

Public Art Policy and Planning: the Australian way

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After many years of enthusiastic but ad hoc commissioning of public art, Australian cities and state governments are engaging in the formation of public art policies and master plans. The paper will explore the relative merits of the different policy models and assess their benefits and negative impacts on the development of innovative and creative art projects in urban developments. This assessment will include consideration of the impacts of policies on creative freedom, addressing bureaucratic interference in decision making and counter-acting negative public and press opinion.

A recent trend is the development of public art master plans that set-out a strategy for future planning of artworks within a conceptual framework, identified physical locations and diversity of artforms. In cities, such as those in Australia, with little or no traditional public art, there are great opportunities for a considered and planned approach to developing a city wide commissioning strategy. A range of public art master plans for waterfront environments, corporate developments and entire cities will be presented and reviewed. The paper will address issues confronting the development of master plans for public art especially the concept of planning for an anarchic activity such as art.

As an extension of the policy and planning discussions the paper will present the concept of “Convergent Practice” that locates the diversity of public art practice in a structure for debate. Convergent practice articulates the range of artist involvement in public art from total collaboration to artwork created in total isolation from other design professionals.

The paper focuses on public art activity in Australia that by virtue of its physical size, geographic isolation, small population and diversity of cultural influences provides an interesting site for study on contemporary public art.

National Context

Australia is a continent of great fascination due to its relative isolation, unique flora and fauna, vast range of geological landforms and climatic variations. Culturally the country is also one of great diversity developed from the mix of an ancient indigenous culture, European exploration and settlement and more recently the arrival of a diverse multicultural immigrant population. Creating a society where virtually every cultural group from around the globe are represented and are making a contribution to the development of a very rich and exciting cultural life. Admittedly, the white anglo-celtic population is still the dominant group.

To understand the current state of the public art policy environment it is important to understand the governmental structure of the country. We are currently celebrating the centenary of federation. Australia is a federation of six states and two territories, with three

tiers of government, the federal government, state and territory governments and finally local government. Australians often complain of being over governed, this may or may not be true but there are certainly many areas of conflict, duplication and competition between the various tiers of government.

Federal Government context

Without going into too much detail I will present an overview of the various levels of public art policy activity within the three levels of government. Firstly the federal government has no formal policy relating to public art associated with its infrastructure projects across the country. Generally it deals with projects on an as needs basis. For example, our company has been engaged as consultants on several federal government projects working with an art budget determined by the client agency, not as a whole of government requirement. Where the federal government has had the most impact, has been through the central arts funding organisation, the Australia Council. Over the years the Australia Council has been able to support and influence the direction of public art through the distribution of funds through its grant program. During the 1980's and 1990's the Australia Council had a special interest in the development of placemaking and funded the involvement of artists in local community cultural development projects and as members of design teams on infrastructure projects.

State Government context

From the early 1980's the state government arts agencies have been interested in public art as a key opportunity to generate employment opportunities for artists and for art to be a contributor to the public realm. All the states and territories have supported public art although only a handful have formal public art policies or dedicated public art agencies. Currently neither Victoria or NSW, the two biggest states, have policies or agencies while Queensland, Tasmania, Western Australia have formal policies and percent for art schemes. The South Australian government boasts one of the oldest public art programs with a dedicated public art committee, it has never had a formal policy. Despite the fact that our company undertook policy development work for the state government in 1999 there is still no evidence of a policy being ratified.

The Queensland government has been the most recent to implement a wide ranging public art policy. The policy "Art Built-in" sets a requirement of 2% for art on all state building projects. This is a significant development and is the largest percent for art program in Australia with the potential to inject many millions of dollars into the arts industry every year and to build a massive collection of artwork.

In addition to state governments directly commissioning public art on their own capital works projects there are some examples, such as the Melbourne Docklands, where the government has set a requirement for private sector developers to commit to a percent for art scheme. This may occur where the development is on government land or is in partnership with government agencies.

Local Government context

Across Australia there are many hundreds of local government authorities. They will range from capital city councils to councils responsible for rural areas the size of many European countries but with a population no larger than that of a small town. With the exception of the Brisbane City Council the major metropolitan centres such as Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide have a large number of councils in addition to the central city council. For example in addition to the Adelaide City Council there are, in metropolitan Adelaide, more than a dozen other councils each with the same powers under the state Local Government Act. Clearly such complexity makes for a high degree of diversity and unevenness in the approach to and delivery of public art. Interestingly local government is currently very active in developing public art policy.

