

## PUBLIC SPACE AS A THEATRE OF CONFLICT

by John Mongard

**How does landscape architecture create inclusive public spaces? How do the values of the non conformist and fringe dweller find their way into a design project? Should they? How does public space maintain itself as an open ended theatre where anyone can be a valid actor?**

Two Stories, Two Places.

**'Black Line / White Line'**: the story of West End's Main Street, a historical boundary between Blacks and Whites. A design narrative to dissolve the spatial line between diverging cultural groups, creating a theatrical forum in the middle of the Street..

**'They gather there...'** a poem about creating public realms in Toowoomba City, telling the story of how a marginalised black community celebrate their centrality in the towns new and most important space.

▲ A paradigm for placemaking ▲<sup>1</sup>

### ▲ A Placemaking Nexus ▲

A fundamental principle : placemaking can only be facilitated when the making and designing of place is integrally tied to the desire to create '**dwelling**' : <sup>1</sup> our search for a profound attachment to real time spaces, our need to experience and be in place in a rich and deep sense.<sup>2</sup> Designers have to become 'dwellers' to create public space. They must learn to be actors in the play, rather than just stage directors - until they do so, they will never know how each theatre works.

Further, designers must create inclusive forums where all the other actors are accepted and where the marginalised and disenfranchised are acknowledged rather than hidden.<sup>3</sup>

Local culture is the only real play left in the dwindling repertoire of placemaking. In the face of corporatisation, gentrification and cyberspace, real time communities and neighbourhoods are unbeatable. A final theme in this line of thought: the friction between culture and nature in urban society has to be addressed more wholistically by Landscape Architects.<sup>4</sup> We are failing to respond to the 'design sandwich'. These are the five themes that I would like to trace with my two case studies.

### ▲ A Design Sandwich ▲

## Black Line / White Line

A line ran through time  
a street  
a spine  
a quiet barrier in West End

Boundary Street still has its limits  
for those in want  
but the line dissolved  
leaving a scatter of patches

A SEQEB substation  
a sofa under a bridge  
a bicentennial bench  
behind the dunnies

Money divides the line  
more than colour

The push for coffee  
is inexorable  
The greengrocers feel it  
as do the street people

The benches are sleeping  
waiting for the fight  
of the old men from Southbank

The mouths of the bins are big  
so they can still go shopping  
Where will they go next?  
To stoic fat one with  
the twiddling fingers  
and loud panasonic

Sharing the line  
the black folk are always moving  
not always by choice

Where can they gather  
in peace now  
The drink is the divider  
bigger than the chasms of culture

People make places themselves  
and sometimes  
lines are drawn around spaces

How do we share space  
without closing the line  
This painful question  
lies under my carpet

West End is an eclectic inner city neighbourhood in Brisbane City. Its people are multicultural, vocal and communal. It is central station for aboriginal movement in the State, and for the urbanisation of Queensland hippies. It has old Greeks, new Italians and Vietnamese, and is under pressure from the 'urban renewal' of yuppies.

The theme about how designers must be actors and not just stage directors is strongly brought out in the story of the urban designers who proposed a mall for West End's Boundary Street : without asking the community for its thoughts, without knowing the subtle needs of this centre. Drawings were exhibited, rejected and the designers relocated.

We set up shop in the community hall, and started to listen carefully. Informal interviews in the street revealed strong desires for a real public space. Groups of five to eight residents walked into the streets one night, two designers per group, and began to design the town. A new toilet to be relocated, a new park with a kiosk created, more trees and specific sites for benches created (one outside the Vietnamese bakery for the old Greek men to sit in the sun amongst the lingering smells of bread).

Stories and discussions were disseminated through "Neighbourhood News", the communities' paper. A demountable shed was set up as a studio behind the library: a place to 'dwell', make and design things for Boundary Street.

