



ART FOR WHOSE SAKE? VALUE OF PUBLIC ART

Traditionally public art was popularised art - its role was to challenge the elite or high art culture of the galleries and bring art to the masses. From religious iconography, totalitarian realism to community based murals - the values of art in public spaces have shifted with economic, cultural and political motivations. Today we find public art is responding to the flexibility and cross-disciplinary nature of contemporary art practice. It is no longer primarily focused on monuments and sculptures, as artists are successfully translating their gallery practice into an array of permanent and temporary public artworks.

For example, emerging Queensland installation and sound artist Sandra Selig has been commissioned to create a diverse range of temporary and permanent public artworks - from a collaborative artwork with architects Fairweather Proberts, consisting of the external fire wall of an apartment building, through to her most recent commission for the Brisbane Magistrates Law Courts curated by Jay Younger. Selig retains a successful contemporary art practice and was selected for the 2004 Primavera exhibition at the MCA.

However, for the majority of the 'public' heated debates and ongoing controversy surround contemporary art practice, especially when translated into the urban environment. Contemporary art challenges its audiences. It breaches boundaries; is shifting and ambiguous. When presented in public spaces it inevitably creates 'culture shock'.

The visibility of contemporary art stimulates vigorous discussion on its benefits and meaningfulness to the public. One of the problems in talking about public art in a curatorial context is that there is little critical dialogue. Any debate concerning public art is from an economic and social perspective, with the few exceptions of Rachel Whiteread's temporary project House in the UK and the Robert Owen's and DCM collaborative Webb Bridge, Docklands, Melbourne.

Is this the only basis on which we judge public art?

Media coverage is quick to spark controversy surrounding a public artwork more so than a work of similar nature found in a State Gallery. A recent cover of Architectural Review questioned 'Is Public Art a Public Liability!' and local newspaper The Courier Mail in Queensland demanded Public Art should be "off to the tip with junk art"!

Public Art serves a range of social, cultural and commercial needs. Local and State Governments in Australia and overseas continue to implement public art policies and strategies that encourage the use of art in public spaces for economic development, social cohesion, urban rejuvenation and tourism.

Social/Cultural Benefits include:

- developing a sense of self worth
- stimulating social interaction
- encouraging healthier life styles
- reducing vandalism and cost
- nurturing grass roots cultures
- expanding learning and awareness
- healing the social fabric

In addition, public art also provides Economic Benefits such as:

- generating employment opportunities
- stimulating cultural tourism
- restoring and revitalising urban centres
- improving the quality of urban life
- providing marketing and promotion opportunities
- attracting desirable knowledge based employees, tenants and businesses
- encouraging partnerships between government agencies and the business sector

Governments are not the only clients realising the long-term benefits of investing in public art. Savvy businesses, fund managers and property owners are aware that public art brings a range of benefits to their projects. This was recently proven by researchers at University of Westminster UK. They found that *'most investors confirmed public art features did have an important role to play in distinguishing competing buildings and that this facilitated letting and reduced risk'*.

These benefits are not new, but this demonstrates that art funded through government policies needs to be accountable and that accountability relates to social and economic imperatives that determine public art's form and intention.

If public art is commissioned within a culture of risk avoidance, safety and public opinion, what impact does this have on the final artwork?

In the case of 33 Exhibition Street Melbourne, none.

Site Specific Public Art 33 Exhibition Street, Melbourne

Peter Hennessey has been commissioned to create a site-specific work on the corner of Flinders Lane and Exhibition Street (Melbourne's Arts Precinct) by Commonwealth Pty Ltd and Bates Smart Melbourne.

The site for the artwork was specifically designed by Bates Smart to house a sculpture. The three-storey high glass vitrine provides a dramatic backdrop for an artwork.

Artist Selection Process

The process involved a direct approach to nine artists. Examples of past works were presented to a selection committee comprising client representatives, a building project manager, architects, interior designers and tenants. Three artists were interviewed and Peter Hennessey was selected to proceed to concept design.

The Design

The concept design consisted of a series of native Orchids to be suspended from the ceiling and trailing through the space. Reminiscent of a terrarium, the orchids will activate the corner space.

At first the client was perplexed at the notion of an oversize flower arrangement to mark the entry to the building. Hennessey specifically selected a series of native orchids as a symbol for the building to reflect the work of its principal tenant Mercer Recruitment. Recruitment agencies are not unlike Orchid traders - both professions source the most appropriate 'candidate' for their clients.

Materials and Fabrication

The Orchids are being constructed out of marine plywood, a similar technique Hennessey uses to create his gallery-based works. These works differ, as they will be painted in a yellow, green and pink matt finish. The works will be installed in the three-storey high glass vitrine.

Benefits

The major benefit of Peter Hennessey's work is the profile it will receive from its location. As the artwork acts as a marker for the building, it aims to generate clients for Mercer and attract future tenants to the building. Hennessey's work is also a solid investment for the fund.

Integrated Public Art Parklands Residential Development Brisbane



Artists working with architects is considered common place to ensure integrated public art projects.

