



An Other Reality  
Melbourne Street  
Window Boxes  
John Mongard  
2006  
RAW Gallery  
South Brisbane

## Place / Displace

Public Art In A Changing World

John Mongard  
[www.mongard.com.au](http://www.mongard.com.au)

John Mongard Landscape Architects

**Keywords:** Public Art  
Placemaking  
Public Space

Sculpture  
Free Standing Objects  
Monuments

### **Abstract:**

*Public Art up until the 1950s was predominantly focused on monuments, free standing sculptures and frieze/surface works on prominent buildings. Since then it has developed into a much broader range of creative interventions in the city and in the landscape.*

*This talk will discuss emerging concepts and challenges related to the making of contemporary Public Art. Exemplar and inspirational examples will be highlighted. Lessons and stories from John Mongard's collaborations with artists on numerous placemaking projects are discussed. The discussion will focus around what it means to create great art in place.*

## Place / Displace

Public Art is art in public space. Public spaces are free environments. Good spaces have the quality of a place. Good Public Art interacts with its specific site in ways which create more than the sum of the parts. Public Art can displace or be placemaking, but should engage intentionally with its time and space.

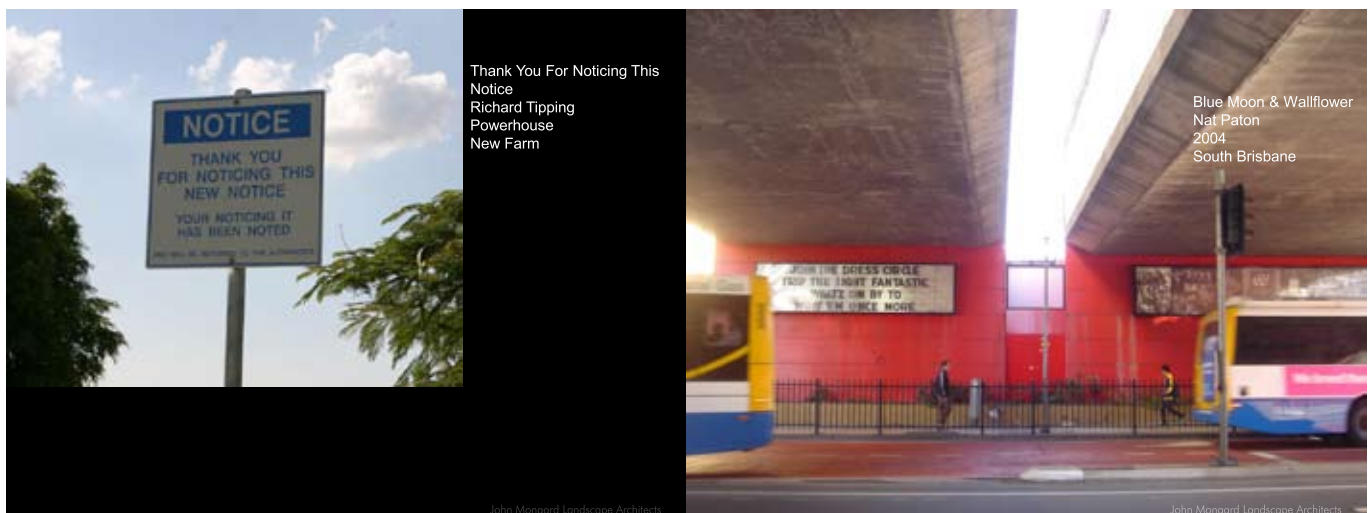
If there is to be more to Public Art than objects in free space, then a process which engages culture and environment must occur. The Art + Place programme aims to make these alignments. Artists and designers with a cultural paradigm are used to working in this way.