The designer as 'dweller' : for four months, amongst artists and residents, at night and during the day, we were involved in the fashioning of mosaics, murals, bronzes, sculptures and a huge mythical lizard. Experiencing place reinforces the making of place, and this takes time. The experience of dwelling during placemaking is relevant at all stages : to learn about the place, to design and then during the making phase

The key issue in refurbishing the town park was how to not displace the fringe dwellers : how to revitalise without gentrifying. We worked with an aboriginal artist and through the advice of the local elders, established a rapport with the park people. We asked them what they thought of our initial ideas, and sought their views. Now the park is open again, they have come back, they haven't destroyed it. The new design of the park makes it easier to create and perceive territories which change by the hour.

We built things into Boundary Street that were designed and inspired by local people. The street used to be a dividing line of colour : the community wanted it to become a meeting place of cultures : to blur the historic black / white line in particular.

A sense of localness was a central design premise. Planter boxes took their material and rhythms from a historic landmark tower by the river. Seats and balustrades carry patterns inspired by street theatre : patterns of the jesters of commedia d'arte, in honour of the Italians, and of Boundary Streets' role as a place of festivals and communal gatherings. The seats were designed to allow a good nights sleep for the homeless residents. The bins were made with large openings to allow the old men to continue their foraging and recycling. These were design details responding to real patterns of use.

The Culture / Nature Sandwich in West End was a point of communal friction : how to increase the number of shady trees whilst not losing car parking spaces. We reclaimed a large piece of bitumen in the centre of town and planted a huge fig tree, turning road into a town square complete with theatre, stage and 'props'. The plaza with its lizard attracts all types of actors, who stroke, climb and talk to this brightly clothed sentinel. The Lizard - an animal in the urban forest - gives people a sense of reconnection with nature, establishing the presence of fauna in the hard urbanity of our towns. She also loosens the child : you can't help but sit on her head.

Improving the main street of West End taught me that change sometimes should be quiet : we sought a gentle touch for the public realm, so that existing dwellers would maintain their love for this eclectic and well trodden street.

## **They gather there .....**

where others  
would rather  
they didn't

frollicking under the ancients  
those gnarly sentinel wisterias.

and in their vision  
those others  
deny them quietly  
searching for a future  
without them

Hunting in the urban forest  
amongst the displaced grasses  
they laugh loud  
at their pansies

Just when we thought you were going:  
they built a forest for themselves  
gathering eons of pain  
into one last laugh  
a permanent reminder of displacement

'They gather there ....' is a story about our placemaking work in the city of Toowoomba. Toowoomba is a prosperous regional centre within a strong pastoral setting. It has a strong history, and the town has become famous for its annual flower festival. Over the years, the city centre has been stripped of its public spaces, to the point where only one small park serviced this city of over 150,000 people in its active centre. In 1994 we undertook a public space strategy, and were involved in designs for the main street and for a new park next to the art gallery.

Toowoomba was a case study for us in developing alternative ways of experiencing, analysing and planning place, where we sought better ways of becoming 'dwellers' within our placemaking context.

Without living in a town, walking its streets at night, talking to people in the day, it is difficult for an urban designer to uncover the subtle rhythms, tensions and needs of a local neighbourhood. We use a process called 'set up shop' to learn to become 'dwellers' of a place, and to teach us the 'insideness' of the urban problems we are asked to solve.

Setting up shop involves the creation of a temporal design studio, usually in a vacant store on the main street. The first half of the time is spent in talking, and in dwelling. The second half is about the thinking of linkages and visions and the designing and making of urban strategies, which are presented to council and community at the end. An average set up shop lasts two weeks and involves three designers, sometimes collaborations between Landscape Architects, Planners, Artists, Architects and Transport Planners.

Sketch interviews are informally conducted on the street and usually at least four workshops are held with need and interest groups. Individual interviews are conducted in the shop and people can wander in to view the progress of ideas.

In Toowoomba, we set up shop a number of times, once with six designers over a three day brainstorm. The hidden conflicts of this prosperous regional city soon began to surface : street children didn't exist in the town, (don't look in the drainpipe near McDonalds on a Thursday night). Homeless old people weren't a problem, and everyone got along with the aboriginal people in the park.

