

# We are the City

**Donald Hutera** investigates as MDI joins forces with Austrian artist Willi Dorner to cast a spotlight on the people of Liverpool

**Is it architecture and urban planning that make a modern metropolis throb with vitality?** If pressed on the subject, I'd wager that it's more likely local people who breathe life into most urban environments. The myriad textures and rhythms of individuals gathered together in close proximity can permeate an entire neighbourhood, or even a single street.

It's just that sort of collective energy, channelled in a very particular way, which We are the City (WATC) will try to tap into. Conceived as a central event of Big Dance 2014 in the North West, this project of MDI is the latest manifestation of Moving Dance Forward – a joint programme of MDI and Dance Manchester designed to foster a new and imaginative vision for dance in the region. In the case of WATC what that vision entails is people or, more specifically, a public procession by groups of human beings

of widely divergent backgrounds, livelihoods and interests. To that end MDI put out a call (via social media and other avenues of communication) asking any interested parties to identify themselves based not so much on who they are as what they do. What, the question was posed, is your occupation, hobby, service or skill and how does it contribute to what makes Liverpool tick?

Among the project's extremely diverse wish-list of target groups were members of a vast range of clubs, associations, societies and professions. These included road workers and mechanics, nurses and care workers, basketball teams and footballers, free runners, security guards, stewards and the police, builders and carpenters, painters and decorators, chambermaids and housekeeping staff, teachers and lollipop men and women, hip hoppers and ballet school students,

boxers and bakers, artisans and craftspeople and...

At press time it's still too soon to say with total certainty if any of these groups might yet be involved in WATC on July 13. That is, however, the date when the entire project comes to fruition as a 90-minute, parade-style event starting at 1.30pm on Anfield Road (location of LFC stadium, and part of a northern suburb in dire need of regeneration) and culminating, about half a mile away, with a final celebration in Stanley Park (one of the largest green spaces in Liverpool). That a strong social aspect underpins WATC is no surprise, given its civic slant. "The idea is to provide people of the area with a chance to celebrate who they are and what they do," says MDI Artistic Director Karen Gallagher MBE, "and a chance for people who live and work outside of Anfield to reflect on the changes occurring there."



All photos: Karen Gallagher MBE



### **“I don’t do community dance”**

The creative lynchpin of WATC is Willi Dorner, a think-outside-the-box Austrian whose interdisciplinary work often collaboratively mingles artists and scientists. Besides touring international performances, Willi’s been keen to concoct events that give audiences opportunities “for new experiences, insights and a different perception of everyday life.” For over half a decade he’s researched urban spaces, focusing on the “diverse architectonic structures which we are living in and using day by day,” and the movements and movement habits connected to that.

Willi was far from a random choice as the brains behind WATC. Setting aside the potential rewards of using dance or dance-like ideas to animate Liverpool, particularly in a Big Dance context, Karen wanted to work with someone from the EU who might favourably interact with regional artists by exposing them to fresh and invigorating new working methods. “We first invited Willi to the region in March 2013,” she recalls. “He met a variety of partners – Liverpool Tate, The Bluecoat and Liverpool Biennial – alongside a variety of artists. During our discussions someone mentioned the streets of Anfield. When I took Willi there he was immediately taken with the idea of Lothair Road – a street next door to LFC stadium that’s nigh on all boarded-up houses. That’s when we really began to consider what if we could make a work here...”

Given all of the above it seems ironic that, in a brief email exchange, Willi claims “I don’t do community dance.” WATC he regards as “a moving installation under an electronic sound cloud. It’s hard to describe in a few words.” He has, however, called the project “a political statement taking place in an area that needs the attention of a wider public.” His stated intention is to “make visible who is the community and what it stands for,” so that residents of Liverpool and visitors alike can “see the city walking by and witness, experience and enjoy...a procession of activities, facts, objects and human beings.” It’s the latter, of



All photos: Karen Gallagher MBE

course, who count most. “In the parade I give people a face, those who provide daily services that we take for granted. I want them to receive recognition. They’re an important part of city life and deserve to be appreciated.”

Working closely with Karen and MDI’s small but hardy support team, and with the invaluable assistance of five local dance artists (Jo Ashbridge, Leila Chebbi, Paul Doyle, Jennifer Hale and Ruth Jones) plus composer Tom Rea Smith and technical manager Fiona Hilton, Willi will construct and, essentially, choreograph what’s being described as ‘a mass participation event.’ Rather than have the aforementioned dance professionals make work tailored to the groups MDI recruits, WATC is more about asking the participants to consider what they normally do and then figure out with them relevant actions which can be turned into repetitive formations – or moments of choreographed motion – within a parade.

