

### **Tips for Success with Brownfields**

*The specific organizations listed below apply to Brownfields in the USA. However the principles for engagement and the science remain the same and should apply in most locales.*

- **Opt in:**

Brownfield remediation is a collective, cooperative activity, and best accomplished in partnership with community leaders and local government. For best results, find out who is already doing brownfields work in your area and become an active participant in the collective process.

- **Inform Yourself:**

To be effective, and to be taken seriously, learn the basics of remediation science. It's a crucial step and it's not that hard. Don't assume that phytoremediation is the answer until you know the nature of the contamination on our site; every type of contamination requires a specific technology. There is a lot of misinformation out there and "urban myths" persist, especially around lead cleanup. What is the specific condition of the land in question? How much is already known? Who owns it? Who is already knowledgeable and involved? The US EPA publishes an excellent introduction, A Citizens Guide to Phytoremediation, [www.clu-in.org/download/citizens/citphyto.pdf](http://www.clu-in.org/download/citizens/citphyto.pdf)

- **Do the Legwork:**

If your site has contamination, chances are, local government officials already know a lot about the property. State and local governments frequently have online databases and offices to assist with Land and Environmental issues. Seriously contaminated properties might also appear in Federal databases such as <http://www.epa.gov/enviro/html/fii/myproperty.html> Any information that exists in public agencies is available to you under FOIA, the Freedom of Information Act. Know your rights under FOIA <http://www.foia.gov/>

- **Find the Team:**

Beyond local government, be imaginative in identifying potential partners and collaborators who might be interested in your project. These might include "openspace" advocacy groups, urban agriculture groups, social justice groups, local vendors, business neighbors, philanthropic initiatives and local academics. Academic researchers in your area may prove useful to assist with technical issues, and also to provide credentials and expertise for grant seeking. There are many underutilized knowledge based assets in every community. Consider the merits of intellectual exchange and civic engagement as a form of "value". Give some thought to what you can offer them; ask what they can offer the project.

- **Take the Long View:**

Be in it for the long haul. Brownfields work is highly regulated to protect human and ecosystem health, and regulated work takes time. Community consultative processes and grant funding cycles also have their own calendars. In addition, phytoremediation is a slow process, 2-5 years at least. These disturbed sites took decades to degrade; they will not be cleaned up over night. Expect to be involved with your site for at least 5 years.

*J.E. Tell me about the post-industrial and its relationship to art and science?*

**F.W.** My interest in the Post Industrial was a direct outgrowth of living in Chicago as it transitioned from an industrial to a post industrial city over the last few decades. Along the way, I had begun to garden and became interested in landscape as both a cultural form and also in the biochemical life of plants. This biochemistry evolved out of my general interest in material phenomena, which has been the basis of my artistic production for decades. These two interests, the world of plants and the post industrial have frequently joined together into plant based sustainability projects.

This is also an extension of my broad interest in the relationship between art and science, which has turned out to be a key issue for climate change and for the future. It is clear to many that hyper-specialization and the separation of knowledges is one of the main factors that has created the systemic problems that we face today. We ceased to understand the impacts of modern industrial life on the natural environment because knowledge became separated into specializations and no one has the big picture. This is the post-Enlightenment critique.

*J.E. From this interest in science and the post-industrial, how did you get interested in knowledge and innovation?*

**F.W.** By 2005, I had become galvanized in my thinking, politicized even, about climate change. I was looking for greater agency, convinced that art exhibitions alone would not change our behavior. I had migrated into public art practice but remained unclear of any engagement that might have impact.

At about this same time I was commissioned to create a community based art project for a new trail and greenway in Cleveland, Ohio. Eventually, I found myself working within the Cuyahoga County Planning Office. While we were talking about the trail project, we also started to talk on a more theoretical level about what it was that we were actually doing, because none of us had expected to be working together. The planners began to tell me what it was that I was bringing to the table. I started jotting these things down and by 2006 I had a kind of “knowledge claim” entitled, *What Do Artists Know?* that outlines artist’s tacit and methodological knowledge. These skills include such things as: knowing how to work with subjectivities; knowing how to navigate intangibles; knowing how to negotiate non-compensation economies, idea economies and social economies, (which are, of course, capitals.)

This emphasis on knowledge, a kind of “knowledge modeling”, is directly relevant to different models of sustainability that have emerged globally. There are different models of the criteria that must be met to have a fully sustainable system, and related to this is a conversation about who, in fact, has the expertise to understand those criteria or pillars.