In 2002, Pradella Developers were faced with the challenge of allocating 0.25% of their five-stage residential development budget to public art as part of their development consent from the Brisbane City Council.

Parklands Residential Development was built on a thin strip of land located on the newly developed Roma Street Parklands and Roma Street Railway. The bulk of the buildings acts as a divider between the parkland and the railway.

Like many developers, it was Pradella's first experience of artwork commissioning and initially submitted a schematic design with a series of advertising billboards on the perimeter wall as the public art component. As this did not adhere to the BCC public art policy, the proposed billboards were rejected by Council.

To resolve the situation, project architects Nettleton Tribe invited Positive Solutions to manage the task of sourcing an artist to work on the design team. The architect's brief to the artists was to create an artistic solution for the 400 metre, three-storey high, perimeter wall.

Artist Selection Process

The three stage process of selecting the artist/s to work on the design team involved 11 artists' practice being presented to the architects, followed by a shortlist of four individual artists attending a meeting with the architects. This process enabled the architect to meet with the artist and gain further insight into their work and their process of collaboration. It also gave the artist an overview of the project and the architects' vision. Three artists were short-listed on the grounds of availability and evidence of their ability to create a site-specific collaborative work, and presented their work to the Developer and representatives from BCC public art advisory panel

Two artists, Jeweller Barbara Heath and Artist Matthew Tobin, were selected to work collaboratively as part of the team.

The Process

A series of design workshops were programmed over a two-month period. During this time the artists had to work through a number of structural issues including acoustics, ventilation and car park screening. These were worked into the scope of the sculptural wall to heighten the impact of the design.

Once concept designs had been approved, the artists were engaged to fabricate the wall components.

Design

The final concept features a leaf pattern inspired by trailing ferns once common to the area. Designed to be a window into the Roma Street Parklands, *Botanica* is visible to thousand of commuters both by rail, car and bus each day.

Materials

At the design workshops it was established that in addition to the \$200,000 artwork budget that had initially been allocated and which was to include all costs, the artists were also able to utilise the existing perimeter wall material budgets. Low cost materials were explored including MDF (lacquered) and weathered steel to be the base for the artwork. Patterns were created to allow for ventilation gaps and acoustic provisions.

Powder coated, laser cut stainless steel was used for the fern like motif that climbs along the wall. Elements of the leaf motif were hand folded by the artists.

Fabrication

At the end of the design phase it was evident that the artists could extend their role and be involved in the construction of the artwork. The artists were engaged separately during the construction phase. The majority of the wall was fabricated by arts foundry UAP (Matthew Tobin).

Benefits

In the end the client and architect achieved and furthered their expectations of the value of incorporating public art into the development. The 'art wall' has created debate and is one of the most high profile and large-scale pieces to be commissioned in Brisbane to date.

From a project that started with caution, scepticism and a small budget for a 400 metre wall, the design team managed to turn it around and create an inventive and creative solution well beyond the expectations of the Developer. The artists, their professionalism and their creativity had a major impact on influencing the budget to be extended to \$1,000,000.

And although the development is still unfinished, the sheer size of the work has created a landmark. As Glen Mallet, Project Architect stated *'people either love it or detest it!'* Is this a sign of a successful work of public art?

Temporary Public Art

Over the last decade, there has been a considerable rise in the number and type of temporary public art projects. We are witnessing a resurgence of sculpture in environmental and urban based environments such as Sculpture by the Sea in Sydney; Floating Lands, Noosa; Strand Ephemera, Townsville; Melbourne's Laneway Projects and shop front based projects such as Retail Therapy, Brisbane.

Whether these projects are part of a festival program or are one off special events to raise the awareness of contemporary art practice, they are without the controversy associated with commissioning a permanent work but can still produce all the same benefits.

Fees and management for installation, engineering and insurance are usually on a par with permanent works. In addition, site specific works may also include fees for community programs such as workshops and artists in residence.

There are ways of giving temporary projects some form of longevity whether this is through documentation resulting in postcards or publications, or the long-term education programs.

For example, Darwin's Museum and Art Gallery and Territory Craft's most recent temporary work *Sojourners* by Greg Leong involved the community in the creation of the work.

The \$40,000 budget was divided between artist fees, which included a six week accommodation and per diem and the engineering fees for the work. The project has been well documented and will result in a series of postcards to promote the Institution and the artist.

Retail Therapy, Brisbane

Retail Therapy was an integrated temporary public art exhibition, using the shop fronts of fashion retailers in Brisbane's Fortitude Valley. 14 artists and designers worked with individual retailers with the retailer as client.

The project drew inspiration from initiatives such as the 'Miracle Mile' in New York, which created a co-operative marketing event to define a precinct.

The project was an initiative of the Design Institute of Australia (Queensland Chapter), the Royal Australian Institute of Architects (Qld) and Artworkers Alliance. It ran for two weeks during September 2001.

With 14 teams of clients, artists and designers, *Retail Therapy* exposed the difficulties of collaboration. It was apparent that some partnerships were more successful than others and the successful ones led to long term relationships between practitioners; an example of a permanent outcome of a temporary project.