Although about 150 people of all ages from various Anfield-based arts groups are involved in WATC, it was never Willi’s desire to attract experienced performers. Among non-dance folk who may take part are beekeepers, ballroom dancers, bikers, brass bands, the fire brigade and knitters, with urban farmers, the ambulance service and street cleaners still to be confirmed. Nor by any means are all of these people strictly residents of Anfield. Little wonder that Karen refers to WATC as “a tapestry of Liverpool life, an intervention, a disturbance and a process in considering how we use and define movement to make a statement about people and place.”

#### **Lows and highs**

Jo Ashbridge sees WATC as a case of

“taking movement and presenting it in a way that’s artistic and interesting, but very natural. It’s a celebration of the everyday, but framed so that it’s also pushing the boundaries of what people think dance to be.” She refers to each participant as a vehicle capable of changing the perception of those watching the parade, “and all the friends and family members they speak to about it.”

For Karen the creation process has been anything but simple. In mid-May she admitted, “I’m finding myself in a state of panic. This project is not majorly different from the usual, and yet it’s harder than anything we’ve ever done before.” In part, she says, this is due to the nature of recruiting participants. “How do we connect with them? We have to have a conversation, describing the project in a way that makes them want to participate. It’s about building trust. Face to face all the barriers start to strip away, and people begin to understand that it’s not that we want them to dance. We can actually showcase what they do, and who they are.”

While this might sound incredibly positive, the reality is a sometimes frustrating series of disappointments and setbacks. Like fish eluding a hook, Karen has found that she and her colleagues have spent an almost inordinate amount of time “attempting to engage with people who initially show an enthusiastic interest then decide against it. By phase one of the project we had eighteen groups we felt sure of. Now we have ten for certain, with maybe another two or three to add before the event.”

The reasons some groups have dropped out may vary, but are often related to economics and how work life has changed. As Karen’s come to realise, “A key learning curve has been

our assumption that most services such as cleaning, road maintenance, gardening, sewerage and so on remain the responsibility of the city council, and that the council is therefore the main employer. But those services are now actually outsourced to major private companies, which makes our ability to connect with the workers all the more difficult especially when they’d have to volunteer their time to take part. When everything is a privately run business people won’t do things for nothing.” And, as Karen has been repeatedly reminded, those for whom a job is just a job just aren’t interested.

The police were unable to commit to being seen in uniform due to related legal reasons and responsibilities. The UK’s stringent health and safety laws also put paid to the idea of street runners using the roofs of derelict buildings along the parade route.



Another headache has been explaining to certain groups that there's been a change of plan and they're no longer needed or, indeed, not quite suitable for WATC. In some cases there's been such a lot of talk that it's severely reduced creation time with those definitely on board. Too, the groups who've committed maintain radically different schedules, which renders rehearsing altogether before the actual event 'a massive risk.'

A further and, in ways, trickier task has been trying to explain to Willi (who has by no means been a constant presence in Liverpool) why certain expectations that he might have as a Continental resident cannot be met. "He hasn't realised the way different countries do business," Karen says. "This is a first for him, a real pilot project. He's starting to talk to other partners in other countries about it." The implication is that WATC is a learning curve for Willi, too, but the groundwork for the project has very much been MDI's responsibility: identifying not just participants but potential partners, organising technical support, and securing permission to close and use roads and the park.

There have, Karen says, been wonderful highs to balance the aforementioned lows: Mersey Fire Brigade setting up drills in full uniform, as well as providing cadets plus a fire engine; the thirty-strong Formby Brass Band eliciting goosebumps with their interpretation of a beckoning new work by Tom Rae Smith, and the walking patterns devised for their tuba players; the exemplary punctuality and organisational nous of the Mersey bikers; beekeepers suiting up and demonstrating how they care for their buzzy charges; and the welcome calm vibe of the small but choice knitters called Purlesque.

What, finally, has Karen herself learnt from all of this? "To be as prepared as I can be, but lessen my expectations and go with the flow a little bit more." WATC, as she admits, "doesn't feel like a typical MDI project, but at the end of the day I believe in it. It's revealing itself as it goes along, and constantly evolving." Some of it, she says, has been "heart-warming on lots of levels, but the challenge remains – how do we bring it all together? I'm convinced that by the time Willi returns in July,

prior to the event, the locally-based artists will have developed formations for each group to do. We have to find the best ways to facilitate that, and ensure that the participants are confident with what they're doing and enjoying it on the day. But I can't fully picture what it's going to look like. That's exciting. There can be moments of pathos and beauty, or it might be a cacophony of sound and motion. It may all go a bit belly up, but that's okay too. We're really extending our reach, working with people we never dreamt of working with before. The bigger issue is how we engage with them afterwards, and how working on this project informs all of us."

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We are the City takes place on Sunday 13 July 1.30-3.30pm at Anfield Road and Stanley Park, Liverpool. To find out more, **visit** [www.bigdance.org.uk](http://www.bigdance.org.uk)

