

# You Make it Amazing: The Rhetoric of Art and Urban Regeneration in the Case of *The Public*

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## ***Abstract***

*Arts councils and departments of culture tell policy makers that the arts are not only valuable in themselves, but for their contribution to the economy, urban regeneration and social inclusion. However, there is significant debate as to whether public art produced under social arts policy can deliver on expectations. This essay examines a recent, controversial urban regeneration project, West Bromwich's *The Public* designed by Will Alsop, in order to assess its visual, symbolic, and material resources. The analysis reveals that, while the gallery functions, at least partially, to construct a shared public experience of West Midland and its culture, it is an experience encapsulated within and aesthetically made over by *The Public* such that *The Public* becomes a replacement scene, thereby undermining the community and at least some of its goals.*

Keywords: urban regeneration, material iconicity, public art, visual rhetoric, *The Public*

## **You Make it Amazing: The Rhetoric of Art and Urban Regeneration in the Case of *The Public***

Arts councils and departments of culture, in both the U.S. and Europe tell policy makers that the arts are not only valuable in themselves, but also make significant contributions to the economy, urban regeneration and social inclusion. As a report by the secretariat of the International Federation of Arts Councils and Culture Agencies (IFACCA) puts it, “Sprinkle a little cultural fairy dust on a rundown area and its chances of revival will multiply—or so the argument goes.” However, both artists and policy makers debate whether public art produced under social arts policy can deliver on expectations. Reports from arts councils and cultural agencies tend to focus on contributions of such projects to regeneration while academic work often takes a more critical stance, pointing out the risks of staking claims to causality and a lack of clear evidence to support such claims. Critics of culture-based regeneration efforts often use the case of the Millennium Dome of the Greenwich Peninsula (London, England) to illustrate a failed large-scale project that lacked cultural vision and only attracted half the forecasted number of visitors (Mirza, 2006). By contrast, scholars and critics alike cite Chicago’s (Illinois, USA) Millennium Park as a crowning achievement of urban planning. These two cases illustrate several of the strategies typical of culture-led urban regeneration. Indeed, the IFACCA identifies 1) iconic buildings and cities of culture, 2) cultural quarters and clusters, and 3) cultural dynamism as three of the most common of these strategies.

A recent urban regeneration project which employed the iconic building strategy is West Bromwich’s (West Midlands, England) *The Public*. Designed by Will Alsop, *The Public* is a £40 million community arts centre in England, one of the largest of its kind. *The Public* is an interesting case at least in part because of the significant amount of public controversy it generated. It is infamous both for its progressive design by a world famous architect and for the extent to which it was over budget and behind schedule. In fact, the project ended up £49 million over budget for a total cost of £73 million and was completed 3 years behind schedule leading to an audit and suggestions that it be “mothballed, decommissioned or even demolished” (*Express and Star*, 2010). Furthermore, *The Public* was voted as the “biggest waste of taxpayer money in Britain” in a poll for an ITV program (Brooks, 2008) and interviews with local residents suggested that they would have preferred something like a community swimming pool or cinema complex instead (the community of West Bromwich has neither). Still, the Arts Council, the Sandwell Borough Council, and other donors who contributed funding, stuck to their rationale

that *The Public* would act as a catalyst for culture-led regeneration.

*The Public* is also an interesting case because of its explicitly stated, largely rhetorical, aims: 1) to feature local community art exhibitions and craft demonstrations, 2) to celebrate West Bromwich's history with displays about local parks and memorials and cinematic footage of past events and 3) to explore ways in which *The Public* might serve to catalyze local groups. In what follows, we examine *The Public*, focusing on its visual, symbolic, and material resources as well as the discourses it has generated. Our framework for this interpretive analysis and assessment incorporates the concept of iconicity in combination with the three rhetorical functions of public, commemorative, urban art as identified by Gallagher and LaWare (2010): 1) highlighting/intensifying values and experiences, 2) highlighting location in meaning making, and 3) inviting judgment<sup>1</sup> (agency).

### **Material Iconicity and the Functions of Public Art**

Many scholars of visual rhetoric reject the idea of starting with a method or linear schema (Blair, C., Jeppeson, M. S., & Pucci Jr., E., 1991; Denzin, 1991), such as suggested by Foss (1994), advocating instead a blending of ideas (Hariman & Lucaites, 2002) that may be chosen by the critic to analyze artifacts in insightful ways. However, in order to conduct a rigorous analysis as called for by Elkins (2003), critics may draw upon concepts from a repertoire of rhetorical theory, visual culture and postmodern theory, etc. Each visual artifact or phenomenon presents a different context or set of circumstances, and a critic must then determine which analytical tools would best help illuminate a deeper understanding of a certain artifact or set of artifacts based on that context. According to Rice (2002), postmodern analysis of visual communication requires layers of approaches and methods (Rice, p. 17). This essay uses a layering approach by drawing upon Foss's emphasis on the role of function in visual rhetorical analysis, Gallagher and LaWare's schema of the rhetorical functions or consequences of public art, and the rhetorical-linguistic concept of iconicity.