Public Art implementation

It is likely at this point in time that the majority of public art in Australia is happening despite the lack of formal policies, especially the lack of percent for art schemes. Although with the Queensland government's Art Built-in picking up momentum the balance may change.

The growth of public art in Australia has not led to a proliferation of Public Art Agencies such as those found in the UK and USA. There are to my knowledge no dedicated non-profit agencies such as the Public Art Development Trust in England or the Public Art Fund in America. The public art agencies that exist are all government bodies established to administer the government's public art program. Some public art management has been undertaken by one or two artist membership organisations as a fee for service activity, although these organisations have found it difficult to balance their membership obligations and fee for service work that at times places them in conflict with their own membership. In the Australian climate of free enterprise there are growing opportunities for private sector consultants to provide services in the public art area. For example the Art Built-in program requires the engagement of curators and art managers to ensure the effective and efficient implementation of the program.

These opportunities have led to an increasing number of individuals establishing themselves as Public Art Consultants and provided the opportunity for our company, Brecknock Consulting P/L, to develop as a major national consultancy. We now have offices in Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane and work with all tiers of government and with the private sector. Our services cover the full range from the development of public art policy, master planning for public art programs on individual development sites or for entire cities, site curating and project management of often major projects involving teams of artists and significant budgets. Over the last three years we have undertaken over 150 policy, planning and project management projects and managed commissions for over 100 artists.

Arts Practice

The other important dimension to the debate is the diversity of arts practice encompassed by the public art programs. As might be expected, around Australia there is a wide range of outcomes from public art projects and as such there has been considerable debate about the pros and cons of public art generally. It is my perception that some of the discussions have missed an essential aspect of public art and that is that the term “Public Art” is a generic phrase “covering a multitude of sins”.

Much of our thinking about public art has to be conditioned on a series of sliding scales. The first of these scales relates to the intent of art making. [see Fig 1] At one end of the scale the intent can be to generate a high level of public involvement in the conception and creation of the artwork itself. Such approaches have become known as community art, a mode of practice where the artist subjugates individual expression in order to draw others into the art making process and to generate a high degree of community ownership and pride in the resulting artwork. At the other extreme is the stand alone art object created

by an individual and totally uncompromising with regard to its siting in public. It is a fact that between these two extremes there are many diverse modes of practice that helps to create culturally rich public environments. For example as we move along the scale from the true community art project we can position the creation of street furniture and other functional objects by artists who are responding to the community's desires and aspirations while being the individual creator of the objects. While towards the other end of our scale the site-specific artwork is a unique blend of individual expression informed by an understanding of site and society. I believe that one of the crucial considerations is not to allow value judgements to get in the way of validating all these variants and acknowledging their role in the total public art sector. This is not to say that one does not apply aesthetic judgement to work but it must be done with an understanding of the intent of the work.

Perhaps two of the most debated concepts of recent times are integration and collaboration. They are often used interchangeably but they have quite different meanings. An artwork becomes integrated as the result of a process: the process of integration, while collaboration is a coming together of two or more individuals to work towards a common goal.

I first presented what I refer to as the concept of convergent practice [Fig 2] at the Art+Architecture conference in Copenhagen, Denmark. This is a graphic representation of the potential working relationships between artists and architects. The chart shows the con-

