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Tenant to Tenant: The Art of Talking with Strangers

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“Meeting of the Minds” is only the most recent example of many collaborations that artist Stephen Willats has had over the last four decades with residents of public housing estates in England, Paris, Berlin and Helsinki. Informed by communication theory and psychology, Willats has made challenging and fascinating work by asking residents to reflect with him on their living environments.

As far back as 1967 Willats wrote of his approach: “The audience is not considered as an afterthought . . . but as the essential reason for the development of a work.”¹ Throughout his long career he has been remarkably consistent in giving priority to the audience. His work has also remained fresh because he has insisted on investigating the rich material of human interaction within the context of the built environment.

In 1988 Willats wrote about his fascination with “symbols of modern living” — in particular the residential tower block and the office computer. “[W]hether you live in a tower block or not, or use a computer or not, is not a precondition for having strong associations about them, for knowing their controversial status in modern life.”²

In “Meeting of the Minds,” highrise housing again assumes a central position. But in line with his earlier practice, Willats focuses less on the examination of actual form, than on the different ways such environments may be perceived. Like many of Willats’s previous works, “Meeting of the Minds,” therefore, locates its search for the hidden qualities of place in the most personal aspects of perception, as tenants share their individual responses with others in words and images.

Take the phrase, “do it yourself,” often shortened to DIY. In Britain, DIY has been primarily a postwar practice that describes how people individualize spaces or objects to suit their particular tastes. Willats recognizes DIY as a way

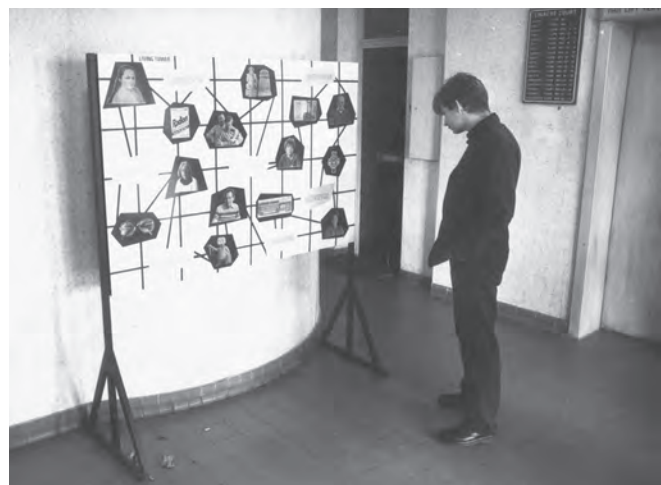
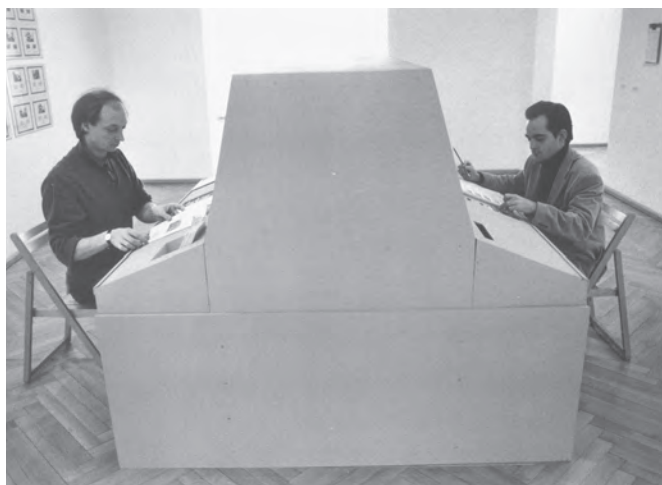
in which people customize their mass-produced environment to reflect themselves. He calls this impetus to rearrange, “self-organization . . . the ability of a system to change and determine its own relationships between the elements that comprise its various parts.”³ Participants in “Meeting of the Minds” thus organized for themselves the elements in their environment, individualizing their places.

