

# Rubbish tips

To many people, derelict land is little more than a city desert but to the founders of Heisenberg it is both a space to engage local residents with their environment and a rich source of raw materials, as they tell **Katy Greaves**

PORTRAIT **MATTIAS EK**

I liked the sound of Heisenberg as soon as I'd heard that maybe it had got right under the skin of Deyan Sudjic during Glasgow's 1999 Year of Architecture and Design. Not that I have anything against the esteemed founder of Blueprint, it's just that there was a certain childish pleasure to be had in the audacious guerrilla tactics of this maverick group of artists.

While the organisers of Glasgow '99 were busy promoting the best of beautiful shiny new design, Heisenberg was busy hijacking the show with giant orange figures that would turn up randomly in Glasgow's less than beautiful spaces. The media spent more time chasing the Orange Men and speculating where they'd turn up next than covering the official proceedings, so it's hardly surprising there was the odd harrumph of disapproval from the Sudjic camp.

Heisenberg was trying to highlight the real issues, such as the fact that no matter how many times Glasgow tries to reinvent itself with regeneration schemes and more building programmes per capita than anywhere in the UK, a shifting 10 per cent of the city stubbornly remains wasteland space. Heisenberg felt it was all very well "fetishising" slick imported design but that the Glasgow '99 programme was also painting a sanitised veneer over the city. Journeymen, Heisenberg's year-long exploration of the role played by Glasgow's wasteland spaces, of which the Orange Men was only a small part, sparked a healthy debate in the city that rumbles on today.

Leftover spaces and derelict buildings are something

of a preoccupation for Heisenberg. Its studio is on the second floor of what an estate agent would call "a loft property, ripe for development in an up-and-coming area of Glasgow". Needless to say, the group's founders, Dan Dubovitz and Matt Baker, have no intentions of doing so, even though both trained as architects. They met me at the door when I arrived. Dubovitz reminded me of the Porthos figure in *The Three Musketeers*, the garrulous, slightly portly one who never took his role too seriously. Dubovitz specialises in photography, while Baker is a sculptor. Baker is taller and less inclined to tangential rambling, seemingly more serious.

They took me through to their workshop/store, a dusty, fascinating space housing racks of industrial shelves stacked with years' worth of stuff they've salvaged. Things like a porthole, a giant search lamp, an old medical box from a German mental asylum full of test tubes and syringes. There's tons of stuff. "Lots of our work grows out of this rummaging process," says Dubovitz, "wastelands are our laboratory. We'll salvage things, then graft them into other spaces."

When I visited, there were also 12 huge aluminium sculptures – elegant, abstract flying figures reminiscent of elongated skydivers – waiting to be transported to their new home in Glasgow's notorious Gorbals district. Later that week, they were due to be mounted on the exterior of a housing development like modern-day gargoyles. The project is part of an artworks masterplan for the Gorbals led by Heisenberg, which includes a huge permanent installation at the entrance



Main picture: Dan Dubovitz (left) and Matt Baker; far left, Orange Men popped up all over Glasgow as part of the 1999 Journeymen project



Facing page: top left, Orange Men, part of Journeymen, an exploration of Glasgow's wasteland spaces, bottom left and right, Sounding Vessels, the Berlin project that focused on aspects of the environment.  
This page: top left and above, The Crossing, commemorating Jean Armour Burns, wife of the poet Robert Burns, straddles the banks of the Nith in Dumfries; bottom left and right, elements of The Gatekeeper, which stands at the entrance to the Gorbals housing estate

Gorbals housing estate called The Gatekeeper.

The authorities originally wanted a large-scale piece of artwork to hang on the huge glass screen already installed. But Heisenberg turned the brief on its head, saying that a screen closed off the gateway – what was needed was a more welcoming threshold. Instead, there is now a walk-through steel structure suspending a vast, 5m x 5.5m sepia-tinted photograph on glass of a ghostly woman in a stone corridor. At the bottom of this, sunk into the ground, is a kind of crypt or well, to remind people that while the buildings may be constantly under redevelopment, the land has always been there. Above the photograph, the same woman is represented in a suspended sculpture, a bronze figure that appears to be hovering above the gateway.

Heisenberg drew on the immigration history of the place for inspiration for the work. "It's the idea of someone arriving from overseas with an address in their hand, and the idea that here is where they'll make their new life," says Baker. "There's a sense of guardianship, which goes back to stories of a woman called Lady Lachow who ran a hospice on the site and engendered the idea of a female figure watching over the place."

Heisenberg is a hard act to define. The image of an artist as a tortured soul working alone in a garret doesn't fit. The group is set up more like a practice, with Dubovitz and Baker at the core of a shifting group of collaborators and consultants. I was intrigued by the idea of running an artists' practice as a business – these

days they even have their own PR machine and are no strangers to spin. Our meeting was less of an interview and more a performance, stage-managed to portray Heisenberg in the right light and on its own terms.