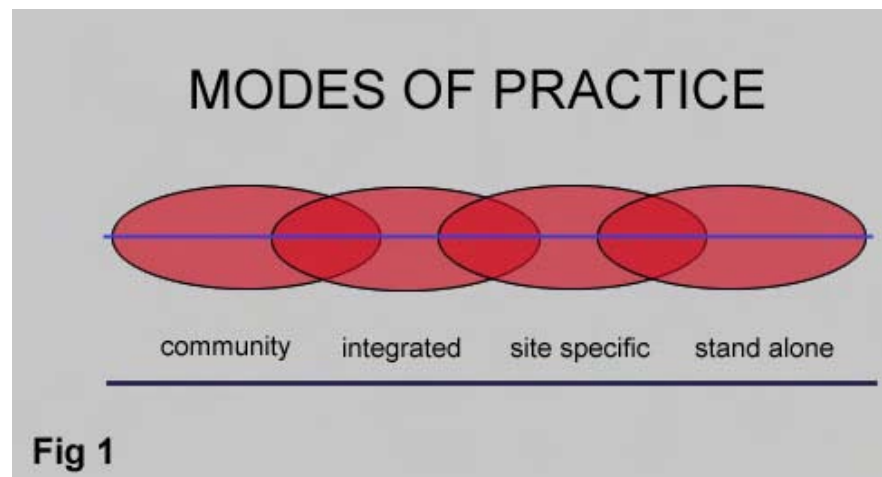


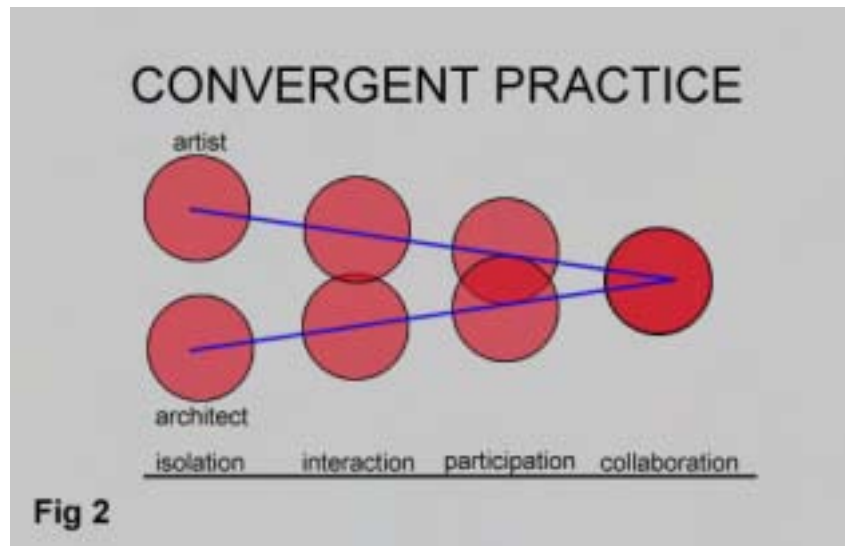
Fig 1

verging relationships starting with works created in total isolation from each other, for example a sculpture created for a building that already exists or the purchase of an artwork that already exists. Reaching a total collaboration where there is no way of differentiating between the in put of either discipline.

Policy Frameworks

As previously stated there are a limited number of established public art policies. The Tasmanian State Government and the Melbourne City Council both have had a percent for art policy in place for well over ten years. In both cases reviews have taken place over time and changes made, such as the Tasmanian percentage has been lifted from 1% to 2% and the Melbourne percentage has been shifted from individual projects to a pool of funds for strategic application. Recent policy work by our company has included the concept of a mandatory percentage for art where cities and states have requested that approach. However we have been strong advocates of basing the percentage on the total capital works budget rather than applied to individual projects. There are several good reasons for this approach, firstly there is the ease of calculating an annual budget, secondly it allows for the strategic allocation of funds and finally it allows the government to be seen to be giving money to projects. This final point is a significant psychological advantage as the percent for art is often seen as taking money away from projects and giving it to the arts.

The structure of the policy can also have a significant effect on the artwork outcomes and commissioning processes employed. For example the Queensland policy “Art Built-in” implies a high degree of integration, however the reality is that many opportunities for integration are lost through the overly bureaucratic structure and the time it takes to get participating agencies to agree to the commissioning process. Brecknock Consulting were the Artwork Managers for Art Built-in’s largest project to date, the Roma Street Parkland project. Despite the wishes of the landscape architects to employ us early in the design phase to ensure integration it was over a year before we were formally engaged, through an open tender process, by which time the design was completed. We were then faced with limited time and a daunting task. We were required to implement more than a million dollars work of artwork, by sixteen artists, in a period of six months. It is hoped that with time and review the Art Built-in process will become more flexible and streamlined and achieve its aim of integrating art and architecture. It has however been the experience of our consultancy that the more collaborative projects happen outside the formal policy frameworks where teams of artists and architects happen because of commitment to the concept rather than as an obligation of a policy. Increasingly we are being engaged to work with the



architects from the very inception of a project to ensure we are involved in the planning stages and thereby giving us an opportunity to make sure that the artists are brought into the project at an appropriate time. This a good development.

To address the need for encouraging diversity of art practice we have in a recent policy for the City of Adelaide provided a framework that includes three commissioning categories. The 'Outdoor Gallery' for stand alone or signature art pieces, 'Integrated Art' for artists working on capital works projects and 'Community Art' for those projects either involving an artist working with the community or where the community participates in the creation of the artwork. This will allow each area to be treated differently from the perspective of aims, process and assessment of outcomes.

