

# Civic Art: the renewed philosophy of town planning – a TCPA arts & planning provocation paper



“...that word art leads me to my last claim, which is that the material surroundings of my life should be pleasant, generous, and beautiful; that I know is a large claim, but this I will say about it, that if it cannot be satisfied, if every civilized community cannot provide such surroundings for all its members, I do not want the world to go on.”

William Morris, 1887

<sup>1</sup> 'A Garland for May Day 1885 – Dedicated to the Works by Walter Crane'. Source: Connections. Town and Country Planning, 1979, Vol.47, Jan, 42

## Summary

In March 2020 the Town & Country Planning Association (TCPA) launched a project to explore how planning might reconnect with its artistic roots. The conversation between planners and artists has been happening at a low level for years but growing concerns about the poor quality of new housing, the lack of trust between people and planners and the decline of many of existing civic spaces were beginning to spark new energy in the ideals of planning as an art. This has now come to a head thanks to a pandemic which has forced us to reflect on our homes and places and our connection, or lack of it, with nature. This paper is designed as a provocation to feed into the development of the new TCPA Arts Strategy. The paper calls for an entirely new philosophy of planning based on Civic Art to restore planning as a humane and powerful force for enabling better lives. It aims to stimulate debate and action.

## The Art of Planning

There is clear evidence of the impact that the way we organise places can have on people's life chances. People's mental and physical well-being is shaped by the homes and neighbourhoods they live in. As a result, planning is important for our future. But the practice of town planning is at a very low ebb. Planners are seen as a problem and much of what is built is ugly, inefficient, and soulless. At its worst planning is so weak that it simply provides a fig leaf over a development model which

manufactures housing units that range from boring to shamefully inhumane. While there are notable exceptions, we should be honest that most homes built today are little more than engineered boxes for people-storage. Often neither an architect, nor design in any meaningful sense – play a part in the process.

For the TCPA, planning is not just about land use. Planning is about asking the defining question of a civilised society; how are we going to live? With this ambition, it is not surprising that planners have often made mistakes, but the record of the past is uncomfortably impressive. From Bournville to Letchworth to millions of generously built and high-quality council homes, we were once capable of doing much better. In trying to answer the question about what went wrong with the way we plan there is a strong common thread. We forgot the humane, idealistic, and artistic foundations of planning.

Reconnecting planning with art means nothing less than putting the soul and spirit back into the places we create. It does this by creating space for – that most annoying tendency of human beings – to have feelings about their environment. As a result, this project is not about getting people to think about art as an add on in their decisions, like the way we place public art in roundabouts, it's about creating a new philosophy of how we plan in which art is core to the process and the outcomes. By doing so we expect to engage in the messy world of emotions, affection, and contested

arguments about what art means. Thinking artistically about planning means placing the full breadth of the human experience at the heart of the process so it speaks to that part of the human spirit which is so hard to define but so essential to a good life. This note is simply a provocation to get the debate going. It tries to set out the scope of the debate and most importantly to capture the philosophy of Civic Art which shaped the first 50 years of planning in the UK.

## Planning as Civic Art

Before the words 'town planning' were widely used, the founders of the planning and Garden City movement often referred to what they did as a 'Civic Art'. They meant that the sum of how we shape and design buildings and spaces, parks and gardens is to achieve not just something efficient in engineering terms but was to be delighting and beautiful. For the founders of the planning movement what they did was seen primarily as an artistic practice. A relic of this understanding lives on in the Royal Town Planning Institute's founding objective to promote the 'Art and Science' of town planning. The scope of civic art was broad but perhaps bounded by the spaces we share as a community or with friends and family. The principles applied to it were strongly expressed and vitally important to the philosophy of planning.

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<sup>2</sup> Ruskin rejected classical design as 'the art of the slave' because those who constructed it had not no control at all

## Origins

The founders of the planning movement, inspired directly by John Ruskin and William Morris, saw the arts as central to liberating people and enabling happier lives. There is nothing novel in this idea and it's a view that would be shared by many classical artistic traditions. The distinctive part of their philosophy was a powerful social justice strand, so access to the arts must be for everyone, not just elites and not just in formal settings but in people's everyday experience. The job was not just about creating decent utilitarian conditions for healthy lives but ensuring that a sense of beauty was core to the design of places. Underpinning this notion of beauty was a powerful assumption about the importance of nature to the human spirit. Designing places with nature and bringing representations of the natural world into the home became a distinctive part of Civic Art. It is significant that Morris instinctively understood the value of nature to people, but we cannot evidence that instinct with the wealth of public health research.

