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Issues of 'Community' and 'Engagement' 1992

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Central to this theme of change is the transformation of the urban environment and its impact upon quality of life, 'community' and cultural identity. What we mean by 'community' here is important, since the word often associated with nostalgic or highly romanticised images of 'place'. This in our experience is not very useful, indeed it is counter productive within a dynamic of change. All communities are essentially communities of interest. The fact that this 'interest' may attach itself to a specific location in certain circumstances is not unimportant since this may involve issues of identity, especially when an area is undergoing major demographic change as in Docklands. Nevertheless, we do not regard this as the primary factor in defining a community. Community - as its root *communis* implies - is inextricably linked to communication. It is an identifiable 'sphere of discourse', with codes of inclusion and exclusion - a micro-culture - which is of necessity meshed with other spheres of culture and society, and engaged actively with them in a continual dynamic of change. As Raymond Williams says,

> *"the process of communication is in fact the process of community: the sharing of common meanings, and thence common activities and purposes; the offering , reception and comparison of new meanings, leading to the tensions and achievements of growth and change".* [2]

It is therefore this dynamic view of 'community', which may extend far beyond any particular location, engaging and interconnecting with other 'spheres of discourse', that we are concerned with developing in *The Art of Change*.

The Process of Engagement

In a society as complex as ours, however, it is clear we cannot address all communities - even if we wanted to - and expect them to share our meanings and goals. We have to make choices. Put simply, the process of engagement starts with 1) establishing what communities we actually

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[2] Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* , Pelican first published 1958

belong to and what the nature of that involvement is; 2) linking with those we we want to belong to, have connections with or wish to ally ourselves to; 3) working outwards from there to make contact with others who may be interested in dialogue and exchange. It is obviously more complex than a linear 1, 2 ,3; these levels happen simultaneously and cross refer. But putting this way helps to clarify what our role might be at various moments in the process. As communicators, to help -as Raymond Williams puts it - "the sharing of common meanings", to build the bonds of solidarity - that's our *Sustaining* role, at times even a defensive role. And it's an important one, where there is a value in 'speaking to the converted', and an opportunity for *celebration* which is vital. The other role - the *Transformative* - is in "the offering, reception and comparison of new meanings". And this - the point of intervention - is obviously where we are most likely to engender conflict. Here again we have to make choices. With those whom we choose to ally ourselves, we have to be aware of, and sensitive to, the new directions that community wishes to take; to be part of its *becoming.* Against those whom we oppose - those who oppress - it is important to make our critique hard hitting, not to convince *them* because they are not interested in genuine dialogue or exchange. It would be against their interests both materially and subjectively. (There is a poster for the latest Godfather movie that says, "Real power cannot be given, it must be taken"; there is some truth in that statement.) But there are many people who do not deliberately ally themselves with the minority interests of the powerful, who are nevertheless caught up - at varying levels - in the momentum of power. And if any real change is to be effected, they have to be reached. We also have to be aware that, in certain instances, the *they* in question might well be ourselves.