

Armstrong, H.B. (1997) 'Australian Collaborative Design Paradigms: Universities, Designers, Communities' in De Lorenzo &, Laurence, & Samuels (eds) *Emergent Paradigms in Design Education*, proceedings of EPDE Conference 10-13 July 1997, UNSW Sydney. Pp45-52.

## **Australian Collaborative Design Paradigms: Universities, Designers, Communities Emerging Paradigms in Design Education**

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### **Introduction**

The concept of collaboration between university design faculties and communities has gone through a paradigm shift since the community design projects of the 1970s. This paper will explore the changing nature of collaborations both between different design disciplines and between design schools and communities from the empowering political processes of the 1970s to the entrepreneurial pragmatic processes of the 1990s. It will look at the rationale for collaborative design projects and consider the role that rural communities have played in the emerging paradigm for Australian design education.

### *Changing Nature of the Community Design Paradigm*

Collaborations and community design were heady, idealistic enterprises in the 1970s when staff and students in design and planning schools worked with inner city communities as advocates and empowering agents. Although the concept of advocacy was focussed on the needs of disadvantaged inner city communities who were seen to be victims of 'rapacious' development interests, there was also a concurrent crisis of confidence within design professions. There was growing disquiet about the impact of modernist rational developments on communities and the social problems which were being created in the name of state of the art planning and design (Comerio. 1990.). Increasingly, it was recognised that instead of single rational solutions, professional design and planning practice was characterised by complex issues, uncertain outcomes, and conflicting values. These were 'wicked problems' masking deeper issues which needed to be addressed (Schon, 1983; Comerio, 1990).

In this crisis of design confidence, designers sought answers to these 'wicked' problems by working with community groups, with the result that community design emerged as a public discourse. It was during the 1970s that professional advocates developed, many of whom were academics in design and planning schools. This was the time when students, academics and communities worked together on planning and design concepts; a period Comerio(1990) refers to as the Idealistic Phase where community design centres were established, usually funded by government and often organised in a quasi-voluntary way by academics.

Despite such energy and idealism and the fact that many inner city areas were saved from highrise development, few projects were built. The amount of energy expended on advocacy meant that there was little time devoted to well resolved designs of the community facilities. As a result, many designers felt that community

design meant poor design outcomes and by the 1980s there was a definite swing away from *The Whole Earth Catalogue* designs which seemed to typify community design of the 1970s.

During the 1980s, as the political climate became more conservative and government funding was reduced, community design processes were forced to be less idealistic and more pragmatic. Instead of a political model of empowerment, it was now an economic one. University affiliated design centres were replaced by agencies, often in the form of business enterprise centres. In the UK, however, there was an attempt to maintain the role of design through non-profit collaborative professional service organisations such as CLAWS which provided architects, landscape architects, planners and business managers who were funded by government to work with communities. By the late 1980s local enterprise centres were helping small businesses and projects were being built. As a result, the outcomes of community design were more visible.

In contrast to the idealistic and political broad issue community activities of the 1970s, the late 1980s projects were local and non political. There was a growing interest in self reliant community development policies aimed at the local community. Comerio(1990.28) refers to this as the 'entrepreneurial phase' of community design. Interestingly in the early 1990s there was another crisis of confidence within the design profession, in part attributable to the consumerist attitudes of the 1980s, but also attributable to the globalisation of cultural production and its resulting homogenous products. Once again there was interest in empowering communities; this time to address social and environmental sustainability. The 1990s reinforced Manuel Castell's observation that community design is something that exists in the tension between professionalism and social realism (Manuel Castells, 1983).

Just as the community design paradigm changed between the 1970s and the 1990s, so also the focus of design shifted from the consumerism of the 1980s to sustainability in the 1990s and central to this shift was the recognition that collaboration and community were the vehicles for change.

### ***Issues of sustainability***

The tensions between localism and globalism brought into focus for designers in the 90s, whether landscape architects, architects, or artists, the issues of social and environmental sustainability.