As regards the business element, Dubovitz says: "I'd had a stable job teaching in architecture schools in London, Sheffield and Strathclyde, and Baker had an established practice as a sculptor, so we were giving up a lot to do this." They met at Sheffield University where Baker was constantly being told his projects were more sculpture than architecture. It confirmed his instincts and, after a stint as a trapeze artist, he took an apprenticeship in figurative sculpture.

Dubovitz went to work for Peter Eisenmann in New York, a firm that was supposed to be among the best theoretical practices in the USA. Three days spent hand-drawing an image for a magazine (there were no computers in the office), followed by instructions to stencil a "computer-generated plan" in the corner, rather shattered his illusions. A seminal moment that caused Dubovitz, the young idealist, to break with architecture was when Eisenmann banned him from going to see a project he was working on, saying, according to Dubovitz, "nobody visits the site". "It's relevant to our story because our work is so much about bringing forward the character of a place through direct experience on-site," he says. He promptly left New York to become artist in residence in Slovenia for a year, before returning to architecture to teach.

Dubovitz and Baker had been collaborating on an informal basis for several years but in 1997 they entered a competition for a public art commission in Belfast. They were shortlisted, which encouraged them to enter a competition for a statue of Robert Burns' wife on the banks of the River Nith in Dumfries. They shunned the brief in favour of a proposal that placed a stone figure on one side of the river and a photographic image of her emerging as a modern woman on the facing bank. The piece conveyed a sense of history and timelessness through the use of stone, but created a tension through the use of the modern medium of photography with its ephemeral quality.

They won the competition: sculpture and photography became a recurring theme of their work. Heisenberg was formed on the back of that project. "We didn't come into this to make the odd artwork here and there," says Dubovitz. "It's about being involved in things at a strategic level and changing policy." Heisenberg does not wait to be asked for commissions, it is proactive about getting itself known and persuading authorities they need its input. Dubovitz and Baker wanted to make a difference to cities in a way they felt unable to do in the more straitjacketed professions of architecture or urban planning. They are not interested in cities or spaces as abstract concepts but as places with people in them.

With such ambitions, they felt it was important to set up as a professional organisation. "We knew we'd be

going into boardroom situations and we wanted to be able to sit there with equal status." The name was important because it was something they could use as a cover, rather than revealing their individual identities, and to facilitate collaboration and a multidisciplinary approach, rather than having to categorise themselves as artists or architects.

They chose the name of nuclear physicist Heisenberg because, says Dubovitz, "science is about fact. That a scientist would come up with something called the uncertainty principle appealed on an artistic level. He also stated that the act of looking at something actually changed what you look at, and that was important in terms of the way we work with direct action on a site to change people's perception of it".

There are two strands to Heisenberg's work: integral (permanent) projects such as The Gatekeeper, and itinerant (temporary) works such as the Journeymen. Ultimately, Heisenberg sees them as one and the same. The group is currently in the middle of a long-term project, part of a trilogy, aimed at bringing together its work with leftover spaces. "First, we had to ask ourselves why our desire was so strong to work in these places," says Dubovitz. According to Baker, "a lot of the rules that govern space in a city don't apply and you can capture a lot about the nature of a city and modern culture by examining its wastelands".

The team also realised that the wasteland condition wasn't unique to Glasgow and identified Berlin and

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New York as cities undergoing similar transitions. They went to Berlin on the 10th anniversary of the fall of the wall. Eventually, in a project entitled Sounding Vessels, they took five adapted air-freight containers to various wasteland sites, drew visitors' attention to aspects of each environment and recorded their conversations. After initial problems gaining access to sites, the team took to dressing up as Berlin's street cleaners, which succeeded in rendering them invisible to the authorities who gave them no trouble thereafter.

The New York leg of the project starts in August. Titled Congregation, it will consist of five events at six key sites, which have either been neglected or scheduled for redevelopment, including Hell's Kitchen and the Fresh Kills landfill. Project partners in each location will gather two congregations: one a disparate group from the area, the other a homogeneous collection, such as a group of factory workers. Each will be asked to bring a photograph they strongly identify with.

Installed on each site will be prosthetic sculptures that will oblige the 10 people to stand in a circle holding their photos in front of them. Discussions and testimonies will culminate in a portrait being taken and a year later they'll be asked to return. "It might lead to a permanent sculpture, to the site being redeveloped or bring opposition groups out of the woodwork. We hope it will act as a catalyst to get things moving," says Dan.

Getting things moving is what it does best. Love it or hate it, Heisenberg will not be ignored. **B**