Public Art Master Plans

Of special interest to this conference is the Integrated Urban Art Policy of the Docklands Authority in Melbourne. The Melbourne Docklands is a vast area of derelict waterfront land adjacent to the central business district of Melbourne and covers an area almost as big as the current central business district. [fig 3] The Docklands Authority is a State Government statutory authority charged with the planning and overseeing of the Docklands transformation but not with the actual development process. The Docklands has been divided up into five major development packages, each of which has been tendered out to the private sector. [fig 4] Included in the tender package for each precinct was a requirement for Integrated Urban Art. In the early planning stages the Docklands Authority established an Integrated Urban Art Committee to advise it on strategies for the integration of art through an arms length process. The committee, of which my fellow director Carol Atwell and I were members, recommended that a percent for art requirement be included in the tender package to ensure that all those developers tendering would have to address the issue. The resulting requirement is in retrospect a little complex and is causing some problems as the first developments take place. Rather than a simple 1% of development costs having to be spent on artwork the requirement broke down the 1% into three parts. Part one being half of the 1% that must be spent on artworks integrated into the buildings or in public spaces within the property title. The remaining funds are then divided between monies spent within the public realm in the developers precinct and funds transferred to the Authority to be spent at the Authorities discretion.



Fig 3

For the last year and a half our company has been developing master plans for Yarra's Edge, one of the large development precincts, for the Mirvac Group. While I cannot talk about the specifics of the project for commercial in confidence reasons it is public knowledge

