

'BESIDE THE SEASIDE'

"ATTENDRE- C'EST LA VIE"

John Gingell

[Back to Index](#)



2

I have taken Victor Hugo's famous phrase as the key to the theme of Waterfront - of the city by the sea.

CARDIFF grew rapidly as a port in the late 19th Century - it was a phenomenon of the discovery of coal in the valleys behind it. This fuel changed a small market town into a seething port where ships from all over the world came to take on coal; dumping their ballast on the quaysides. The city was built with this residue and now lies silent beside the sea, with only the hum of services and the lap of polluted water to mark the closure of all but the last mine.

THE CITY now dreams into the next millennium and is a fact of historic This story maps the meeting of reality as history with the eternal presence of continuum. The ships have gone leaving photographs as fading memory, but the waters, the sea remains. The waterfront is now the place of redevelopment - "Cardiff Bay", where space extends and land melts into wriggling liquid.

Gone are the grim docks. New homes and offices crowd to seek respite and 'difference'. 'On the waterfront' once signified the sordid edge - a dark place of power, menace and the absence of the regulation of the civil in the name of trade. Now, the developer wipes clean the grimy strands and spreads a new nomenclature evoking romance and nostalgia - 'SchoonerWay' 'Maritime Close'. Development corporation and civic authority work together for a new solution.



3

***“The city sleeps and the country sleeps,
The living sleep for their time..... and the
dead sleep for their time,
And there one and all tend inward to me,
and I tend outward to them,
And such as it is to be of these more or
less I am”
WaltWhitman - ‘Song of Myself’***

‘Tiger Bay’ no longer appears on any map of Cardiff. It was the exotic local name for the slums residual until the Forties around the dockland. A mini world where mixed peoples from all the world lived, evoking shivering tremors in the hearts of outlying suburban citizens. It is now more dangerous in the City centre of shopping malls where to wander in the precinct at the deserted hour is to invite mugging or violence from those who cruise the vacated streets. Planning wipes away history - the city convolutes. Its movement is slower than the eternal threshing of the waves uncountable, but change is the ‘forum’ which links the apparently static of the one with the ever present dynamic of the other.

These are unlikely twins, embraced.

THE SEA is a reality which eludes the city. The sea is a real skin which cannot be altered which ages not as does its sister. It is not subject to human will. It cannot be held nor occupied or ploughed like land - there is no place for dreams. It is just there, wrapping, unfolding, re-forming and disappearing but never absent.

THE CITY is the dump - the place of Baudelaires ‘spleen’ - where the ideal - the imagined but unreal flourishes like a (passion) flower.

4

Each citizen lives out his life alone; making up the community, which with the architecture, the streets, the meeting places, the stores and places of business make up the reality. This is the theatre of the everyday which being named - here is Cardiff. It is of the water - it came to being because ships could come in and take its black gold. Like every remaindered port; it survives and thrives and like a grand-child, it is of its past and seeks to define its future as a new identity.

The Waterfront is a dark water, deep and present alongside which the city sleeps. It is now a suspended state - a suspension between land and sea which recent history has created.



The future is conjured by the men of money - who see the Waterfront, as a sales pitch in the national frame, of ever increasing demand for housing, services, and all that goes with a lived life. The business life provides the theatre for the new operation to create a second city on the waterfront. The idealism of the city authorities and the entrepreneurial capacity of a group which forms Cardiff Bay Development Corporation see the Waterfront as a prime site. who does not want to live by the sea? Bathed in its reverie, its cyclic change, its sense of drama and history. The new city is regulated - plans command the construction and the objects. Forms of 'real estate' are brought to play their part in the post-modernist reality of electronic seas, the invented wave-forms which constitute the new waterfront

[Back to Index](#)

5

- where all is connected, all is possible and each one of us can exit and import through our computer harbours, with its warehouses, stores, files and memories.

