

Public Art and its relation to urban-planning challenges : The french experience

Pierre Gaconnet
Town Planner

In the last ten years, french towns such as Strasbourg, Montpellier, Nantes and Orléans have successively chosen to have contemporary artists working on the public spaces along their new tramways.

For these often growing conglomerations (as well as more recently for Paris), the tramway has been the latest expression of a urban project that could be shared between local authorities and the population in an « almost consensus », whereas through out the country the legitimacy of the standard urban project is more and more contested and therefore less regarded by local authorities as a political opportunity. It probably has something to do with the fact that the objectives of a tramway are equally referring to urban planning stakes as well as to an every day preoccupation of most of the actual inhabitants of these conglomerations.

This is the context in which, the promotion of Public Art (a choice usually known for being controversial), has finally been made by local authorities and was not opposed (at least not yet...) the hostility that could be expected from inhabitants and users, since the « national controversy » about Daniel Buren's work at the Palais Royal took place in 1985/86.

From that point it seems interesting to bring about a questioning on the nature of the link between Public Art and urban planning through out recent history and thereby on its evolution consecutive to the coming out of new challenges given to town planning.

Indeed, this recent « enthusiasm » of local authorities for Public Art needs to be questioned, and especially on the relation it supposes between Public Art and the notion itself of project, as it can be understood in town planning.

In that purpose, the institutionnal foundations of public art in France can be related to the successive meanings of the project in the understanding of the leading actors in the sector of planning.

First of all, it has to be pointed out that through out the history of Public art in France government institutions have held the leading role. Local authorities really appeared in this sector in the middle of the eighties, the initiatives coming from the private sector or associations are still discreet today.

In this part, government institutions and naturally the Minister for Culture had from the very beginning a clear intention of supporting economically artistic creation and artists: in 1951, with the creation of the 1% procedure, and in 1983 with the creation of a specific national fund and of the FRACs (regional funds for contemporary art).

This intention remains an important issue : nowadays, the key role of State institutions like the DRACs (regional directions for cultural activity) which intervene in almost every public art commission-

ing, is to bring artists (and fundings...) to every local authority who initiates a project. The background objective being one of promoting artistic creation in a relevant way referring to the art network values.

The second crucial point is that, the frame in which this support has taken place is another sector in which government institutions have had the leading role : town-planning and construction, its successive approaches and methods and therefore through different « projects » .

The development of a territory

Two periods are characteristic of this « nation-wide » project :

The national reconstruction after World War II. The project is not only one of reparations but it deals with social, economical and industrial development planned on a national scale. Every professional category is concerned, and of course especially engineers and architects according to an approach which is widely influenced by fonctionnalism and the Athene's chart principles.

If the task is nation-wide, the artist's part is conversely proportionate...As we mentioned before, the involvement of artists is based on an intention of economical support which takes place, therefore as a pure decorative addition to the architecture : since 1951 artists are invited, as in every 1% procedures, to work on sculptures or paintings situated in administration buildings. It is interesting to notice that the idea of ornamentation in itself is not yet contested even though Walter Gropius and the Bauhaus ideas are already known. Nevertheless, this period founds a long during link between public art and architecture, in its contemporary understanding.

The project of the « New Towns » which began in the sixties is also to be considered as part of a « nation-wide » strategy of development even if it only concerns a few sites and Paris in particular. The government is still in charge and the concern is mainly one of economical and social efficiency of the biggest french conglomerations. But the social context has changed and more and more the methods and the institution's approaches of town-planning are being contested.

Artists are part of this contestation. According to Michel Ragon Jean Dubuffet intends to « spread cancer in the fonctionnalist city ». His main target is the economic center of La Défense which begins to raise its buildings behind the Seine, in the western Paris (at the same time, other artists like François Morellet, Piotr Kowalski, Gérard Singer and Daniel Buren begin to think that public spaces are more relevant for artistic expression than museums and galleries) .

