

Homeland *making meaning in Middle England*

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Within any social space there is a plurality of overlapping histories and traditions, or 'maps of meaning', which relate, in very different ways, to the dominant attitudes of everyday life, and thus to the distribution of power in society. This multi-layered cultural terrain is constantly contested according to particular (ultimately economic) interests within the social hierarchy. With the recognition of a plurality of cultures ('high' and 'low', black and white, masculine and feminine, gay and straight, urban and rural, etc) it is clear that different meanings and values will conflict and compete for ascendancy in accordance with the underlying power mechanisms of society.

Antonio Gramsci's re-working of the concept of 'hegemony' theorizes the ways in which one set of moral, political and cultural values is seemingly 'naturalized' as everyday 'common sense' so as to support the interests of a dominant social group. As part of this normative process, the main cultural institutions work to reproduce and affirm these privileged meanings and values as the 'natural order'. As Raymond Williams puts it:

"[Hegemony] is a lived system of meanings and values – constitutive and constituting – which as they are experienced as practices appear as reciprocally confirming. It thus constitutes a sense of reality for most people in the society, a sense of absolute experienced reality beyond which it is very difficult for most members of the society to move, in most areas of their lives. It is, that is to say, in the strongest sense a 'culture' [a whole way of life], but a culture which has also to be seen as the lived dominance and subordination of particular classes." ¹

Of course hegemony is always contested by those it implicitly subordinates, through resistant cultural traditions and practices, as well as more direct oppositional means. Resistance may not always be conscious, active or open (often it will be latent and largely symbolic, as in the counter-hegemonic attitudes of popular culture) but, as Stuart Hall says, "it is through the medium of culture that people transform the mundane phenomena of the material world into a world of significant symbols to which they give meaning and attach value." ² Within this "socially-produced space", as Henri Lefebvre describes it, "state-imposed normality makes permanent transgression inevitable." ³ Thus 'culture' is a domain, no less than the political and the economic, in which social relations of dominance and subordination are negotiated and resisted, where meanings are not imposed but contested, and where there is a constant process of appropriation and re-absorption as part of an on-going power struggle.

The term 'Middle England' refers to a particular cultural terrain, in a national context, upon which many of these hegemonic struggles currently take place. Increasingly politicians, advertising and the media refer to 'Middle England' as if it is an accepted everyday definition, and yet its underlying criteria remain unclear. The question of who is able to consider themselves a part of Middle England, for example, is ambiguous. Although it is 'placeless' in physical terms, Middle England is apparently situated somewhere outside the main metropolitan centres, and beyond the reach of industrial influences, and yet it is employed by the media to represent the supposed mainstream attitudes and desires of the country.

The 'culture' of Middle England appears to reproduce the sense of a singular homogeneous community, constructed around closely defined models of the home, the family and the individual subject. Whilst in reality no-one can fit in to such narrow definitions, competition for the 'ideal' Middle England lifestyle remains a powerful motor of social aspiration. Inevitably this competitive hierarchy is permeated with hidden prejudices lurking just below the surface of everyday life that can quickly be re-activated to exclude individuals who do not fit the model, whether through class, race, gender, sexuality or more specific 'differences' from the norm.

From 1999 to 2005, whilst Director of Spacex, a contemporary art space based in Exeter, I curated a series of 'off-site' projects and exhibitions, in collaboration with Zoë Shearman, entitled the Middle England Series.⁴ There is not enough space in the context of this essay to discuss the details of these projects, but the overall aim of the series was to commission artists to produce context-based work in relation to different aspects of Middle England. In other words, the series set out to examine the construction of a cultural hegemony around this peculiarly English, class-bound model of community, with its strong sense of belonging and ownership and thus its equivalent sense of exclusivity and resistance to difference.

While many of these projects were 'site-specific' in the conventional sense that they developed in response to a particular 'place' and its histories and traditions, the primary location of the work was the abstract cultural or social space of Middle England. In other words, the main context of the work existed in the shared meanings and values of the different audiences or participants in the projects. Thus many of the projects were participatory, with the artist functioning as a facilitator for a collective exploration of different aspects of Middle England as reproduced in the city of Exeter.

Exeter has a reputation for having a high 'quality of life', with the seaside and moors close-by, and is regularly placed highly in national surveys of such matters. At the heart of the city is the High Street shopping centre, a thriving consumer hub for the surrounding Devon area, which is increasingly being taken over by chain-stores and global brands (indeed, in another recent survey Exeter was judged top of the 'Clone Towns'). It is a relatively small provincial city and, despite a diversity of communities, appears to promote a 'mono-cultural' sense of its own identity. In fact there are many different histories and cultural traditions within the city, as well as the whole range of contemporary social issues, in contrast to this uniform self-image.

