

## PACA's Speculative Proposals - an alternative approach to Public Art

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Between 1994 and 1998 the Birmingham-based Public Art Commissions Agency (PACA) initiated a programme of Speculative Proposals. In seeking to “redress the current client-led nature of many Public Art commissions”<sup>1</sup> PACA invited selected artists to create notional yet achievable Speculative Proposals for high profile sites around the UK.

This paper examines the development of this alternative approach to commissioning from the 1994 exhibition proposal ‘*The Urban Laboratory*’ to the programme’s partial realisation in two proposals for sites in London - Dan Graham’s proposal for Bankside Pedestrian Bridge across the River Thames (1997) and Jochen Gerz’s provocative proposal for the Empty Plinth in Trafalgar Square (1996-98).

PACA professed that the Speculative Proposals programme was not aimed at producing art objects, but rather at provoking public debate and highlighting the potential of artists and art in urban contexts. The paper evaluates this attempt to provide an alternative to the client, often developer, led model of Public Art provision with an approach based on an unrestricted framework with which the agency hoped “to provide an opportunity for artists to become catalysts in urban change”<sup>2</sup>. It questions the extent to which PACA was able to provide an unrestricted environment and the success of attempts to encourage debate and raise the public profile of both the artists’ proposals and the potential of the chosen sites.

PACA applied to the Arts Council of England for a Visual Arts Development Grant in 1994 to research a touring exhibition entitled “The Urban Laboratory: Speculative Proposals” which would showcase proposals from invited artists and architects for high profile sites chosen by PACA. The Agency announced:

*“This initiative is one amongst a several planned by Public Art Commissions Agency over the next four years with the aim of redressing the current client-led status of many of the public art projects in the UK. ... Whilst we envisage that there will always be a demand - albeit fluctuating - for permanent commissions from a variety of public and private sector clients, we are aware of the current burgeoning interest by artists in creating temporary, often non-commissioned work for public sites. Acting as facilitator, the Agency intends to provide an unrestricted framework”*<sup>3</sup>

The 1994 application set out the aims of the project as to:

- “ - provide the framework in which artists can make both notional and achievable proposal for development in real sites*
- give an open brief to artists to respond to real sites in an innovative and exciting way without the constraints of a commercial or municipal client.*

- *heighten the expectations of approach to visual aspects of the public realm*
- *provide an opportunity for artists to become catalysts in urban change*".<sup>4</sup>

One obvious point that should be made is that PACA's proposed exhibition sits firmly within a Fine Art tradition with all that that implies in terms of a top-down, almost elitist approach to the autonomy of the artist. At no time was any form of public consultation envisaged, either in terms of choice of site or artist. This is evident from the title of the project in which the urban environment is posited as a *laboratory* in which the artist is free to experiment with the associations of a neutral, clinical space.

The Fine Art curatorial approach extended to the choice of artist. Artists were researched through the gallery system and the final list of twenty aimed for a "cross section in age group, nationality and stage of career of artist - [which] allows for a diversity of responses to sites and of approaches to creative working methods".<sup>5</sup>

The traditional deference to curatorial wisdom also informed the choice of sites, which were selected by PACA despite original suggestions that artists would be able to propose sites. PACA chose high profile sites where works would be particularly visible including; Trafalgar Square, Bankside Bridge and Docklands in London; New Street train station and Spaghetti Junction, the country's largest motorway intersection in Birmingham, as well as sites in the North in Manchester, Durham, Middlesborough, Newcastle and Sunderland.

Although public consultation or involvement was not envisaged in the process, raising public awareness and debate as to the choice and nature of site, artist and art for Public Art was the anticipated product of the exhibition. To this end PACA proposed to utilise both the Internet and more unconventional venues, Director Vivien Lovell expressed the view that "a more exciting approach might be to make artists' proposals available on the Internet ... the 'exhibition' would reach a far wider audience. Also I think the format and scope of the Internet is highly compatible with the concept"<sup>6</sup>. However the venues chosen and approached for the exhibition consisted of a more conventional mix of public and university galleries. The Ikon Gallery in Birmingham rejected the exhibition proposal, but PACA did get expressions of interest from the Castlefield Gallery, Manchester, the University of Sunderland, Tyne and Wear Museums, the RIBA Architecture Centre and the Architecture Foundation in London.

