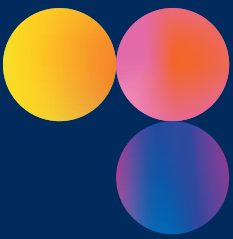




# Where Strangers Meet



An international collection  
of essays on arts in the  
public realm.

## Where Strangers Meet: Art and the Public Realm

Foreword/Preface by Jo Beall

‘I’m not saying I told you so but rappers have been reporting from the front for years.’<sup>1</sup>

Why is the British Council interested in the public realm? ‘The public realm can be simply defined as a place where strangers meet’. So says the eminent urbanist, Richard Sennett.<sup>2</sup> If this is the case then the British Council, a cultural relations organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents, works squarely in the public realm. For around eighty years, through promoting the English language, the Arts and educational links, the Council has fulfilled its Royal Charter mandate to ‘promote cultural relationships and the understanding of different cultures between people and peoples of the United Kingdom and other countries’,<sup>3</sup> bringing strangers together from all corners of the globe to encounter each other. While formal or mainstream diplomacy primarily involves bilateral relations between national governments, the pursuit of cultural relations happens largely among people – in and through educational institutions, cultural organisations, communities and cities.

Unlike the private realm, such as the family where we know each other well and close up, the public realm is characterised by incomplete knowledge and, significantly, by place:

'Traditionally, this place could be defined in terms of physical ground, which is why discussions of the public realm have been... linked to cities; the public realm could be identified by the squares, major streets, theatres, cafés, lecture halls, government assemblies, or stock exchanges where strangers would be likely to meet. Today, communications technologies have radically altered the sense of place; the public realm can be found in cyberspace as much as physically on the ground.'<sup>4</sup>

While much of the literature on the public realm focuses on politics and citizenship, class and social identity,<sup>5</sup> the so-called 'performative school' offers a more cultural approach, derived from anthropology, focusing on 'how people express themselves to strangers'.<sup>6</sup> Taking this as our starting point our interest was in how arts professionals and performers, policy makers, and citizens, connect through the arts in different public realms.

Cities exhibit a critical mass of social, educational and cultural organisations, concentrations of actual and virtual communities, public spaces, and physical and digital connections. As such, they present a unique opportunity to use the power of arts, culture, education and the creative industries to power city and regional economies, catalyse urban renewal and to promote and share our cultural assets. The British Council has a presence in five cities in the UK and over 180 cities around the world, with its work extending far beyond this to several hundred cities and their rural hinterlands. From this base we are working to support cities in the UK and abroad to be internationally inspired and globally connected.

By using our knowledge, experience and connections we can support cities to achieve their international ambitions, working in partnership to create more livable, inclusive and vibrant urban spaces and places and to improve the quality of life for their citizens through exchange of knowledge, people, ideas, insight, culture and experiences. Our cultural relations approach is built on a spirit of mutuality and co-creation, which inform this collection and how we engage with art and the public realm.

Most would agree that a good city is one where people's basic needs are met, where public services are delivered affordably and efficiently, where the economy thrives, the environment is protected and where public spaces are not only safe, accessible and affordable but also interesting and inspiring – alive places in which people can engage with each other and where creativity can flourish. Contemporary urban planners adhere to the view that beautiful cities are more liveable cities and culture-led development has become *de rigueur* for urban planners in many places around the world. Within the arts the concepts of public art and public space are intertwined and as Geoffrey Crossick writes in *Understanding the value of arts and culture*, the cultural force of the city and its built environment plays a significant role in this. Yet as Crossick acknowledges, the tangible role that the arts play has been largely untested.<sup>7</sup>

This is a contested area with some seeing the harnessing of the arts to promote creative cities and urban economies as the instrumentalisation of culture.<sup>8</sup> Conventional public art can also be viewed as exclusionary, foregrounding the interests of elites over ordinary urban dwellers and artist-led gentrification.<sup>9</sup> The conversation surrounding cultural value is engaging with such challenges and the need to develop appropriate means of engagement and participation in the arts. Cities, with their vast and growing populations, their density and networks of public services, spaces and institutions are central to this wider discussion.

Underpinning our approach and captured in the spirit of this collection is that cities are about people and the character of a city itself and expressions of its attractiveness and liveability is generated as much by those who live in it as by its built environment and infrastructure, its governing body or political leadership. Cities are the sum expression of all their people, civil societies and the institutions that define the experience of being in the city.

