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Meeting of Minds

Stephen Willats

“Meeting of Minds” was developed in response to an invitation from a tenant’s group in Liverpool and the nonprofit Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT). Liverpool today is one of most economically deprived areas of Britain, but it is also home to a strong sense of history and culture. The idea was to involve people living in tower blocks on the outskirts of the city in an artwork that might fundamentally transform their view of themselves and their society.

After a reconnaissance visit, I determined that the group of tower blocks at Sefton Park was the best site for such a work. It offered direct physical connection with the extensive gardens, wooded areas, and monuments in Sefton Park, which also contains the historic, restored Palm House, and it offered community rooms in a nearby cricket pavilion that could be used to work with residents.

I first presented and discussed a conceptual model of the work at an open meeting of the local tenants association in January 2003. I showed slides and films from previous works, and explained how the project was open to anyone living in the tower blocks interested in producing exploratory artwork with a partner he or she did not previously know.

As in the past, I wanted to explore the process of seeking agreement between individuals that allows a self-organizing “society” to evolve. In this sense, “Meeting of Minds” was less directly about the physical environment than relationships between people and the idea of community. By opening the residents to a multiplicity of views and per-

ceptions, the work aimed at creating more sociability in an isolating environment.

Engaging with the Environment

The first exploration took place over seven weeks from late March to mid-May, as each pair of residents attended a workshop that lasted about four hours. During this time they made a journey together, starting outside York House in the middle of the tower complex, and walking exactly the same route along footpaths across the estate and into Sefton Park to the Palm House.

During the course of this journey each participant pair was invited to respond to each other’s discoveries and recordings of signs, symbols, objects, textures, etc. — especially any that had personal meaning. When one participant found a sign or object, etc., and recorded it with a camera, the other would try to guess what his or her partner was perceiving. He or she would then record this realization from their own point of view using the same media.

The idea was to use such points of contact in the familiar, local environment to propel people’s imaginations. Even small things like sidewalk drawings, or bricks that had started to crumble, or a plastic bottle rammed into the fork of a tree might trigger meaningful associations.

Both still photography and Super-8 film were used by each participant pair in the course of their journey. Then, immediately after returning to York House a tape-recorded discussion was held to elicit the personal meaning of what they found.

Art as Social Practice

Stephen Willats

The expression of a social- and community-founded art practice that celebrates collaborative, informal social networks is an important way for artists to develop frameworks for viewing the future of society. But to actualize such a model, a strong contextual binding between language, meaning, location and audience must be established to create clear parameters of form. In “Meeting of Minds” this meant purposefully tying the work to a particular setting, the highrise housing towers of Sefton Park on the outskirts of Liverpool. In its very fabric, this setting

contained signs, symbols, norms and values representing the polemics of life in contemporary society.

Agreement between people is the basis for mutual society, and arriving at a state of agreement formed the main activity of “Meeting of Minds.” The work was conceived as a sequence of participatory events between pairs of tower residents previously unknown to each other. These were articulated so as to facilitate imaginative transformations in the way participants viewed their local environment.

Although the transformations were personal and discrete, they were externalized through the action of the work. At the end of the

process, they were also brought fully into the public domain by being physically placed back into the context from which they were derived through a series of displays mounted in the foyers of the housing blocks.

The work embodied the belief that art should be a part of the fabric of society and should use a language familiar to its audience. There are four audiences for a work like this: the participants themselves; other local people like them; people outside the locality who hear about it and come to see it; and those far away who may be inspired to do similar work.



Liverpool has many Victorian Historical monuments, and the work naturally had much to do with the past speaking to the present and the future. There is a Peter Pan monument with its head chopped off and no arms; a lake with no water and no boats; an aviary with no birds — only rats; a bandstand with no roof, and no band. Such dereliction is meaningful to people, especially if you are sixty and know how it used to look.

Although initially only a small group wanted to participate, by the end I had to turn people away. This showed how the work was operating over time. You don't just come in and change perceptions; there has to be a context created internally. At the same time, I became something of a figure, and people relaxed with me because I was an artist, not a social worker or an official from the local council. I find it is important to be amateurish in such a situation so that people can gain confidence, the sense that the work is on their own level.

Presenting a Work

One month after the initial explorations all the information was gathered and brought to a two-day workshop attended by all the participants. Working in their original teams, each pair created a symbolic metaphorical journey from a creative reworking of their original material. Each partnership thus expressed the imaginary journey as a form of agreement, combining individual perceptions and meanings into artwork that would be presented on a display board.

This took place in a large room with work tables and a variety of facilities to stimulate discussion, comparison and agreement. Several computer engineers helped capture images from the films. There was sound-editing equipment and typewriters and various media for making marks on the presentation boards.

As a facilitator, my role was to enable participants to go beyond their initial perceptions. I made no effort to mediate or criticize. The whole process was social and informal.

The final step was a public presentation of the work. The display boards and actual films the participant pairings made were installed in the foyers of the various tower blocks at Sefton Park. Two display boards and two video monitors playing the original participant films from the first workshop were situated in each tower block.

The installation was provided free of charge three days a week for a month, with a representative from FACT on hand to discourage theft and vandalism and explain the show to visitors and residents. On opening day, a walk was also held to let others experience the route that participants took. After the installation was removed, the display



boards and original material associated with the making of the work were deposited in an archive at the local public library.

Although the work is intimately related to the perception of place, it had no specific design intent. Indeed, I didn't know at first if it would have any productive outcome at all.

What the work didn't do was try to take a green door and change it to a red one. At the same time, it was intended to re-create a kind of spirit, a spirit of society between people, a self-organizing society, that has been lost.

Previous: Pairs of participants from the Sefton Park tower blocks were asked to record elements of their environment. Photo courtesy of author.

Above: After working together to arrive at a "meeting of minds," the resulting art boards were exhibited in public areas of the tower blocks. Photo courtesy of author.

Opposite Left: In "Meta Filter," an early work by Willats, two participants interact through a common interface to resolve problem situations. A public register of previous responses is posted on the walls behind them.

Opposite Right: "Living Tower," made with residents of Linacre Court, Hammer-smith, London, October 1992. Residents and visitors could take the lift to the top floor, and then walk down the stairwell to see the installation of boards on various floors. Such integration of meaning, context and audience allowed the work to function independently of any existing institution.