Artists such as Joseph Bueys, as the vanguard of these concerns, foreshadowed the issues with works which forced public attention on environmental sustainability. Similarly the artist, Mierle Ukeles, elicited public awareness of environmental sustainability with her subtle works for the New York Sanitation Department. Other artists such as Andy Galsworthy explored an intimate engagement with places in ways that enabled a close focus on familiar places, in other words, sustainability of the ordinary and everyday. As well artists, including Mel Chin and his work called 'Revival Fields', have undertaken projects which highlight human sustainability.

In parallel with the concerns for sustainability, the 1990s embraced postmodern ideas of pluralism and this climate of intellectual enquiry the notion of collaboration between designers was re-invigorated. It was felt that such collaborations would bring many dimensions of the problem into play and would allow for the plurality of values and ideas as well as a playfulness or jouissance (Foucault.1986).

At the same time as designers were seeking to collaborate there was an acceptance that a powerful tool in dealing with many of the environmental and social problems, often generated by global forces, lay in collaboration between local communities, for example communities which shared the same river, communities of similar professions such as designers, and communities of strangers who shared the same public spaces (Greenbie, 1981).

In Australia, there was a growing desire amongst designers to work collectively in an attempt to re-invigorate the social agenda which had been discarded during the 1980s. In Melbourne, the Box Hill Community Centre was a highly successful collaboration. In Sydney projects such as *Synthesis 6* and *Future City* (1992) involved artists and architects working together to speculate on ways to deal with the urban excavations left as a result of failed developments. Similarly the 'Working in Public' project included the powerful statement in Woolloomooloo by Anne Graham, working collaboratively with the community to produce an evocative commentary on the homeless in our cities. Another project which was initiated at this time(Creative Village) looked at how the issues of collaboration and sustainability could be addressed through environmental/urban design with rural communities.

### ***Issues for rural communities***

Rural communities, particularly the small communities, were seeking survival strategies to deal with a number of issues including the impact of global agribusiness, population loss due to unemployment and the demise of small businesses due to the competition of larger regional towns. At the State policy level, suggestions were made that these small communities, in a free market economy, should be left to become 'rural relics', however studies in Britain (Clifford and King. 1985) and in USA (Blakely. 1994) showed that there was social and cultural capital in the network of such small communities. Studies such as *Revitalising Rural America* (1996) explored the value in the intimate relationship between place and culture which expresses itself in shared identity and civic responsibility. This was also evident in the conservation activities initiated by Common Ground. More recent studies at QUT on rural communities are exploring the nature of work and the way such communities survive through voluntary work carried out collaboratively by all members of the community.



Social capital in Australian country towns – Canowindra, NSW 1992

### ***Background to Creative Village program***

In the late 1980s the Arts Council of New South Wales, under the guidance of Helen Colman, initiated workshops with selected rural towns on how urban design projects related to the town centres could revitalise small business. At the same time, Helen Armstrong and Craig Burton of the Cultural Landscape Research Unit (CLRU) at UNSW were undertaking masterplans for small rural towns with a particular cultural landscape heritage. Projects in the CLRU were also applying the work of Common Ground, UK, in selected rural communities in an attempt to reveal the community values associated with their environmental heritage.



Community Mapping, Cobar 1990



Community Mapping, Lawson 1992

In 1991, Helen Colman, inspired by the conference held in Melbourne on 'Creative Cities', suggested that the Arts Council and the CLRU work together to take urban design skills to rural communities. A small committee was formed and the program known as 'Creative Village' was established.

The key to 'Creative Village' was collaboration. The project was highly ambitious and carried high risk which is the nature of all ground breaking work. There were three major objectives; one was to revitalise the design community by bringing together teams of designers from different disciplines in order to stimulate new approaches to design for and with communities, another was to generate a new design education paradigm through the collaboration between disciplines and through

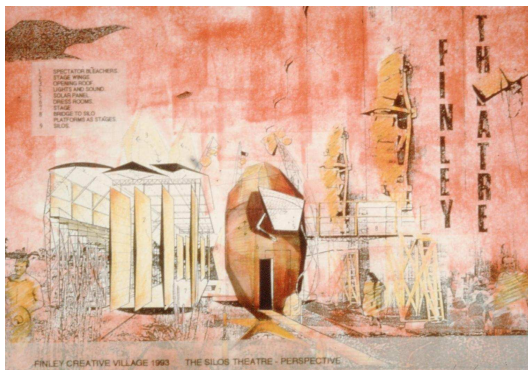
collaboration between professional designers and students working together as a team and the third objective was to bring urban and environmental design expertise to rural communities in order to generate survival strategies.