Where there is an inconsistency between political rhetoric and local reality then city diplomacy efforts will likely be undermined. We cannot project an image of a city as the 'greatest place on earth to live' if the reality is only that for some of our citizens.<sup>10</sup>

This collection focuses on what happens to both identity formation and place making when people engage in the public realm through the arts. Its starting point is to recognise artists less as individual producers of *objet d'art* and more as collaborators, participants or producers of situations, shifting the focus from 'production to reception, and emphasises the importance of a direct, apparently unmediated engagement with particular audience groups'.<sup>11</sup> It explores facilitating participation in the arts in everyday and extraordinary spaces and shares ideas and experience of the public realm internationally.

The collection shows public artists grappling with often complex, social dynamics and relationships as they play themselves out in and through public space. Because art operates beyond the rational and the functional, it often challenges urban planners who by definition are Cartesian in their approach. Yet planners do recognise that cities are social spaces and that social spaces continually change and in the process, that cities are constantly made and remade. Amin and Thrift see the city, 'as everyday process, mobilised by flesh and stone in interaction',<sup>12</sup> growing and morphing around the actions and engagement of ordinary people. This is at the heart of the British Council's cultural relations approach, sharing international experience in the hope of inspiring understanding and opportunity.

Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Ice T, *Los Angeles Sentinel*, 7th May, 1992 at the time of the Los Angeles riots. Cited in Edward W. Soja (2000) *Postmetropolis, Critical studies of cities and regions*, Oxford: Blackwell Publishing, p.374
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Sennett (2016) 'The Public Realm', *Quant*, [www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb](http://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb)
- <sup>3</sup> British Council (1993) *Royal Charter and Bye-laws*, London: British Council
- <sup>4</sup> Richard Sennett, 2016
- <sup>5</sup> See for example, Arendt, Hannah, 'Public Rights and Private Interests.' In M. Mooney and F. Stuber, eds., *Small Comforts for Hard Times: Humanists on Public Policy*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1977; Noel O'Sullivan, 'The Concept of the Public Realm', 2010, Routledge; and Douglas Kelbaugh, 'Three Urbanisms and the Public Realm', *Proceedings. 3rd International Space Syntax Symposium Atlanta 2001*, [www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/3sss/papers\\_pdf/14\\_kelbaugh.pdf](http://www.ucl.ac.uk/bartlett/3sss/papers_pdf/14_kelbaugh.pdf); and Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', 2016, [www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb](http://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2.aspx?pageid=16&cc=gb)
- <sup>6</sup> Richard Sennett, 2016
- <sup>7</sup> Crossick, Geoffrey and Kasynska, P, (2016) 'Understanding the value of arts and culture', AHRC Cultural Value project
- <sup>8</sup> See for example, R. Florida (2002) *The Rise of the Creative Class*, New York: Basic Books and C. Landry (2008) *The Creative City: A Toolkit for Urban Innovators*, London: Earthscan
- <sup>9</sup> See for example Miles (2005) 'Interruptions: Testing the rhetoric of culturally led urban development' *Urban Studies*, 43(2) pp.421-440; J. Peck (2005) 'Struggling with the creative class' *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research*, 29(4), pp.740-770; and S. Zukin (2010) *Naked City: The Death and Life of Authentic Urban Places*, Oxford: Oxford University Press
- <sup>10</sup> Jo Beall and David Adam (2017) *Cities, Prosperity and Influence: The role of city diplomacy in shaping soft power in the 21st century*, London: British Council, p.23 [www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g229\\_cities\\_paper.pdf](http://www.britishcouncil.org/sites/default/files/g229_cities_paper.pdf)
- <sup>11</sup> M. Kwon (2004) *One Place After Another: Site-specific Art and Locational Identity*, Massachusetts: MIT Press
- <sup>12</sup> A. Amin and N. Thrift (2002) *Cities: Reimagining the Urban*, Cambridge: Polity Press, p.10

## Where Strangers Meet

Introduction by Claire Doherty

I am making my way along a train station platform in my home town of Bristol in the west of England. It's early summer, a time in which this harbour city reawakens, its public character more extrovert and social for a few short months before hibernating come October. But this morning, most of those around me are moving with the speed of a ritual commute – already mentally occupied with the day. Though physically moving through the concourse of a railway station, these people are already somewhere else – their knees locked under a desk, their faces buried in a screen. There are very few bodies at leisure – unlike the lingering space of the public square, or, for some, the lingering time of the lunch-hour. This is a public space in which bodies are propelled onwards; this is not a place of looking, agitation or agency, nor unexpected encounter. And then something changes...