It has now become dangerous to use the word 'beauty' for all sorts of legitimate reasons, but for the founders of the planning movement, the word had a very distinctive character. While both John Ruskin<sup>2</sup> and William Morris can be said to have a refined sense of aesthetics, they spoke about art and

over the outcome and no way to express their creative side.

design in the context of making it available to everyone and in the spirit of equality (see Ruskin's *Sesames and Lilies*, 1865). This was not about beauty in an authoritarian classical aesthetic sense but their ambition to provide beauty for all and to empower everyone to be part of the construction of that outcome. It was an all-or-nothing arts strategy in which discussions of building a home was no more possible without a conversation about art than it was without a conversation about bricks. The best example of this advocacy is in Raymond Unwin and Barry Parker's 1901 publication *The Art of Building a Home*. This quote is from the introduction:

*"Understanding something of the true meaning of art, we may set about realising it, at least in the home which is so much within our control. Let us have in our houses, rooms where there shall be space to carry out the business of life freely and with pleasure, with furniture made for use, rooms where a drop of water spilled is not fatal; where the life of the child is not made a burden to it by unnecessary restraint; plain, simple, and ungarnished if necessary, but honest. Let us have such ornament as we do have really beautifully wrought by hand, carving, wrought metal, embroidery, painting, something which it has given pleasure to the producer to create, and which shows this in every line - the only possible work of art. Let*

*us call in the artist, bid him leave his easel pictures and paint on our walls and over the chimney corner landscapes and scenes which will bring light and life into the room, which will speak of nature, purity and truth; shall become part of the room, of the walls on which they are painted, and of the lives of us who live beside them; paintings which our children shall grow up to love and always connect with scenes of home with that vividness of memory from childhood which no one can efface."*

There were other important aspects of the notion of Civic Art which speak to the ideals of civics. Cooperation was a vital aspect of the approach, so cooperative and collective visions are not a single vision of an auteur artistic genius. Competition and the obsession with originality were seen as major barriers to 'good art'. The growing division between planning and architecture in the last 70 years was in part due to the clash of two profoundly opposed ideas; one collective and cooperative, the other based on the individual architect genius often working in the context of major assumptions about what was 'good' for the community. While the pages can be closed on someone who believes themselves to be genius poet, we are all forced to consume the ego behind the built environment.

Dialogue and co-creation were critical parts of Civic Art so that design was not thrust upon the community but instead

emerged from it. This strand of ideas was core to Colin Ward's anarchist attempt to promote collaboration between planners, architects, and communities but with communities in the driving seat. This idea of co-creation also linked to the vital role of craft and meaningful creative work. Beauty was partly derived from the knowledge of the skill and pleasure that went into making buildings and furniture. It's interesting that of all the component of good Civic Art, it's this notion of craft and care for what is produced and who produced it which is the most difficult and perhaps most important in an era when meaningful human work is under renewed assault.

This ideal for the place of art in people's everyday lives was incredibly powerful and shaped the iconic designs for Letchworth and many other communities. The tradition became forever associated with the arts and crafts movement where, in contrast to modernism, ornamentation and decoration were welcomed so long they flowed from function and so long as the outcome reflected meaningful craft. It goes without saying that the principles of Civic Art sketched in this paper do not lead to a single aesthetic outcome. Nor should we overlook the emphasis which those who built our post-war New Towns placed on Civic Art which has left a rich legacy that is a sharp contrast to much of development we see now.

But this notion of Civic Art was not the only role of the arts in the planning movement. Art was also an important way of agitating for social change. This

was most obvious in the works of literature which inspired Ebenezer Howard's and Garden City ideal including Morris's 'News from Nowhere' (1890) and Edward Bellamy's 'Looking Backwards' (1888). These stories made the political space for exploring important questions about how we should live. The planning movement inhabited this space by offering ideas such as Civic Art and Garden Cities as key solutions to achieving better lives. At the same time, North America sees the surge the 'City Beautiful Movement' which intends to introduce the beautification and monumental grandeur. A movement growing in parallel to the Garden City movement, it was also a result of concerns around the poor living conditions of all major cities and its precursors promoted beauty not only for the sake of beauty, but also to create moral and civic virtue among urban populations. It was also notably criticised by some for doing the opposite.

In short, Civic Art was a philosophy, a way of thinking which played a critical role in humanising and balancing the other technical aspects of planning. As the planning movement was professionalised the practice became dominated by technical questions and necessary though these disciplines are, they often find sensitivity to the human condition difficult to compute.