Student team undertaking workshops in country towns

Initially, the program was funded by the Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts. Rural towns were invited to apply to be part of the program as a result of media publicity in rural areas and the promotional activity of the Regional Arts Development Officers. The interest in the rural sector was immediate and a number of high standard submissions were put forward by different rural communities. Seven towns were selected for the inaugural year of the program, including one town whose design team would consist of students only.

Concurrent with the promotion of the program in the rural sector, a similar promotion was aimed at the design profession. The design teams were to be artists, architects and landscape architects. As in the rural sector, there was an immediate interest and the calibre of designers who were keen to be involved was encouraging. The Creative Village committee went through extensive interviewing and ultimately selected eighteen designers for the first year.



Mobile Theatre using train line, professional team, Finley, 1992

A fundamental component of the program was the student design studio. A collaborative studio was run with students from the College of Fine Arts, the School of Architecture and the School of Landscape Architecture, UNSW. The studio was located at the College of Fine Arts and was coordinated by Dr Helen Armstrong, Dr Catherine De Lorenzo, and Associate Professor Liz Ashburn.



In the inaugural year the program was too ambitious. The studio was structured so that one town was studied by the students alone. In parallel with this, the students were members of the professional design teams studying a range of other towns in the state. This meant that each student was working in two towns. The rationale for this was to provide a studio in which all the different professional approaches could inform the student town design. It was exhilarating for the students but exhausting. The studio was dynamic and intense as the students described the different towns they had worked in and the different approaches of the professional designers. The students were also intensely involved in the design proposals for their own town. As a result they found themselves undertaking two different designs concurrently and neither the professional designers nor the students fully understood their roles.

Despite the problems for the students in the first year, the student town proved to offer an exhilarating experience for all involved. Because the students and their tutor were all billeted in the town, there was a much closer involvement with the community than the professional towns where the designers and students stayed in motels.



Hosts to students in country town, Canowindra, 1992

As a result of the first year, the program was modified so that students only worked on the towns studied by the professionals, assisting the professionals while undertaking their own parallel studio design. As well the students were billeted in the towns, however the professionals remained resistant to such an idea.



Student team in Harden-Murrumburrah, 1993

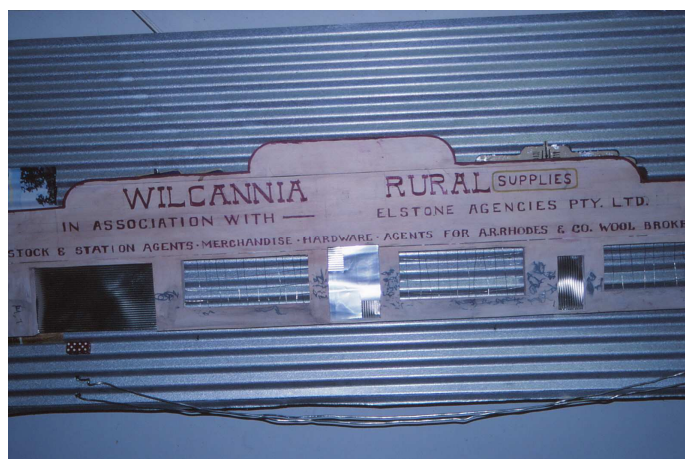
### ***Issues about design collaboration***

#### *Collaboration Between Design Professionals*

Because one of the prime objectives was to achieve new forms of collaboration between designers with the hope that this would re-invigorate the critical edge of design, an intensive training weekend was held to explore the notion of collaboration. At this stage of the program, all involved were committed to the idea of collaborative work, but none had been put to the test. However collaboration between designers that goes further than the division of skills is not easy. The design ego is an important part of the creative process and design education tends to encourage a personal commitment to individual designs. Most design schools do not teach design students the skills to work collaboratively in a way that is exploratory, challenging and iterative. Instead there is a tendency for collaborative projects to result in divisions of skills and a suppression of ideas due to an inherent politeness or a resistance to conflict. This is frequently true in professional design collaborations as well.