In amongst the moving crowd are two stationary figures – in worn, khaki soldiers' uniforms. They are standing by the platform edge, waiting, occasionally catching the eye of a stranger. Incongruous due to the anachronistic nature of their historic costumes, they are all the more startling because of their stillness. They're not drawing attention to themselves through any words or movements. They are not exactly theatrical, but they're performing precisely because they should not be here. They are out of time and out of place.

On approaching them, I am handed a card in silence. It bears the name of a Lance Corporal who died on the first day of the Somme in the First World War – 1 July 1916 – and his age, 17. This is a memorial of sorts, but one that understands the public realm not as a stable site, but as a place and a time in a constant state of becoming; a place in which we are all implicated as actors and in which past, present and future are colliding. This is the progressive sense of place that geographer Doreen Massey once evoked as she described ‘place’ as a collision of events and times, memories, fictions, material culture and meeting points.<sup>1</sup>

My encounter that morning in Bristol was later revealed to be one of over two million uncanny encounters of First World War soldiers in public spaces across the UK on 1st July 2016. Though it felt intimate and specific – it was an artwork of immense scale, disbursed through multiples times and places throughout that single day, accumulating online as a mass public encounter and public memorial.

A project by artist Jeremy Deller in collaboration with Rufus Norris, Director of the National Theatre for 14-18NOW, the UK’s arts programme for the First World War centenary, *we’re here because we’re here* became one of the most celebrated public artworks in the UK of recent years (explored in detail by Kate Tyndall in this collection), and it was a catalyst for my interest in working with the British Council on this new collection of essays: *Where Strangers Meet*.

*We’re here because we’re here* is representative of a diverse network of artistic interventions, projects, gatherings and actions globally that are challenging the way in which we think about ourselves, our pasts and our future potential, by changing our experience of the urban public realm. But even within the 12 months since Deller’s performers infiltrated my consciousness and changed my perception of the temporal limits of public space, the title given by the British Council to this collection – ‘Where Strangers Meet’ – seems all the more provocative, all the more politicized than the phrase used by Richard Sennett in 2009 to describe the anthropological character of public space.<sup>2</sup>



Within the past year, as a culture of fear has built around the fault-lines of intolerance, strangers have become the silhouetted figures of potential violence lurking in the shadows of public space. Sennett's promotion of the 'unfinished' city plan, which allows for its inhabitants to adapt and change the public realm, seems all the more fragile.

"In a 'post-truth' world," UCLAN's Professor Lynn Froggett suggests in this collection, "the meeting of strangers in civic space demands ever more effort, reaching across gaps in recognition and understanding, and in urban environments beset by division and discrimination the need arises again and again. It impels the citizen to take a critical and self-reflexive perspective on their relations with civil society and the body politic. One of the key services that art can perform in urban environments is to change the conditions under which 'strangers meet' so that we can know each other better and imagine other ways to live together."

*Where Strangers Meet* considers the recent artistic, technological and political shifts determining emergent new forms of cultural experience in the public realm and in turn, what is at stake in the emergent forms of our cities' cultures. The voices included in this collection speak from disparate locations across the globe, distinguished from one another by their own set of conditions, and in some cases, distinct political positions. There are, however, some significant shared concerns which emerge globally. These include:

- The encroachment of privatisation on public space and the implications for freedom of movement or cultural expression and new cultural forms;
- The risks of 'artwashing' urban development, thereby disguising social implications and speeding the rate of gentrification at the expense of urgent community needs;<sup>3</sup>
- The growth of a culture of fear which threatens to infringe civil liberties, stalling the potential for individuals to freely adapt public spaces for personal or collective cultural activities, whether that be

through exclusions due to political or environmental upheaval or the imposition of state forces of control;

- The rapid development of mobile technology and significant changes to the way in which people are authoring, co-creating and participating in culture and the emergence of simulated experiences and their ramifications for our understanding of what 'public' space might be and how it is constructed;
- A tension between self-initiated, self-directed cultural activity and organised programmatic approaches to city-wide cultural programmes for economic growth.