Public Space as a theatre of conflict : in Toowoomba, the conflicts were 'under the skin' and would have never been found in a conventional analysis process. A fear of encouraging the wrong kind of 'dweller' possibly explains why a city famous for its gardens, has none in its core. The main town park next to the City Hall was seen to be a 'problem' area, with aboriginal people drinking near the toilets. How do you upgrade a park and increase territorial flexibility without forcing anyone away?

Council decided it should destroy the hundred year old wisteria pergola to 'let the light in' and 'expose the toilets'. Such problems of space appropriation are not ones to be solved by physical change : they strike deep at the heart of the culture of a town and are symptoms of social dislocation. They become health issues for the city: the well being of people surfaces in the way they dwell in its public spaces.

Whilst this problem space next to the town hall continues its theatre of quiet conflict, a new park has been carved out of some shops nearby. Local artists wanted the shops to set up a community arts workshop, but councillors pushed for a public park to display the 'culture' now evident in their refurbished art gallery. With a shoe string budget and a very short time frame, we were asked to create a suitable public space. The park was designed using the set up shop process, a collaboration with artists, gallery and council officers.

A LEAP project for unemployed aboriginal men was being conducted by local artist and ironworker Steve Weiss, and we decided to integrate these artworks with the park. Paradoxically, Council accepted this proposal for their next town park, perhaps not realising the cultural implications of the outcomes. The park was designed around ten bold aboriginal totems that were created by the group. A single path cuts diagonally through the space, meandering its way toward the 'other' park where a less formal type of aboriginal appropriation was being enacted.

At the same time the park was intended to spill the art out of the gallery : grassy sites for installations await their pieces, and act as platforms for performance art and festivals associated with the growing life of the Art Gallery.

### **Directions for Cultural Planning**

Public space becomes a theatre of conflict when cultural values in a community are unreconciled. Toowoomba's Art Gallery park and West End's park are not isolated examples : most towns throughout the land are faced with similar issues to do with the appropriation of public space by marginalised groups, in particular aboriginal people, the homeless and the drinkers.

It is perhaps time to acknowledge that Landscape Architects don't have the expertise to address complex cultural issues on their own : social anthropologists, community planners, behavioural experts and people with local wisdom are needed.

Design in the public realm will not solve the deeper conflicts within our society, but there is no excuse for ignoring the problems that surface. Better communication and design processes are needed in order to uncover and identify the needs of the 'hidden' dwellers : people that don't fit neatly into the normal world we generally seek to recreate and live in.

In both the public spaces that I have used as case studies, we were faced with a moral dilemma : the local authority's brief did not encompass or acknowledge the needs, roles and values of the marginalised groups. In both cases, it perhaps could be said that a degree of design subversion was used to expand the brief. Small details such as seats which are long enough to sleep on will make a difference to those who don't have the choice of a bed, and this is certainly within the realm of the designers capacity, if you choose it to be.

In summary, placemaking is a complex process with strong social, political and economic dimensions. The design of key public spaces requires more than just an understanding of physical issues. There is a moral imperative to try to improve things for everybody, not just the mainstream. Placemaking can fulfil broad community values whilst also involving the disempowered parts of the community.

## NOTES

1. Heidegger, M. (1975) "*Building, Dwelling, Thinking*", article in ***Poetry, Language, Thought, Place?*** USA: Harper Collins.  
Heidegger outlines a way of understanding the making of landscape that is refined and has a depth which Landscape Architects could heed. My diagram shows an interpretation from a designers perspective of his placemaking paradigm.
2. Mongard, J. (1991) ***Place and Meaning***, published lecture for Site Planning Theory Course, Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane.
3. Papanek, V. (1995) ***The Green Imperative - Ecology and Ethics in Design and Architecture***, Singapore: Thames and Hudson, p.54. Papanek talks about the spiritual potential in placemaking when following a code of ethics that connects social and environmental values.
4. Register, R. "*Eco-Cities: Rebuilding Civilisation, Restoring Nature*", article in ***Futures by Design***, Sydney: Envirobook Publishing.

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