In the inaugural year of the project, the committee put the design teams together. Some of the teams were highly successful collaborations, but other teams were quite unable to collaborate. The training weekend had intentionally focussed on the nature of collaboration and had not been prescriptive about what should happen in the towns. As a result some of the teams were in conflict about what should be the process within the towns and what should be the outcomes. There was particular tension when the team consisted of city based designers and rural town designers.

As a result of this experience in the first year, the committee recognised that they did not have the skills to determine who would work effectively together, so in subsequent years pre-existing teams were invited to apply. In doing this the projects lost their cutting edge of internal innovation. Despite this, some of the teams produced highly innovative work. Although it was acknowledged that a particular aspect of the collaboration was lost with this change, it was important to give priority to community collaborations rather than spend resources on exploring the nature of collaboration between designers.



Display panels for community in Wilcannia, 1994

### *Collaboration Between Students*

In contrast to the professional teams, it was essential that the student component of the program address interdisciplinary design collaboration. In design schools there is the tendency for students to self select into groups. In the case of Creative Village, the students were from three design schools and did not know each other at the beginning of each year of the program, so they elected to go into teams on the basis of the location of the rural town. Each year there have been outstandingly successful collaborations and painfully unsuccessful collaborations. Clearly this is an area waiting for educational research.

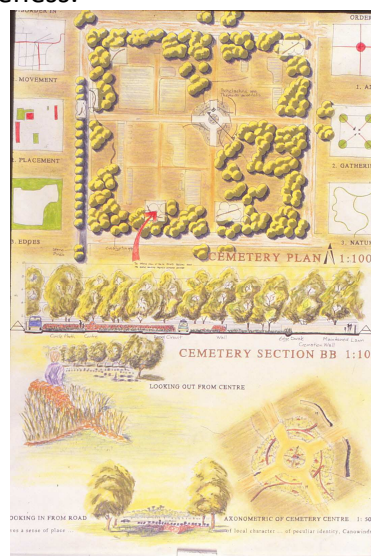


Canowindra countryside



Student Design for rock sculpture

The successful student collaborations resulted in outcomes which were more than the sum of the parts. The five years of the student programs showed that, when it works, interdisciplinary collaborative design results in personal and professional growth by the individuals involved. Mostly this occurs through the interaction between different designers with their different design approaches. Interestingly, it was thought that the blurring of discipline boundaries would be the main virtue of the process. Instead, the recognition of the nature of the contribution of each design discipline proved to be more important. This was unexpected. It was assumed that the blurring of boundaries would result in new design awareness, instead it was the understanding of one's own discipline through the reflection by others which produced new design awareness.





The unsuccessful collaborations are worthy of close study. In many cases, both student and professional, it was the intense commitment by individual designers to the project which resulted in painful conflict. In other cases there was conflict between rural and urban designers over the appropriate design language to be used in rural communities. This is interesting and will be pursued in the current evaluation of the five years of the program. The project was initiated by urban based interest groups and the designers from large urban centres had a clearer understanding of the newer approaches to design collaboration. Whereas where there was conflict, the designers from the rural towns tended to align themselves with the community and foster a sense of outrage about city designers' forms of representation and the nature of their ideas. Occasionally there was tension between the student groups and the professional teams. Perhaps the only collaborations which appeared to be free of conflict were between the designers, students and professionals, and the community

#### *Collaborations with the communities*

Rural communities have traditionally been thought of as socially cohesive, enterprising, stable and physically defined. Over the last decade perceptions of rural communities have changed to ones of disadvantage and decline. Although this is a valid perception for many rural communities who have been impacted by changes in global agribusiness with the resulting population loss and unemployment, the sense of demoralisation is undermining the traditional strengths in these communities. Recent work in QUT in collaboration with the Office of Rural Communities has been looking at the survival strategies employed by rural communities in particular the nature of voluntary work.