According to Foss (1994), critics may productively approach rhetorical analysis of visual artifacts by first determining the function of the artifact (based on the critic's interpretation rather than the creator's intent). Then the critic may move to assess how well that function is communicated and finally, develop a convincing interpretation and evaluation of the function itself. Though Peterson (2001) criticizes Foss's first step, "determining the function," arguing that this makes the critic less accountable and the critique more subjective, many postmodern theorists believe Foss's first step is similar to notions of abductive reasoning and Roland Barthes' concept of

connotative meaning—both concepts that nod to the interpretive and intuitive role of the critic. However, by using a layering of ideas, as suggested above, to critically evaluate the visual rhetoric of a public art space and its transformative potential in urban renewal projects, this kind of abductive reasoning can also be utilized without the restrictive aspect of a one-size-fits-all schema.

In their recent work on public art in urban contexts, Gallagher and LaWare demonstrate this type of approach. Similar to Foss, they suggest that critics interested in public art and urban regeneration initiatives assess and conceptualize such projects according to their rhetorical functions or consequences. First, critics are encouraged to examine how and to what extent the symbolic and material elements of a particular work and/or site highlight certain values and experiences, making those values concrete and visible to a wide audience and, thereby, evoking and intensifying emotional response(s). Second, they focus the critic's attention on the extent to which the values and meanings of such projects are "not universal, but are contingent on location and audience, the product of a complex physical – as well as historical, political, and social – context" (2010, p. 89). Finally, they push critics to assess how such projects serve to invite judgment "not only by art world elites, but by the public at large" because of their "location outside of a museum or gallery" in a public space and by the implication that they are meant to benefit or edify the local populace.

A look to traditional rhetorical concepts may also help the critic consider a visual phenomenon from a new perspective and can help provide an additional layer of understanding. Iconicity refers to the "harmony between the semantic ("content") and syntactical ("form") levels of an utterance" (Jasinski, 2001, p. 304). Jasinski (2001) uses Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "Letter From Birmingham Jail" as a straightforward example wherein King uses the very longest sentence in the letter to help amplify his claim that the racial segregation never seems to end. In short, the *form* of the sentence is unrelenting like racial oppression which is the subject or the *content* of his message. Furthermore, because of the necessity for the critic to intuitively recognize the similarities between form and content, the use of iconicity as an evaluative term highlights the agency of the critic. As Leff and Sachs (1990) explain, "as in the case of metaphor, the functional uses of iconicity outstrip our capacity to describe them in theoretical terms. Iconicity, then, is a principle more readily apprehended through an interpretative rather than a formal approach to discourse" (p. 259). This interpretive nature of iconicity is important to note for those visual critics who argue that applying the logic of language to the visual is not particularly useful because visuals are more "arbitrary." Where language "is more involved with manipulating a

conventionally learned code...visual communication involves observations that lead to hypotheses about meanings” (Moriarty, 1996, p. 185). Moriarty (1996) continues by suggesting critics learn informally about a visual phenomenon. However, we argue that concepts such as iconicity may still be useful to critics in their evaluative observations because 1) as stated earlier, doing so encourages the critic to approach a phenomenon from a new perspective and 2) because some visual scholars and designers, such as Kress and Van Lleuen (1996) and Norman (1988) make the case that visual communication is not as “arbitrary” in its learned code as Moriarty and others would suggest.

Investigating the harmony between message content and form seems like a useful endeavor when the topic of concern is a public arts space conceived of as regenerative catalyst. However, the way content and form is interpreted in visual communication does not transpose very neatly from the linguistic definitions—though this is also hard to determine definitively since there seems to be disagreement among visual communication critics in regard to these definitions. For example, Rice (2002) provides this definition of content and form, “content deals more with the visual stimuli, including fundamental items like composition, materials, line, mass, color, and so on. Form is typically what might be labeled image-making, the result of making sense out of the perceived content in some organizational semblance. Deeper perception, beneath the surface, is where meaning results.” By contrast, in her critique of Foss’ schema, Peterson (2001) writes, “Assumptions also include the privileging of function/content over form/style and seeing style primarily as a means to understanding artists and their purposes.” This statement indicates that content is more closely related to the function of a visual artifact as opposed to the visual stimuli. Peterson continues her critique by arguing that a postmodern critic wouldn’t make such a definite distinction between function and form anyway. Because of this confusion among these terms, we propose using phrases such as “visual stimuli” as roughly corresponding to the linguistic “form”, “visual subject matter” as corresponding to the messageopic and “visual content” as corresponding to the function or consequence of the phenomenon. Using these terms we can investigate the possibilities of a kind of material iconicity—a harmony between visual/material stimuli and visual/material content or consequence. The goal of our analysis is thus to assess the material consequence of *The Public* and to thereby address the following questions: how does *The Public* function rhetorically and to what extent do the symbolic and material elements of *The Public* achieve iconicity?

