

Right (opposite page): **Antoni Malinowski** and **Steve Tompkins** of Howarth Tompkins, Royal Court Theatre view from Sloane Square, 2000. Photo: *Phil Sayer*. Bottom: **Nathan Coley**, *Urban Sanctuary*, 1997. **Nathan Coley**, *Urban Sanctuary* – interview with Neil Gillespie, 1997. Photo: *the artist*

## INHABITED 4 SPACES

# Architectural dialogues

Jes Fernie reveals the process of enquiry that challenges collaborations between artists and architects.

ART IS NOW ANYTHING YOU want it to be – a limited company, a shack between council houses, an oil painting, a pair of acoustic ears or a hoax planning application. It has leapt way beyond the gallery walls into the mess that forms our public space. After thirty years of flailing around in the dark (when art in the public domain was hijacked and used by politicians, administrators and bad artists as a pawn in the regeneration game) it seems that a growing number of artists are now sliding very adeptly between the two worlds of the gallery and public domain. To these artists, the term 'public art' as opposed to 'gallery art' is a non-starter; their work is situated where it needs to be, and for those artists there is no physical or psychological barrier between the two spaces.

An area of this activity that has burgeoned in the last five years is collaboration between artists and architects. Where once the word 'collaboration' meant big-boy architects allowing the work of artists to be placed in their hallowed architectural spaces (Mies van de Rohe and Alexander Calder or Richard Meier and Frank Stella), now we see artists and architects forming dialogues which result in buildings, spaces, objects and conversations which are a product of an intense interest in each other's work. A successful collaboration often involves artists and architects asking unnerving questions of each other, challenging the foundations of their knowledge. They come to the design process with a vulnerability and generosity of spirit which stems

from a sense of trust, and engage in situations where problems are not necessarily there to be solved, but to be radically reinterpreted, laughed at, kicked out or embraced.

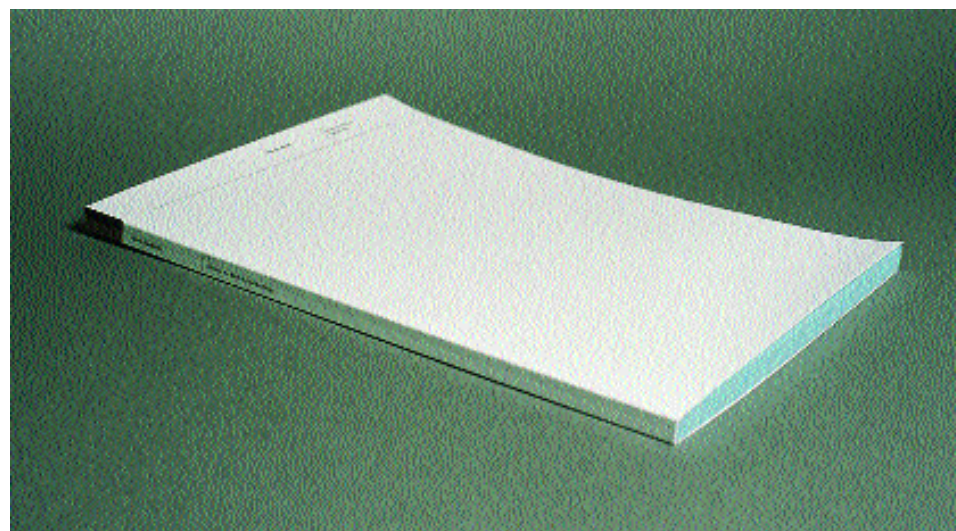
It is, of course, absurd to suggest that more than a handful of artists and architects are truly interested in working in this way. Many architects consider themselves to be artists as well as architects (and they are the absolute pits when it comes to collaborating) while many artists consider their work to be superior to architects who they see as more concerned with function than form or concept. Artists who are not wedded to the object and who can let go of the need to claim an element of a project for their own, are ideal working partners (although I admit to having witnessed even the staunchest of conceptualists eking out a notional place to sign).