## Signs

What makes up great Public Art? How is Public Art different from other environmental objects, signs and surfaces? Public Art is bedded into real space. How it engages with the space is the challenge of placemaking. Our cities are littered with signs and symbols, all of them intentional and competing. In a quick tour of inner city Brisbane, we can find many examples of two-dimensional 'public artworks', in various states of public attitude and position. Some are legal, some commissioned and some transitory or temporal. It is often unclear in the city what is a sign and what is a public artwork. Some artists working with signs aim for this diffusion of meaning.

## Pointers



Public art is often commissioned to help people identify and experience entries, edges and points of interest. Sometimes public art becomes a landmark. These art objects are often fiercely debated for their symbolism or relation to the city and its people. They can be pointers to a culture, a time or place. Sometimes they just attract attention.

## Blurring



Hervey Bay Entry  
John Mongard Landscape Architects and Mona Ryder  
1999  
Hervey Bay



Cloudgate  
Anish Kapoor  
2004-06  
Millennium Park, Chicago

The nature and form of Public Art is blurring, like its creators. The role of artist / designer / activist/ architect / citizen interact to generate public art in new and unforeseen ways. Public Art is being stretched as our world is challenged by global/local, private/public, environmental/egocentric, real/virtual, lowtech/hightech.

Public space has many objects and object makers. Some are large. They lay claim to being sculptural objects by their scale and form. Norman Foster's Gherkin, or Santiago Calatrava's bridges are examples of the architectural object as art.

Who makes Public Art? Due to the scale and constraints of public art, it is common for the artist to not be the fabricator or the installer. Public artists are now often creative directors and idea managers. There is object displacement going on in public art practice: architects making buildings as art, furniture makers designing public spaces, landscape architects shaping land and artists making furniture. Interesting people seem to like working outside of their territory. Is this part of the post/post-modern condition? Anyone can design anything, irrespective of scale. Laser cutting machines and



blurring

Norman Foster  
2003  
London  
30 St Mary Axe  
"Gherkin"



Hotel  
Callum Morton  
2008  
Eastlink Commission  
Melbourne

three dimensional fabrication means that anyone can sculpt three dimensional objects in real space without a sculptor's hands. This is not necessarily creating better public art, but it is increasing its accessibility to other design disciplines.

What then separates artists practising public art from the other emerging public realm designers? In essence, it could be to do with utility. Designers are trained to be pragmatic and seek to fulfil functions. Artists have a more chaotic or unbridled way of thinking. Their objects are often intentionally useless and poetic. The edges of the practice of public art are unclear and this is potentially a good thing, adding mystery and unpredictability to who makes what in the public realm. So engaging Public Art is coming from many places and the distinction between interior/exterior, designer/artist/architect is blurring faster than ever.

### **Potentiality / Prospect**

Our objects and spaces are filled with our latent desire to affect the experience of others. People want to be moved, to see new and wonderful things in this world. Artists also want to sometimes challenge or affect the world. In the public realm, this is akin to setting up props and sets for a theatre in which the actors and plays sometimes change at random.