PACA had been informed in August 1994 that its application for a Development Grant had been successful and that any application for further funds would have to be received by 5 December 1995, yet the project was not taken further until the autumn of 1995 when PACA employed a free-lance consultant to complete the application. This delay was caused in part by administrative and personnel changes in PACA including a sabbatical taken by PACA's director Vivien Lovell and this delay was to seriously curtail the possibilities for realising exhibition. There were no firm guarantees of exhibition space as gallery after gallery requested further details and more concrete proposals

and although PACA intended to seek sponsorship from computer firms to enable part of the exhibition to be shown on the Internet, there was not sufficient time to negotiate commitments before the application deadline.

In 1996 the Arts Council of England had 63 applications totaling £800,000 against an allocation of £148,000 for its exhibition programme, and PACA's application for *The Urban Laboratory* was rejected. The reasons for this were set out in a letter to PACA and highlight a perceived lack of preparation:

*"it was felt that the project was not sufficiently developed and left a number of things unresolved. For example, it was not clear ... how artists had responded to the brief or how PACA would match artists and architects to sites. As PACA had received a Development Grant to research the exhibition the Committee felt that at least one 'speculative proposal' could have been fully developed in order to show how the exhibition could be realised and that other sponsorship should have been confirmed at this stage".*<sup>7</sup>

Despite a Fine Art approach which might be criticised for its relegation of the various users of the sites to a single passive audience for the proposals, PACA's attempt to highlight and seek an alternative to the client or developer led nature of Public Art Commissioning in the mid-1990s in the UK was commendable. Hampered by internal agency administrative constraints, the exhibition proposal was never fully developed so it is difficult to gauge how effective it would have been in provoking debate, both within and beyond, art and architecture circles.

Unable to take the exhibition proposal further without funding, PACA did commission two Speculative Proposals. In January 1996 PACA approached the American artist Dan Graham to make a speculative proposal for a pedestrian bridge across the River Thames in London at Bankside to link the Tate Modern gallery with the north bank by St Paul's Cathedral. PACA's reasons for the invitation were outlined in a letter to the artist:

*"Our aim in inviting you is four fold: first to invite an artist of highest calibre to propose a viable scheme that would receive maximum publicity; secondly to raise awareness of the scope for artist-designed infrastructure schemes; thirdly, to showcase the potential for collaborations between design professionals, where an artist might lead rather than being a member of a design team; and fourthly, to lobby for the scheme to be implemented".*<sup>8</sup>

In the same letter Lovell admitted that the idea of a footbridge had been mooted for two to three years and that an architectural competition would soon be launched, sponsored by the Financial Times. Interestingly, Lovell subtly alters the fourth aim in her approach to Southwark Council it is no longer to lobby for but "to ascertain the viability of the scheme being implemented"<sup>9</sup>.

Already we can see a slight variation from the professed aims of the Speculative Proposal. Graham was invited to make a design for a high profile site, but it was never considered merely speculative, as

there was a high expectation of a commissioning opportunity in the near future. Lovell stated to Graham in a letter: “Clearly, if there is one thing preferable to Speculative Proposals - its reality” and a legal Commissioned Design Agreement was not entered into with the artist until after the launch of the FT competition. Nor was the invite to Graham within the unrestricted framework PACA had envisaged for Speculative Proposals. As the intention was always to enter Graham’s Speculative Proposal for the Financial Times Competition it was subject to the seven pages of Competition Conditions and the 29 pages of Planning and Technical Brief plus 6 plans and 17 pages of appendices.<sup>10</sup> These set strict requirements for the location and dimensions of the bridge, the preservation of views of the river and St Paul’s Cathedral, down to the precise placing of supports.

