

# PUBLIC SPACES: For Them or Us?

by Tam Giles

## **A follow up and response to 'An Outdoor Living Room',**

by Jeff Higley

Jeff Higley has written eloquently about the conception and its final form of the memorial seating area dubbed by park users as, '**The Outdoor Living Room**'. As one of those involved in making it, I can only add, what a pleasure it was to participate in this genuinely communal creation. As work continued, I began to ask whether it could not also be seen as an example for more such projects which give citizens the opportunity to create and contribute to their local environment.



One morning, not long after the massive chunks of oak still only roughly shaped had been installed, I arrived to find a bronzed man sitting on the smallest and most nearly finished. He was eating a bun and swigging a can of drink. He looked very content, sitting in the warmth of the sun. He asked if it was OK to sit there.. He said he always had an early morning workout in the nearby outdoor gym and declared that from now he would add breakfast on this seat as part of his routine. This was our introduction to Chris. Another 'regular' observer of progress was Tony whose main activity seemed to be walking round the British Isles. Both acted as general guides

to curious on-lookers, -what was happening, and why, and so on. There were no barriers around the site, anyone could come round and watch as the project developed. Some were sceptical: 'They'll nick them...' No, these are very heavy, a ton or two... 'Well they'll turn 'em over.' 'No, they have metal legs set in deep holes filled with concrete'. 'Then they'll burn 'em...' 'No, the wood is seasoned, it won't burn, get singed maybe.. but that can be removed with a grinder'. Onlookers, if sceptical, were grudgingly reassured. Others were intrigued.

Another memory: of the day when Geoffrey Court, Managing Director of The Circle Works, came with others of the group to dig out the site and then lay down the surfacing materials. The final stage of this process involved stamping white gravel well down into the octagonal lattices of the base material: I saw Jeannette's toddler grandson join in this, his face serious with concentration as he alternately watched what we were doing and then copied with obvious pleasure.. he was watching, learning, then joining in, becoming part of the adult world and enjoying it.

Much of Jeannette's work had been with children, and The Circle Works members wished this to be remembered. Tam and Jane suggested that school children could make small mosaics to be set in to the ground surface or the benches. Workshops were organised in two nearby schools. Only a few of these could be included within the area but the remainder could be set within the school playgrounds. Not all the mosaics are by children, Circle Works members came to separate workshops at The Studios.

So this Memorial became a fine example of what can be done when a public Authority, (in this case Michael Rowan and his team of Rangers) are prepared to allow local citizens to intervene and have the hands-on experience of making. And more: by their participation members of the public have become in a sense part owners of the completed project.

Recently I have been watching progress of another example of communal effort. I live within a few minutes walk to Burgess Park on the borders of Peckham and



Bermondsey in south-east London. This park emerged as the aftermath of war time bombings of warehouses, small production units, bakeries, a brick yard, etc. grouped alongside a branch of the Surrey Canal. It remained a brownfield site but gradually improvements were made and it attracted locals of every ethnic and linguistic group. Often on fine summer weekends whole community and family groups would spend the day there, relaxing, playing football, fishing in the lake, enjoying the wide open expanses.

Major works are currently in progress. Southwark Council received an award to upgrade and improve the park. Designs were submitted, four chosen by the Council were presented to the public, one was selected, but there was some dissent and the 'Friends of Burgess Park' suggested modifications on the side of less formal design, more concern for natural habitat. Many of their suggestions were accepted. And as a result of their pleas for a community garden to grow vegetables, plant fruit trees, create a wildflower meadow to attract bees, The Friends were allowed to take on another site immediately alongside the eastern boundary of Burgess Park. Volunteers gathered on many Saturdays to clear out an overgrown no-go area of brambles, thorn trees, nettles, all kinds of junk from beer cans and plastic bags to parts of old cars, and evidence of rough sleepers; what they have achieved is to be seen in the accompanying photos. it reveals what local residents can achieve if given the opportunity. Such collaborative action by local residents must result in forming bonds and is not this

what is needed? Our societies are fractured, so we hear, but what will re-form bonds? What about all those grassy areas around Estates? Fences beside the open road, fair enough, but why are the (rectilinear) pathways fenced off from the grassed areas within the estates? And why has each grassy area got to have a (regulation?) rose bed, tended



without much enthusiasm, by Council workers? (No wonder the poor roses look dejected and unloved!) But does this need to be so? Recently some of the same team that worked in Mile End Park, carried out major renovations in the Cossall estate, Peckham. The free-lance professional landscape designers, and artists with experience in community projects, drew up plans to lure



**Food being grown in recycling bins at Burgess Park**

residents to become involved, take part in workshops, offer examples of what they would like to have or see happen. There is an apathy born of powerlessness and somehow this has to be overcome and it will not be overcome by 'top-down' schemes carried out by too-often 'job's worth' Council or big company employees. In fact by engaging the residents it is possible to make ad hoc modifications to fit in with what they want. Reports are that this formerly run-down problem estate has revived. After all, if you can get residents themselves to participate, they are more likely to defend what they have made. As LAN member Lorna Green once said, the best way to stop vandalism is to get the vandals to help make the (art work or bike track).

This is just one of many possible ways to help 'heal our broken societies' but it is one for which LAN members are particularly suited. But public authorities and funders have to be persuaded. Perhaps one useful role for LAN would be to accumulate examples, which members can provide, which will demonstrate the value of the outcome when local people can become creators of their own shared spaces. Often there is locally available skill and vision, what is needed is a catalyst to spark off the chemistry which could transform 'their' space to 'OUR SPACE'.

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For more info on Burgess Park Project go to :-  
<http://burgessfoodproject.posterous.com/>