The methods will change...partly. Institutions and planners intend to get rid of fonctionalism, but « the only way that was found to oppose to quantitative abstraction was the approach of the « practicable », which led to a reinforcement of the fonctionalism that was at the origin of the quantitative and abstract... ». For public art this

means that it still depends on the good will of architects and planners, and if the intention to open public spaces to art exists, the nature of the public spaces that are planned is still highly functionalist. Therefore public art often takes place as an ornament, no more to the building but to the urban framework.

Nevertheless, different initiatives are launched to involve artists with an openly confessed intention of bringing « humanity » into town-planning.

In 1974 an international competition on public art is organised for the economic center of La Défense (following Jean Dubuffet's first target...) and the same year an administrative structure takes place, meant to promote public art in the planning of the five « new towns » surrounding Paris. This is where « public conceptual art » finds its way of expression, but on the other hand this period founds french public art especially as a compensation for the roughness of town-planning's latest achievements...

A few experiences in new towns led to a more ambitious approach of public art. These experiments tried to change the methods used in the projects by reorganising relations between artists, architects and planners. The more emblematic example of this is the « Axe Majeur » designed by artist Dani Karavan in the new town of Cergy-Pontoise. The artist and the planners achieved there a real collaboration which led the work of art to have an important impact on the city's plan. If this experiences remains unique and not really relevant for the future, it is probably because the artists who had left galleries and museums could'nt be satisfied for long with the only perspective of fulfilling an 'ambiguous and institutional demand for Art' ?

Nevertheless, the art that was involved, mainly by conceptual artists like Piotr Kowalski or Nissim Kerado, was meant to be « conceptual and autonomous ». « It's a concept about space itself and not a collaboration to improve its aesthetics ».

At this point, we could consider that planners and artists had at this time a similar understanding (compatible even if irreconcilable) of space as a sort of « fac-simile »: it is a neutral material for the planner to receive « quantitative abstraction », it is a material from which the artist wants to point out a meaning « conceptual and autonomous ».

On both sides the project generates a necessity to « keep a distance » with the object.

The « urban project »

An institutional turning point comes in 1982 with the decentralization laws. Local authorities are now able to conceive their own project. Still, the state technical knowledge and fundings remains often important in the first years to assist local authorities and this is especially true for Public Art, for which the DRACs when it is not the initiator, is still the

essential partner of local projects.

In 1983, the minister for Culture launches a new important program to support artistic creation, and creates a specific national fund as well as regional institutions meant to endorse local strategies for contemporary art (FRACs).

The regeneration projects

The economic and social context in which local authorities find themselves is often difficult, with the end of a certain type of urban industry (and therefore of income), unemployment and disrepaired housing problems.

The regeneration of town-centres :

Now considered at the local scale, the issue is one of national or even international communication to promote local development.

The public image of a town is then one of the first issues for local authorities to be competitive. In this perspective the regeneration of town-centres gives the opportunity to highlight an architectural heritage, symbol of cultural value. But to « look competitive », heritage has to be highlighted in a modern environment. Because modernity cannot more be expressed through architecture in this context of renovation ...It's Public Art who will be then in charge to give the « modern touch », this essential characteristic of a competitive public image.

No doubt this is the background intention of the big public works initiated in Paris like the Grand Louvre's pyramid by architect Pei or the public art work of Daniel Buren at the Palais-Royal.

But a more emblematic example of this politic is the town of Lyon, which begins then an important regeneration project of its historical centre (its buildings and public spaces) with spectacular projects like the renovation of its opera house by architect Jean Nouvel and the work of Daniel Buren on the Terreaux's square.

The regeneration of the suburbs :

The other project in which public art has been involved is the regeneration of suburbs, especially where big social housing projects had been initiated during the sixties and where important social problems had taken place since the end of the seventies. The financial needs were so important that in most cases here, the state is still largely involved through funding an administrative structures.

