

# A new space of operation

I've been working in and around transdisciplinary practice for the last twenty years now, and have found it to be a fertile and stimulating ground both for those working consistently within it or just passing through, I've just noticed that only recently has it started to become fashionable. The art world seems to be shifting, to acknowledge the importance and value of transdisciplinary work. This is partly a function of the cycles of fashion but also an unavoidable reflection of the increasing number of artists who are not content to have their work framed purely in a gallery context. One can trace the shift from the early 1980s through from interdisciplinary practice (disciplines talking to each other), to collaborative practice (all working together), to transdisciplinary practice (practitioners able to operate outside their own fields).

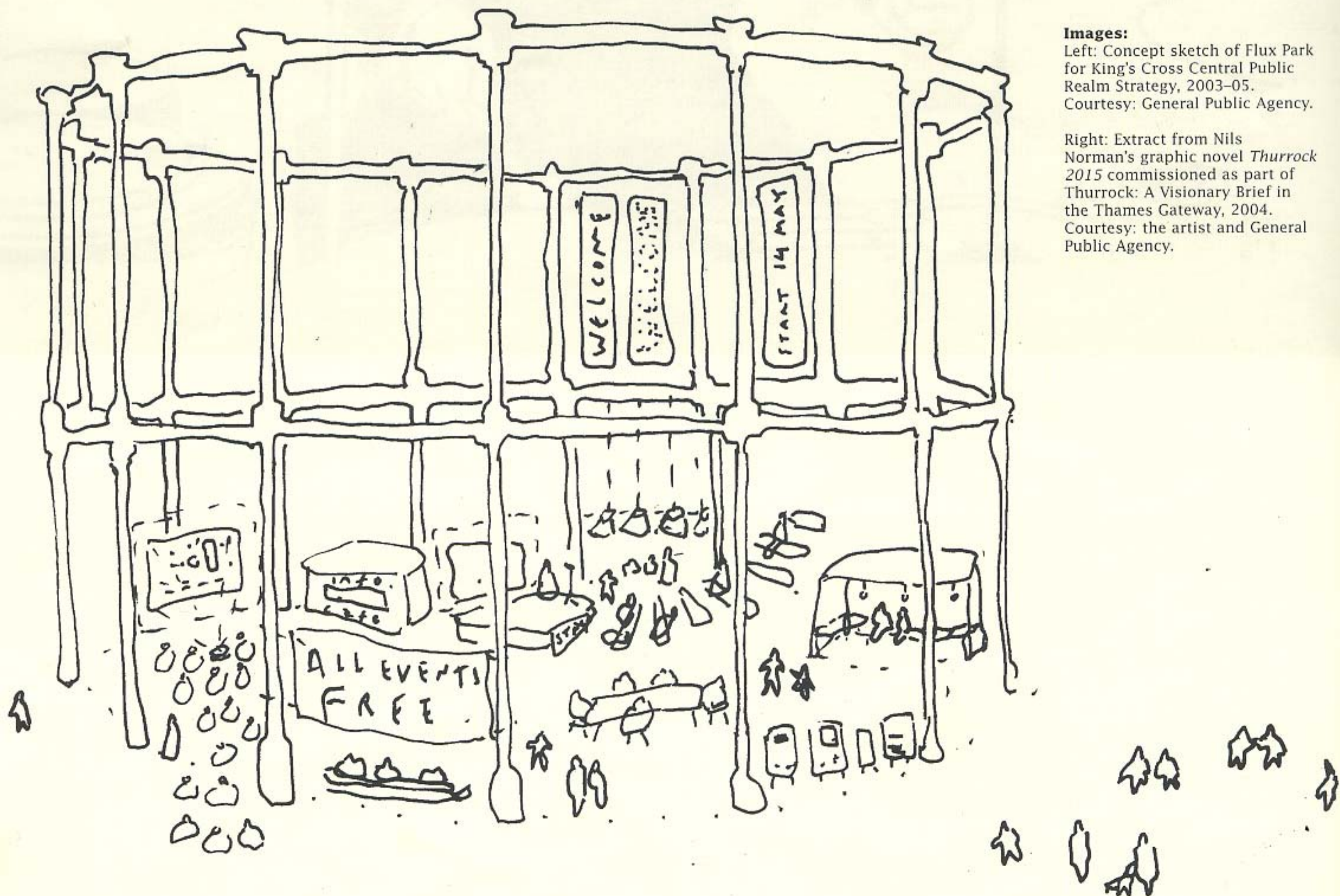
My background is as an independent curator, specialising in inter/cross/trans disciplinary practice, opening up new areas of practice for artists. In the 1980s I curated a large-scale exhibition on Chicano art of the border states of the US, with particular emphasis on collaborative and cross-cultural practices. In 1993 I launched a programme of artists' commissions at the Science Museum in London, which pioneered both the relationship between contemporary artists and museology and between artists and scientists.