MAKING WAVES: The sea- the waterfront implies history: It constitutes a permanent pressure - an everlasting continuum: in a world where all history is unwritten, unnamed, erased. Quentin Tarantino's fables of city life - the extrapolation of violence, the satiation of now - makes of history nothing - culture empties itself before the flatness of now - the levelling of the plain. *"The emptiness of Tarantino is the absence of history, the absence therefore, of even the possibility of a high culture" (1). Bryan Appleyard - "The States we're in" - Sunday Times 11 Jan 98*



PUBLIC ART: The managers of this 'Waterfront' the new city developers - have to bring 'history' in and public art - provided by 1% and more as a levy on the public and private partners who build the new place; it is part of the refusal to let culture and thus history go.

I, as an artist, was commissioned along with many others to make art for the new city to bring by act a sense of conviction, of the extra-ordinary to the unravelling tapestry of the new surfaces, which with names culled from heritage vocabularies insist on a resonance to the impermanence of what now passes for built places. The artist's role is to bring relief from the tedium vitae, an ageless affliction of everyday life bringing the need for constant distraction. I

[Back to Index](#)

6

took the work to create a marker sculpture for the refurbished power sub-station which supplies the ever-increasing needs of expanding Cardiff. The Blue-Flash work and Meshchips do break the skyline, and to the glimpse of the passer-by give monument to the unknowable wonder of electricity and its relation to the SUN and THOR and that which like the sea surrounds us, is outside us and like blood to our personal state, is the city which now is constituted by the circulation of electric power.

My work stands on the power station like the cockcomb to the cockerel - it constitutes the 'ideal' born of the imaginary. It is thus "unreal" and plays its part in the surrounding real city over which it crows. 'Blue Flash' - unreal electricity, a *Jetztzeit-time-of-the-nowthing' Benjamin: on the Concept of History'*. A primitive sign talk in its alchemic physical reality. It takes on the angst of the sea-wish city which has turned its back to the Ocean, rearing like a twisted sea horse above the city - necropolis challenging the '*semper endem - 'always the same with the unexpected'*'. Art as City Sculpture plays its part as divertissement.

MAKING WAVES the politics of communications: the City of the electric waves. [*What kind of 'seas' will be crossed by those who go to the electronic paradise we are promised] - who will sail by?*



7

'BLUE-FLASH' PUBLIC ART WORK

Of course, the work has attracted praise, opposition, acceptance and rejection. It has excited nearly all the attention which surrounded Richard Serra's famous Wall 'Tilted Arc' in Lower Manhattan. But this is a Seaside City where sudden storms pass by leaving calm. The Flash stands at the lake-shore of high and low culture. The public were not consulted as such.

It was a private commission erected on private land but in a very public place - the skyscape. *On some level, I believe there is no such thing as an honest relationship The best you can hope for is an honest relationship with yourself* (2) private work in the public realm - there will always be the confusion of the public seeing art as 'BEAUTY' (a reiteration) and artists, art as work of exploration or psycho analysis. In a sense, the Waterfront City draws upon a sense of the absurd, the frivolous: as if living alongside the mapless sea charges the sense of pleasure we associate as children with the waters edge and perhaps at a deeper level, with the secure home of our watery beginnings as individuals and as a species. I did notice when talking about Cardiff's public art programme in relation to city development in UIAH in Helsinki how 'light' and 'summery' our city looked by comparison to sombre portentous notions of megalopolis planning - and the downright good sense of Finnish community art and architecture.



8

It is a British thing - this sea-struck sense of fun and frivolity. It is as if you are invited to forget your sense of mortality and personal inevitable erasure in the bright light of the edge of land of certainty dissolving into wet nothing.

ALLEGORY & COMMUNITY

So Public Art contributes to the continuity of the City, bringing a sense of unity to the flow of the unexpected. There is always the unofficial rage of the citizen against this tedium of life leading to a de facto self-estrangement in the city dweller. The quiet sustained romantic gesture which breeds suburban culture and even 'garden cities'. 'Art' of course is seen largely like opera as l'art pour Part. Art and its objects have been replaced by as Benjamin says the *rebus-image of commodity...the ever-always-the-same in great numbers*". *The city suffers a tragic loss of the allegorical; the devaluation of art "outdone within the world of objects itself by the commodity"* (3). The consumables have become the treasure piled in heaps in the hyperstores of the city.

