

## **Beyond the Hedonistic Playground: new roles for public art in Brisbane.**

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### **The Changing Face of Brisbane's Urban Life**

I am told that not very long ago, there were no street cafes in Brisbane. Dining on the footpath was not allowed! When this Wowserist legislation was rescinded, suddenly everyone was dining on the street. It was not a cautious or circumspect response; instead like Jacques Tati's movie "Playtime", the streets were suddenly filled with people enjoying breakfast, lunch, and dinner on the footpath as though it were a long established tradition.

In a similar manner, public art has been joyfully accepted as another aesthetic and pleasurable aspect of Brisbane's urban landscape. The instant affluent urbanism that is characteristic of the city in 2004 reinforces the concept of Brisbane as an urban playground where the weather is often quoted as 'beautiful one day and perfect the next' and public art is part of the growth industry.

Public space in Brisbane is characterised by the exuberant growth of bougainvillea and frangipanni in which nestle artworks referencing indigenous plants and people. Riverside promenades are embellished with decorative tiles that weave through the pavement and everywhere water splashes from playful sculptures. Suburban centres are equally richly planted and embellished with art and craft evoking local references.

### **Contemporary Public Art + Architecture**

But public art is more than decoration. Since the Avant-Garde artists of the 1930s and the Land Artists of the 1960s, installations in public spaces have served to remind the population of controversial and deeper issues. The debates around Richard Serra's '*Tilted Arc*' and Joseph Beuys '*1000 Oaks*' have brought to attention social and environmental issues in ways that are as effective, if not more so, as emblazoned headlines and media hysteria. Quiet, simple and yet profoundly disturbing, these installations have resonated around the world reaching people far beyond the actual location of the work.

Collaborative projects, such as *art+arch infinite*, raise questions about the role of art in public space and who can claim to be the artist. Many architects and landscape architects believe that they are artists. This however, is a misreading of the role of contemporary art. The 1930s Avant-Garde moved contemporary art away from the Renaissance concept of art and architecture as refined form and style and instead art confronted people in ways that require intellectual engagement beyond aesthetics. The focus on the sophisticated intellectual role of contemporary art in galleries and public space continued until the massive urban renewal programs of the 1980s.

### **Public Art and Urban Development**

In these urban renewal projects, artists worked with architects and landscape architects, but the artists' works predominantly served as decorative adjuncts to the buildings and parks, in the form of handrails, masking exhaust vents, occasional entry sculptures etc. In Sydney, the artists' works in the urban renewal of Darling Harbour as a 'Festival Market' were indistinguishable from the artefacts for sale in the shops. Although artists were at last being paid, their voices as cultural critics were silenced. Even those artists who worked with community groups found themselves working on projects aimed at re-invigorating economic development within the status quo, such as Main Street projects which proliferated throughout Australia during the 1980s and 1990s. The art works tended to be tokenistic, paying lip-service to site and community-specificity through banners, community-made tiles in footpaths, murals, etc.

Across Australia during the 1990s, designers were involved in transforming urban spaces into clean, attractive settings for public 'play', which served major political and corporate goals. The city as spectacle however, has a sinister side masking many growing urban problems. As the art curator John Barrett-Lennard points out, celebrations of sense of place through public art projects merely shifts urban problems to choices of lifestyle, thus removing politics from urban space.

Also during the 1990s, art agencies began to institutionalise artists' work through programs such as '*% for Art*'. While laudable in improving the lot of artists, these programs do not allow for the important role of the contemporary artist as cultural critic. Instead art is now embedded in architecture in various ways and the artists are subject to the same constraints as architects, namely meeting client needs and the requirements of various authorities. Most of the '*% for Art*' projects are related to buildings and are not often applied to public space. This may be a blessing in disguise because if art in the public realm is to sustain its heritage of the 1930s, it needs to maintain its intellectual and critical edge.