Working with architect and artist Mark Pimlott and Jane Wernick, engineer with Ove Arup & Partners, Graham proposed a pavilion, as might perhaps have been predicted. The bridge was to consist of a torsion beam cradled on cables from four pylons, which supports a glass pavilion some 80 metres in length. The pavilion would be a quarter-cylindrical volume, the vertical side constructed from perforated aluminium, the curved side from two-way mirror glass, with a wooden boardwalk footpath.

In the text accompanying the application Pimlott and Graham described the pavilion as:

*“...intended to be a social space in the city, where people are aware of each other and their place in culture and nature. The pavilion is a place for reflection upon this condition of being people amongst other people in the contemporary city... In these pavilions, people look at nature, at themselves superimposed upon it, at others looking at them, at others looking at others looking at them; an endless equivalence directed at the possibility of acute social (self) consciousness”.*<sup>11</sup>

As planned, PACA entered Graham’s proposal in The Financial Times Millennium Bridge Competition, launched in the summer of 1996. It was a two-stage competition with competitors only allowed to submit two A2 boards and a brief 500 word written report. All entries had to be submitted anonymously. The RIBA (Royal Institute of British Architects) who organisers of the competition for the Financial Times, exhibited the entries in its galleries in May 1997. The proposals of the six finalists were shown in full, alongside summaries of the 227 first stage applications.

As Lovell wrote to Graham in 1997: “Sadly the proposal was not shortlisted, which just goes to show how anonymous open competitions can miss the highest quality”<sup>12</sup>. As well stipulating strict conditions on the artist, it is questionable if entering Graham’s proposal into an anonymous competition could ever have achieved the aims of the Speculative Proposal programme to raise debate.

The second Speculative Proposal PACA commissioned was from the German artist Jochen Gerz for the empty fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square in the centre of London. Trafalgar Square was laid out to the designs Charles Barry in 1843, since then the fourth plinth has remained empty whilst other sculptural works and monuments have taken up residence including Nelson’s Column by W Railton with the

statue by Bailey in 1843 and Landseer's lions in 1867. In the centre of the capital city, outside the National Gallery, PACA had chosen a high profile site for a Speculative Proposal, however, as with Bankside Bridge, we can question whether the proposal was ever considered purely speculative. The RSA (Royal Society for the Encouragement of Arts, Manufactures & Commerce) had launched a media campaign to "solve" the perceived problem of an empty plinth in 1995, at which time PACA had recommended "a programme of new, site-specific temporary installations"<sup>13</sup>. The RSA went on to form a committee to look at suggestions for the Fourth Plinth and prepared a bid to the National Lottery for funding.

PACA commissioned Jochen Gerz in March 1996. Gerz's proposal was designed to be controversial and to stimulate debate, precisely the aims of the Speculative Proposal programme. His proposal was startlingly simple, to display annually a piece of turf from the pitch of the team winning the English Football Premier League. To quote the artist:

*"The work's first function will be to display "art" as an image of the public mind; ... To make the fourth plinth empty is the second function of the work, and in order to accomplish this, it has to become present, that is quite visible, even if this means it will be offensive, provocative. A third function within the strategy of the project will be to prevent the work from becoming a speechless victim in the midst of the media-organised turbulence of the public mind ... The main framework for its visibility, dissemination, information and understanding will be created not so much by the (discreet) work itself, but by the press and the media... The discussion will not only take place in art or cultural publications, even though the work's attraction in this context is real, but foremost in the general media and sports press. The popular press will face and be tempted to comment on the following "dilemma": pride about the valorisation in this work of sports as heir to the national heroes and icons on the one hand; doubt about a possible irony of mass culture and idolatry of contemporary society on the other. In any event, the (re)viewer of the new (empty) plinth will find it difficult ... to ignore the popular potential of soccer, and the valorizing identification on Trafalgar Square."*<sup>14</sup>

PACA did not view Gerz's proposal as merely speculative and tried to get project realised, but in doing so they came up against the constraints of the planning system in obtaining the necessary permissions. In November 1996 PACA approached both Westminster City Council and the RSA to try and arrange for Jochen Gerz to present his proposal but without success, leading Gerz to say of the project:

