

Power, Poetry And Contemporaneity In The Public Landscape

by John Mongard

Poetry

The ritual and building of experiences in place is what creates poetry in the landscape. It sings in your memory, and if it is strong, you can visit that place your mind many years afterward.

This type of layering happens when people enjoy a place. Public places have a significant role in being the vessels for a communal experience. We fought this premise up front in Australia for many years, with our anglo-saxon glorification of the private realm, and the resultant creation of places for individuals rather than for gathering. The suburbs are much loved by Australians, but they are loving these places in isolation.

It is not enough merely to create the vessel for a public space. Like crafting a good guitar, the shell has to have the potential for music. It is just that potentiality which is the challenge in the creative process: to create the things which go beyond paving patterns and objects. The search for a poetics in public space design is an important cause.

Power

The making of public landscape also involves the negotiation of power. In key public spaces, one could argue that politics is the central platform for the creation of place. If this is so, then power and politics are hidden layers in our designs: we build whilst we negotiate the delicate balance between business, community and governance. This is not a process one learns about in design school or through design texts.

The successful materialization of a design vision relies on the patronage of power. Public spaces which become great experiences start with ideas which are inspirational in nature. Societal leaders – councillors, agency managers, business leaders and community leaders, take up these inspirations. These power brokers assist the ideas through the complex path of coming into being. Designs rarely get built without patrons who have power and access to political influence. This has always been the way: from the ancient Athenians, the high priests of Teotihuacan in Mexico and the enlightened chocolate factory owners of England who helped fashion the idea of a 'public' park.

Power and politics in the landscape is often an abuse. Those with influence build what they desire – whether it's a Stadium, a theme Park or a City. Designers intervene in the desires of others, fashioning spaces according to the meld between their values and the values of others who are invited into the placemaking process.

Great places seem to arise when the process creates a communal vessel which puts poetry into the imagination of many people: they all feel the thingness of the place, like recognition of a tune in music.

Poetry in space: how do we negotiate the power and the politics to reach out to it?

Contemporaneity

Not only does one ask the space to sing, and the users to sing back, but one searches for a core which makes the thingness of the space authentic and true to its geography, culture and place. A hard ask. The designer's sandwich has the bittersweet crunch where culture and nature meet.

We oscillate between past and future, but rarely hit the present, in our design strategies. Local contemporary culture is perhaps the only authentic meaning in a world full of constructed forms. It takes a conscious effort to make a place of its time and place. We are often tempted by nostalgia, which is safe and prefabricated by the market.

So what is the contemporary nature and meaning of our Australian public spaces? Our multicultural urban spaces are young. Time will layer us into distinction. We do however need some maps.

Public space design in Australia needs some critical and philosophical paradigms if we are to create a more complex and Post-Modern future to match our society.

In Practice

The images selected to discuss these issues are two projects by our practice, which have attempted to build a local poetics for two towns in Queensland – The growing coastal centres of Cleveland and Mooloolaba.

Cleveland took ten years to plan and Mooloolaba just two years. The timing of these projects was mainly dictated by political concerns.

The finished form of the public places is a negotiation for the use of space. In both instances the period of construction and the period of opening became political: the fashioning of new major public places is always a point of controversy. The acceptance of change often begins with points of friction. After a year or so, however, places can be judged for their experience, not for their politics. People judge with their feet, eyes, and with their repeated attendance and experiences.

Attempts have been made to reflect contemporary culture in the types of activities, finishes and forms. Some areas work better than others do. Artists and craftpeople have saved the spaces from the homogeneity of mass production and the singularity of the designers.

Furniture, signage and play elements are customised to reflect local patterns and a material context. In both towns, this urban microarchitecture is a significant unifying force, an attempt to establish a backdrop of useable but aesthetic urban elements.

Both places have been fashioned to last a significant period. This has meant a substantial capital investment for each local authority. It is hoped the places will be enjoyed in fifty years time, and in this context, the true lifecycle costs of the public spaces will be evident.

Time will tell how its users will make these spaces into places. The vessels made for the experiences of others do not always stay the same, and this is perhaps a good thing. Places that become loved are taken care of and become the well-worn clothes of our society. We can only dream that the places we help fashion will become so.

For Further Information Contact:

John Mongard
John Mongard Landscape Architects
Ph: (07) 3844 1932
Email: mail@mongard.com.au