A problem for monumental public art as such lies in the centuries [seen] between the present moment and that which has just been lived. The modern, and more relevantly, the Post-Modern is not based as Benjamin states, *'solely or chiefly on sensibility'*. An elevated spontaneity has replaced it as Jules Laforge saw in



[Back to Index](#)

9

Baudelaire's AMERICANISM. The modern is now - all else is antiquity. The modern city thrives on mass-production - the singular is replaced. Again, Benjamin sees '*neuroses in the psychic economy*' - an obsession to live choose to PLENTY brings a sense of security.

A city as seas of households filled with domestic goods always-the-same-in-countless-number. Life in the city resides in recurring crises - need, satiation, followed by want and fulfilment - a dull craving for recurrence. Benjamin identifies the "*city dweller*" in Baudelaire's work as a poet of his (modern) time. 'The goal is the market. (ambling, strolling, collecting are set against the '*dump-life*'. There remains only one '*radical novelty*' - death - life is lived therefore as a putting-off- a life inevitably knowing '*no development*', at best finding only '*petrified unrest*'.



AND BESIDE THE SEA the reality of its depth and presence beneath the changing surface acts as an allegory of recuperation - a place to take balm. Meanwhile away from the pier, the esplanade, the sea front - the function of allegory in the busy world of commerce - of my Blue Flash (I realise as I write) is to make attainable an heroic from the unknowable, invisible macro-commodity - the flow of current. Power in the Red Box - a bourgeois toy. The Blue Flash breaks with anger across the rumbling flatness of the hum-drum city.

10

THE POSSIBILITY OF ESCAPE AND ESCAPADE

So the city by the sea - Cardiff - draws by its proximity to the site of former comings and goings - the HERE TO THERE, FROM traces of its former self. And as such, even now transfixed, as are all cities, plotted planned and accounted for - there is still the sense of, the possibility of, escape - from or to. The exotic persists in the unerased sense of seaborne transience.

In most cities, land wrapped - the Park performs this role - a place of escape from the real world of the city - a sea of solitude - an inner sea, a that-which-is-not-the-city. For the city-dweller (in the labyrinth) lives with the Beast of his own mortality - in the everyday. There is the staving off of catastrophe in the clamour for novelty - of fashion but as Benjamin indicates - *“that things “just go on” is the catastrophe. It is not that which is approaching but that which is”*. As Strindberg said - *Hell is not something which lies ahead of us - but this life here.*



My essay has flowed down the veins of Benjamin to find the heart of Baudelaire's rage our rage. The rage of the sea lures us to it's edge, our correspondence to its mood and calm encirclement of our landed place, of commodity and repetition. As an artist, living in the Edge City by the water, I have in the Ocean of my own time to take on, partake of and use the process by which my art work is commodified. We are all paid Journeymen now.

[Back to Index](#)

1 1

The Waterfront takes its place, not for commerce *across*, but to provide a memory of time *past*, to hint at the connections which take life past the moment and resonates it as experience. We need the “Story” of the sea and it is comforting in some indefinable way to huddle close to it. The role of the artist who works in the Public realm is to struggle with “the site upon which his madness grew”.

All is displaced, replaced or SPACED out. All we have as we stand on the Waterfront of the Now is the concatenation of *‘echoes and resonances of times past’*: time has dissolved from its simple divisions of Past, Present and Future, into a diverse electronic play with ludic icons, economic transmission and loss. The City, resembles a compost heap, a morass of connections, ever decomposing and being added to in heaving and sinuous activity. Then thus is the Port City and the Sea now alike - joined at the Waterfront.

The Sea is our refusing to surface and in its lyricism, its constant play; the drama of its storms and colour, its perfect passage, its roads to freedom and the faraway, *we find our distraction*.

1: Bryan Appleyard: “The States we’re in, Sunday Times 11 Jan 98

2: Patrick Marber: Article by Lyn Gardner, Guardian 3 Jan 98

3: Walter Benjamin: Essay “Central Park”