From Conceptual Designer to Co-Creator

In April 2003, when I knocked on the door of Willats’s London flat, his tall figure bent forward under a low doorway to greet me. Now sixty-one years old, he beckoned me upstairs, where we had tea in his efficient but tight space. Here he moved from kitchen to seating area to typewriter in one or two great strides, as a collection of angular and colorful desk lamps, all turned on, brightened the afternoon.

Willats began by telling me of his early interest in cybernetics and self-organizing systems. Working in a London gallery in 1957, he became acquainted with the Israeli painter and sculptor, Yaacov Agam (b. 1928), whose works quite directly involve the viewer as a participant in creating meaning. Gordon Pask, author of *The Self-Organising System of a Decision Making Group* (1965), was another early influence, fostering in Willats the realization that human interaction is the meaning of a work, and that there is no overall controlling factor, particularly not the artist.

In these early years, Willats worked for a time at a think tank run by Pask, Systems Research, where he met a number of cyberneticians. He also founded *Control Magazine* in July 1965, a publication which he continues to write for and edit, and in 1971 he launched the Centre for Behavioural Art in London. In keeping with his ideas about



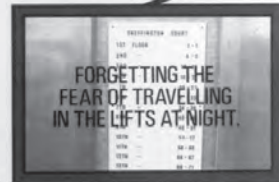
Living without the certainty that I will see someone tomorrow.



For company I usually have to wait until people come to visit me at my place.
What do you propose is the way for me to form new relationships within this isolated tower.



My code.



My intention.



My behaviour.

My attitude.



SPURS
Acquiring somewhere
which will enable us all to
form into a real community.

Making potential resources
available to everyone as a
vehicle for social interaction.



intelligent systems, until about 1964 he did not identify himself as an artist, but rather as a “conceptual designer.” Even after he began to call himself an artist, he refused to attach his name to his work until the mid-1970s.

An early work by Willats is revealing of these theories. “Meta Filter” (1973–75) was an installation made with engineer-collaborators. It consisted of a computer, a slide projector, two viewing screens back-to-back, and a problem. Two people operating the apparatus simultaneously were asked to agree on an interpretation of slides as they were shown, using words from a thesaurus. If the pair could not agree in six attempts, “Meta Filter” selected another slide set. If the pair did agree, “Meta Filter” would offer a new problem based on the word they had both selected.⁴ Through such works, Willats has sought to explore ideas derived from social psychology, using visual representations of human interactions to model how people interact as a “communication network” — an artistic take, if you will, on group-performance studies by social psychologists like James H. Davis.⁵

In addition to works like “Meta Filter,” Willats also began surveying residents of housing developments, those other “symbols of modern living.” He knew he wanted to work in a “consistent environment,” and he found such settings in and around London. Enormous energy and resources had been expended in Britain building high-density housing following World War II, fueled in part by the 1956 Housing Act, which subsidized the construction of towers (more money for more stories) by local councils.

The mass-production approach employed in such projects dovetailed perfectly with the political and social circumstances of the 1950s and 1960s. In addressing the postwar housing shortage, modernist designers employed up-to-date architectural language and theory; politicians appeared to be getting the job done; and builders could create entire communities by stacking them vertically. Furthermore, as Julianne Hanson recently explained, English social housing guidelines of the era assumed all people used space in similar ways.

A systematic approach, with standard plans and checklists, certainly allowed construction of a great number of projects. But Hanson also noted these designs “failed to account for the variety of ways in which people were actually living at the time.” In fact, people were “encoding” their spaces with very particular information about themselves.⁶

Instead of trying to understand these subtle attempts at placemaking in academic terms (as Hanson and her colleagues were eventually to do through spatial syntax research), Willats wanted to engage the occupants them-

selves in an examination of their physical surroundings. In the process, he allowed the occupants to make evident their own creativity and thoughtfulness, celebrating the do-it-yourself attitude.