### ***The Public: History and Controversy***

West Bromwich has been described as “an endless sprawl of West Midlands towns and suburbs with charmless urban scenery.” However, Jubilee Arts, a small community arts organization established by Sylvia King in 1970 sought to change West Brom’s reputation. The organization outgrew its original premises about the time funds from Britain’s lottery were becoming available for community development. The members of the organization decided to pursue an ambitious plan to build a purpose-driven arts center that would give the rundown area of West Bromwich an injection of vitality. The project first attracted controversy when Jubilee Arts representatives approached architect Will Alsop. Alsop is known as an attention-getter for his avant-garde, modernist style distinguished by use of bright colors and unusual shapes. Under the vision of Alsop and Sylvia King, the plan for the center expanded to an almost 100,000 square foot building with galleries, studios, workshops and meeting rooms that would host exhibitions of local and international artists. Their vision also included exploring new kinds of visual art practices such as digital art, given its current social and economic significance around the world. The building, as envisioned by the architect and the community organizer, would have cathedral-like dimensions with 3,500 square meters of cultural space and 2,250 square meters that would be rented to creative industries. According to Marlene Smith, Director of *The Public Gallery* (2008), the “project is part town planning, part regeneration, part visitor attraction, part contemporary art gallery and part media collection. The whole concept is derived from the notion of change through art and participation: it’s a place where people take part and a place where taking part is considered and examined” (para. 1). One of the main features of *The Public’s* design was an interactive gallery showcasing art from local, national and international artists and providing a range of creative experiences that would evolve with each individual visitor. However, when *The Public* finally opened its doors, the interactive art gallery remained closed due to crippling technical and financial problems.

The project was bedeviled by two major disasters. In 2004, 17 months after work on the site had begun, Alsop was removed from the project because his company went into receivership. Eventually, in 2006 the project was forced into administration when funders were made aware of the cost overruns—this led to a year of absolutely no movement on the project. The local authority took ownership and appointed a new team with local architects, Flannery & de la Pole. However, the company had to accommodate trying to bring the scheme back into budget with a huge set of budget cuts that reduced the entire cost by a factor of 10 (from £750,000 to £75,000).

Then in 2009, *The Public* Gallery Ltd, the second company responsible for managing the ill-fated gallery space, also went into administration after the Arts Council of England declined a request for additional funding and pulled its annual £500,000 grant. The Sandwell Council took over the project after the Arts Council donated a final £3 million. There have been other failed lottery projects: Sheffield’s National Centre for Popular Music, and the Earth Centre in Yorkshire, but *The Public* is singular, in that it went into administration even before it was finished (although the center had opened, the interactive gallery had not). The gallery, which is run by a new not-for-profit company set up by the council called the Sandwell Arts Trust, is finally open, Wednesdays to Sundays. However, as Linda Saunders, the general manager of the site, explains, “The interactive experience has been made simpler and more accessible. It is lower tech than the original vision but, as a council, we have had to make hard decisions about what we can realistically deliver” (Batty, 2009, para. 15).

### Description and Analysis of *The Public*

What *The Public* is most noted for visually is the building’s exterior, commonly referred to as the “magenta-and-black fish tank.” The 300 ft long building is four-stories tall and its rectangular shape is comparable to a dark gray aluminum clad shoebox with huge assorted sizes of windows shaped like amorphous blobs reminiscent of water droplets or jellybeans. The windows are further enlivened with hot pink frames (see Figure 1).



Figure 1. The exterior of *The Public* (Ell Brown)

Alsop’s famous creative method is to dribble paint in brightly colored blobs across a sheet of paper. It is not hard to imagine in the case of *The Public* that one of Alsop’s doodles has been translated directly into physical reality. The building is situated within the “ring road” (a road that circles the town) and next to the delivery yard of an aging Queens Square shopping center. In the center of the



space is a “No Loitering” sign and other cautionary signs such as “No dogs in the interests of hygiene.” Judging from the size, color and structural design, *The Public* was undoubtedly intended to function as an architectural tour de force much like the Tate Modern and the Great Court. The exterior of the structure definitely stands out in West Bromwich, which as some reporters describe, is an area still big on “net curtains and bay windows.”

