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Going Beyond the Plan:
The Bandwidth That Is Stephen Willats

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For more than forty years Stephan Willats has been going "beyond the plan" as a way to consider and then counteract plans that have been made for him and society. Reacting to the social visions manifest in the postwar housing estates of the London suburbs, he set out to develop a "meta language" in which he and residents could communicate with each other about their everyday environment. Beginning with a piece called "Man from the Twentyfirst Century" and continuing today, Willats has carefully examined how people adapt the repetitive and alienating dwelling units that characterize public housing from this era. Through photography, discussion, and sometimes even field adventure he has chronicled these personal landscapes, both interior and out-of-doors.

If that project sounds familiar, you are right. His methodology is uncannily reminiscent of Kevin Lynch, Clare Cooper Marcus, and Lawrence Halprin — pioneers in the fields of social factors and experience-based participatory design. However, I asked Willats if he knew of these people; and I asked Cooper Marcus, a fellow Brit, if she knew of Willats's work. The answer from both was no.

Willats's premise is that the artist can operate within the fabric of the community and does not have to be bound by a gallery. Starting in the 1960s he began to experiment with cybernetics and various learning theories in order to "transcend restricted language codes . . . to demonstrate a practice of art that would be meaningful to people outside that world." To accomplish this, he employed various participatory approaches, a primary device being what he calls "the question." "Make a map of your neighborhood showing how it relates to existing social facilities, such as shops, libraries, schools, sports clubs, etc. . . . How would you reorganize the above map in order to make the social facilities serve what you consider your neighborhood needs to be. . . . Describe and draw a map," he asks of his participants. They write essays in response; there is a dialogue between the artist and the participant; a series of photos are taken that characterize key ideas to be represented; and a poster-like or collage-like work is produced and displayed.

In the recent project chronicled here Willats had residents pair up and walk through the neighborhood on a predetermined route and record what they perceived. The pairs of participants then worked together to prepare a display to represent a "meeting of minds" on what is out there. The late Kevin Lynch, a professor of Urban Studies and Planning at MIT for thirty years, developed similar methods. His interest was in legibility and wayfinding — he wanted to know what districts, patterns and landmarks contributed to a citizen's recognition and image of the city. Lynch argued that a positive image of everyday place con-

tributed to emotional well-being.

In the world of community planning, designers use these kinds of activities as a starting point for making change. Participatory projects in Japan, for example, often start with "town watching." In the Kano neighborhood of Gifu, an old and rundown area, planner Jeremy Liu knew that he had to reconnect residents with their pride in place before he could start a discussion about change. To do this he had them walk the neighborhood and then create a iconographic postcard of it. In the Misyuku neighborhood of Setagaya, Yoshiharu Asanoumi used a similar device, giving citizens red picture frames to hang on places they considered to be landscape treasures. The Kano adolescent girl makes a postcard of herself on a swing, reading a book in front of a landmark castle. An old man in Misyuku frames a tree limb emerging out of a stone wall.

My partner Randy Hester and I have developed numerous participatory design techniques that involve posing a question about place attachment and giving the participant a camera with which to photograph these valued places. This process was developed borrowing heavily from Ken Craik and the environmental psychologists here at University of California, Berkeley — as well as from Lynch. For the Chesapeake Bay/EPA (Environmental Protection Agency) program, we used this technique as the basis for training staff to work with communities to identify the local sacred structure. Photographing and mapping these places formed the basis for land use decision-making within sub-watersheds of the Bay drainage.

We also use a step-by-step process in our design work that involves a phase of "introducing the community to itself." After a period of intense investigation (which typically involves interviews, site analysis, and a review of existing documents and data), we formally present to participants what we have learned about the place in question. This is transactive communication — it means we have listened. It also means we have an opinion about what we've heard, or more to the point, we think there are certain things that need to be exhibited and discussed before we can move forward on design thinking. Willats's use of photographic essay as "bandwidth" for language is a similar step in the meta dialogue. He develops a neighborhood language that includes icons of place that are so recognizable they transmit a code embedded in the representation of these landscapes. In a sense his art pieces say "I am speaking to you using your unique spatial language. Respond."