Confronted with important social issues inside the suburbs and often political ones outside, public art couldn't really allow to express itself out of the social vocabulary. This context which obviously favors community art led to a difficult debate in public art commissioning.

As we mentioned before, the DRACs objective is to guarantee the value of the institutional command of art, by assuring it is relevant in its choices with the art market. Therefore it led DRACs to keep a distance with community art and to experience, for example, the work of Jean-Pierre Raynaud for Venissieux in 1984 (The white tower) which, for relevant it was, had absolutely no chance of being carried out.

On the contrary of the public art in town-centres, which was meant to be seen from the outside, here art had to be seen from the inside, to guarantee to the inhabitants of a down-going environment that they were recognized as real partners and citizens. This intention often led to experiences like wall paintings and therefore stayed out of the art-institutions' main strategy.

Conglomeration projects :

Another important change comes in 1997 with a law meant to promote the gathering together of local authorities through institutional partnerships. This law was essentially meant to reinforce partnerships that had already been carried out by most of the biggest conglomerations in the country.

The political and urban issues are then the improvement of the urban networks and especially on the transport side. For public art it led to new projects, already mentioned, along tramways and subways. If such experience like in Los Angeles can lead to community art, with a relation established between the stations and the people living around, the experiences carried out in Strasbourg, Montpellier, Orléans etc are more or less a logical extension of the art work initiated with the regeneration of the town-centres.

Nevertheless a few exceptions introduced the seeds of what could be a new form of public art, no longer considering only the site or the space as meaningful, but also the way of living that space and site as a matter of inspiration. The artist Bill Fontana composed, for example, « loud postcards » from the sounds of eighteen sites in Lyon, which are broadcasted in the stations. It then shifts people from a place to another, just like the tramway...

The environmental project

Last but essential change is the law called « Solidarity and urban renewal » adopted in the year 2001. It requires from local authorities to change its planning tools to a better expression of sustainable development stakes, considering urban renewal as a major objective instead of urban development. Considering this evolution of town planning, from a culture of project to a culture of management (from urban regeneration to urban renewal and sustainable development), it seems obvious that the demand for public art, which has been founded on the culture of project (architectural and then urban) needs to be redefined.

Two points are to be considered as essential in the actual defini-

tion of sustainable development (which has to be seen as a questioning on the totality of public administration and not only on the ecological side) to help us foreseeing the form of a new command regarding Public Art :

- the globalization of public activity: the usual practice in the organisations of local authorities dividing responsibilities tend to increase risks of ecological and financial problems
- the renewal of the « deciding process », no longer owned by elected representatives but which need to include inhabitants and associatives at different stages.

Both items can be regarded as opportunities for Public Art to express itself out of the only field of architectural and urbanistic projects. Confronted to a new kind of challenge, related to its own organisation and management, the local authority can relay on artists for creating a real context for public debate and questioning on its activity.

That doesn't mean everything has to be reinvented : it already exists through different aspects.

In the first place there is the « Nouveaux Commanditaires » program. Managed by the Fondation de France which is the gathering of different partnerships acting in humanitarian or civic issues. It represents another approach of public art coming directly from the expression of a need by inhabitants of a neighborhood, workers of an hospital or any other kind of association. Its aim is to give to these demands the means that are necessary to carry out the original idea. An art councillor is missioned to assist the people, he has to propose different artists whose artwork seems relevant confronted to the context and the demand and in the end to find the fundings. This way, we cannot consider it as pure « community art », because it still supposes that the artist involved is recognized as relevant by the art-network. In fact, the main purpose is to keep the people in a constant relation with the artist, so as to share until the end compatible objectives. If local authorities are often part of these projects through funding, they are no longer at the origin of the idea. It means that, this way, public art can manage itself outside of an architectural or urban project. But this « alternative way » as shown its own limits : most of the time it leads to interesting projects in the countryside or inside big corporations, but seems difficult to achieve in an urban environment, where local authorities have to be largely involved. Nevertheless it brought out in the open new methods, especially in the approach of the link between the artwork and the public, that could be adapted to an ordinary command of public art.