## Why am I interested?

As a curator: Because I like new thought, I like what happens when you put different understandings and positions together, the fruitfulness of misunderstanding or the shifts of understanding, the frictions and epiphanies that can emerge. Some of my work used to involve pairing artists with other practitioners, 'brokering the marriage', then artists and scientists increasingly formed their own collaborations, as did artists and architects; though their respective positions were still clearly defined. It is much more exciting now that practitioners themselves are slipping confidently between disciplines, operating as authors or directors of a group of disciplines, working in crossdisciplinary collectives.

## General Public Agency

General Public Agency (GPA) launched on May Day 2003. We are an interdisciplinary team of architects, urban designers, artists and researchers. There are two directors, myself, who has a curatorial background, and Lucy Musgrave who worked first as a journalist and then became director of the Architecture Foundation. General Public Agency delivers social, cultural and spatial planning for clients from both the public and private sector. We expand our core team to bring in and collaborate with other practitioners from a wide range of disciplines where appropriate. The area of transdisciplinary practice within urban and rural renewal is the subject of a book I am writing with Lucy at the moment, to be published by Thames and Hudson, Spring 2007. It's an international survey of inspirational projects involving artists, architects, engineers, designers that demonstrate new approaches to regeneration or renewal. On a global scale there is a new field emerging to tackle intractable problems; the projects are catalysed by a clear brief emerging from a concrete problem. We think this is a new field and through the book we are seeking to outline the principles of this field.



## Images:

Left: Concept sketch of Flux Park for King's Cross Central Public Realm Strategy, 2003-05. Courtesy: General Public Agency.

Right: Extract from Nils Norman's graphic novel *Thurrock 2015* commissioned as part of *Thurrock: A Visionary Brief* in the Thames Gateway, 2004. Courtesy: the artist and General Public Agency.



Part of our program is set up town brainstorming sessions to get as many local ideas networked as we can so that together we can start to implement DIY changes on a micro-level. If you want to start your own demonstration, solarise your whole village, set-up aquatic sewage silos at bus-stops, collect and redistribute used vegetable oil so that you and your neighbours can stop buying diesel, set up Local Economic Trading Systems... you name it, we'll be listening...

### Who works best within transdisciplinary practice?

There are certain personal qualities that I would propose are required when working across disciplines: the ability to listen, and an interest in and respect for others. This true interest in the other allows a transdisciplinary practitioner to understand and see the bigger picture, they do not see, consider or accept the boundaries and silos, which hem in much thought and practice. An intense curiosity also seems required, coupled with an interrogative mind. Perhaps the most interesting minds have always been transdisciplinary. The assumed freedom of the artists mind also exists for the most creative of scientists, engineers, etc.

I believe that creativity is essentially transdisciplinary – the unexpected connections, leaps, oppositions of creative responses do not respect the barriers or borderlines of discipline or profession. This is how new thought emerges. Art processes are useful training for this process but do not have an exclusive hold on creativity.

### Pragmatics and problems

I have always worked clearly within a client-based framework. Prior to GPA I worked as a consultant, now we operate as a business. This seems to me to provide the clarity of understanding between different disciplines, encourages everyone to consider value, and of necessity requires a brief. A brief is a very useful way to ensure that priorities and expectations are articulated. I have always found a brief to be a stimulus for creative response, a framework through which ideas are tested and emerge.

In our work we have our background specialisms but we do not work exclusively to these. We work as a team: the artist, architect, urban designer, curator contribute and comment on all projects. A team member is expected to have a body of knowledge and expertise but not to be bound by that, obviously then a certain level of confidence and resilience is required to be a team member. When we commission other practitioners to join the team we make the terms of reference clear – whether they be geographers, artists, play experts or engineers, we clarify whether their work will be discrete and credited/authored by them or whether it will be part of a team response.

When we commission other practitioners to work with us we like to give them a challenge – to ask them to do something new. Clarity and challenge are important strategies in supporting people to produce their best work.

### New spaces of operation

I believe that transdisciplinary practice is a new field. Two major cultural shifts, towards a participative culture and the breaking down of professional boundaries, require a transdisciplinary response. Transdisciplinary practice raises interesting questions, one of which is around ideas of ownership and authorship. Sometimes authorship can be retained but the logical progression of this area of practice is that notions of authorship will radically change – for if we cannot say this is the art and this is the engineering how will we know who to credit for what? Are artists and the art world able to accommodate this?

Transdisciplinary practice is fundamentally about moving out of spaces of operation – not just disciplines. The work exists outside material reality but is not purely conceptual – this is a transdisciplinary space.

Clare Cumberlandidge