

WHAT DO YOU MEAN BY THIS PLACE?

By John Mongard

John Mongard Landscape Architects planned and designed public spaces in the seaside town of Mooloolaba over a period of four years. The infamous 'Loo With A View' was the first built project in an 18 million dollar masterplan, and this work recently won a BDP Urban Design award and the RAPI National award for Urban Design in 1999. We have asked John to describe the design, and the meanings behind its detail.

Is there a genie
in the Loci
or just a mirror
for a child.
does the land sing
or is it a container
for our dreams.

Beyond the pragmatics of access, safety, structure and budget lies the sticky realm of meaning and context. In the public realm we struggle to give shape to a fractured palette of culture and nature, which are fused notions in themselves.

I would like to voice that struggle through a critique and dis-assemblage of our recent works in the town of Mooloolaba, Queensland.

THE PROBLEMS OF MEANING SOMETHING

Most designers carry with them ideas about 'genius loci', 'placemaking' and about how they give meaning and significance to their built works. These concepts are complex by their nature and given the lack of philosophical leadership within landscape architectural practise, lead many of us into an unresolved field: design intention without a strong thesis.

Is there a genius in the loci? Can we find eternal truths in the landscape, as some of the modernists sought to, through abstraction and geometry, or do we search for multiple meanings and truths based on a search for cultural significance, as post modernists would suggest? Can we attempt both, or are they mutually exclusive? Is the site neutral, or loaded with meanings?

For most landscape architects, these philosophical debates are not at the heart of their daily practise, although in those critical moments of creation, we are always faced with such decisions and indecisions, and our own 'hidden' thesis about design generally expresses itself. We

all have theories but they are just mostly nestled and not articulated. Can designers create meaning? What basis of authenticity can this be grounded on? Is there some underlying truth to be discovered in the Landscape?

Caroline Lavoie (Landscape Review 1998:4 (1)), suggests that meaning is an act of creative imagination, experienced by dwellers of a place and part of a collective memory forming traditions within our communities. Authentic meanings are, for her, ones that have some grounding to a particular place. This thesis is phenomenological, and leads the designer to work within a field that is both objective and subjective, and which is open to normative values. In other words, we work with rational concepts such as function at the same time as irrational concepts such as feelings, emotions, attitudes and values.

Heidegger, the German philosopher implied that to express and understand the heart of a place, one needed to become a 'dweller': because of our perennial search for 'home' in the world, we have a primal need to dwell. He used poetry to try to capture a language which best expressed the meaning of place, because, like music, it moves toward the emotions, moves beyond the rational. My own particular efforts to create a poetics in the landscapes that I deal with is grounded in these phenomenological ideas, and seeks to find and be a catalyst for authentic meanings and values in place. This is not always a picture with a clear horizon, but it is at the heart of why I practise landscape architecture.

Meaning in the landscape can be intended by the designer, but may be read otherwise by its users. The amalgam then is a shifting ground, where things that are meaningful at a particular time and place can and should be dealt with. In this approach, we have a responsibility to read and interpret a place, as it was, how it is, and how it might be. Even though people's experiences change, and meanings change, I believe that there is value in the 'local', and it is in the realm of local culture and local identity that we can find a degree of authenticity.

LOO AS SYMBOL

What distinguishes Australian culture and places from others?

Mooloolaba, like most fast growing tourist orientated towns has, in a quick period, changed its clothes: people still come to holiday, but they do it in apartments rather than tents, and they drink cappuccino's rather than just milkshakes. This is a type of resort orientated gentrification which, like most other forms of the same process, is very hard to control. One gesture to try to combat this at Mooloolaba has been to ensure public space remains public, and to give those spaces quality which is as good as the private resort areas.

Modern resort tourism as dictated by the market place in Australia offers few cues to 'local' place, and in these settings it is harder to prevent all places graduating toward sameness. In this realm, elements of local significance for people should be promoted and enhanced.

The Loo With A View structure was built by Council over fifteen years ago and designed by prominent architect Lindsay Clare. It was somewhat controversial for its proximity to the beach, and for its celebration of 'toilet' and 'lookout' as a combined place.

When the Loo With A View was refurbished as part of a bigger public space, it continued to be controversial. How could Council spend millions of dollars on a toilet? When the toilet itself wasn't the main focus of the money, people also objected. It captured the imagination and thoughts of the whole region, and became a talking point, much like the Olympic games prior to the Olympics.

Our cultural focus in Australia is probably more centred around recreation than the arts, and the places where this happens, such as the beach, often become more important than our theatres or town squares. This might explain how a toilet block with a lookout on top of it can gain such a dominant place in the collective memory of a town. The refurbished Loo With A View has been in place for some years now and people still passionately discuss its significance and worth. A web site has been set up and has been linked up to other significant 'loo's of the world'. A German television lifestyle program recently brought a film crew to feature The Loo With A View. It seems that this toilet block became a symbol for many things, and perhaps it is through this process of talking and debate that meaning collects in the locality.

