

The Docklands Photo-murals

Dunn, P. and Leeson, L. 2007, 'The Docklands Photomurals' in *Art and Social Change: A Critical Reader*, ed W. Bradley C. Esche, Tate publishing in association with Afterall, London. pp. 245-248.

The photo-murals were developed in response to the request from community representatives for large posters to represent the key issues affecting the redevelopment of the Docklands. The Docklands Community Poster Project steering group considered carefully who the main audience for these posters should be. Were they to be directed towards the developers, or to explain the issues to outsiders? Or were they to be primarily for the Docklands communities themselves? It was decided that the latter group were the most important. Most people were unaware of what was going on, and only knew the miles of corrugated iron now surrounding what was left of the docks, and that they had been left stranded in poor housing with few facilities.

The siting of the photo-murals was also important. Commercial billboards, aimed at communicating a simple brand name, tend to be situated in locations where they can best attract the attention of passing motorists. Since the Poster Project's information was aimed at local people, it was decided that the organisation should construct them on sites where they could be seen over time by passing pedestrians. To this end, the organisation decided to build its own billboard structures, and the first one was subsequently constructed opposite a health centre on Wapping Lane. When further funding came through from the Greater London Council, seven more photo-mural sites were built in and around the Docklands area. Some were temporary, however at any one time six sites were in operation.

The images themselves were developed with the multiple photo-mural sites in mind. They were designed to change gradually through replacement of individual sections, to develop a narrative rather like a slow motion animation. In practical terms this meant the images could be transferred from one site to another, enabling the story of Docklands to unfold through time and space.

Inspiration for the format of the photo-murals came from Chinese wall posters, which had brought information to the people during the Cultural Revolution. The name 'photo-mural' was coined by art critic Richard Cork when searching for words to describe this aspect of the work. Messages to be conveyed by the photo-murals came out of the discussions of the Docklands Community Poster Project steering group. The latter was comprised of representatives from the tenants and action groups in the Docklands area, who met once a month to feed back on current issues of the campaigning and identify where action was needed. This group decided on the siting of the photo-murals and issues for communication. Peter Dunn and Loraine Leeson then worked on the representation of these themes, bringing imagery back to the group for further discussion of its meaning, though the visual representation was entirely the remit the artists. In this way the Docklands Community Poster Project was able to build on the model of the steering group model developed for the East London Health Project, which allowed each member of the collaborative team to use their best skills and avoided a 'lowest common denominator' approach. This process of decision making enabled a multiplication of skills and experience and provided a hub of creative energy that sustained the project for its ten year duration.