However, based on the still depressed landscape surrounding *The Public* and the common reaction in popular media that the structure looks like a “B&Q superstore with eyes” it is difficult to see at first glance how *The Public* can evoke (perhaps, provoke?) any kind of shared or common cultural understanding. Though the building is architecturally bold and its visual stimuli unique, modern and vibrant, the visual content does not match up harmoniously with this form. Leff and Sachs (1990) explain that in linguistic iconicity, the form deals with the juxtaposition, timing and psychology (what the material actually conveys) of the words. Similarly, as Blair (1999) suggests in her schema of material rhetoric and Dickinson, Ott and Aoki (2006) elaborate on in their critique of the Plains Indian Museum in Cody, Wyoming, the material surroundings of a public material phenomenon are just as important in the overall visual rhetoric of a piece as the visual stimuli of the piece itself. A building large enough to hold almost 100,000 square feet of galleries and studios, workshops and meeting rooms is likely to appear somewhat overindulgent when placed in a community lacking more basic amenities and jobs. It also makes a visitor immediately consider how a building of this magnitude can sustain itself in such a community. Though the building was intended to allow local people to experience the arts interactively while also launching the area’s regeneration, the function or consequence, at least in respect to the outside of the building, is instead as a monument to striking form in disharmony with context and location. This visual and material dissonance relates to what a group of artists involved in the urban regeneration of the Thames Gateway region of South East England were referring to when they concluded that: “There is a tiredness around the idea of the single cultural icon, and a growing awareness that new models of cultural facilities need to be explored...Not every town can sustain its own Tate Modern, and the long-term sustainability of such iconic statements is being increasingly questioned...the iconic building as regenerative catalyst may be the wrong answer” (Charrette, 2004, p. 3).

Still, if regeneration in the area does occur, this visual dissonance between function and form may fade and the cliché of “if you build it they will come” re-invigorated. Indeed, the center experienced an increase in visitors in April 2010 with around 24,000 people visiting (compare with



90,000 total visited in 2009) and began to generate its own funds by renting out the “lily pad” structures as offices to companies such as BP Recruitment, employees of *The Public* and the Sandwell Council (the organization which took over the project after the Arts Council walked away), leading to renewed optimism among supporters about its future and its transformative power. The most promising news, from the regeneration perspective, is that in 2010 the supermarket giant Tesco had been granted the rights to develop a 540,000 square meter shopping and leisure centre in West Bromwich town centre, right next to *The Public*. The plans consist of a Tesco Extra store, other shops, a restaurant and a cinema. It also includes new roads, covered by canopies, and, according to Tesco, the creation of 2,000 new jobs. Demolition work began in 2011, and the project is set to be completed in 2013 (Sandwell, 2012). These changes to the context and location will impact the rhetorical function of the building but whether it will achieve the harmony implied by iconicity is less certain. This is due, as we demonstrate below, to the values and experiences highlighted by the interior and exterior symbolic and material elements of the structure.

Upon entering *The Public* through sliding doors, the full extent of the building’s volume can be seen while standing in a colorful foyer (see Figure 2).

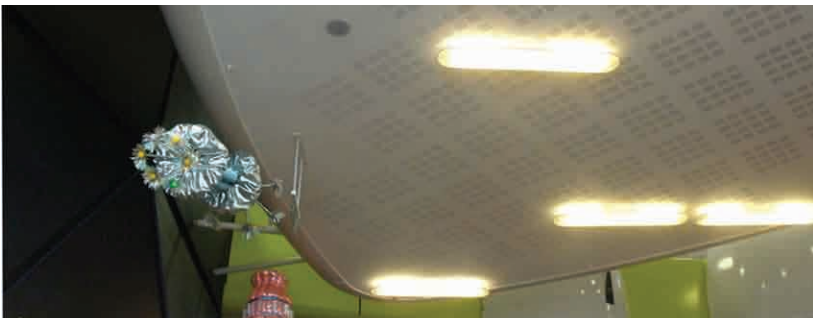


Figure 2. Foyer of *The Public* (Ell Brown)

This view of the grand interior of the building has been achieved by designing the internal structure of the building and the exterior as two discrete segments. The main structural steel H-frame, which the engineer described as being “like rugby goalposts that crank in at the crossbar and then out again” supports the floor plates without them having to touch the external walls in the public areas of the building and repeats every 8.8 meters. Because of this envelope effect, a 1-meter wide void surrounds the perimeter and extends up the 20-meter height of the walls. Visitors can glimpse up through the voids in the

foyer. The southernmost end of the building is designed more conventionally in order to house a 250-seat performance space as well as offices and a restaurant. It is difficult *not* to feel a sense of awe, when viewing the entire expanse of the enormous shell. The bold colors and shapes immediately displayed before visitors are unexpected, exciting, and somewhat overwhelming. Specific light treatments range from pink neon scrawled across the ceiling to the simple fluorescent fittings that are programmed to follow the flow of visitors. The Kevan Shaw Lighting Design (KSLD) lighting scheme actually won a Lighting Design Award in the Public Buildings category in March 2009. KSLD stated, “The lighting is designed to be an integral part of the experience of the building. Both colour and dynamics are employed to create a remarkable series of events within the multiform interior” (iReference.ca). Indeed, being embraced by the dramatic visual stimuli instead of the surrounding economically depressed community, a visitor could get lost in the space and bright lights and begin to imagine her or his own creative possibilities. At the same time, however, the experience turns the visitor into a spectator who is awed, foregrounding the scene rather than the agent and his or her agency.