### **Restating the Critical Voice**

Some public art projects, usually temporary, have eschewed the tendency for playful spectacle. Instead, many have critiqued the impact of Late Capitalism, including the growing phenomenon of homeless people. *Working in Public*, curated by John Barrett-Lennard in 1992, resulted in a number of art installations throughout Sydney. At a time when materialism and consumption were being celebrated with enthusiasm in public spaces, Barrett-Lennard's exhibition highlighted the importance of challenging the complacency of affluent urban dwellers.

Barrett-Lennard was particularly interested in the notion of 'the public' and the complex issues associated with art and contemporary society. He was concerned about the way art had become appropriated, thus undermining the potential for the public domain to act as a rich cultural sphere in which to explore uncomfortable questions about social values. He suggested that art has lost its privileged position established by the Avant-Garde and that this is a serious loss.

He considered 'public' to be a complex term through which we constitute concepts of social interaction and civil society. As a conceptually contested notion, the term needs the discursive territory of contemporary art to reveal the many competing interests (Barrett-Lennard, 1992:12).

Today the question remains. Can contemporary art re-establish its intellectual dimensions and its critical voice? Can critical art practice address itself to the bigger issues and intervene in public spaces in ways that can arouse community self-reflection?

We have seen this with environmental issues. Art has become an acceptable prompt to remind us to be more environmentally aware, witness the themes of the popular temporary sculptures along the Bondi headland in Sydney. Art works about biodiversity such as Janet Laurence's evocative and delicate works, and works that explore water and waste management are seen as virtuous. However, in general such works are not overtly confronting. Mierle Ukeles' installation of mirrors on the New York sanitation trucks are really quite gentle reminders that we cause this waste. In a western Sydney parkland, as a precursor to the transformation of concrete drains into constructed wetlands, Turpin and Crawford's sinuous and sensuous curve, *The Memory Line* of rye grass, serves to reassure rather than challenge.

Suzi Gablik, in her arguments for *The Re-enchantment of Art*, suggests that the lack of political engagement in public art relates as much to the disenchantment and cynicism associated with post-modern nihilism as to the appropriation of art by political and corporate interests. The idea of redemption through art has been replaced by Lyotard's notion of 'active nihilism', where artists' works can either accelerate Late Capitalism's decadence or disengage as a kind of 'drift' or 'hovering' where the state of neutrality is seen as a radically-charged gesture (Gablik, 1991:16).

More than ten years later, although some artists have addressed the issues of the homeless and environmental degradation, the main thrust of art and design has continued to endorse the

consumerist lifestyle associated with Late Capitalism. Brisbane has been a latecomer to such unrestrained urban consumerism but now engages in it with gusto.

Gablik calls for the return of the soul – a form of re-enchantment – as a way of overcoming the cynicism engendered by post-modern disillusionment. She argues that we should re-engage in an ethic of care as part of social and environmental healing. The art in Brisbane's urban spaces is playful and light-hearted, inclusive and humorous, but does it engage with the soul? Does it address bigger issues or is there a risk that it is only about lifestyle and celebrating place?

### **Discourses on Collaboration**

Not all architects and artists have accepted the impact of consumerism unquestioningly and collaboration has been cited as a way to search for new answers for the designed world. During the 1990s an Australian program, known as *Creative Village*, involved intense collaboration between artists, architects, landscape architects and communities in designs for the public realm. While achieving many innovative outcomes, the program stayed within a 'feel good' realm and did not explore the numerous difficult professional questions which emerged during the collaborations.

An equally interesting program in London in 1997 involved architects and artists in a series of collaborative events, recorded in an issue of *Architectural Design (A.D.)* entitled *Frontiers: Artists and Architects*. The articles and debates highlighted both the similarities and differences in each profession. As Maggie Toy, the editor, states '*the debate about architecture's position as an art rages as contentiously as ever*' (AD,1997:7).