*"I know that the whole thing is highly hypothetical, but then the coexistence of the blinding list of commissions and committees and the marginal character of the project as to its chances of realisation, is surreal. I was up to now the specialist of impossible projects ... but this one makes the word 'impossible' look like a toy"*<sup>15</sup>

In April 1998, PACA again approached the RSA, this time with a view to getting Gerz's proposal included in the RSA's scheme for a series of temporary commissions, but without success as the RSA scheme was only for British Artists. The Government Department for Culture,

Media and Support declared in May 1998 “that this proposal would not be appropriate on Trafalgar Square, and would be unlikely to receive planning permission”.<sup>16</sup> The Executive Director of St Martin’s in the Fields, the church on Trafalgar Square wryly commented:

*“We cannot honestly say we are enthusiastic ... I am sure the pigeons will be delighted to have a celebrated piece of turf to enjoy”.*<sup>17</sup>

Westminster City Council Public Art Advisory Panel considered the proposal at their meeting 20<sup>th</sup> July 1998, immediately after agreeing to the RSA as “*it would instigate important debate on public art*”<sup>18</sup>. The Panel decided however that Gerz’s proposal “*was not considered to be technically feasible or of high artistic merit*”<sup>19</sup>. English Heritage also deferred a decision on the Gerz proposal until after reaching a decision on the RSA scheme and then declared “*In the circumstances [we] do not think that there is scope for a further proposal outside the RSA initiative*”<sup>20</sup>.

PACA had kept Gerz’s proposal confidential from 1996 until the launch of the Agency’s anniversary publication *Public:Art:Space* in May 1998, ostensibly to prevent its dismissal by ill-informed authorities. Although the project was intended to be the subject of a special feature by Jonathan Glancey in the daily broad sheet *The Guardian* and an interview with the artist arranged for April 1998, the article did not materialise. As with the Bankside Bridge proposal, it is questionable whether without publicity this Speculative Proposal could fulfil the aims of the programme. The RSA scheme came to fruition with the exhibition of works by Mark Wallinger, Bill Woodrow and Rachel Whiteread on the fourth plinth in Trafalgar Square and it has been decided that the plinth should remain a site for temporary works.

The purpose of this paper was not to comment on the artistic merit of the works proposed for Bankside or Trafalgar Square, but instead to focus on the concept and implementation of PACA’s Speculative Proposal programme. The programme’s aim was to provide a framework in which artists could develop proposals for high profile sites without the constraints of working for a client and within the UK’s planning system. PACA hoped that this would open up debate around the role and potential of artists and Public Art in urban environments, both in art circles and in the popular media. Despite the somewhat arbitrary assumption that the ideal of an unrestricted framework excluded any consideration of consultation or involvement with the users of sites, further elevating traditional notions of the autonomy of the artist, PACA’s attempt to refocus commissioning away from the primacy of a client or developer, should be commended.

Unfortunately, and mainly due to internal Agency administrative difficulties, which hampered the development of a full funding application, the original touring exhibition *The Urban Laboratory* never took place and thus it is difficult to estimate how effective it would have been. PACA persisted with the concept of the Speculative Proposal but with commissions that were never purely speculative. In the exhibition proposal the status of the artwork was ambiguous, the interest was not in the creation of an object but the capability of the concept as a catalyst to provoke debate. With both the proposals discussed, PACA worked from the start towards the realisation of the art works and was prepared to limit the dissemination of the proposals in

order to do so. In Dan Graham's case, his Speculative Proposal was definitely not created in the promised unrestricted framework.

Although PACA never fully realised the potential of their concept of the Speculative Proposal and remained tied to an approach based on the primacy of the twin pillars of artistic autonomy and the creation of objects, the potential of the original concept retains currency. That artists might be encouraged to propose notional interventions in urban sites, as catalysts for debate within all sections of society highlighting the plurality of possibilities and alternatives that lie in wait for Public Art and urban living in the future is still both challenging and exciting.

### **references**

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