The Middle England Series began with a focus on homelessness. As a city with a reputation for a high 'quality of life' inevitably Exeter also attracts a large number of rough-sleepers (indeed in yet another city survey, Exeter had the second highest number of rough-sleepers relative to the city population in the UK, until a recent 'zero tolerance' crackdown that is). Close to Spacex there is a hostel for homeless young men, called Gabriel House, and over a number of years an on-going series of participatory projects developed with the clients and staff (facilitated by Caroline Mawdsley, Education & Outreach Co-ordinator at Spacex).

In 2000, an area of wasteland awaiting development, next to Gabriel House, became the site for a number of participation projects. Christine & Irene Hohenbuchler's exhibition at Spacex focused upon the (then current) war in Kosovo and issues of housing displaced people. Out of this initiative developed a project with Gabriel House and the architect Mike Lawless (a finalist in the international Architecture for Humanity project) to construct a temporary building, as a model for 'transitional housing' in war zones, using simple gabions and rubble from the wasteland.

Another participatory project led by Austrian artist Lois Weinberger set out to explore ideas around the division of nature and culture, and the 'edges' of the city. Working with groups of homeless and 'excluded' young people from Gabriel House, St Petrocks Day Centre and Exeter College, the waste ground was partly transformed into a garden, including 'outsider' plants transplanted from the overgrown estate of Poltimore House, as well as the creation of a large-scale mural mapping the edge of the city, incorporating phrases relating to the boundaries between nature and society, which was erected on the outside of the hostel. The words on the map were a combination of the names of plants Weinberger found growing on the waste ground and phrases contributed by the participants which had particular meaning for them; for example 'Blue Moon' and 'Black Oak', which are brands of super-cider, 'Beware of the flowers' and other lyrics from songs, etc.

Another focus of the series was to unpack aspects of the colonial histories implicit within the city. A key site for this strand of projects was the Royal Albert Memorial Museum (RAMM), the local city museum, which has a quite remarkable ethnographic collection, most of which was donated by local residents in the mid-19th century, and which now forms the basis of the displays in the newly renovated World Cultures Galleries. A great deal of critical reflection and curatorial effort has gone into the ethics of presenting this non-Western material, e.g. RAMM was one of the first museums in the UK to repatriate artefacts to their country of origin, yet at heart this remains a collection of 'trophies of empire', and thus perhaps more a portrait of Exeter than of 'the world'.

In 2000 Scottish artist Gavin Renwick undertook a four-month residency within RAMM's ethnography department. Renwick had worked in the Canadian Sub-Arctic for a number of years, most recently with the Dogrib Treaty 11 Traditional Knowledge Project, in Rae-Edzo, Northwest Territories. The Dogrib were in the process of negotiating self-government from Canada (now achieved). However, as a traditionally nomadic, hunter-gathering culture, they were reluctant to base their land claim solely upon Western conceptions of territory, which are sedentary and agrarian, in contrast to their own. The Traditional Knowledge Project had therefore involved Renwick as a kind of 'cultural intermediary', under the direction of the Dogrib elders, to help qualify parallel understandings and so facilitate a more equitable dialogue.

As a result of research undertaken during his residency in Exeter, Renwick identified a number of objects from the museum's reserve collection that embodied a "Northern, non-Western idea of home". Many of these artefacts had been difficult for RAMM to classify but, via the internet, Renwick was able to ask the Dogrib elders to identify them. Subsequently, in a project entitled *Home: the Outpost of Progress*, he placed selected objects in specific locations throughout the museum, as a way of making a comparative study of underlying assumptions about the home. For example, next to the silver tea service of the first Governor of Vancouver (a native of Exeter) he placed seal-skin cups from Nunavut, in the Baffin Zone, while the display case containing cartographic and navigational items was supplemented by an Inuit 'map', a carved bone worn around the neck. An accompanying internet project also facilitated exchanges between school groups in Exeter and Yellowknife, in the Northwest Territories, on the theme of 'home'.

Other strands within the series explored issues such as sexuality in Middle England, consumerism and environmental issues, music sub-cultures, religious difference (e.g. Islamic traditions within the city), the urban and rural divide, farming after Foot and Mouth Disease, horticulture and imperialism, the heritage industry and other key themes which resonated within the context of the local cultural hegemony.

