best quality mediocrity in the world as a result of the institutionalised banality of the planning system" but added: "I think he got the point but missed the target. Planning after all is only part of the institutionalised banality of municipalisation."

Certainly there seems to be a municipal obsession with seeking assurance and approval through regurgitating the past 'successes' of others elsewhere: to rely on 'proven' models, rather than original visionary thought as the starting point.

"Like teenage girls trying to look old enough to get into a club, Councillors hunt high and low for their town's 'unique selling points', historical soundbite or cultural real estate - usually with unimaginative results."

Jai Redman Artist & Creative Director UHC

These 'models' are all dressed up with nowhere to go in pseudo-strategies and pedalled like snake oil by travelling consultants: piling it high and selling us short.

Of-course having the courage and tenacity to go on a journey which begins with a freshly captured dream, to take others with you, and not lose sight of it in the process has always been a challenge. In a society which has long undervalued reverie and defined those of us who have been caught staring into the middle ground through the classroom window as lazy there is little permission to capture those dreams, discover their value and even less to act upon them and realise their potentials.

Ultimately our visions need strategy but the dream must be explored and fully formed if it is to survive in the real world and be allowed to make its contribution.

pure research is essential to all forms of non-linear progress, not only in art but in all forms of human endeavour, be it in the development of society, industry, science or technology. Art Gene Manifesto

Can aesthetics save us?

We all adapt to our environment and become desensitised to it. To some extent we become it. This goes for beautiful places as much as ugly ones: I have lived in both. Living in Barrow is not easy you have to work hard to be uplifted by it: It's challenging more than nurturing but fascinating non the less, it's edgy, full of contradictions and potentials for creative engagement. The danger is that we might through our efforts to regenerate it create a place which is less fascinating and less challenging indeed perhaps just less. Some of the threats of gentrification are perhaps a little beyond reach in Barrow at present but it is gradually becoming less like itself and more like everywhere else. Retail and business parks are gradually devouring former industrial sites used in the production of iron and shipbuilding. Something of the towns heritage is being lost in this process but, perhaps more importantly the potential of these sites is not being recognised, appreciated or being capitalised on: 'Wastelands' are not seen for what they are now but as inactive remnants of their former use - they are suffering from being designated as 'brown field' when in-fact after many years of inactivity these former industrial sites have become wildlife havens and are used informally for a variety of recreation. They have or are in the process of becoming the rural within the urban and as such they represent an opportunity to seek out unfamiliar synergies of identities and uses within the future cityscape.

"The networks of communication that have arisen in the twentieth century now make possible a truly decentralized civilization where formerly urban functions are now distributed throughout whole regions...the tendency, therefore, of all new development is toward fragmentary, low-density development at many points simultaneously —development that combines urban, suburban, and rural elements."

Robert Fishman: Beyond utopia: urbanism after the end of cities

Barrow - Our Research Test-Bed

Situated at the end of what has been termed "the longest cul-de-sac in England", Barrow grew rapidly across a peninsula and parts of a series of islands protected by natural harbours. By 1876 Barrow had established the largest steel works in the world: much to the disapproval of John Ruskin who could see it glowing behind the mountains from his home beside Lake Coniston some 20 miles away. Barrow encapsulates huge contrasts: a coastal working town born out of the Industrial Revolution: the production of iron, the ship yard and most recently the production of nuclear submarines: situated beside a largely undiscovered natural coastline and idyllic countryside with a mountain backdrop.

Welcome to Paradise...

Glocal Town

With a population currently around 70,000 Barrow's scale and diversity is ideal for research. It is large enough to exhibit common trends within many towns and inner cities experiencing regeneration but small enough for our collaborative research associates to come to understand it quickly. Our approach to research and engagement reflects notions of glocalisation* where globally relevant work is explored locally

"our global economy the significance of the nation-state is shrinking. The key units are regions competing on a global scale. The regions that will thrive in the future are those that maintain the greatest diversity within their boundaries: vital central cities and local centers; beautiful open spaces; a respect for historical identity to balance innovation; a mix of different transportation systems; and a system of culture and education that mobilizes the talents of all of their populations. Creating and maintaining this regional pluralism is the vital task of urbanism everywhere."

Robert Fishman: Beyond utopia: urbanism after the end of cities

*Glocalization (or glocalisation) is a portmanteau of globalization and localization. By definition, the term "glocal" refers to the individual, group, division, unit, organization, and community which is willing and is able to "think globally and act locally." The term has been used to show the human capacity to bridge scales (from local to global) and to help overcome meso-scale, bounded, "little-box" thinking.

Perhaps, like Darwin, we need to realise the importance of extinction in a process of non-linear evolution. If we are to make big leaps we sometimes require a powerful catalyst, perhaps that catalyst is the threat of extinction posed by global warming or economic recession. In this sense these man-made threats may come to be seen as amongst our 'greatest' achievements.

So where does this leave us?

The current global recession can be seen as warning shot across the bows of a society seemingly hell bent of self destruction. However it has to some degree led to an uncertain breathing space in the field of regeneration and there is more than a suspicion that the failed crop of the past requires the re-seeding of a fundamentally different approach to regeneration to achieve a sustainable future.

I do not wish to suggest that the engagement of artists in regeneration is a cure all - far from it. Artists are defined by how society has historically found 'use' for them or perhaps not found 'use' for them: but some of us believe we have a useful contribution to make as part of multidisciplinary teams even if we need to remain on the fringes to do that effectively.