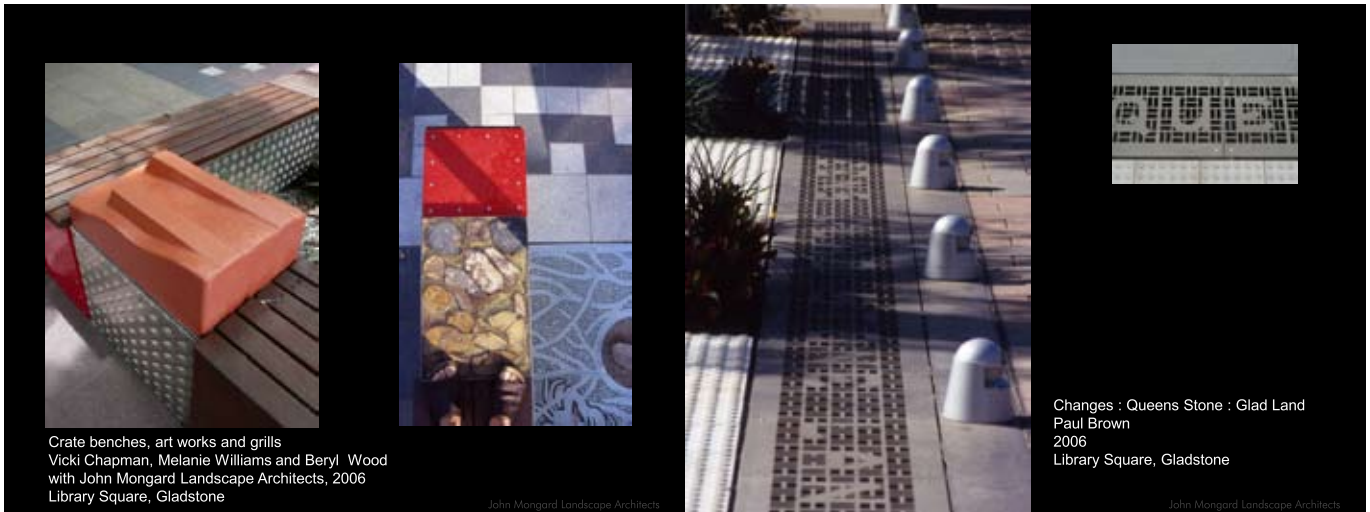
Designing the public realm is thus an act exploring potentiality: how to make space a more engaging container for people's daily events, the potentiality of a public realm to harness creativity, and random acts of living. Public Art is a central ingredient in this process.

### **Culture / Collaboration**



People are collaborating more in the public realm. In Public Art, there are imperatives related to public safety, so some particular skills and an element of material robustness are needed. Artists and makers and technicians are coming together in more creative mixes, and this is allowing technology to be more integral to the innovation process.

To make places sing with good quality artworks we need to invent even better processes of collaboration. The cultures of artists, place managers and design professionals need to join up. Local and regional values and realities need to share a place with the uber trends which emanate invariably from the cities. In regional Australia, the act of placemaking occurs in many ways, most of them in ad-hoc, spontaneous and one-off events. Acts of improving the public realm – with public art, with public



Crate benches, art works and grills  
Vicki Chapman, Melanie Williams and Beryl Wood  
with John Mongard Landscape Architects, 2006  
Library Square, Gladstone

John Mongard Landscape Architects

Changes : Queens Stone : Glad Land  
Paul Brown  
2006  
Library Square, Gladstone