How can local authorities get involved in public art within this preoccupation of sustainable development ?

The example of the Borough of Barking and Dagenham in East London can give us a first answer. It launched an important public art program called Artscape along the A13 in a context of urban regeneration and with the main objectives of protecting the inhabitants of the borough from noise and pollution and further on improving its im-

age.

An important thing is that Artscape got fundings from the european community's RECITE program through the LOTUS 2000 project (long term urban sustainability) which aims to provide a long-term sustainable strategy for improving the urban fringe of major european cities. Public Art is therefore highly recognized as an important matter for sustainable development. It certainly deals with the fact that Artscape provides an ambitious relationship between the inhabitants of the borough and the artists involved. Working on the ecological side (protection from the noise and the pollution coming from the traffic of the A13) as well as on the social side (residencies of artists in the Borough, projects discussed in local forums etc.).

If the borough's decision process is concerned, it is also interesting to notice that the artscape program was recently transferred from the Regeneration department of the borough to the department of education, arts and libraries, although it still deals a lot with the town's planning stakes. This could be seen as relevant, considering the globalization of public activity mentioned before, to see culture and arts highly involved in the urban project of the borough...

Mr Geoff Wood, public art consultant for the borough, mentions the fact that what really creates a difference between artists and designers is their different time scales. Art « creates » time and that is one of the reason it is relevant towards town-planning. Today's big challenge, sustainability, deals with no more than the city's various time scales. To bring this point open to public debate and understanding is an objective that artists can naturally fulfill.

In Paris the recent « Centre d'art en mouvement » proposes, through artistic projects, to « show the city's and its movements ». It already began to work with institutions in charge of the planning of a large area around the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, so as to get artists to intervene on and during the public works through three different ways at least : intervention on or with public services, on the architecture and on the sounds of the area. In London, the architects and artists of FAT (Fashion Architecture Taste) initiated innovative partnerships with local authorities and property companies of shops confronted with a commercially down-going neighborhood. FAT commissioned thirty artists to make shopping bags that were given to everyone who bought something in the area. Just like Fontana's loud postcards, the artwork is here not only considering the site but also the way it is lived and practiced. They are actually commissioned by the city of Bristol to work on an « artistic strategy » to improve the use of public transport. The artwork of FAT often questions the monumental. It also brings commerce and public transport, and the behaviours going with it at the centre of public art's expression, dealing this way with town planning's actual stakes.

These are few of the experiences that can lead us to think that public art can be highly involved in the local authorities strategies for pro-

moting sustainable development. Confronted to the recent history of french public art it means that the link between artists, architects and planners has been changed. The artist can find in the new challenges of town-planning a large spectrum of relevant issues, from the classical ornament of a roundabout to the way people are living an urban space, can foresee and discuss its development. Without this ability of getting the inhabitants and users of a city to feel and question their environment, it seems difficult to carry out the objectives of a sustainable development .

Publications :

- « L'art et la ville, urbanisme et art contemporain » SGVN, SKIRA, 1990.

- « L'invention du quotidien » Michel de Certeau Gallimard, 1990.

- « L'art renouvelle la ville » MNF, SGVN, SKIRA, 1992 .

- « Et maintenant, pourquoi et comment produire des œuvres d'art ? L'aventure des Nouveaux Commanditaires ». Supplément Beaux-Arts magazine, 2001.

Thanks to :

Peter Watson, Geoff Wood and Jackie Poncelet at Barking and Dagenham.

Sean Griffiths and Charles Holland from FAT architecture

Pierre Marsaa, mediator at the Fondation de France.

Web sites

Artscape :
www.a13artscape.org.uk

FAT www.fat.co.uk/

CAM : www.metafort.org/
ecoute