

PUBLIC ART, PUBLIC SPACE, URBAN DESIGN – CASE STUDIES

CREATING SIGNIFICANCE THROUGH PUBLIC PLACES ART

AN INCLUSIVE + INTERDISCIPLINARY PRACTICE

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Abstract Introduction

A diverse range of professions and practices go into creating public places that bring health and wealth to cities and communities. The art of planning and design for quality and vitality in public spaces rests in the balance of people, place, spirit and custom. Public places need to be more than safe and accessible, they also need to have meaning and significance for people, to be used more fully and with greater appreciation.

Through selected public projects, the paper explores how this can be achieved and what is the vital role of the artist / designers in collaboration with scientists and other professional designers of urban spaces. The artist / designers are needed to 'tell the story', enhance the significance and provide the framework / amenity for its celebration. They provide for / create the spirit and identity of public places out of their function. In the examples issues of cultural contradictions, social awareness, political, emotional and economic values are addressed. Their effect on the sustenance and maintenance of community, economy and environment is demonstrated.

Working with the range of expertise that is called for in public places planning and design requires thinking inclusively across different disciplines and different interest groups. Examples are given of team collaboration across diverse areas including archaeology and ecology, social planning, architecture and landscape planning, traffic and services management, visual art and design. The real art is in bringing all together in balance such that the public places ARE the artwork. The examples demonstrate that an interdisciplinary approach is the key to socially valued, long-lived projects.

The projects in this paper describe the increased value of public places that include designing for the cultural environment and working collaboratively in the early planning process. The benefits come from the celebration of diversity, the building of community custodianship, the reduction of crime and the increase in social capital and property values.

The paper proposes that in order to build better places, urban design policies, geographical and ecological principles, and social and cultural environment planning must be included in the scope of public places art and design practice.

Selected public projects.

The following selected examples are well known to the author and have been the subject of a personal and informal program of evaluation over several years.

Encounter 2002 Victor Harbor – *Un / Occupied Territory*

Art that is inclusive and generates change.

An artwork installation that became the catalyst for change towards public acknowledgement and reconciliation with the local indigenous people.

Presenting a public identity and political significance for the Ngarrindjeri.

The artwork is a memorial to the meeting at sea of the explorers, Matthew Flinders and Nicolas Baudin. The concept for the work combines art and science and is based on a theme of the wind. It serves the needs of urban design by providing a destination point at the end of the main street. It also serves as a symbol for a 200 years old story belonging to the area.

The artwork became a focus of political and social attention through its title, which refers to the position of the British in 1802 that the land was 'Terra Nullius' when in fact it was occupied. The local Ngarrindjeri and Ramindjeri people suffered as a result of those early colonist attitudes.

After intense debate and negotiation, the launch of the artwork became a ceremony of great importance for present and future cultural relations in the area. There was an exchange of flags between the Rupulle of the Ngarrindjeri, the British Consul-General in Australia, Mr. Anthony Sprake, and M. Michel Rocard, ex-Prime Minister of France.

A Document of Apology was signed at the event and a copy included in the description installed on the artwork. The outcome is a public identity for the Ngarrindjeri / Ramindjeri people that is inclusive and carried with pride.

Warriparinga 1997 - *The Tjirbruke Gateway*

Art that is responsive to the need for cross-cultural reconciliation resulting in regeneration for the land and for the Kurna people.

Presenting social benefits, spiritual significance:

From a concept for 'The Absent Presence / The Present Absence' conceived in 1994, the Tjirbruke Gateway was developed with the Kurna artist Sherry Rankine as a project for reconciliation. Since its completion it has become the place for Kurna ceremonies including rallies for community solidarity, a public funeral and the monthly lighting of fires for regeneration. Linked with activities in the nearby culture centre, it has become a focus for education of both indigenous and non-indigenous people, about the land and indigenous law.

When the installation was completed, the artist Sherry Rankine spoke for all when she said "It feels like the Old Ones have returned". It is a sense that is also affirmed by indigenous visitors from the Centre of Australia.

The Tjirbruke Gateway installation continues to encourage the spirit of reconciliation with which it was begun. It was opened in the International Year of Reconciliation 1997 by Dr. Lowitja O'Donoghue and Sir William Deane, then Gov.General of Australia. New River Red Gums, propagated from the ancient trees on site, were planted surrounding the 50 'implanted' tree trunks as a gesture of reconciliation with the Land.

Brighton Jetty and Jetty Road Brighthon - *The Elements at Play* 1999

Art that is part of rebuilding a cherished landmark and the local economic environment.

Presenting economic benefits, scientific significance and social benefits:

In popular culture for all nations, jetties have a particular attraction for people, as a meeting place and destination. In 1994 the Brighton Jetty in South Australia was destroyed in a storm. The new jetty is now the site of an installation unique in Australia. Three works 'play' with wind, light and

water. Titled 'The Elements at Play' it has become a destination with a difference. The 'Æolian Harp' is sounded by the wind, and the 'Hydraulis Organ Pipes' are sounded by the waves. The tension membranes of 'Sky Lines' play patterns of light and shade across the deck and onto the water. 'The Elements at Play' provides an opportunity to rediscover and experience the environment in an unexpected way.