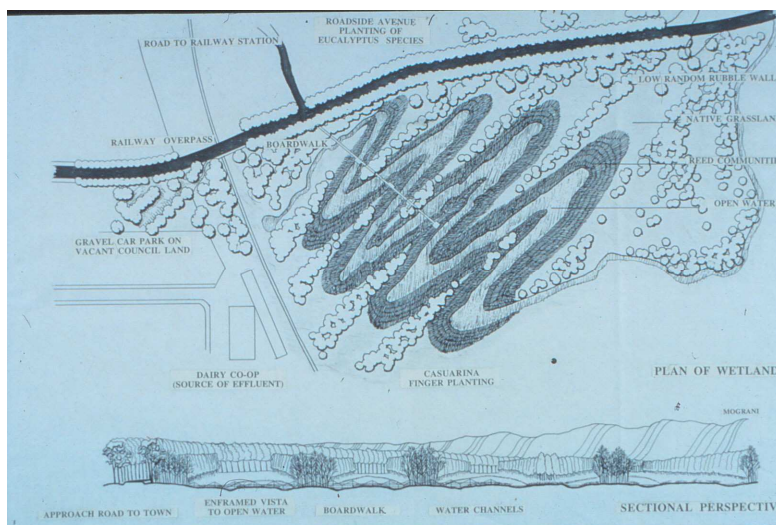
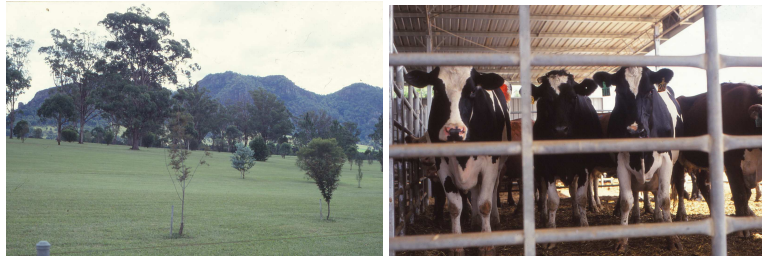
Collaborations between the communities and the design teams relied heavily on the volunteers within the towns. In the early years of the program the local volunteer organisations and key members of the community were usually responsible for the submissions to the Creative Village committee and for the organisation of the team visits. In the last few years, however, because of because of funding needs, local government has played a much stronger role.

The most successful and innovative collaborations occurred in smaller communities from 700 to 3000 people. Projects undertaken in the larger towns tended to be more conventional professional urban design consultancies . Not all the designer/community collaborations worked. In some cases, the urban based teams had strong environmental agendas which were not acceptable to rural communities who were locked into environmentally damaging agricultural practices.

#### **Sustainability and Other Issues in the Towns**

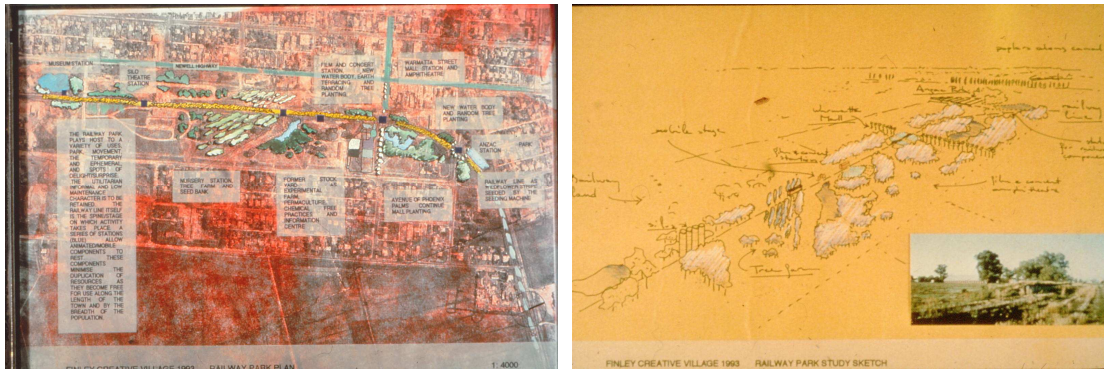
The issues in the towns varied. Most towns were dealing with economic decline. Some towns were also dealing with environmental issues, others were coping with difficult social problems such as youth unemployment and complex Aboriginal community issues. Other towns were dealing with the growing impact of road transport passing through the main street of small towns.

The challenge for the Creative Village teams was to go beyond town beautification as a tourist lure and work with the community to tease out the particular opportunities that were specific to each town and its rural setting.