For the last three years, through our (Inter)national programme and test-bed-concept 'Barrow-by-Design', Art Gene has been pursuing pioneering working partnerships with local and sub-regional regeneration authorities in Cumbria which we aim to adapt and apply globally through our (Inter)national associates.

Art Gene believes that this is an opportunity to redefine orthodox working relationships: the constitution of the 'design team': it's working approach and aspirations towards a Re-visioning of Utopia...and beyond

Stuart Bastik, Artist and co-founder Director; Art Gene April 2009

Charrette

Re-visioning Utopia...

4pm Wednesday the 15th July to
12 noon Sunday 19th July.

Approach

Re-visioning Utopia will bring together Artists, Architects and Academics in small multi disciplinary teams and offer an intensive series of research field-trips exploring the diversity of Barrow and its Islands followed by good food, studio based discussion, 'model' making, drawing, mapping and text based exploration.

The charrette runs from 4pm, Wednesday 15th July at Art Gene, Barrow in Furness, Cumbria. That evening we will eat together at Stuart Bastik's off-grid, former fisherman's cabin on the coast of Barrow. Over the following 3 days, multi-disciplinary 'research groups' will explore a range of challenging landscape/townscape stimuli.

Mornings will be focused on outdoor explorations, afternoons on generating group responses to those explorations, whilst evening plenary sessions will be a cacophony of reports, demonstrations, illustrations, discussions and debates towards meeting the aims of the charrette.

The charrette programme and process has been designed to provide both the freedom to explore and experiment with an imperative to apply what has been learnt. A Moderator will chair the evening debates, draw out contributions, curtail unnecessarily discursive elements and contextualise our findings. On Sunday the charrette will conclude with a short 'what next' session.

There will be up to 24 participants supported by others charged with capturing and facilitating each working group. The knowledge and research results they capture will then be disseminated to a wider (Inter)national group with an interest in the regeneration of the social, natural and built environment.

It is hoped this first charrette will establish and inspire an ongoing series at Art Gene and extend our networks, partnerships and associates towards a re-visioning of Utopia.

Ultimately we intend to apply our research in the delivery of projects (Inter)nationally

"Our intention is to move beyond categorical thinking and the stratification of architectural systems and budget-based regeneration models. This will involve a re-examination of hierarchies and the seeking of emergent properties created through re-worked relationships. We want to shift to a perspective that makes transformation possible."

Alison Hand: Art Gene Board of Directors - Head of Business Development, Archtype Architects

Aims

- To re-examine the orthodox working relationships between Artists, Architects and Academics: to uncover, explore, and develop a new continually evolving practice.

- To utilise Barrow and its islands as a 'test-bed' for engagement through experiential field research to re-orientate and free studio practice from orthodox constraints in the development projects.

- To invite participants to imagine with courage, vivacity and vision and to make tangible these qualities to others through generating and capturing both concepts and approaches: Ones that respond to both the particularity of our test-bed and the commonalities present within it which are globally applicable in our towns and cities and their populations.

- To address the question 'how can a place (such as Barrow) with multiple dysfunctional and contradictory identities, be developed into 'one place' – the urban, rural and social aspects be re-designed to work together to mutual benefit.

Art Gene

Back Ground

Art Gene is an independent Art Research Facility founded by artists Stuart Bastik and Maddi Nicholson. We work collaboratively with (Inter)national artists and architects to explore their role in the regeneration of the social, natural and built environment.

Since 2002 artists and more recently architects from all over the world have been coming to Art Gene; contributing to that research and exhibiting in the Art Gene Gallery.

Welcome to Paradise

The new Art Gene Gallery which opened recently with an exhibition featuring artists and architects entitled 'Welcome to Paradise' is the culmination of over five years work to achieve a more functional and inspirational space through which we can share our research and engage our visitors. The Gallery is our shop window exploring new futures with diverse audiences from some of the most deprived electoral wards in Europe.

Welcome to Paradise was originally conceived as a show responding to the new gallery space. It quickly became clear that it needed to be one showing work in a new gallery space in Barrow-in-Furness. Each of the pieces in the show related in different ways to Barrow and the current effort to regenerate it: some primarily observed and reflected upon the social others the natural and most the built.

The Gallery will be the project space for the Re-visioning Utopia Charrette

Its Not As Rough As It Used To Be

A collaborative project by Art Gene and Ultimate Holding Company 2008/9 (see appendices)

We also take our work out into communities delivering events in unusual locations which highlight unrecognised, built and natural 'assets' of our environment and promote a pragmatic designed dialogue between them and diverse interest groups and communities.

Art Gene's focus has grown out of in-depth education and consultation within communities, local authorities and regeneration agencies: to the development of environmentally aware design-led artistic and architectural practice with an ear to the ground. We pride ourselves on providing an aspirational ladder between stakeholders: contextualising local culture on a world stage and bringing high quality contemporary art, design and thought to the regeneration of the social, natural and built environment.

We aim to engage artists and architects in programmes of work which aim to **diffuse the social, natural and built environment with an artistic sensibility rather than place isolated commissioned artwork and buildings within it...**

Pursuits between our areas of focus are essential to our approach: explored collectively in the pursuit of a re-visioned Utopia.