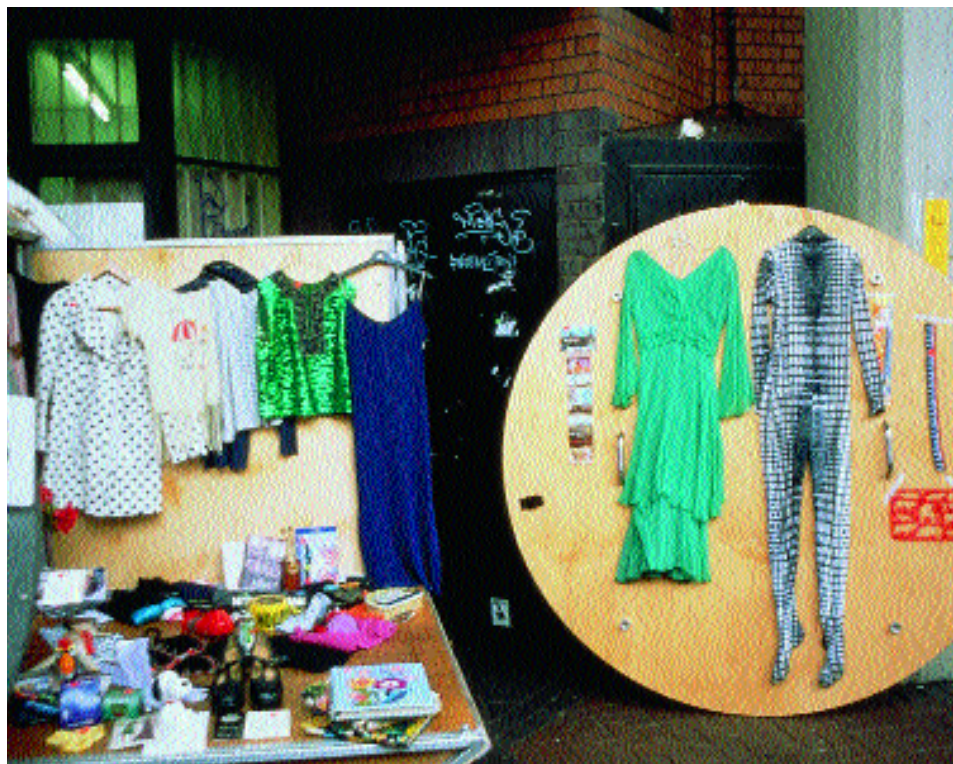
In stark contrast to the many clunky, one dimensional sculptures or public works that litter the streets of the UK, the outcome of collaborations between artists and architects can take many different forms ranging from a direct material approach (applying paint to a wall surface for example) to a conceptual approach in which a process of enquiry becomes the work.

These two polarities are evident at the Royal Court Theatre in London and Stills Gallery in Edinburgh. In both cases, an artist was invited onto the design team and worked closely with the project architect over a number of years. At the Royal Court Theatre, Antoni Malinowski worked with architect Steve Tompkins of

Howarth Tompkins Architects on the refurbishment of the theatre. Malinowski's brief was to find a way of bringing the activity of the theatre out onto the public square in which it sits. A fairly straightforward Grade II listed façade which had to remain intact prevented artist and architect from making a direct contemporary statement. Malinowski negotiated this restriction by making a spectacle out of the auditorium drum wall which runs throughout the building and can be viewed from the street. He painted the wall an intense vermilion and with painstaking detail traced the movement of light as it fell across the space. The humming red wall, in effect, cut out the façade of the building, presenting members of the public in the square below with a night-time spectacle. So while the paint is physically retained behind the closed doors of the theatre, its effect is felt most strongly in the public square.

In 1996 at Stills Gallery, Nathan Coley worked with architect Neil Gillespie of Reiach & Hall Architects. Coley was involved in discussion concerning the layout of the gallery, the café and the photographic studios in the basement. No physical manifestation of his work exists on site, but his thoughts, suggestions and discussions with the architect are embedded within the fabric of the building. The collaboration led him to devise a parallel project called *Urban Sanctuary* – an exploration into the idea of building a city sanctuary and what this would mean to the people of Edinburgh. Coley went so far as to display fake planning applications on railings, walls and public sites which, of course,





resulted in a furore. Local people who wished to log a complaint were given a freephone number connected to Stills Gallery. Staff at the gallery would send the grumblers a publication, produced by Coley, consisting of a series of interviews between the artist and members of various groups including a policeman, a theologian, an artist, a Feng Shui specialist and a sociologist. Each interviewee was asked what they considered an urban sanctuary to be, who might use it, how it would exist in relation, for example, to the law. In contrast to Antoni Malinowski's materially evident project at the Royal Court Theatre, *Urban Sanctuary* existed in the public domain as a series of questions and proposals, encouraging members of the public to consider