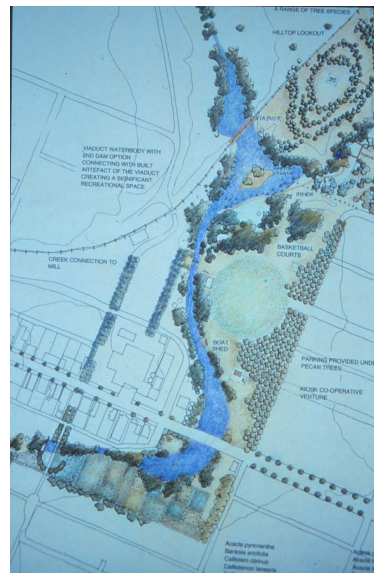
Cleaning the effluent from dairies in Gloucester, NSW, 1994

The environmental issues related to salination and dieback were pertinent to a number of towns. In Finley the design team saw the opportunity of using a little used rail line as the spine for a range of design interventions which addressed recreation, new forms of employment and environmental remediation of the surrounding agricultural land. This was achieved through the design of a rail carriage which could move in to the various spaces and take on different roles to animate the spaces. In one space it might be a film projection and food outlet, in another it might be a form of transport for a new nursery of trees to address the salination problems outside the town. In another town the issues of water management and flood mitigation resulted in some pioneering urban water management schemes brought about by the collaboration between the landscape architect and the artist, in this case the students.



Addressing salination and dieback in Finley, NSW 1992

In another town the design teams both students and professionals worked on new forms of intense agriculture to address new forms of employment and a way of connecting two small communities. A number of the projects looked at job skill programs to achieve the implementation of the designs and in one town a student landscape architect was asked by the community to come back to the town and help implement part of the design for a town park working with a jobskill group.



Intense agriculture of niche crops to connect Harden with Murrumburrah, NSW 1993

In some towns the problems were social and the design teams undertook sensitive workshop processes to ensure that the different community groups were heard. This was particularly true of three towns in NSW with large Aboriginal populations, Bourke, Brewarrina and Wilcannia. Perhaps the most interesting proposal came from the team working in Brewarrina which has a fifty thousand year old fishery. The team realised that an important problem for the town was the issue of literacy. The town is very remote and many of the adults had not completed their schooling. The design team recognised that the community processes required two stages, firstly they designed a series of games to overcome the literacy problems. Each game addressed a specific issue which had emerged in the community workshops. The games were aimed at facilitating decisions about the different areas of the town



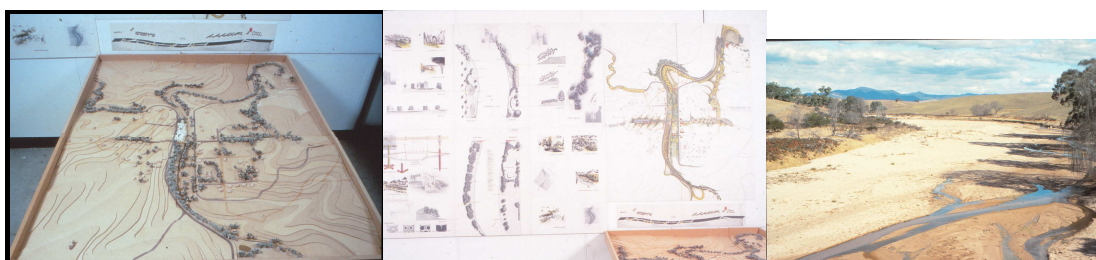
and its surrounds. At a later stage one of the designers went back to the town and worked on the brief the community developed after using the games.



Environmental games for community in Brewarrina, 1993

The community collaborations varied. Each team developed their own particular means of working with the community. In Canowindra, a student town, the men of the town presented the social history of the town through a Tall Tales evening. Most collaborations involved using a shop front for the interaction between the team and the town. In Canowindra, the community committee provided the Court House as a dedicated studio and site for continuous workshops.

All teams left the town with a brief derived from the community workshops and other participation processes and agreed to by the community groups. This was then developed into a design which was taken back to the community.