As visitors stand in the foyer and look up they are presented with a “Piranesian assembly of sculpturally articulated objects” (Woodman, 2008, para. 16). Most architects working under a Piranesian influence explain that this refers to experimenting with form’s malleability and using many sources within a single composition. The Piranesian legacy also asks architects and artists to exert creative license in order to reveal fantastical possibilities. At the very top of the suspended Piranesian objects hang numerous white platforms linked by greenish-yellow bridges (see Figure 3).



*Figure 3.* View from underneath the “lily pads” (Ell Brown)

The undersides of the platforms as well as their balustrades are covered in glass-reinforced plastic. Jubilee Arts intended to use these formations,

dubbed the “lily pads,” as a workspace for the organization. Now, as previously mentioned, they are being rented for commercial revenue and are out of bounds for public visitors. Partly due to the value re-engineering (after so much of the budget had to be cut), the quality of the lily pads’ detailing is not as outstanding as in Alsop’s other notable suspended forms like those in Victoria House or Queen Mary’s Hospital Projects in London according to Arty-tecture.com<sup>2</sup> (August 2010).

While it is fortunate for the financial sustainability of *The Public* that the lily pads provide opportunities to generate revenue, using them in this manner does little to advance the other stated goals of the project, as indicated by Sally Luton, Regional Executive Director of Arts Council England, West Midlands. Young audiences are able to experience the exceptional architectural design of the lily pad exterior but because the general public is not granted access to the lily pads it indicates that commercial ventures are figuratively and physically placed on a pedestal (even if floating) and disconnected from the community in white bubbles. This elevation of commercial businesses in the lily pads is not necessarily void of material iconicity however. The clean, slick and plastic form of the lily pads are compatible with the visual function of a plastic world removed from the realities of the community. Situated at some of the highest points in the building they are also reminiscent of a kind of deity looking over the activities of the world below. As the commercial tenants are providing some of the most hopeful news to *The Public* since it went into its first administration, they are acting as a kind of savior in a sense. Though many of the artists make efforts to include the community in their installations, the commercial tenants do not and their autonomous pod-like homes within *The Public* do establish a kind of material iconicity—even if the function was not what the Jubilee Arts organization had originally envisioned for the space.

Within the larger envelope of the interior as visitors continue their journey, is a series of enclosed or semi-enclosed discrete structures, organically shaped and described in terms such as the “Pod”, “Rock”, “Pebble”, “Lily-Pad” and “Sock.” Like the internal floor plates, the organic structures are fully defined and detached as they break through the external shell of the building. The structures with the highest elevation, the rock and pebble closest to the neighboring shopping center, are constructed out of mirror-finished stainless steel and their assertive presence leads visitors to assume they house something of artistic significance. Instead, the rock and pebble have been routinely criticized for celebrating the less important functions of the building, the bathrooms and an administrative area with offices and kitchens (see Figure 4).



Figure 4. Entryway to the bathrooms (Jo-H)

This is probably the most obvious instance where the material and visual elements speak not to the goals of the center but to the design's focus on itself. Visitors cannot but help be curious about the rock and pebble with their shiny reflective coating and conspicuous shape. After stepping from outside into a brand new enclosed and exciting environment a visitor's first thought when seeing the rock and pebble is, "what sort of new visual occurrence will I experience within that unique structure?" In an odd way, the mundane, more private experiences actually housed in the rock and pebble become a kind of stand in for the promised inspiration and shared community of *The Public*.

Still, the most eye-catching architectural element looking up from the foyer is the ever-rising 350-meter long ramp featuring the digital interactive artwork, structural tree exhibits and touch screen displays gradually connecting the ground floor to the third floor (see Figure 5).

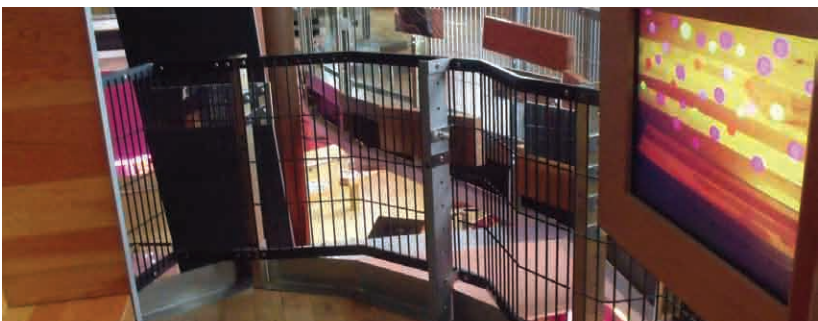


Figure 5. Interactive digital displays (Ell Brown)