Highrise Interconnections

Initially, Willats would drive to different estates around London, surveying the entire project and talking to a lot of people before eventually selecting a location for his work. As he noted in an interview with critic Grant Kester in 1992: “The selection of the actual building for these installations is a very important part of the process for me. The building is a kind of polemical symbol of the institutional aspirations of society.”⁷

Starting in 1974, Willats also began searching for a way to bring his work in neighborhoods and highrises into a gallery setting. Instead of courting marginalization, he says, his intent was to transform the way galleries work in the community by bringing new concerns and audiences to them. To make that connection, he eventually decided to photograph individual spaces and link the images to transcribed text from interviews with their creators.

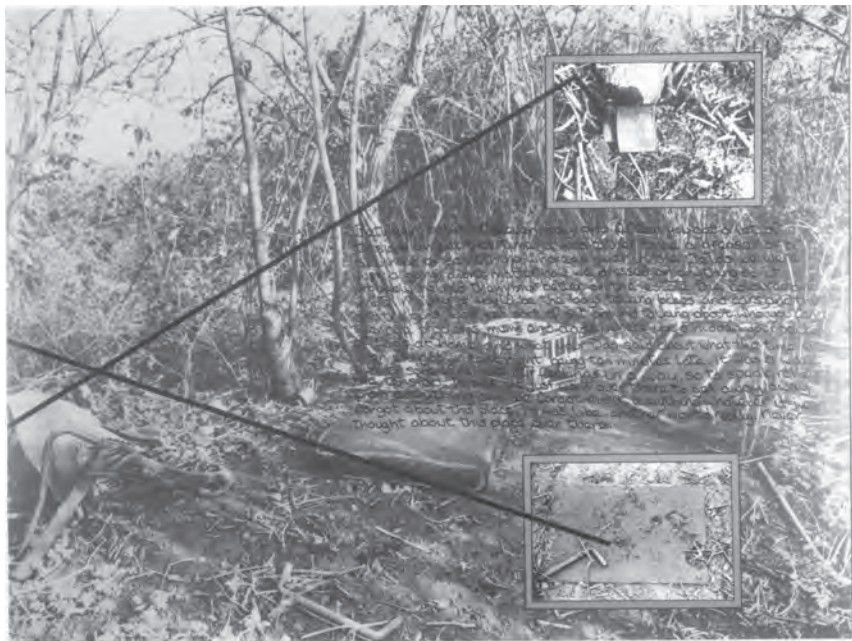
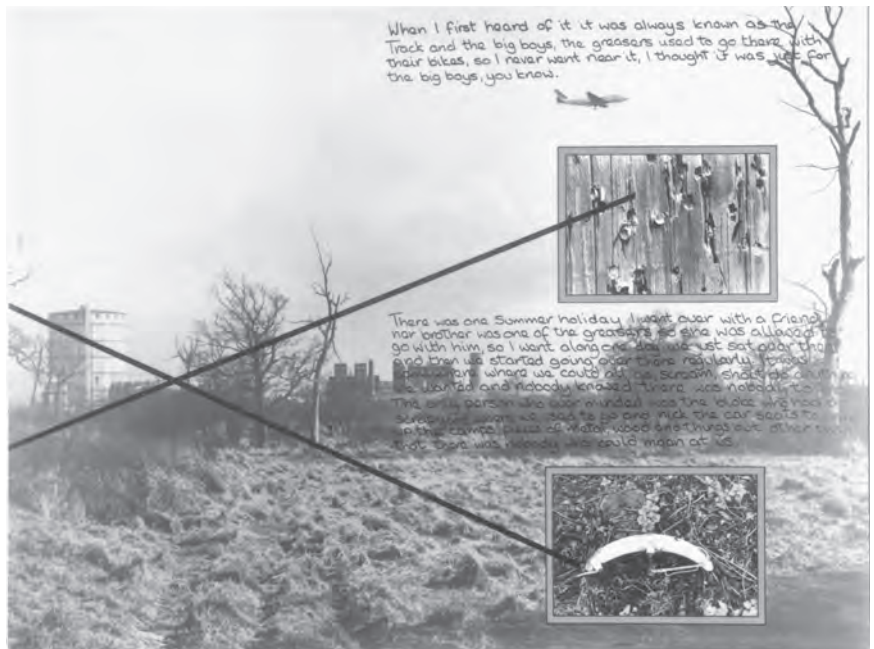
For example, in the 1978 work “Living with Practical Realities,” he introduced an older woman resident of a highrise apartment block (Skeffington Court in West London) in three panels — “Living within the confines of my new home”; “Living with the present day limitations of a small income”; and “Living without the certainty that I will see someone tomorrow.” The panels presented her in her apartment, moving through her daily routine, both inside and outside the multistory brick building.