In the *A.D.* debates, artists saw themselves using their creativity to search for the unknown and seeking, through their work, to disturb order that is too complete, while, to artists, architects remained in the '*space of functionality*' (A.D.1997:12). Architects saw themselves as equally creative but felt that artists lacked the professional rigour required to achieve finished works as complex as buildings. There were many discussions about the utile (architecture) and the non-utile (art) where architects were seen as locked into meeting client needs and therefore unable to generate cultural criticism in their works.

The *A.D.* debates showed that the roles for artists and designers in the public realm are different. It was generally agreed that if art is to exist in public space it must exist at an intellectual and critical level, whether temporary or permanent. In contrast, architects and landscape architects are accountable for the successful use of their spaces and the longevity of the finished work, thus tempering the level of critique. This dilemma is sadly apparent in the response to Richard Weller's *Garden of Australian Dreams* in Canberra, a strong political work which is to be replaced with grass, trees, and seats.

Given the constraints that built environment designers work under, collaborative projects such as *art+arch infinite* provide designers with replenishing opportunities to explore their political and critical edge. For architects, there is a particular exhilaration in working with ephemeral installations where creativity can be stretched to engage with the wider issues associated with community and place. The critical edge is not only informed by insightful collaborations, but contentious approaches to the public realm, disseminated through media discussion, publications and exhibitions, provide important opportunities to rethink the city.

### **The Power of the Site: New Conversations with the Sublime**

Brisbane has not always been a benign playground. It has a recent sinister history palpably described by Andrew McGahan in his novel *Last Drinks*. Given this history, the city is a site of potentially powerful explorations of both the 'uncanny' and the Sublime as well as the recent concept of 'warped space' (Vidler,1992,2000).

In the *A.D.* debates, architects such as Will Alsop and Hans Hollein were cited as examples of how important it is to reconsider the values embedded in the Sublime, where beauty is infused

with a sense of foreboding. And how mindful one must be of the Picturesque which is 'always lurking around ready to appropriate artistic visions, defuse them, and render them harmlessly void ...' (Spens, 1997:33)

Similarly the art and architectural theorist, Anthony Vidler, points out, that today anxiety and estrangement are intimately linked with the aesthetics of space, particularly public space. In his discussion about *The Architectural Uncanny* (1992) he explores the uncanny effects of mirroring and shadowing, pervasive elements of recent instant urbanism. In *Warped Space* (2000:2) he talks of the landscapes of fear where the modern megalopolis is made up of 'topographies of despair' as a result of technological and capitalist development.

He maintains that there are two forms of spatial warping, psychological and artistic, and both are evident in the space of the metropolis. The first is produced by the psychological culture of modernism where space has become a repository of numerous neuroses. He says 'Space... is not empty, but full of disturbing objects, among which the forms of architecture and city take their place' (2000:viii). The second type of warping is produced by the intersection of different media – film, photography, art, architecture – in ways that break the boundaries of genre. This is evident in Rachel Whiteread's work, 'House', which engages with architecture as a critical part of the art work.

In the context of urban anxiety, art practice is often concerned with the homeless and shelter such as the *Critical Vehicles* of Krzysztof Wodiczko, or prosthetics such as the work of Richard Goodwin and Ricardo Scofidio + Elizabeth Diller. Others such as Vito Acconci are concerned with the nomadic life induced by post-industrialism. Whereas architecture, allowing for some subliminal commentary, has in the main engaged with warped forms as a new style enabled by increasingly sophisticated IT tools.

Vidler (2000:ix) summarises his position by pointing out that whether architects and artists engage with the inherent problems of contemporary cities through utopian solutions or simply by representing them in all their horror and excitement, 'new forms of expression' are required.

Can contemporary collaborative art projects engage with the public realm as *new forms of expression*? At an intimate scale, can the works elicit uncanny and eerie feelings? On a larger scale, can the Sublime be used in ways that both disturb and delight? Finally, apart from the sinister memories associated with Brisbane's urban space and its current role as an urban playground, are there bigger issues for the future of Brisbane?