The collection embraces a broad definition of 'art' in the public realm which encompasses unexpected and unannounced artistic interventions, immersive, dispersed and networked performances and simulated experiences, direct actions and collective, grass-roots resistance through imaginative cultural activities. The collection gives insight into the concerns of architects and planners, but focuses less on form and design, than on the social, political and environmental implications of those creative practices in public spaces. It recognises residents, visitors, commuters and passers-by and new arrivals as active respondents – protagonists in, rather than just witnesses to, the stories unfolding in the public realm.

The meaning of 'public realm' itself is stretched and redefined through these essays by contributors who are concerned less with the theoretical discourse around the terms 'public space' and 'public realm' (see Habermas, Arendt, Mouffe and Sennett) than with the lived experience of publicness. There are clearly defined cultural differences of course in the conditions of public space across these distinct localities: for example, the provisional nature of public realm from Mexico City to Rio de Janeiro and Lagos contrasts starkly from one other, each with its own particular set of political and social conditions, ritualised public practices, architectures and topographies; furthermore the formal character

of interior public space evolving through the privatised urban development explored by architect Diba Salam in Dubai contrasts significantly to that described by Karolin Tampere in her consideration of Oslo's harbour area and the work of artist collective Futurefarmers or Dave Haslam's exploration of the club scenes of Manchester, Liverpool and Birmingham.

What does emerge are a common set of tactics that use degrees of subversion and collective action as a means to work as artists and cultural producers in the gaps between planning and lived experience. In his description of two consecutive forms of exclusion which emerged in Cairene public space following the momentous events of the spring of 2011, for example, Omar Nagati describes the revolutionary reclamation of public space by the public which led to exclusion through fragmentation, and the securitisation of public space by state control. "Art intervention in public space", he suggests, "work[s] through the cracks of the system, both geographically and politically, using design as a negotiating tool, and subversive tactics to mediate the different forms of exclusion resultant from the periods of flux and of securitisation." This responsive and agile mode of operating by artists, designers and creative practitioners is a common thread to emerge particularly where a city is in flux.

As this collection unfolded in 2017, a 7.1 magnitude earthquake hit Mexico City, rendering contributor Gabriella Gomez-Mont's words all the more resonant, as she spoke of cities who are in the process of imagining themselves out loud. Yet equally, whilst some are becoming acutely attuned to the need to adapt to environmental shifts and changes, so for others the public realm is increasingly mediated and filtered; this is a disbursed and connected public, largely occupying a virtual public space. Rather than explore specifically the internet as a form of public space, however, three writers have considered the implications of creative technology on our experience of physical spaces.

Professors Lynn Froggett and Jill Stein explore how 'play' through digital interaction in this shifting landscape holds out the promise of integration and connection. Stein surveys the digital platforms for

collectively authoring spaces, such as location-based and location-specific mobile ambient storytelling; location-based mobile games; augmented reality experiences; and social location tagging/sharing, all of which, she suggests, “blur the lines between the digital and physical public realms by engaging city dwellers with a persistent layer of ambient information.”

Froggett asks: “What is the impact on the public consciousness of this repetitive simulation, widespread engagement in flow states... and the ‘Disneyesque’ aesthetic of much game design? How does it affect human interaction in public space?”

Both authors look at critical, creative practices which are emerging as a form of resistance to a simulated, anodyne public realm to enable what Froggett refers to as a kind of ‘deep play’ whereby critical reflection and individual agency is triggered, rather than repressed. Furthermore, Tony White offers an insight into a live-streamed takeover of libraries by young people in the West Midlands of the UK as a means of considering the library as a public place free from judgement and catalyst for co-created content and unregulated behaviour. This chimes with Dave Haslam’s assertion of the need for self-organised, uncontrolled spaces. “The fact is,” he suggests, “great ideas come from the margins.”

There is no shortage of future forecasting against which to set these reflections on arts and the public realm, but as William Gibson suggested, “the future is here, it’s just not very evenly distributed.”

Froggett suggests, “The capacity to affect and be affected by the needs and claims of others – who are not of one’s friendship group, community or kin – is a neglected aspect of civic life. Affect flows in public space, as it does in private lives, informing how we act into the public realm as embodied and emotional subjects.”

In a recent research inquiry into the civic role of arts organisations, the Calouste Gulbenkian Foundation identified common characteristics

and operating principles shared by arts organisations committed to a strong civic role, namely they are rooted in local needs; develop community agency and build capability and social capital; as well as championing artistic quality and diversity and provide challenge.<sup>4</sup> Such principles are shared by the artistic projects gathered here which work upon the public realm, modelling new civic acts of tolerance, of resolution, resistance and challenge.

