

MSDM (Collaborative arts unit)

We titled the video *The Public Art of Campaigning*, and there was a rationale behind this. When we met Elaine in March of this year at Moncrieff Place she was campaigning against a public art project that Southwark Council was using to evict her from the space her business had occupied for over 14 years. Her campaigning methods, combining direct action with site specific intervention in the space, looked to us like an art that is public should be like, bringing the question of democracy into the urban aesthetic debate.



Moncrieff Place is a small plaza in Peckham Rye, which is the main shopping street. In the planner's words, "*Moncrieff Place contains the town centre cinema and is one of the main access points from the car park to the town centre, it is a strategic gateway in the town centre's development, without it the town centre does not exist.*" The street is noted for its mix of high street retailers, and small street markets. It is a mixed area, with many immigrants in a predominantly black neighbourhood. Until now the market traders were licensed to use the site and there are usually two stalls at the entrance to Moncrieff Place.

In the video, people speculate about who will really benefit from the improvements. It is suggested that the cinema is behind the council, pressuring them to invest money embellishing the area. What we suggest is that Moncrieff Place is part of a much wider process of uneven development, and gentrification in particular, that is happening in many large cities. It is a generalised process of deinvestment and reinvestment, of devalorisation and revalorisation of land and property by real estate companies, banks and the state, under the auspices of a return of the middle class back to inner city areas. To areas previously constructed as dangerous, dirty and poor but now being repackaged as safe UEDs: urban entertainment destinations.

However, Moncrieff Place has obtained a new status. It has become a contested site. A space in the heart of the so called global economy where its social cultural and economic oppositions come to light. The Peckham Partnership's delivery plan indicates that by the end of 1997 the Moncrieff

works should have been completed. This means that since the commissioning of the project in 1996 the traders succeeded in keeping its status as a contested site. We found that the current project was not the first to be commissioned for Moncrieff. The first project was proposed by Lilian Lin and was a fibre optic sculpture of lights. It was made without any consultation, and the traders were told they would have to move.



The traders started campaigning, collecting signatures, and the council cancelled the plans. In 1998 Free Form Arts were commissioned to build public art projects for the area, due to their record with community based approaches. They invited an open call for submissions to be judged by the local community and traders through consultation. The proposals were made public in the Rye Lane chapel, and the International Carpet of Flowers, designed by Anne Wiles, was selected.

Briefly, the concept was to create the effect of a red carpet that is rolled out for the premier of a film, in reference to its location in front of the cinema. It would be made of bricks of glass encapsulating flowers and illuminated from below by fibre optics. The flowers would represent the cultures of Peckham and the world developed through workshops at local schools and community groups. In addition the overall plan for Moncrieff Place would include upgrading the building frontages, painting them silver, providing a giant screen for projections and light shows in the front face of the cinema and additional interactive lighting.

When we met Elaine, the planning details were about to go through, to be approved by Southwark property and planning. Elaine was still collecting signatures against the plans and campaigning on the site for the project as she was trading, selling T-shirts in the middle of the winter. The campaign reflected our concerns about peoples' right to the city and because we were interested in theories about the social production of space and the uneven development that occurs under capitalism, for us there was a sense of urgency in starting the video because negotiations were going on between the traders and the council, and the campaign could stop at any time.

A week later the campaign was on hold because the council had made a deal with the traders that they could stay.

When on the following week we interviewed the project manager at the Peckham Partnership, the most recent plans indicated that the traders would be moved to the side, to the wall near Woolworths. That was the day before there would be the meeting at the town hall. We were given a copy of the plans which we shared with Elaine, and that provoked a series of events which led to

the committee's disapproval of the Partnership's tactics and ruled in favour of the traders keeping their places. The latest news is that the project is going back into consultation.

The most interesting aspect is that the Moncrieff case is not an isolated phenomena in Peckham or even in the borough. With massive urban development come other contested sites, other groups of people campaigning against their evictions, usually in response to a specific redevelopment project such as in Moncrieff Place. We can mention a few cases included in what we call the 'contested sites' database, including: 1-51 Peckham High Street, the Tooley Street residents, the East Dulwich estate residents, the Crystal Palace Park campaigners, the 121 in Brixton, and finally the group of homeless people living in the Bullring, Waterloo.

It's all part of the gentrification of South London whose infrastructure appears now as a multiplicity of UED projects, including the Millennium Dome, the London Eye, Imax cinema, Jubilee Gardens, Tate gallery, UCI at Crystal Palace Park and more specifically in Peckham, the Arch, the Pulse, the Zoetrobe, the new library and now Moncrieff Place, taking its cue from larger UED's that have become trendy in the USA and across the world. Barcelona for example is the model for Lord Rogers' and John Prescott's Urban Task force.

If we look at the development of Peckham we see all the characteristics of an emerging fantasy city specifically its 'themo-centrism' and solipsism in creating an environment of illusion that ignores what's happening in its own neighbourhood, that ignores hopelessness, unemployment, social injustice, evictions, while transforming sites into promotional spaces. In the video the city officials talk about the overall look, divided into themes of colour, light and animation used to create a new identity for the town centre.

Another concern is that these fantasy cities are the culmination of a long term trend in which private space replaces public space. The majority of large scale UED initiatives are created by public development agencies in joint business with private partners from the real estate and entertainment industry. In the case of Peckham, from the £31 million budget for improvements to the town centre £18.3 million (more than 50%) comes from the private sector. We know that these private investors will have control over what the streets look like, who will be allowed in and what kind of activities will go on there.

That's why we should be able to place the aesthetic debate about the International Carpet of Flowers within the context of broader struggles over the meaning of democracy. All of the rhetoric around the redevelopment of public spaces invokes the idea of the unitary public sphere, characterised by its inclusiveness and openness, even though it is structured more by exclusions and attempts to erase the traces of these exclusions.

The enclosure of flowers in glass bricks symbolising all communities, represent social space as a substantial unity and is in itself a fantasy that contains its own spatial politics. Our concern is that it legitimises the exclusion of anyone that destabilises that form of representation. In the video we can see the rhetoric of democracy, mobilised by the city officials when they talk about a town for everybody, but this is in itself an authoritarian voice, and a nostalgic image of space because in the reality, we can not recover what we never had.

Our interest in Elaine's campaign was precisely what we interpret as a confrontation with this authoritarian vision of a unitary social space, and a counter image to the redevelopment. Employing

slogans like "stalls on, art off", the entrance to Moncrieff Place was transformed into a strategic frontier, forcing the people as well as the city officials to testify to a conflict they are trying to conceal. Campaigns like these can disclose the evictions that occur when theme projects are presented as symbols of social cohesion. It would be good not to think of public space as a theme park pre-packaged for users, but as a result of the practice or counter-practice by people in their daily life.

Excerpt from:

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'The following material represents responses to a series of artist/ political public forums presented at the South London Gallery (SLG), Peckham, London, August 1999, under the title Non Place Urban Realm. The aim of the project was, in the gallery's words, to "explore urban renewal in the city through art and cultural practices in the form of an Exhibition, Open Forum and reading Room." The theme and issues involved were critical to the situation in South London itself, but also held a more widespread relevance with respect to aspects of inner city regeneration and gentrification in cities throughout Europe, particularly in terms of developments during the last decade.'