This long walkway was initially part of the paying access portion

of the building but the fee was removed following *The Public's* re-opening in 2009. The digital exhibits had to be made simpler and more accessible as well. Now visitors are free to roam the skeletal walkway and experience the many displays primarily aimed at families. Walls are few along this path because *The Public* was intended to introduce artists and visitors to art of a digital nature and so that required a new kind of art space. Interior/gallery designer Ben Kelly invented the tree-like structures to house exhibits in a place where there are few walls. Accordingly, the dozen exhibits that were specially commissioned for the first show were all of a digital nature, and each involved some sort of visitor interaction. For example, visitors were asked to say their name backwards so that this could be recorded and later played back to them as part of a sound installation. Also, along this journey visitors happen upon the largest of Alsop's freestanding structures, the "sock." The sock has two rooms on top of one another where temporary exhibitions are presented and its detailing has also been described by reporters as "fairly horrific." It has also been criticized for having such faceted walls that only freestanding work can be displayed. Films are often shown in these spaces.

It should be noted that many of the digital exhibits are created by involving the West Bromwich community. For instance, Lia and Miguel Carvalhais with the assistance of pupils and staff at Perryfields High School, a school located in Oldbury West Midlands, created "Content Pools," an installation completed in 2008. This exhibit includes a set of circular screens that display images of water related to the Datafall (another exhibit) and can also be changed through control frames. Cronehills Primary School, another school in west Bromwich, assisted Blast Theory, an artist group that uses interactive media, in creating Flypad, a videogame for up to 11 players where the objective is to exchange body parts through collisions with one another. The main objective of the game is to keep an avatar in flight.

In addition, the artists of many of the other exhibitions at *The Public* have developed at least some of their work in collaboration with a community organization, school or by recruiting local individuals. Of the 11 exhibits currently on display in *The Public*, ten involve the community in some way whether the exhibit features West Midlands or the community offers input into the creative process. For instance, "Love Stories" features a collection of short stories gathered by artist Jo Löki from participants at Tea Dancing sessions held at *The Public* each fortnight and "The Very Public People" celebrates the "everyday heroes of society, people who drive us to work, look after other people's children, sell us food" through interviews by 16 local artists. Other more traditional exhibits include photography displays

documenting life in the Black Country and collections of fine artists from the Midlands who work with glass, ceramics and sculpture.

The exhibits in *The Public* provide an interesting phenomenon for analysis because they so nicely encapsulate the content of their exhibits within the creative forms of architects and interior designers. As Director of *The Public* Marlene Smith explained, they wanted to create an experience that is “fun and appealing to people who might not see an art gallery as ‘for them,’ but it also has to have artistic integrity and to be really rigorously thought through and delivered. We want the conversation about art and change to happen with our peers as much as it does with our very wide audience” (2008). Looking at the form of the exhibits’ containers, whether this is “the sock” or the tree-like structures, one wonders if the architects and designers felt like the space had to stimulate visitors’ interest more than the exhibits themselves (see Figure 6).



Figure 6. Tree structures and digital exhibits (Ell Brown)

The artistic content of the exhibits make a great effort to connect with and showcase the history, identity and public memory of the West Midland area. However, the space in which these exhibits are presented seems motivated to draw more attention than the exhibit content themselves—in short, the creative desire of the architect and designers appears to outshine the local artists or in some cases displays two genres in such incongruous ways that it becomes less enjoyable for visitors.

Perhaps one of the clearest examples of the building usurping focus from exhibition content is associate curator Jason Bowman’s decision to approach artist Esther Shalev Gerz about a film where local residents are asked to consider the building and themselves. Filmed during the last few weeks of construction, this piece acts as a dialogue between the citizens and the building. However, this choice manifests itself as representative of many of the decisions regarding visual form where the content about West



Midlands, its people and its art is not enough to investigate on its own—the building must act as a compelling filter for visitor interaction. The consequence of the exhibits combined with their exhibition form is that although the cultural heritage and current happenings of the West Midlands is interesting enough to earn itself a place in *The Public*, the building itself needs to add its own aesthetic visual stimuli in order to elevate the visual subject matter. Here, the separation between visual form of the exhibit spaces and the visual function of the exhibits and spaces is less distinct. The form so greatly influences the function or overall message about the art of the exhibits that a consideration of material iconicity is not as productive. Instead, a rhetorical discourse, a “construction that blends form and content into a concrete whole—a whole that assigns meaning to a region of shared public experience and solicits an audience to embrace the meaning it constructs” (Leff and Sachs, 1990, p. 255) might be a better concept to help think about this interaction between visual form and consequence. Thus, while there is evidence that the gallery functions, at least partially to construct a shared public experience of West Midland and its culture, it is an experience encapsulated within and aesthetically made over by *The Public*.

### Implications

Following this analysis, at least two main points should be discussed 1) the idea of the long-term transformative potential of a landmark building or single cultural icon and 2) the possibilities that a notion of material iconicity can offer critics and designers in their construction and evaluation of a public arts space.