Extending from the jetty, Jetty Road, Brighton has a series of banners, the design of which is based on the international code of signals, as are the sails on the jetty. The banners highlight selected dates of historical importance to Brighton, while canvas wraps at the base of the poles depict traditional seafaring knots and their fanciful titles. Together with traffic planning, new paving, tree planting and new lighting, they mark out an interactive street block and create an entrance to the jetty.

The works have had a significant effect in transforming the way people experience Jetty Road and the jetty. Empty shop fronts are now fully occupied and busy. The jetty is now used as a back drop for wedding photos and often appears on TV. Regularly parents, and hosts for interstate and overseas visitors, can be overheard explaining, with a proprietary pride, how the sound installations work. The sense of custodianship, already present in the 'Friends of the Brighton Jetty' group, has been significantly widened and the numbers of visitors have been greatly increased.

The Project won a State Civic Award.

The Mile End Wall 1996

A response to the need for noise mitigation and resistance to vandalism.

Presenting the story of a place – heritage significance and cultural reconciliation:

A new development being designed for a site at the intersection of two busy roads needed a two metre high wall to mitigate noise pollution. The developers did not want the wall to be an invitation to graffiti 'tagging' that would spoil the image (and the sale) of the new residential buildings. Their urban design planner worked collaboratively with the artist.

The 'Mile End Wall' design refers to sedimentary layers, factory buildings and foundry chimneys. It commemorates the existence, in the 1950s, of a state-of-the-art foundry and its production of farm machinery that was historically important. Inserted in the wall on the southern aspect is a cast iron fragment from one of the farm implements produced on site.

Rather than being seen to hide a community behind walls, this wall tells a story of the site to the public. In nearly 10 years it has not been tagged or vandalized. Taxi drivers and bar tenders, most important to the tourist industry, have commented spontaneously and favourably to their clients' regarding the wall design.

Mounted on the south-eastern section of the wall is the bronze relief sculpture 'We Have Survived'. This was conceived by the Kaurna [aboriginal] artist Sherry Rankine. It is a declaration of endurance in the face of industrial development. The relief sculpture, was the first public marker in Adelaide to present the public face of its Aboriginal people through their own eyes.

The project won an award from the Planning Institute of Australia.

Swallowcliffe Schools 1995

A response to vandalism and a dismal public image.

Presenting Social, Aesthetic and Economic Benefits with Cultural Significance:

A team of six artists worked with the architect Patricia Les on the redevelopment plan for the two schools. The area was one of economic and social disadvantage and not suited to works that were 'art for art's sake'. For this reason the art team decided to focus on the infrastructure needs

of built forms, paving, flooring, safety rails, security fences and rainwater heads. The building itself became an artwork. The local spirit of endurance, in the face of disadvantage, and the strong sense of identity shared, formed the basis for planning and design outcomes.

The utilitarian materials of bricks, linoleum, galvanized iron and painted steel were transformed through design and application, creating a different idea of aesthetic value. It reflected the spirit of the community and lifted their public image. The project won the national Community Environment Art and Design Award, the national Sir Zelman Cowan Award 1995 and three other State Awards.

An official evaluation was conducted two years later and published by the Australia Council. [Worth et al, 1997] The significant cultural change, brought about by the re-development, was evidenced in the reduction of vandalism from a daily event to twice in six months. Property values rose as people became interested in their children attending the school and local pride in ownership was enhanced. One local resident spoke for the others when she said, "It's just like us, we're all a bit bent up here". A significant cultural change for the better is represented and has been founded on the strengths of the past – those of the built forms and those of the local culture.

Recently there have been spin-off developments, expanding the art/culture presence into projects for the adjacent shopping centre, landscaping and the school pedestrian crossing area. The value of this approach for integrating art works and public place has been recognized and continued by the local community.

Other examples include:

Tarnannga – Place of the Native Honeysuckle 1998 on-going

A response to violent crime, the sale of drugs and stolen goods.

Presenting Social, Aesthetic and Economic Benefits with Environmental Significance.

Tjukurpa Wangakapai – Story Telling Place 1999 - 2002

A chance to re-create a positive cultural presence within a hostile environment.

Presenting Social and Aesthetic Benefits with Spiritual Significance.

Conclusion

The health, identity and public image of a society benefit greatly when its cultural symbols are recognized publicly. Art has an invaluable role in creating the significance of public spaces.

Cultural Environment Design and Public Places Art are not simply for the production of out-doors art gallery spaces. They are the result of collaboration across many areas of expertise and they include the clients as government and community. They influence interaction between people. They enhance, and sometimes even create, the meaning of a place. The outcomes are public places that more people frequent and with interactions that promote quality of life