One of the striking things about Willats is his deep knowledge of the lives of his participants. I asked if he kept in touch with them or if he followed up to see if their

lives had changed as a result of involvement in his art. The answer was interesting. First he told me that when he embarked on a new project he would advertise them in neighborhoods where he had worked before. Apparently, past participants routinely would come to take a look at the new pieces. "They made the effort to maintain contact." Perhaps they were checking the bandwidth. But that was the limit of his contact. Said Willats: "I only interviewed people about their reaction to the experience once, and did so reluctantly. My work hopefully develops a mutualism with participants; it is not research using people as guinea pigs. This changes the relationship." Those of us involved in postoccupancy evaluation can take heed.

We discussed the importance of mutualism in his practice and in mine. Willats emphasized that he has been trying to demonstrate a new approach, one in which, "small, self-organized groups cooperate in completing a problem . . . one where participants see each other complexly rather than objectifying or competing with each other." I responded that in my work community members often come to the table with a self-interest, but if the participation is genuine and real exchange occurs, it is unavoidable that participants come to know each other richly, deeply. The challenge is to translate this symbiosis into form.

So what has Willats learned through this process? The London housing estates in some cases were made tolerable through small acts of individual adaptation — art on the walls, the arrangement of furniture. These acts have helped residents escape anomie and envision a better world, contends Willats. He interviews Garry, Dave, and Liz, who move into a flat and paint the entire interior matte black, filling it with elements symbolizing death and night. They are part of the Post Punk generation, about which Willats says, ". . . their own personal poverty made the transformations they created inside their flats even more significant." He tells us they sought to separate themselves from other occupants. This stands in contrast to the story of the residents of Charville Lane Estates. To overcome isolation, residents formed an association and started a family-night disco in the estate center. To pay for it, they held a minimarket where they recycled household items. The community-building activities snowballed.

Willats finds through these works "extended space" that is "symbolically transformed to be socially and psychologically possessed." This type of unprogrammed space is something Margaret Crawford and others have observed being made by new immigrants to Los Angeles. Her chapter in the edited book *Everyday Urbanism* features a series of photographs depicting how Latino residents have used

the driveway, fence, abandoned lot, and sidewalk to sell wares. This is done regularly, not only to sell things, but as a way to create space in the neighborhood for everyday exchange. They take standardized infrastructure and transform it, giving it "self-organization" and a human face.

Alas, many of Willats's examples provide a tragic window into the neighborhoods and lives of his participants. Few places seem to be loved, individually or collectively. It is sad to learn that the British response to postwar housing pressures produced so much that was dehumanizing. In the San Fernando Valley of Los Angeles I have been studying the relentless miles of subdivisions, "scientifically planned on a grand scale" to meet American postwar demands. Equally undesirable housing came out of it, but over time much of it has been transformed, personalized, and as a result loved. I suspect the fact that these are owner-occupied makes all the difference — as does the fact that it is detached, single-family housing. These neighborhoods are beloved despite their boring-ness. They are less fondly viewed when they change into racially mixed and income-mixed neighborhoods (read: influx of low-income immigrant renters occupying higher-density apartments).

Lynch and others believed that rather than passive consumption of place we must play an active role in changing it to meet our needs. In participatory design in the U.S., we hope that participants will come to the table to dream about the future, allowing place to become the medium for discussion and change. Even if Willats is reluctant to do so, I would like to ask his participants if their involvement in the art has caused them to stick it out, work with others to make more comprehensive changes to their living conditions; go "beyond the plan," as it were.

Last he heard, Pat Purdy, a teenager he worked with in a series of makeshift "glue-sniffing camps" built to escape the West London housing blocks in which they lived, was tending bar in the Canary Islands. Garry, Dave, and Liz told Willats that in their vision of the future, "We will live like this forever." Within a month they moved out.

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