As part of the display, a photograph of the woman’s rectilinear U-shaped apartment block was placed in the center of each panel as the defining reality of her existence. Each panel then posed a question to prompt viewers to think from her vantage point. For example: “What do you propose is the way for me to form new relationships within this isolated tower?”⁸

Willats reflected: “While, like so many others, I was excited by the symbolism of modern building, by the out-face of its mass and presence in the city, I was also becoming aware of another aspect to these buildings, a dark side, as reflected in the hidden, segmented structure of their interiors.”⁹

Willats spent two years in Berlin in the late 1970s, producing works featured in the 1980 exhibition, “4 Inseln in

Opposite: The third of three panels that comprise Willats’s “Living with Practical Realities,” January 1978. Photographic prints, ink, Letraset text, gouache on card.



Above: "Pat Purdy and the Glue Sniffers Camp," January/September 1981. The entire work consists of four triptychs presented as a sequence. Triptychs one and

four are shown here. Photographic prints, photographic dye, gouache, Letraset text, ink, felt tip pen on card with objects found in Lurky Place, Hayes, West London.



Stephen Willats · Ich lebe in einem Betonklotz Märkisches Viertel Berlin

creative and positive. According to Willats, “self-organization coupled with the ability to transform — to see that one thing could be another, both in meaning and in function — were fundamental components of creative behavior.”¹² The ability of residents in a housing project to reconfigure or alter their living spaces could thus activate a “dialogue” with the building, transforming both the residents and the building “in meaning and in function.” It also, to an extent, could undermine the hierarchy of provider and provided-for, essentially empowering those who are often assumed to lack any power at all.

Some of the challenges of living in these tower blocks include lack of privacy and space, noise, and social isolation. Other work by Willats, in Berlin and London, examined what happened when people literally escaped the confines of these highrise flats. Some claimed space in nearby vacant lots, as at Avondale Estate in West London.

Above: “Ich lebe in einem Betonklotz Märkisches Viertel Berlin,” part of Willats’s 1980 exhibition of work from Berlin in the late 1970s.

Of this location, Willats noted:

The inside of the slab blocks on the Avondale Estate were very isolating and depressing to anyone visiting, let alone living there, with their long corridors of uniform front doors, no natural light and grey concrete. So perhaps it was to be expected that contexts would be created in the buildings which could be personalized by various activities such as wall drawing, carving or making holes into the fabric of the walls, by scavenging old car tyres, discarded bits of furniture and placing them around the space.¹³

When you don’t feel at home when you are at home, where do you go? Many of the young people living at Avondale Estate went through the parking lot, behind the garages and through a hole in the fence to create their own spaces, hidden from the view of others (sometimes dug into the ground). “The Lurky Place,” as residents called it, was a large open space surrounded by factories, junk and rail yards, a school and public housing.

Willats wrote: “...I had seen that the wasteland must have had an enormous pull and role as an available resource in people’s lives there, especially for younger residents...”¹⁴ With one teen in particular he explored the makeshift camps where youth gathered, often to sniff glue. “At the point I came to work on the estate, most of the services associated with its upkeep had been withdrawn or were seriously depleted and so the various groups of younger children and teenagers were more or less left to themselves.”¹⁵

Willats has returned to the Lurky Place numerous times over the years, creating about ten works in total.