what a sanctuary might mean to them. Two projects which might be considered to lie somewhere between these different approaches are *Mobile Porch* and *Acoustic Mirrors*. *Mobile Porch* is a curious peripatetic object made by two curious peripatetic artists and one architect. The porch, a roaming space that can be used for a multitude of purposes, is neither a building nor a sculpture. Artists Kathrin Böhm and Steffan Saffer devised the idea with the architect Andreas Lang after being commissioned by the North Kensington Amenity Trust to make a work that would act as a catalyst for activity underneath the busy Westway flyover in London. Made from a circle of wood with a steel frame measuring seven feet in diameter,

Right (opposite page): Channel Communication Amplifier Folkestone, Kent. Photo: Jes Fernie. Left (top): Kathrin Böhm, Steffan Saffer and Andreas Lang Studio, *Mobile Porch* 'Super swaps' at Portobello Market, December 2000. Left (below): Kathrin Böhm, Steffan Saffer and Andreas Lang Studio, launch of *Mobile Porch*, November 2000.

*Mobile Porch* can be rolled from site to site and dismantled to make a backdrop for any number of activities. In its two-month stint underneath the Westway (it has toured Germany and England since), it was used as a catwalk for a fashion show, a swap shop, a graffiti work shop, Christmas parties, a gallery and a stage. This project exists in the public domain as art, but art that evolves along with the nature of the users and the space around it.

It is difficult for artists to initiate collaborations with architects (rather than vice versa) because of the nature of procurement programmes – an architect is hired by a client and then, if the architect is interested in collaborating, an artist is selected to work with him or her on the design of the building. Only on rare occasions is the situation reversed. The artist Lise Autogena managed to subvert the norm and selected her own 'collaborator', Tom Barker of b consultants, to work with her on a project that aims to get the French and the English talking to each other. Using a series of existing 'acoustic mirrors' located along the coast in Dungeness, as a basis for their project, artist and engineer propose to make a tool for communication across the English Channel. Built between the First and Second World Wars the existing mirrors are huge concrete and steel structures designed to pick up the sound of enemy war craft approaching British shores. They never saw active service due to the invention of radar in 1935 and have remained untouched and unused for seventy-five years. Autogena and Barker plan to place a contemporary mirror on either side of the Channel, one on the coast of Dungeness and the other in Sangatte in France where the Red Cross has recently closed its doors to asylum seekers trying to make their way to England – obviously a poignant setting for such a project. By standing at a very precise location within the dish, people will be able to talk to each other across the sea.

The idea that a project that exists within the public domain must kowtow to the lowest common denominator is slowly disappearing. Artists are finding increasingly diverse ways of inhabiting public space without compromising their goals or getting swallowed up in the parochialism that pervades our streets.

**JES FERNIE IS DIRECTOR OF RSA ART FOR ARCHITECTURE.**

*She is also a freelance art consultant and writer.*

*RSA Art for Architecture is a catalyst for collaborative ventures between artists and architects. All the projects discussed in the article involve artists who have received RSA Art for Architecture grants.*

**Further information:**

**RSA Art for Architecture** [www.rsa-afa.org.uk](http://www.rsa-afa.org.uk)

**Nathan Coley**, *Urban Sanctuary*; A public art work by Nathan Coley, Stills Gallery 1996. [www.stills.org](http://www.stills.org)

**Lise Autogena** [www.autogena.org](http://www.autogena.org)

**Mobile Porch** [www.mobileporch.net](http://www.mobileporch.net)

**Andreas Lang** [www.andreaslang.net](http://www.andreaslang.net)

*'Inhabited spaces' is devised and commissioned by Deborah Smith in collaboration with [a-n] MAGAZINE. The series compliments and enhances existing editorial taking us on a journey through innovative practices exploring definitions and reinventions of our ideas of expression, looking at the shift in language and discourses of art. In the January issue, Penelope Curtis writes about 'Old spaces for new art'. Deborah Smith is an independent curator and co-director of smith + fowle.*