The project leaders for *The Public*, original and current, have ambitious goals for the building as a new kind of arts center that will allow people of all ages but especially youth to experience the arts and digital arts in a way in which people participate. According to Luton (2008) “young people in particular now expect to interact with and influence the arts activities they’re involved in, rather than just passively consuming” (*Building Design Online*). This statement is a little paradoxical in the sense that Luton was advocating for the creation of a center that would encourage young people to participate but the resulting space, as our analysis illustrates, places them in a passive role. Instead of designing their own plans or their own artistic outlets, visitors are presented with a variety of choices from which to pick. While it could be argued that *The Public’s* interactive exhibits provide the training wheels to creative initiative, the exhibits are tied to consumption as well as to technology in ways that make them function more so as brief bursts of entertainment. Additionally, as illuminated in the analysis above, because



the form of the building points to itself, its sheer monumentality, the center's slogan, "you make it amazing" is inherently contradicted. Indeed, the form of the building works to assert its own agency, thereby at least partially undercutting the agency of visitors. If a visitor's efforts can only end up competing with the building, and its interior elements, for attention, then the possibility for creativity becomes highly circumscribed. *The Public* creates a space of attention that points to itself rather than to the people or the local community which surrounds it. In Burkean terms, it establishes scene as the essential element of a rhetorical act. By initially forcing visitors to pay for each interactive experience and directing them to make purchases in the bookstore, *The Public* instituted a kind of financial hierarchy within the audiences of varying demographic backgrounds. Visitors are corralled into various roles by the dominance of the scene, whether this is through monetary demands or an overreliance and demanded sense of awe in regard to the technology. The interactive exhibits indicate a kind of passivity and strongly advocate consumption. Eventually, these problematic issues resulted in the permanent exhibits as being accepted for pure entertainment and viewed as largely for children. Instead of exhibits that promote extended looking, animated memory and personal fulfillment, the exhibits existed as brief bursts of experience and short-lived wonderment. This kind of looking does not promote any kind of active engagement on the part of the participant and opportunities to really engage the local community are lost.

Not only are visitors of *The Public* stripped of their artistic agency, so are the curators and employees of the facility. The most recent report, an independent inquiry by auditor Anthony Blackstock Ltd (2011) and commissioned by the Arts Council itself, found that the, "building lacks flexibility and will be hard to adapt in the future ... Some of the specifications have proved to be unworkable. It has concerns about maintenance, security and acoustic quality" (p. 27). Without flexibility with the material space, curators will have a difficult time providing visitors opportunities for true creativity. In response to the report, Arts Council Chief Executive Alan Davey comes close to articulating the failed material iconicity, "*The Public* is a clear example of a project where the execution did not reflect the original vision" (Walker, 2011). But the problem was likely not only in execution but in completely disregarding their mission to keep it "local." The form or visual stimuli never celebrated local talent even in its original choice of architect and so the visual content is inevitably contradictory. There might exist a strong rhetorical discourse, as described by Sachs, with a reported 157,000 visiting the *The Public* annually, but true harmony between concept and form simply was not achieved. This lack of harmony does make it more difficult for a

project such as this to continue to succeed. Prior to and even three years after its delayed opening, there is still considerable speculation about whether or not *The Public* will continue to draw visitors and be able to adapt to changing needs over time.

*The Public* also raises other questions about arts policy and current understandings regarding the universal power of art. According to curator and arts professional Andrew Brighton, when the future of a cultural arts center rests on the regenerative power, this, as well as the rhetoric of social inclusion, leads to a “tick-box culture of political bureaucracy which all artists should be wary of” (Mirza, 2006b, p. 18). Furthermore, there may also be issues of these major projects actually inhibiting the original creativity of a city or area. Communities begin to “hunger to absorb advancements from abroad;” in *The Public*’s case this would be the more famous and international shows that are likely to be more attractive to the international tenants, and eventually the “unique culture and traditions are sinking under external influences” (Gilmore, 2004). Making recommendations for cultural advancements in Shanghai, a city now investing heavily in landmark buildings, Gilmore (2004) writes, “Shanghai must begin the task of nourishing this inner force—the imagination of its people.” In respect to this recommendation, *The Public* does have an advantage. Though it is a landmark building it also has been the catalyst for efforts to “nourish its [Bromwich’s] inner force” by reaching out to the artistic resources of the surrounding community through its exhibits. Other studies claim that only an “in-depth understanding of geographical and historical specificities will help us understand the way in which cultural regeneration potentially strengthens existing sources of identity rather than imposing new ones” (Bailey, Miles and Stark, 2004). However, it seems impossible that a cultural center or landmark building would have no change on the identity of an area, however slight, if it has become part of the cultural landscape itself. The driving motivation behind these centers is that they will imbue some kind of change, mostly through urban infrastructure and economic growth but it is probably naïve to imagine that there would be no influence on the previous “unique culture and traditions.”