The most familiar model of sustainability is the UN model known as the “triple bottom line”, where the evaluation criteria are the social, environmental, and economic impacts of your project or action. One of the first alternative models I was exposed to has been put forward by Tony Fry, a sustainability theorist from Australia, which is loosely based on Félix Guattar’s three ecologies. Fry’s model replaces the 3 pillars or sectors of the UN model with bio-sphere, techno-sphere, semio-sphere. This model is very interesting because it collapses all artifacts of the built world, whether it be art, design, industrial production, material production, etc, and puts it, undifferentiated, into the techno-sphere, the world of artifice. The bio-sphere is self-explanatory. The semio-sphere is the invisible realm of values and meanings, and Fry maintains that all of the trouble comes out of the semio-sphere, because this is how we decide what we need, what we want, and how we want to live. The choices and decisions about what is built in the techno-sphere are generated out of the semio-sphere.

Meanwhile, other theoretical models have also been developed. In 2001, Jon Hawkes put forward, *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: Culture’s Essential Role in Public Planning* that has now been officially adopted by UNESCO as their model for sustainability. Hawkes maintains choices that effect sustainability are driven by cultural values. Beyond cultural “planning”, we need a shift in public policy which creates instead a whole-of-government, cultural “framework”. In this model, Culture is no longer relegated to tourism and entertainment, but is now the underpin-

**F.W.** While Hawkes Model names “Culture” as the 4th pillar, he focused also on Innovation and vitality. This connection to Innovation proved to provide more leverage than a theoretical discussion about cultural values. Armed with my Knowledge Claim document, I created an Innovation Toolkit for Sustainable Cities which I presented to the new City of Chicago Innovation Program.. One of the ideas in the tool kit was to formally “embed” practicing artists in city government, much like “embedded photographers” in the military. The Commissioner of Environment, Suzanne Malec-McKenna, who is a very big thinker, instantly understood the connection between culture and environment, and how they might work together towards civic innovation for sustainability. The Embedded Artist Project was launched and I have been “embedded” in the Chicago Department of Environment since 2008.

Even though the knowledge claim is rather abstract, everyone understood that artists ask new questions and get new answers. In a simple way that is what artists are always doing. We have different frameworks. We have different analytical tools. We have different priorities. We have a different language. We have different skills. We are drawn to things like subjectivities that all other people in the public sector have been trained to avoid. We are not only experts at managing subjectivities, but we thrive in it. Just look at any critique in art school and you will see the disciplined management of subjectivities. So artists have unique skills and distinct knowledges that they bring to problem solving, and of course also to re-imagining the future.

*J.E. How has the art world embraced these ideas about innovation and new roles for artists?*

**F.W.** The innovation community has come around to understand that intangibles ultimately are driving everything: this is the same thing as Fry’s semio-sphere. Artists’ expertise in these matters is different than say, an anthropologist’s, or a semiotician’s, because we know also how things become built, how these semiotics are embodied through process.

We understanding is also different than that of designers. When art and design split, art got, shall we say, “meaningfulness”, the symbolic, and design got “utility”, application. Separating “meaning” from “purpose” is untenable. It has led us into trouble, just has the split between art and science. Consequently, we are seeing that art and design are moving back together. A lot of designers are interested in engaging things that look like art strategies and many artists are interested in application and purpose.

Viewing cultural production through these new lenses, especially ideas of how important cultural vitality and innovation are to sustainability, and in the dynamics between the cultural practices of art and design, has made me quite content to be very near the fuzzy edge of cultural production where something might start to look like it wasn’t art anymore. I am content to do this because I am a risk taker and because I trust my artistic methodologies and knowledge. However, people who were more invested in art remaining something that they can point to, maintaining the market, what I call the “cultural quo”, are less comfortable with this approach. A lot of what goes on in art is the performing of “known knowledge” about what art is, as opposed to the making of new art, which never looks like art when it is first made because it is transgressive. It challenges the status quo. Otherwise it is not new. It has to break or subvert some dimension of the convention or nothing changes. The more that you are subverting the convention and the more you are at the fuzzy edge, the less it looks like art. People have different tolerances for this condition. I have also found that many people who were working in new genre public practice, or social practice, are not so fluent with science. But for a systemic thinker, it’s all connected!

Understanding these connections is useful for a pragmatic reason as well. People get overwhelmed with the enormity of the challenges posed by climate change and the culture changes needed in the near future. I remember asking Tony Fry, “Where do you start?” and he replied “Anywhere you can.” That is what I am doing, beginning where I can, because its all connected.

*From a conversation with Janeil Engelstad in May 2010*