



# Public Space

USE IT OR LOSE IT

## Creative Cultural Activity and Public Space

Highly visible cultural celebrations and activities are critical but often undervalued elements of a dynamic public realm and healthy public life. It is more important than ever that extraordinary cultural happenings are allowed to interrupt the indifference that can be a consequence of our hectic 24 hour society.

Artists have always held a valuable role within the public realm; they can question commonly-held wisdoms and temporarily upend the structures of public life and space – historically reclaiming the public realm in anarchic, satirical carnival celebrations, surreal folk rituals and, more recently, confrontational public art and the flashmob phenomena.

Public space and the people that use it can be impoverished by the practice of prioritising cars and commerce over celebration, conversation and community.

As our communities become ever more dispersed and segregated, opportunities for contact between strangers diminish. Our public spaces should actively present themselves as flexible, freely accessible areas for interaction – welcoming to all, regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, age or race.

The arena of public life should not be limited to 'allocated spaces' like parks and gardens, but be any shared place that can be appropriated for people to gather, driven by the need to congregate and converse, to remember, to display and watch – to create ease between the generations, for safety, for community.

The majority of Strange Cargo's work is about, and takes place within the public realm, with a diverse range of communities. One of the most valuable and significant elements of our work

is the research time spent in consultation with people, face to face encounters on busy streets is where we begin many of our projects. We happily accost anyone and everyone we can find to engage them in conversation: we ask about the good news and the bad news, what makes their community unique.

One of the questions we often ask people is how they would like their community to be perceived by the outside world. Emerging from these conversations, and reinforced in our discussions with other professionals, has been an awareness of a number of trends and issues relating to public space. Initially thought to be local issues, they are in fact becoming increasingly common to many communities across the UK and beyond.

In *People Make Places: growing the public life out of cities* the independent think tank Demos reports: 'for many, safety is the cornerstone on which public space rests. Fear is the undoubted enemy of public experiences. This concern, however, often results in safety dominating the design of public spaces with watchful television cameras, security guards and anti-climb paint as baseline requirements. A sense of safety is encouraged more through developing social behaviour, than by focusing on regulating anti-social behaviour out of existence.'

If the initial focus in the development of any public endeavour is first and foremost one of

safe, innocuous, and unchallenging solutions, we will become the recipients of bland, stifled, risk-averse cultural activity, that has no power to create any profound sense of change, or real emotion in the audience or user.

When *Strange Cargo* laid turf in Whitefriars Square for the *Tour de France* event (see page 30) the response from the public was positively overwhelming. This (extra)ordinary patch of grass took on the relaxed atmosphere of a festival or a family gathering, with people embracing the similarities between strangers, rather than the differences.

The design of any space dictates its use — often communicating the required behaviour to the people within it. Thoughtful interventions that change those subtle messages can have a profound affect, not only on the behaviour of people using that space, but on how it affects their senses. Temporary interventions, like the city village green, can be used as a valuable tool in understanding people's behaviour and illustrates the value of a flexible public arena. By creating opportunities for contact with a diverse range of people in a safe environment, we can begin to build a sense of familiarity, trust and community.

Home Office research shows that banks of CCTV cameras and private security do not make people feel safer.

### Can public art change the way people feel about their community?

This was a question we asked everyone who had taken part in *Other People's Photographs*. We received what felt like an avalanche of replies: People said that, 'Folkestone felt more friendly;' 'more like a village;' some said that they, 'didn't realise they knew so many people' and that the project had definitely made them feel more positive about their town. People reported going for walks around their neighbourhood to visit the signs, and some had even got together with their neighbours to go on walks to see who they would recognise.

The project had an amazingly positive affect on many people's perception of their town. *Other People's Photographs* is an unusual and unique project that won awards specifically because it considered the whole of the town as public space — every street — not just the town centre and the parks.

Our ability to work with so many people to deliver *Other*



Canterbury's Whitefriars Square before and during the Tour de France event.



*People's Photographs* comes directly from our carnival work. Carnival is still very relevant today in its 'holding' of the right to reclaim the streets for public use.

Along with many professional, and non-professional, groups we have struggled with the new legislation surrounding the licensing of public events, which has contributed to making any attempt at celebration, gathering or memorialising ever more difficult and prohibitively expensive.

Even with these increasing restrictions carnival is an order that we must maintain at all costs.

**Everyone is enriched by the days when everything stops — rifts in the everyday goings-on in public spaces are an important imposition as they change people's habitual behaviour, making them stop and refocus on who they share their outside spaces with.**

Carnival and other events of this nature provide opportunities for the full gamut of the population, from suited office workers, to retired people and teenagers, to share the same

experience and briefly see *beyond* the briefcase, the frown, and the hoodie. It is important to make room for *a celebration of people* within the commercial and civic nature of the town. Public celebrations, like carnival, are an opportunity for the community to gather, not only for the purpose of taking over the streets, but in order to provide a voice to question and comment on the status quo. We can say with some authority that the annual Charivari Day carnival in Folkestone, which we have delivered with the townsfolk over the past 12 years has become a ritual gathering of local people — a rare event — and a rite of passage for the hundreds of new young participants who create their costumes and emerge onto the streets together to proudly display — we should applaud this ritual as each year it celebrates a new generation. This event, and others like it across the globe, embeds a deep-rooted sense of community wherever they happen. These positive expressions of community should be embraced, and certainly not be treated as flippant or disposable.

Charivari Day is one of many projects that Strange Cargo delivers with youth groups. We are interested in exploring the thoughts, feelings and issues surrounding public space that face young

people. An unexpected outcome of our village green intervention in Canterbury was one such issue. As with many shopping centres, seating was either café furniture, reliant on the purchase of goods, or public benches, and local teenagers are often not encouraged to linger.

These public spaces are main thoroughfares through cities, and as such are prime locations for teenagers to be 'on display' surrounded as they are, by the stylish paraphernalia of contemporary consumerism: a place to see and be seen. But, during our conversations with young people, it became apparent that there is more to these spaces than a place to preen, they consider town centres, because of their public nature to offer them protection, as opposed to parks, where they felt vulnerable and exposed to other groups of people who are also not encouraged to hang around in the city centre.

Communities across the country are polarised over how to deal with their young people: young children are fearfully overprotected, whilst teenagers inspire fear, apprehension and exclusion. In 2007 a Unicef report placed the UK at the bottom of 21 developed countries in a league table of children's wellbeing. Barnardo's has recently launched a controversial advertising

campaign in defence of children, warning that UK society is demonising children. Martin Narey, a spokesman for Barnardo's, reports that the public overestimates, by a factor of four, the amount of crime which young people commit.

Figures from the Home Office show dispersal orders have been enforced in over 1000 communities, though they still lack evaluation into their efficacy and long term value and recent research from the University of Leeds reported that 'dispersal orders convey stark messages about the status of young people and the way they are regarded by adults. They can reinforce a view of young people as a risk to others, obscuring the extent to which they are understood as at risk themselves.'

What we need to strive to regain is a sense of familiarity — not with cameras or private security but with a feeling of being welcome and 'at home' in public areas regardless of age or value as a consumer. A place where a diverse mix of people can co-exist, voices and laughter can be heard, opinions discussed, old people and young made welcome and nurtured as part of the community.

If we as a society can begin to recapture this sense of familiarity, a sense of feeling safe will swiftly follow.



**Unexpected interventions inspire conversation between strangers.**