Activating Housing Groups

When the British government began to cut back on publicly financed housing around 1980, “housing associations” made up of groups of tenants sometimes began to support construction of private rental units, and they received a measure of government support.¹⁶

Another model for present-day housing action is the Liverpool Housing Action Trust (LHAT). Formed in 1993, it has attempted to serve as catalyst for the physical and cultural redevelopment of a city buffeted by economic downturns and cuts in municipal budgets, and among other initiatives it has teamed up with tenant groups to upgrade older housing estates.

According to urban planner Chris Couch, from 1967 on, Liverpool witnessed nearly every experiment in urban policy: from educational endeavors to industrial development; from housing cooperatives to militant Labour Councils.¹⁷ The LHAT initiative, for instance, has sought

to bring artists into the community to steer Liverpool in new directions.¹⁸

It was within this context that the Liverpool-based Foundation for Art and Creative Technology (FACT) coordinated the visit by Willats that ultimately led to “Meeting of the Minds.” FACT had been working with LHAT and tenants’ groups to commission a series of events that linked “new media artists” to communities in the Merseyside region.

Sefton, the site of “Meeting of the Minds,” is perhaps best known in design circles for its late-nineteenth-century Palm House, designed by Mackenzie and Moncur. But the tower blocks at Sefton Park, where Willats ultimately chose to work, present an environment of a totally different, monolithic, character.

At Sefton Park, Willats proposed convening a series of workshops in which interested highrise residents might explore their physical environment together, sharing their perceptions of it using photography, film and sound recordings. Central to his conception was a close interaction between pairs of residents previously unknown to each other, which would allow them to help him create art by inserting their imaginations into the hierarchical, controlling spaces of their daily environment.

Eventually Willats teamed up with twelve residents in September 2003 to compose collages on boards and video interviews that were exhibited in the foyers of the buildings at the estate (York House, Rutland House and Buckingham House).

Expanding Places with Imagination

Donlyn Lyndon, Charles Moore, and Gerald Allen asserted thirty years ago that “to extend your imaginative life into the everyday, the place that you live in should allow for the everyday to become exceptional.”¹⁹

Stephen Willats has collaborated with tenants in Britain, Scandinavia, France, and Germany to discover the exceptional in the everyday, and often to celebrate that distinction. His openness to the creativity of his co-creators and his recognition of their counter-consciousness in building parallel worlds is art in the best sense — art that expands human possibilities.

Notes

1. Clive Philpot and Andrea Tarsia, *Live in Your Head: Concept and Experiment in Britain, 1965-75* (London: The Whitechapel Art Gallery, 2000), p. 161.
2. Stephen Willats, *Conceptual Living* (London: Victoria Miro Gallery, July 2-31, 1991), n.p.
3. Stephen Willats, *Beyond the Plan: The Transformation of Personal Space in Housing* (London: Wiley-Academy, 2001), p. 5.
4. Philpot and Tarsia, *Live in Your Head*, p. 161; see also Stephen Willats, *Art and Social Function* (London: Ellipsis, 2000), pp. 211-24.
5. James H. Davis, *Group Performance* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Publishing, 1969).
6. Julienne Hanson with Bill Hillier, *Decoding Homes and Houses* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1998), p. 109.
7. Grant Kester, “Starting from Zero: Stephen Willats and the Pragmatics of Public Art,” *Afterimage* (May 1992), p. 10.
8. Willats, *Beyond the Plan*, p. 17.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 6.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 24; see also Stephen Willats, *Between Buildings and People* (London: Academy Editions, 1996), pp. 32-57.
11. Kester, “Starting from Zero,” p. 12.
12. Willats, *Beyond the Plan*, p. 5.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
14. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 27.
16. Chris Couch, *City of Change and Challenge: Urban Planning and Regeneration in Liverpool* (Burlington, VT: Ashgate, 2003), p. 134.
17. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
18. “Housework,” Liverpool Housing Action Trust, http://www.liverpoolhat.org.uk/a_main.php?nav=3&snID=86122, accessed April 14, 2004.
19. Charles Moore, Gerald Allen, and Donlyn Lyndon, *The Place of Houses* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1974), p. 140.