Plans and models for Community in Candelo NSW 1994

### **Funding Issues**

A key component to the development of design proposals was an associated set of funding proposals. The students excelled in this area. A studio of forty people is able to mine all the various sources of information related to wide ranging funding programs and can pursue some quite lateral options. Despite this, the funding for the Creative Village project itself and the ability to have the designs implemented ultimately resulted in the committee agreeing to local government having a greater role. Inevitably this shifted some of the sense of community ownership of the



project and exposed some of the rural tensions about local government representation. Rural local government areas have become huge as a result of rationalist policies forcing the amalgamation of LGAs. The local government office is often located in another town some distance away. Often communities feel that local government does not understand local issues. In many cases this was unfounded but the sheer logistics of distance and the lack of staff have resulted in these problems.

### **Evaluation of the Program**

The project has had many short term successes in terms of boosting rural community morale but the long term success of implemented projects is less clear. An evaluation of the last five years is currently in progress and it is hoped that all the participants, students, professionals, and town participants will be located and surveyed. It was always understood that the greatest weakness in the project was the inadequate time spent in the towns. There was not the funding to extend the time and sending one person to the town for a longer period undermined the aims of supplying rural communities with the urban design expertise available in the cities.

Communities are much more empowered today by their effective use of the media. Communities are now familiar with planning processes and effective community activism. In many ways the ground work of community advocacy in the 1970s has borne fruit and the pragmatic, product oriented nature of Creative Village reflects the changing nature of community design in the 1990s.

### ***The Future of the Program***

Educationally the program has been a success, however, there have been problems. Collaboration under the pressure of current academic life has not allowed for reflexive discussions about the pedagogical objectives. As well, the different needs of each design program and their logistics have occasionally been in conflict with the most effective way of running the program. This has been particularly true of the landscape architectural input which has commonly been only half the time of the other design disciplines. The College of Art students have sometimes felt that the project had little relevance to what they wanted to do. Community art and design still sustain a certain stigma in design schools. Not all the collaborations have been successful. Despite the problems, however, the model has proved that when collaborations work, the design development can be outstanding.

The role of the educational program with community groups continues to have great merit. Some of the recent collaborations have involved discrete urban communities and the model translates well. The issue of funding continues to be the biggest problem. Another issue is the problem of 'burn out'. Catalysts for change often result in burn out for the pioneers. Despite this, the concepts explored and the heightened awareness generated influences subsequent activities and new ways are found to take the work forward.

A recent initiative with QUT planning and landscape programs and the Queensland Office for Rural Communities has looked at locating the design studio within a larger

research project on rural communities. The project is looking at the role urban and environmental design can play in promoting local rural survival strategies. It is recognised that the changing nature of rural communities, issues of youth unemployment and loss of town populations needs to be addressed in innovative ways that draw from the particular social capital in rural communities.

The design studio is seen as a 4-dimensional space in which speculations and propositions can be explored. The design studio is more than a place to teach design skills. It is a relatively unconstrained space in which to push ideas against intellectually rigorous resistance. Collaborative design teams within the studio offer a complex of skills to address rural problems; the landscape architects bring the ability to work with large areas of land and natural systems, the architects bring the particular ability to develop adaptive reuse concepts for superseded agricultural infrastructure and the artists contribute communicative processes and ways of working with people and place which challenge predictable solutions. All the disciplines contribute the design language and contemporary cultural theory which, together with the particular qualities of rural communities provide the ingredients for innovative and local solutions in contrast to centralised bureaucratic policies.

A further dimension to this emerging paradigm for design education is the re-invigorated community service role of design schools and universities; in this case for rural communities. There are current programs in the US where universities are the focus of extension programs for rural communities. At the University of Wisconsin, academics advise on local rural economic development. In Nebraska, the university provides a mentoring role for the 'Community Builders Program'. In Europe, the European Commission has given the issues related to rural communities a high priority, however the key role that community and collaborative design does not appear to have been explored. Clearly this is a way forward for universities and for collaborative design.

To conclude, this paper has described the design education paradigm which emerged in the early 1990s in the design schools of UNSW. It suggests that this paradigm be extended so that the design studio becomes the focus for collaboration between government, community, design educators and students. Such a design studio would need to be inclusive in order to explore fully global and local tensions, to penetrate consumerism and engage with new forms of employment. It would also need to encourage intellectual resistance through critical and self reflective processes. Finally the design paradigm should ensure that every project is a work of art.

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