This collection tracks starkly different approaches to addressing the inequities of the present – through direct action, through collaborative exchange and by modelling potential new behaviours or processes. In his study of Utopia, Richard Noble suggested that, ‘for artworks to be utopian, they need to offer two things which seem to pull in rather different directions: on one hand a vision or intimation of a better place than the here and now we inhabit; and on the other some insight into what Ernst Bloch terms the “darkness, so near”, the contradictions and limitations that drive our will to escape the here and now in the first place’.

Former Queens Museum Director, Laura Raicovich spoke, when spearheading a new vision for the museum in 2017, of the importance of the civic role cultural institutions play with reference to the museum’s Immigrant Movement International, a community space in Queens that provides free educational, health and legal services. IM is a partnership between the museum and Cuban artist Tania Bruguera, who is interviewed by Gal-dem editor, Liv Little for the collection. Bruguera describes her notion of *arte util* (useful art) as art which is “the elaboration of a proposal that does not yet exist in the real world and because it is made with the hope and belief that something may be done better, even when the conditions for it to happen may not be there yet. Art is the space in which you behave as if conditions existed for making things you want to happen, happen, and as if everyone agreed with what we suggest, although it may not be like that yet: art is living the future in the present. Art is also making people believe, although we know we may have not much more than the belief itself. Art is to start practicing the future.”<sup>5</sup>

The approaches considered in this collection can be seen to embody this contradictory pull: between the dream of an ideal society and the circumstances of the world in which we live. Some, such as Tania Bruguera's *Arte Util* and the work of *Futurefarmers* here explored by Karolin Tampere, draw upon the aesthetic strategy of 'modelling', as a process through which ideals are tested as types of micro-utopia, whilst others are more assertively direct actions. This difference is often determined by the ways in which the artworks have emerged: some are the result of commissioning processes, outreach programmes or as part of larger-scale urban developments, others are self-initiated and/or the result of collective action.

A consideration of these provisional, unfolding set of works and movements reveals the potential of art in public to expose and respond to the encroachment of corporate interests on public space, to the diminishing opportunities for social cohesion and to the invisibility of the displaced and dispossessed in public life. The significant risk, however, as outlined in the recent discourse on 'artwashing' and critiques of the 'creative city'<sup>8</sup> is "the deliberate use of arts and culture to secure future profitable gain rather than social inclusion or commentary."

But what emerges from this collection is a more subtle set of arguments for the involvement of artists and artistic practices in the development of our cities through collaborative action, resistance, creative invention and by offering productive alternatives through the occupation of the centre to reassert the periphery. *Futurefarmers'* proposition for a public bakehouse in Oslo for example operates as the means by which radical approaches in food production enter the space of corporate urban redevelopment.

Alongside this utopic modelling of potential futures are the equally resonant issues of grappling with a city's contested past. It is worth remembering that Jeremy Deller's soldier performers disruption of the temporal limits of public space in Bristol last year also occurred in a centre promenade in Bristol overlooked by a statue of slave-owner



Rhodes must fall © Schalk van Zuydam

Edward Colston – a site of consistent and increasingly urgent debate in a city built on the slave trade. Historian David Olusoga explores the implications of public monuments as sites of contested histories through the protest movement for the removal of the Cecil Rhodes statue at the University of Cape Town and the subsequent violent rallies which erupted around the confederate statue in Charlottesville this August.

The act of commemoration has always been closely aligned to strategies of storytelling, by which a particular history of the past is sanctioned by those in the present to bring about a particular future. As Boris Groys suggests, ‘The future is ever newly planned – the permanent change of cultural trends and fashions makes any promise of a stable future for an artwork or a political project improbable. And the past is also permanently rewritten – names and events appear, disappear, reappear, and disappear again. The present has ceased to be a point of transition from the past to the future, becoming instead a site of the permanent rewriting of both past and future – of constant proliferations of historical narratives beyond any individual grasp or control.’

As Deller’s significant work of art in the public realm indicated on 1 July 2016, the potential of art in the public realm is to assist us with rewriting and reimagining how we live together in the future, but essentially by revisiting the past with new eyes, lifted from our screens, to feel the materiality of being in the physical environment and to look the stranger in the eye.