This broad agenda could be divided into three areas, corresponding to what the philosopher Felix Guattari described as the “three ecologies”: social, psychological and environmental.⁵

In Henri Lefebvre’s conception of ‘social space’ he also differentiates three areas, contrasting a context of social relations from the physical space of material activity and the mental space of mathematics and geometry. As opposed to a mathematically determined space, in which sites are conceived as stable, unchanging and devoid of external forces, social space is contingent and constantly in a process of negotiation, produced by the interactions and inter-relationships of different subjectivities and social forces. Whereas the idea of mathematical space gives the “illusion of transparency”, as if it were a clear even terrain within which human agency is given free reign, social space defies this sense of ‘luminous’ intelligibility. In the murky web of social space we are all “situated”, which Lefebvre argues undermines the illusion of transparency that naturalizes knowledge and power relations between subjects.

As in the notion of the ethnographer as ‘participant observer’, the ultimate site of interrogation must therefore be one’s own relation to the cultural hegemony. Making meaning is a social activity, and what is meaningful to us personally is still culturally defined, in a historical and social context.

As Lefebvre puts it, “(social) space is a (social) product”.⁶

¹ *Keywords*, Raymond Williams, 1983

² *Resistance through Rituals*, Stuart Hall et al, 1976

³ *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre, 1974

⁴ *The Middle England Series* (more details at www.spacex.co.uk):

- 29 January – 4 March 2000 **Homing: projects for Kosovo** - Christine & Irene Hohenbuchler, Martin Feiersinger, Gunther Steiner, Architecture for Humanity projects, including Mike Lawless, LDA Architects, Art Therapy Initiative
- 22 June – 5 August 2000 **Edge of the City** - Lois Weinberger, Franziska Lettner, Peter Nesweda
- 17 August – 30 September 2000 **Somnambulin** - Sigalit Landau
- 17 August – 30 September 2000 **Garden of Love** - James Ursell
- 1 Feb – 31 March 2001 **Home: the outpost of progress** - Gavin Renwick
- 15 Sept – 28 Oct 2001 **Sea Change** – Ocean Earth Development Corporation, including Peter Fend, George Chaikin, Dennis Oppenheim, Steve Hughes, Samantha Lavender
- 24 Nov 2001 – 2 Feb 2002 **Patterns** - Samta Benyahia, Zineb Sedira, Geoffrey Preston, Ismail Fajer
- 5 Oct – 30 Nov 2002 **Fieldwork / Sounding Dartmoor** - Marcus Vergette, John Drever
- 14 Dec 2002 – 15 Feb 2003 **Buster Keaton** - Steven Tynan
- 1 Oct – 22 Nov 2003 **Introspect** - Oladele Ajiboye Bamgboye
- 17 April – 15 May 2004 **Homeland** - Ansuman Biswas, Jyll Bradley, Lisa Cheung, Guillermo Gomez Pena, Jenny Mellings, Misha Myers, Rosalind Nashashibi, Quack-project, Grayson Perry, Wrights & Sites + *I can see my home* including Tariq Alvi and Michael Curran with guests, Jeremy Akerman, Gail Burton, Michele Dendy, Ana Fonseca, Marc Hulson, Serena Korda, Roma

Pas, Geoffrey Preston, Alex Schady, Show & Tell, + *When in Rome II* including Daniel Baker, Suki Chan, Nooshin Farhid, Amanda Francis, Raimi Gbadamosi, Takafumi Homma, Ronee Hui, Paul Jones, Silia KaTung, Margareta Kern, Maria Meade, Agnes Poitevin-Navarre, Harold Offeh, Paul O'Kane, Yewande Okuleye, Raymond Yap

- 25 Sept – 30 Nov 2004 **Hortus** - Maria Thereza Alves, Caroline Bergvall & Ciaran Maher, Susan Boafo, Jyll Bradley, Stuart Brisley, Peter Fischli & David Weiss, Global Feed, Helena Goldwater, Michael Landy, Andrew Lawson, Vong Phaophanit, Lois & Franziska Weinberger

⁵ *The Three Ecologies*, Felix Guattari, 2000. Guattari extended the definition of ecology to encompass social relations and human subjectivity as well as environmental concerns. He argues that just as nature is threatened by the forces of globalisation, so is society and our own mental health.

⁶ *The Production of Space*, Henri Lefebvre, 1974

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