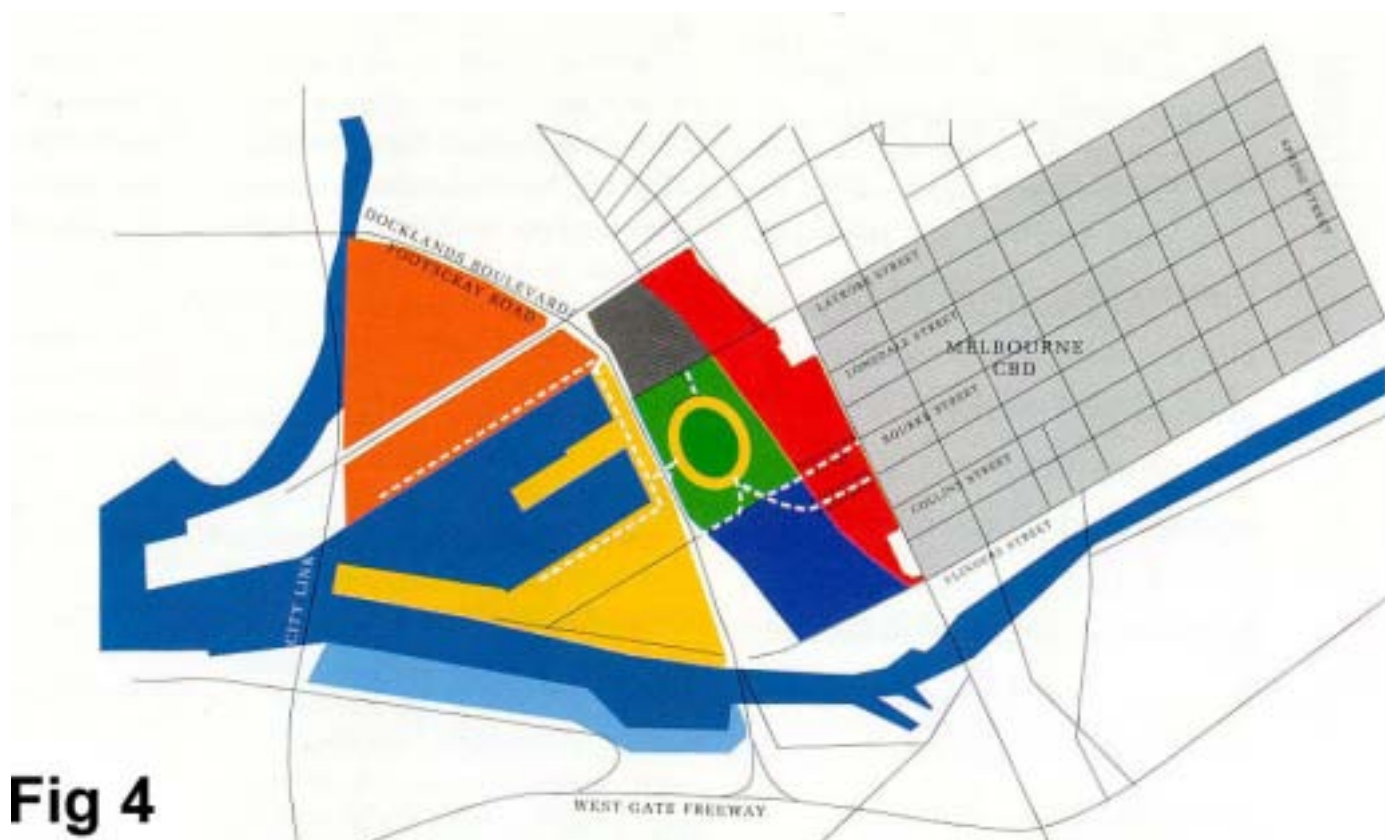


Fig 4

that this development precinct covers a vast tract of land along the southern edge of the Yarra River between two major road bridges.[fig 5] Published development costs for this and other precincts provide a basis for calculating that more than one of the developers will have a potential art budget in excess of five million and potentially up to ten million dollars. As there are a total of five precincts covered by the Integrated Urban Art policy one can see that the Melbourne Docklands will become the site of the largest concentration of public art in the country. Our approach to the Yarra's Edge involved a range of aspects such as a detailed analysis of the development plans and the proposed staging over approximately a ten year period and gaining a clear understanding of the architecture and urban design approach. The master planning aimed to develop a conceptual framework that would underpin the selection of artists and to provide some linking themes and conceptual starting points for commissioned artists. This planning process also involved considerable thought to ensure that artworks could be commissioned within the staged development process and that art opportunities were effectively distributed across the percent for art categories as defined by the Integrated Urban Art policy.

Our work on master plans for development projects around Australia



Fig 5

such as Yarra's Edge have involved us in extensive research and site analysis followed by the identification of art opportunities. We usually prepare an Art Opportunities Report that summarised the research and sets out a framework for the identified art opportunities, both providing geographic distribution and a conceptual framework. This conceptual framework, or curatorial rationale, will provide a conceptual starting point for artists engaged to develop the identified opportunities and to provide a linking mechanism or site narrative to the collected works. Finally the Art Opportunities Report provides the commissioner with an appropriate implementation methodology for each of the identified projects. The challenge is to develop the conceptual framework in such a way that it provides a structure ensuring the incrementally commissioning of works can take place within the curatorial rationale without it restricting an individual artist's creativity.

A recent development has been the growing interest by Australian cities in public art master plans for the whole city. Our company has been engaged to undertake city plans for cities such as Wodonga, a regional city in the state of Victoria, and the City of Adelaide. We are currently preparing the City of Adelaide's first five-year 'Public Art Plan'. These planning projects usually require consideration of the conceptual and locational dimensions for public art and the strategic implementation of the plan over a five to ten year timeframe.

Implementation Issues

With an increasing focus on policy development and master planning what are the issues to be confronted by policy makers and consultants working in the field?

Perhaps the most contested aspects of the public art commissioning process are the artist selection and concept approval phases. There have been numerous projects where all the appropriate procedures have been followed in selecting artists and approving concepts only to have the whole process fall apart when politicians have personally intervened and overruled committee selection. There is nothing more frustrating than the old "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like" factor when personal taste overrides considered professional judgement. While it is possible to develop policy that minimises political intervention the nature of public art seems to act as a magnet to controversy.

Once a commission is underway there is a real need to ensure that commissioning processes are carefully considered to provide appropriate support to the artist while also ensuring the commissioner faces minimal risk. There is a danger of over managing public art, especially where a level of participation or collaboration is required. The project manager must be very sensitive to providing effective co-ordination while not creating a barrier between the artist and design team. There has been a lot of talk in Australia of 'Best Practice' in project management. What though do people mean by Best Practice? I suspect that to some people the concept of Best Practice suggests a fixed formula for commissioning such as standardised calls for expressions of interest and limited competition models. I like to think that Best Practice relates to having a thorough knowledge of public art

practice and the ability to establish the most appropriate commissioning model for each individual project.

Master planning has the distinct advantage of providing a framework for incremental development of public art programs. It can also assist in the commissioning of a collection of works that fit within a predetermined conceptual context. The potential negative side of master planning is that it can become too proscriptive or set out themes requiring literal interpretation all of which restricts individual artist creativity. It is therefore beholden on consultants and commissioners to develop conceptual frameworks that are robust but adaptable and open to creative interpretation.

In conclusion I would like to stress that I believe in diversity, flexibility and planning. Including diversity of artistic practice to allow for the free flowing of creative ideas. Flexibility in developing policy to ensure appropriateness to the local political and environmental conditions. Forward planning that is robust and allows for what I call 'Incremental Opportunism', that is having plans in place that allow commissioners to take advantage of opportunities as they present themselves in a strategic rather than haphazard way.