### Footnotes

- <sup>1</sup> Doreen Massey, 'Landscape as Provocation: Reflections on Moving Mountains', 2006 republished and downloadable at [oro.open.ac.uk/7227/1/Journal\\_of\\_material\\_culture\\_pdf\\_version.pdf](http://oro.open.ac.uk/7227/1/Journal_of_material_culture_pdf_version.pdf)
- <sup>2</sup> Richard Sennett, 'Quant: The Public Realm', available to read and download at [www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2](http://www.richardsennett.com/site/senn/templates/general2)
- <sup>3</sup> See journalist Jack Shenker's recent article in *The Guardian* who characterised the threat of privatisation as the "insidious creep of pseudo-public space" where the control of 'acceptable behaviour' ranges from covert policing and surveillance to the less obvious 'planning-out' of free movement
- <sup>4</sup> Gulbenkian Foundation, *Rethinking Relationships*, downloadable from [civicleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk](http://civicleartsinquiry.gulbenkian.org.uk)
- <sup>5</sup> Tania Bruguera, 'Reflexions on Arte Útil (Useful Art)', available to read or download at [www.taniabruquera.com](http://www.taniabruquera.com)
- <sup>6</sup> See Oli Mould, 'Why culture competitions and 'artwashing' drive urban inequality', *Open Democracy*, Sept 2017. Download at [www.opendemocracy.net/uk/oli-mould/why-culture-competitions-and-artwashing-drive-urban-inequality](http://www.opendemocracy.net/uk/oli-mould/why-culture-competitions-and-artwashing-drive-urban-inequality) and Alexander Nazaryan, 'The 'Artwashing' Of America: The Battle For The Soul Of Los Angeles Against Gentrification', read at [www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html](http://www.newsweek.com/2017/06/02/los-angeles-gentrification-california-developers-art-galleries-la-art-scene-608558.html)



## Claire Doherty (Editor)

Claire Doherty is an arts director, producer and writer.

Previously, Claire Doherty was Director at Arnolfini (2017-19) and was the founding Director of Situations. Over the past decade, Situations emerged as one of the UK's most innovative and pioneering arts producers, commissioning and producing temporary and long-term public arts projects, creating public art strategies and visions for city-wide initiatives and leading publishing and research initiatives to improve the conditions for, and skills to produce, new forms of public art worldwide. Claire has developed an international reputation as a leading thinker in new approaches to public art policy and planning, and is dedicated to engaging those for whom the arts might have seemed irrelevant or inaccessible through transformative art and cultural experiences; advocating for the social value of the arts, and finding ways to catalyse positive change in specific places.

Claire was awarded a Paul Hamlyn Foundation Breakthrough Award for outstanding cultural entrepreneurs, 2009, and appointed MBE for Services to the Arts in the New Year's Honours List 2016.

The British Council is the UK's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities. We create friendly knowledge and understanding between the people of the UK and other countries. We do this by making a positive contribution to the UK and the countries we work with – changing lives by creating opportunities, building connections and engendering trust.

We work with over 100 countries across the world in the fields of arts and culture, English language, education and civil society.

Each year we reach over 20 million people face-to-face and more than 500 million people online, via broadcasts and publications.

Founded in 1934, we are a UK charity governed by Royal Charter and a UK public body.



© British Council 2018  
The British Council is the United Kingdom's international organisation for cultural relations and educational opportunities.

## *Where Strangers Meet*

An international collection of essays on arts in the public realm.

The urbanist Richard Sennett has written that ‘the public realm can simply be defined as a place where strangers meet’. As the number of us living in cities rises, the pressures on the shared spaces of a city will increase; the places in which our future relationships to one another are negotiated. This is particularly resonant for the British Council, an international organisation that brings people together from different cultures, countries and continents through arts, education, science and the English language. Building on its multifocal work in cities, the British Council commissioned a collection of essays to explore different perspectives on how artistic and cultural experiences affect individual and collective participation and action in the public realm.

For 80 years the British Council has worked in cities in over 100 countries worldwide. The British Council is now responding through research and programmes to the changing urban dynamics affecting citizens and institutions globally, including the impact of globalisation and technological and political change. Work in cities also forms part of our response to some of the world’s current challenges including migration and security. This collection is intended to strengthen our global offer to collaborators and audiences by demonstrating how the power of the arts and creative exchange can be harnessed to make cities more open, dynamic, inclusive and fit for the future.

[www.britishcouncil.org](http://www.britishcouncil.org)