## **Paradise lost**

Experiencing and participating in art is a vital part of securing people's well-being but over the last 50 years, the

practice of planning has drifted away from its artistic roots. This has disconnected it from the principles that make great places and separated it from the people we have increasingly come to plan for but not with. The planning process has largely become technocratic and driven by government guidance which ignores the art completely as an issue for planners. There has been a renewed interest in design codes which is welcome, but codifying 'good design' is problematic for Civic Art tradition. Such code can inspire but they can also squash creative solutions. Just as a reference point the word 'art' never appears in the entire main body of the National Planning Policy Framework for England. The message could not be clearer.

But the problem runs much deeper than just the current policy priorities of national Government. The absence of debate around Civic Art in professional practice is striking. There is often an active disdain for any planning outcome which cannot be measured and outright fear of dealing with people's emotions about the identity of their places or their emotional connection with nature. Aspects of Civic Art are no longer a core part of the curriculum of planners and are seen as soft and peripheral to planning practice. On the whole artists and planners inhabit different worlds and speak different languages. Although successful collaborations do exist, these are very rare.

The private sector development culture is no better. Although the roots of Civic

Art lie in a concern for the ideal home, our current housing delivery model has no place for co-creation, beauty in design or for artist involvement, except in the occasional piece of public art that provides a thin icing over tens of thousands of value-engineered brick boxes. There are examples of those trying to do better but they are the exception and while the origins of Civic Art came from people in private practice there is no such collective voice now.

There is also a problem in the way urban planning is taught. The founders of the movement believed that art was a core aspect of the way town planning was understood yet planning education has been narrowed drifting to a technocratic approach to building places. The creative aspects of design and playfulness in town planning are no longer found in planning degrees, training professionals do not find art in the experience of place anymore.

Of course, planning is now so deregulated that it cannot be blamed for some of the very poor outcomes we see. But even at its very best, outcomes can be both 'sustainable' and mind numbingly soulless. This problem is set to get much worse by the monetisation of nature. It may be useful to value what nature does for us in terms of ecosystems services but the move to 'net again in nature' means decision being driven on arbitrary economic values places on the environment which completely ignores people's feelings about their place. Telling people their environment will be developed because it's worth less than

someone else's or that new bits of nature will be created ten miles away is one example of just how inhumane and stupid decision making has become. Planners get what they deserve if they ignore the intense feelings people have about their local neighbourhood and the psychological impact that change can have on people for better or worse.

Technical knowledge, including economic impacts, are all vital in planning processes and decisions and no one is arguing for a planning system which ignores the evidence or becomes dominated by competing 'feelings'. We are arguing for a system which has a sensitivity to human needs and ensures those feelings are reflected in the decision we take about how streets and neighbourhoods develop. The principles of Civic Art are the way we do this.

### **Re-creating Civic Art**

Putting art into planning only works if you believe, as the Garden City pioneers did, that art can transform people's lives. It can do this by the design of places and the way they excite, stimulate, and entertain people. It can do this through ensuring there are venues and places to experience art and by enabling people to directly participate in artistic activities. Civic Art is not limited to any specific media so it can be as much about the visual arts as it can be about people writing stories or making films about their places.

We also assume that planning is not just about colouring in maps but about the much wider endeavour of shaping

the world to enable people to live healthy and fulfilled lives. Because planning must be about the complexity of the human experience, art is always going to be central to the ideals of town planning.

Having agreed about the power of art we need to be clear about what we mean when we talk about a 'new Civic Art'. This has to reflect Civic Art as an approach and as an outcome. So here goes:

- We believe that Civic Art can play a transformational role in people's lives by speaking to that part of the human condition which is moved by the creative expression of emotions.
- Civic Art is about making the places we share in the community and the home beautiful.
- Civic Art is grounded in the belief that people are sociable beings with a powerful desire to connect to the natural environment
- Civic Art is rooted in the ideals of equality and social justice so that what we create must be available to all of us in our everyday lives. As a result, Civic Art can be challenging and controversial, but it must always be useful. It must not be used solely to beautify a place or become a means of art washing.
- Civic Art happens through a process of co creation, and cooperation with communities. Artists and planners are there to

inspire, convene, help, inform  
but never to impose their will.

- Civic Art offers the opportunity for meaningful and creative work and learning through the co-production and crafting of homes, buildings, and spaces.

### **The next step: A new Civic Arts strategy**

The TCPA is beginning a new journey to put the passions and inspiration of artistic practice back at the heart of the planning process. In coming months, we will be preparing an Arts Strategy which will form the basis of the much wider conversation with planners, artists, and communities. We will also be producing a guide for people and planners which showcases some best examples of how art can transform communities with a real practical benefit for all of us. We want this to be a collaborative process so do get in touch with us about initiatives and case studies that you think embody what we argue for in this paper.