At retail shop Loisida, artist Sebastian Di Mauro and architects Alice LTM Hampson, Sheona Thomson and Sarah Foley, worked with the owners, clothes manufacturers and designers to produce a sculptural installation. Di Mauro explains that the owner's brief referred to the structured nature of her own designs, as well as interests in Japanese fashion design, the Japanese tradition of folding, and natural elements (as a source of inspiration). Wire coat hangers were used to construct a screen, and a wall of suspended, white paper jacket 'lanterns' was created. Salt, symbolising a purifying element covered the storefront floor. Di Mauro stated *'for me as an artist it was also important that I was true to my own practice, as well as working with the client and the architect.'* Di Mauro and a number of other artists such as Jodie Cox and Craig Walsh, have established long term relationships with the project team architects. This has resulted in their involvement with future commissions. Artist Craig Walsh

and Cox Rayner Architects continued to work together on numerous public artworks, including Mackay Regional Art Gallery and Logan Entertainment Centre.

Although the *Retail Therapy* project was installed for too short a timeframe, due to initial concerns of the retailers concerns, it provided a range of benefits to different stakeholders;

For the RAI and DIA:

- promoted collaboration with other arts professionals
- an opportunity to collaborate with artists on projects under the Art Built-in Policy
- raised their public profile
- provided professional development for their members

For the Artists:

- provided employment opportunities
- opportunities to collaborate with other built environment professionals on projects under the Art Built-in Policy
- raised their public profile
- provided mentoring opportunities from more experienced artists

For Retailers:

- supported the promotion of the retailers in the precinct
- reinforced the arts component of the fashion realm
- generated a new customer base (suburban tourism)
- developed brand awareness amongst their target customer group

For cultural and audience development:

- culturally enriched the public domain
- engaged with the public in a non traditional format

Crowd Theory Project Footscray, Melbourne

In the past, local public art projects have been synonymously associated with Community Art. There are numerous examples of children's murals or community mosaic walls embedded into our landscape. Footscray Community Art Centre (FCAC) in Melbourne has been leading the field in challenging this notion of Community Art.

The Crowd Theory Project is a series of photographic events that FCAC has developed into a unique model of working with and engaging communities in the creation of art. The project explores how communities imagine themselves.

Over 400 people from interested communities work with artists to explore themes concerning representations of collective identity - and how this relates to specific geographical sites. Through this process, events are planned in which these communities create a detailed vision of themselves that is captured in a

large-format photo (2.5 metres x 1.8 metres). The project involves extensive consultation and discussions with interested communities over several months.

In 2004, The Crowd Theory project, was produced by FCAC in collaboration with Simon Terrill, dramaturg David Everist, and undertaken by over 400 members of the communities of Braybrook and Footscray in the western region of Melbourne.

The project involved the creation of two photographs of over two metres in length, and accompanying soundscapes by Kim Dellavedova, investigating the relationship between people and place.

The first photo was taken at FCAC, on the banks of the Maribyrnong River. The foreground consists of unusual markings in the soil and lighting from beneath the gardens onto the groups of people enveloped in smoke. This was set against an industrial background and Melbourne's cityscape. People and communities that were connected to the site gathered for the shoot.

The second photo was taken at a frequently used and historically significant sports ground in Braybrook. This oval has been the site of many games and other gatherings. The open expanse of the oval provides a stark backdrop for a representation of the diverse and complex social fabric of this locality.



Conversations were had with the communities on how the locality is perceived - *'it's time we showed positive images of Braybrook'*, to suggestions for the site of the photograph, to evocative ideas of expressing identity, for example a Braybrook resident suggested that he participate in the event, wrapped in the flag of his sporting club.

The total project costs for the two photographs was \$100,000 with the process taking 8-12 weeks.

Benefits

- Cross Cultural project
- Engagement with a broad community
- Innovative way to involve community in the artistic process
- First time attendance at a visual arts opening
- Provide an avenue for story telling

- Creating a sense of place

Conclusion

A debate continues around the benefit of public art, in particular the 'artistic' value of public art. When does public art truly represent the vigour and consciousness of contemporary art practice we often find in a gallery, in addition to providing social and economic benefits to the commissioners and the community?

While the multifaceted spectrum of public art practice has provided artists with new opportunities and new sources of income, its competing expectancies can be contradictory. An American critic, Plagens in 1986 argued that *'public art was being asked to carry an impossible burden by being required to be popular, inoffensive to minorities, profit-inducing, civically enhancing and aesthetically pleasing. The end result was too often one of mediocrity.'*

Whichever perspective one adopts, the public art resurgence over the last two decades has made a significant contribution to the urban renewal of cities in Australia and overseas and continues to challenge the public's view of contemporary art practice.

At the end of the day as a curator, what you have imagined as the artistic potential for a site and the final result, can be two different things - everything is dependent upon the process, the supporters and most importantly, the artist.

With so many stakeholders and opinions on the quality of art, in the end the question still remains: who are we commissioning public art for?

*Renai Grace
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