### **Whither Brisbane in the Growing Megalopolis?**

There is no doubt that the self-interest embedded in Late Capitalist materialism is evident in the unrestrained land grab for residential development in South East Queensland (SEQ). In a project such as *art+arch infinite*, can artists and landscape architects deploy metaphor in ways that can highlight one voiceless aspect of our world – the productive lands that have traditionally nested within the fringes of our cities?

There is the risk that the delightful playground of SEQ is spinning out of control with dizzying speed. While the Brisbane urbanites enjoy the riverine setting with its recreational banks, the bigger catchment is turning into bitumen and concrete. Once the 'fruit bowl' of Brisbane, Sunnybank has become dense housing, the 'salad bowl' of Redlands is fast disappearing, while further afield the green fingers of canefields are gradually ebbing away under new waves of residential development. SEQ in the near future will be a continuous urban conurbation from Noosa to the Tweed River, with Brisbane merely one of many urban nodes.

In this context, what can art do? The landscape architect, Adriaan Geuze of West 8, provides one example of how similar issues were explored in the Netherlands, through his confronting installation art called 'In Holland Stands a House' (1995). He covered the entire public space of

the Netherlands Architecture Institute with 800,000 small individual houses, provoking the public to see the alarming implications of unbridled residential growth.

Perhaps we need to revisit Gablik's concept of a reconstructive art practice of social responsibility and environmental attunement. However, 'environmental' has been high-jacked by the naturalists. A new paradigm of environmental attunement is needed, one that includes cultural landscapes and agricultural land. The 'endgame' of unrestrained urban development, so brilliantly fashioned by the Netherlands architect, Winy Maas, in his 'datascape', shows that megacities of unrelenting urban conurbations have frightening implications. Catastrophes such as Mad Cow disease and SARS clearly tell us that we must reconsider the way we live and work within the landscape. There are big issues to be faced in SEQ and artists and designers are the ciphers of such messages. By working together, their collective creativity can awaken concern for the last vestiges of sustainable landscapes and suggest a new urban paradigm that re-engages with locality as a healthy, living and productive place at a manageable scale.

### **Beyond the Hedonist Playground: new roles for the Trickster**

Gablik and more recently the art theorist, Jean Fisher, suggest we need to get over the betrayed ideology of the Avant-Garde. Fisher is particularly interested in the way the 'Trickster' in art can continue to act as an agent of change in the era of Late Capitalism and globalisation (Fisher, 2003). She points out that the conventional paradigm of oppositional art as the inverse of the hegemonic position is limited and is wickedly appropriated and parodied by a tricky mainstream media.

Traditionally, we associate the Trickster with performance art which has equally been appropriated by the spectacle city. Given such unrelenting appropriation, Fisher suggests that one remaining critical resistance tactic for art is to present the shocking aspects of what is familiar and seemingly safe. Mirroring Vidler's 'uncanny', installations can encode the viewers' encounter with the works in ways that enable the familiar to be experienced as confusing and disturbing, tricking us into deeper and more serious reflection.

Can public art become a reconstructive art that both engages with and subverts the urban playground so that bigger issues about our cities can be seen and not seen in enigmatically disturbing ways? For as Morris Berman suggests in *The Re-enchantment of the World*, we need a counter culture that alerts us to the denial embedded in the hedonistic consumerist playground. In his argument for a possible re-enchanted world, he states '*If there is any bond among the elements of this emerging counter culture, it is the notion of recovery...of our bodies, our health...our rootedness in the land...*' (Gablik, 1991:22).

In such a playful environment as Brisbane, the challenge for projects such as *art+arch infinite* is to both replenish the creativity in built environment designers, whilst also responding to Berman's call for a counter culture that explores alternatives to consumerism, to Gablik's appeal for a re-enchanted belief in a civil society and a healed environment, and finally to a muted plea to save the surrounding productive land.

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