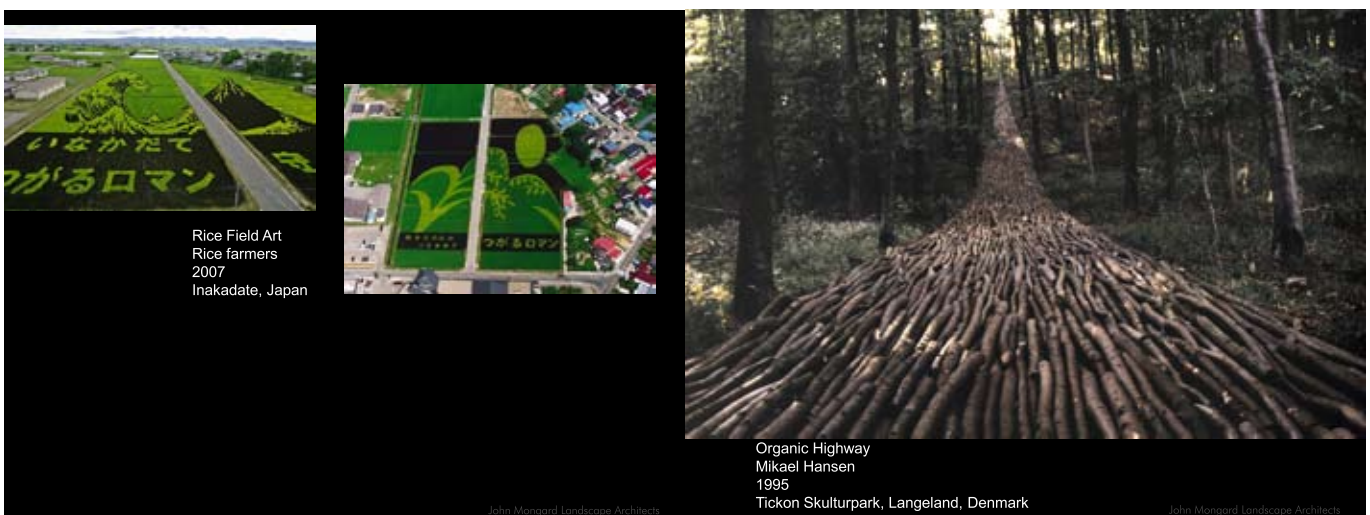
John Mongard Landscape Architects

spaces, and with happenings, suffer from a lack of integration of design, art and community cultures. The problem becomes more noticeable the smaller the community becomes. It is rewarding work when many people feel like the place or the artwork is actually theirs and 'belongs'. Good collaboration creates a vessel for better public art and design, and this can make places sing, or even shout.

## Land / Surface

The organic landscape has provided rich fodder for a more temporal public art practice. These works play with nature and are often mainly appreciated through the end point of photography. Crop circles and Japanese rice paddy art are examples of field art which is mysterious in the former and celebratory in the latter. Even the land can be a painting.

## Memory of Place



Rice Field Art  
Rice farmers  
2007  
Inakadate, Japan

John Mongard Landscape Architects

Organic Highway  
Mikael Hansen  
1995  
Tickon Skulpturpark, Langeland, Denmark

John Mongard Landscape Architects

Great places are remembered. The act of making them is part of the memory of place. Public Art is a process as well as an outcome. When a culture is creative throughout its people, Public Art becomes embedded into places and creative placemaking becomes a spontaneous act. How long does it take for a creative culture to emerge in a community or place? In our work throughout Australia, from Torres Strait to Tasmania, we have seen public art's emergence since the late 1980s as an element which has an accepted role in the built environment. It has taken twenty five years for public art to reach this point in Australia. In regional towns, for most commissions, public art is often still new and

discretionary. It relies on state and federal funds to occur and has not reached local government or private enterprise projects without a lot of pushing and facilitation.

In the Atherton Tablelands, it took us ten years of working with local people before they began to consider making public art by their own means. Projects at Hallorans Hill Interpretive Park and Hou Wang Temple and Museum Garden have acted as exemplars, and artists who made works or were mentored through these projects went on to develop ideas for other public spaces in the region. Works such as those at Atherton Rotary Park followed later in a self-guided way. This is the long term process of establishing a level of creative confidence in a place and its people.



In contemporary Indigenous art, we see the emergence of public arts practice in the works of many artists, including that of Dennis Nona, who has bridged traditional Torres Strait carving and culture into printmaking artworks. This printmaking practice has subsequently bridged into public art through numerous cast works which are increasing in size and complexity but continue traditional Torres Strait markings and themes particular to his culture.



Public art in great cultures is a natural element of the city. It just happens without being forced. In Australia, we have a small number of very experienced artists working in the public realm, a larger group of emerging and full-time artists who are working in public spaces, and a large body of artists and designers who occasionally undertake public works and are rapidly changing the skills and disciplines of the genre. Public art is not so much a discipline as a series of subcultures.

## **Conclusion**

Public art is a rich and emerging practice in our built and unbuilt environments. It continued to morph in new ways, particularly with the digital media revolution. Virtual space occupies as much territory as physical space in our world, and this is challenging placemakers to consider what is our culture and what role and form public art should take.

## **For Further Information Contact:**

John Mongard  
John Mongard Landscape Architects  
The Designbank 89 Grey Street South Brisbane Q 4101  
Ph: (07) 3844 1932  
Email: [mail@mongard.com.au](mailto:mail@mongard.com.au)