Empirical data regarding the impact of cultural infrastructure does not clearly indicate whether or not culture alone can revitalize an area. Ellis (2005) argues for a much more comprehensive plan for urban renewal because he believes cultural infrastructure pulls funds from the private and public donors that invest in other civic systems like transportation and housing. Therefore, he warns that huge public facilities like *The Public* can “pre-empt and siphon off existing audiences and philanthropic resources rather than

generating new ones” (para. 5). This same belief about the transfer of civic funds from one need to another, and initial lack of urban regeneration with this kind of practice, is what sparked most of the criticism and mockery of *The Public* years before it even opened. Through most of its planning, construction and events for the first couple years after it opened, *The Public* appeared to support architectural critic Dejan Sudjic’s (2005) assertion that cultural landmark buildings are a “decadent, short-lived phenomenon” (Shaw & Evans, 2006, p. 4). However, with new signs of regeneration, such as the Tesco shopping center, it is possible that *The Public* will go the route of what Charles Jencks (2006) predicts for cultural landmark buildings, who sees these kind of cultural centers as “having both staying power and potential as creative, pluralist forces, providing they observe a code of good practice” (p. 3).

A prime example of a successful cultural center by way of urban regeneration, with much less controversy surrounding its planning and opening, is The Yerba Buena Arts Centre in San Francisco. This more comprehensive multicultural area, forms part of a mixed-use regeneration scheme includes hotels, a public garden, shopping mall and the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA). According to Shimuzu (2002), in its first three years, the “new complex attracted over 7.5 million visitors, making a tangible improvement to the local quality of life, reducing crime in what had been a ‘no go’ area. The city’s hotel bed tax revenue for the arts (established in 1961) also increased by 14%, and the contribution from new hotels in the cultural district was estimated at \$271 million per year, producing wider benefits as well as a return to city” (Shaw & Evans, 2006, p. 4). Singapore is another successful, but much different example (Shaw & Evans, 2006), that makes the case for iconic community buildings with a Chinese school and a Malay Mosque. These buildings are constructed with the support of a particular community and are found “to derive symbolic as well as use value by reflecting shared memory, identity and solidarity of a social group’, and to ‘act as a counterbalance to transnational iconic projects that often dissociate the local society’” (Ho, 2006, p. 91).

In the case of *The Public*, it seems that the exhibits on the interior succeed in reflecting this shared memory and representing the identity of the West Midlands, similar to the Chinese school and Malay Mosque in Singapore. However, the architecture and design of the building, the outer form does not match the content or function of the interior—either visually or fiscally. If the form and function of the building had been able to achieve a level of material iconicity it is likely the cultural center might not have had so many crippling struggles along the way. For this to have happened, the Jubilee

Arts Council would have had to continue listening to and incorporating the community throughout the entire process, as in the case of the Malay Mosque in Singapore. As Research psychiatrist Mindy Fullilove (2004) explains, if a community wishes to create an environment of visual expression in order to “lift the spirit” attention must focus on “opportunities for relatedness.”

In the case of *The Public*, a disconnect occurred between the form and intended function once the plans for the most dominant visuals (shape of the building, space design) were made not to highlight the culture of the community but to draw international attention to the project. Though the idea of “root shock” might not apply specifically in this case<sup>3</sup>, what Fullilove says about urban renewal is very relevant. She writes that urban renewal is also “indicative of the type of society toward which Western society is moving—a mere collection of individuals seeking to satisfy their own individual interests” (Moran, 2006).

Using a concept of material iconicity when planning, constructing and evaluating the visuals of a public space, offers critics and designers another tool or frame to consider the relevant phenomenon. There are unavoidable issues regarding the definitions and connotative understanding of form and content especially when applied to visual artifacts. However, if the designers and critics are clear in their own personal definitions, examining the harmony between the visual stimuli or composition and the function or consequence can be a productive exercise. For instance, in regard to the *The Public*, it is interesting to note that where our analysis demonstrates that iconicity was lacking, such as in Alsop’s architectural design of the building’s exterior and the “rock and pebble” spaces, these were also the same elements of the project that received the most criticism in editorials, blogs and guest commenting online. This is not to say that material iconicity is a determinist concept (critics could easily discuss the issues of the floating structures not being open to the general public, even though we found these elements to achieve a level of material iconicity). However, it does provide another way to think about the strength of an artifact’s visual rhetoric.

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## Endnotes

1. Gallagher and Laware (2010) explain that the monument to Joe Louis (as an illustrative case of many monuments) "invites judgment, not only by art world elites, but by the public at large because of its location outside of a museum or gallery and by the implication that it is meant to benefit or edify a local populace" (p. 89).
2. Arty-Tecture is the name of a small multi-disciplined design team based in the West Midlands.
3. Fullilove defines root shock as "the traumatic stress reaction to the destruction of all or part of one's emotional ecosystem."



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