STARTING POINTS

The catalyst for change in Mooloolaba was the refurbishment of a run-down toilet jammed up to a playground next to one of Australia's most popular swimming beaches. Mooloolaba as a safe haven for families seeking fun and play, is the contemporary and historical genesis for its popularity. The towns perched one sided main street facing the ocean led to ideas about the verandah and gallery type spaces: a type of gallery by the sea notion to be expressed through art and performance. A boat shaped plaza was built around the Loo With A View as part of the first gesture to integrate the town, cutting a diagonal swathe from the beach to shops. The boat shape suited the functional need to provide a widening transition space around the toilet and lookout : a verandah onto the beach which tripled the available sitting, viewing and circulation space. It also attempted to create a meaningful form based on a cultural reading of the town.

The boat building tradition of Mooloolaba, as well as the fact that the town is a sailing haven, were strong cues to make forms, both as

spaces and objects, and these were ways in which we could answer to a context which was grounded in some sense of place continuity, rather than say, the placeless notions of commercial and contemporary tourism. On the site itself, large boats used to unload holiday makers from Brisbane, who would set up tents on the beach at a time when only a pub and a few fibro shacks existed. The boat is a memory of this. Through talking to people, we found out that The Loo With A View was Mooloolaba's main cultural landmark, along with the surf club. The Loo was run-down but retained an identity in the collective memory of the town, so it seemed like an instinctive place to reinforce the town's image. The boat envelops the Loo With A View, allowing it to function, whilst setting up an interesting and perhaps unresolved juxtaposition of signs and symbols.

The notions of 'safe haven', 'play', 'boats', 'gallery' and 'verandah' are elements which provide a source for placemaking in the Loo With A View project. They were found and made important through a social and collaborative process: the talking and walking of the place by all of the design team in concert with local community and traders. Nothing in the design process it seems can make up for a lack of place knowingness: without becoming an 'insider', placemaking is a hit and miss project. This implies that our role is to discover how the landscape speaks, and that design process is about listening and answering to the landscape, which in my case implicitly embraces notions of community.

But concepts such as 'safe haven' or 'boat' in themselves can be meaningless, or alternatively meaningful to many places. It's not enough to just dwell on simple concepts and hope that they will have strength and look right. Other design meanings and qualities can and should inform a process.

THINGS THAT MEAN

The development of a range of urban furniture for Mooloolaba is one example of how we attempted to introduce depth to the design intervention. The micro architectural design was layered by ideas of permanence and sustainability. The off-white cast concrete benches, tables and bollards are supported by marine grade stainless components. The number of finishes were reduced to the minimum possible. This idea was inspired not by Mooloolaba but by a fifteen-minute rest in an old park in the city of Buenos Aires. A hundred year old concrete bench gave quality and performance without demanding much and it occurred to me that we can still achieve this.

We've lost many craft related skills with modern technology, and so another dimension to the process was to develop craftspeople who could provide and sustain an ongoing placemaking process grounded in material quality and craft. This was not without pain, and at the

beginning required one of our designers to work with the artists over a period of a month assisting with concrete casting. Sometimes, to innovate and to craft requires a personal commitment that goes beyond any brief : in this case, no conventional concrete manufacturer in Australia would make the double curved concrete pieces, so we had to invent a new craft industry using artists. Some of the concrete pieces made early on failed due to technical issues which were ironed out along the way. The furniture is now part of the place, and the higher cost of production and crafting should be compensated by the low energy consumption and long life cycle of the pieces (we're aiming for a 50 year life).

Aside from craft and sustainability as qualities which can give meaning to the design forms, is the notion of place as a catalyst for fun. There is always a fine line between kitsch and playfulness, however it is worth walking it! Sometimes, we need to be children, and we shouldn't be afraid to design for laughter and joy. At Mooloolaba, for example, the surfboard seats capture the sensuous feel of a surfboard between your legs; the showers, shaped like ventilator funnels on a steam liner, celebrate the washing off ritual; the bollards look like mooring posts and make good perches, and there is a wall mounted ladder to climb from beach to picnic spot. A sculptural playground for small children was built around the ideas of sand and water and was highly popular in the beginning, but sadly became the object of safety beurocrats and political infighting.

We should design things that are a pleasure to feel, sit on and that are worth photographing. These are the small pleasures of tourism.

FLUCTUATING MEANINGS

The 'Loo With A View' and 'The Boat' compete for significance as identifiers at Mooloolaba, but on the whole provide for differing and alternate interpretations by people. The Boat is only readily visualized from the multi-storey units and from the beachfront. At ground level, it reads more like a big verandah, jutting out to the beach and providing welcome shade in the heat.

In its combined form and meaning, it is a hybrid space : a town square on the beach, a performance space with an undefined audience, a place to draw people from shops to water, a place for all types of watching and sitting. Like many Italian squares which are voids in the centre of activity and buildings, the boat deck invites invention and play. Public places are containers for people's experiences and their own placemaking.

ART OR OBJECT

At the urban object scale, it is also interesting to provide meaningful fluctuations between notions of furniture and art. Designing in the

space between the practical and the non-sensical is rewarding but difficult to achieve. Senseless acts of beauty are, however, always worth pursuing.

In one current intervention in the shopping esplanade across from the Loo With A View, we are attempting this type of meaningful fluctuation through designing 'The Curvy Bench', a commissioned artwork in collaboration with furniture designer David Shaw. The seating sculpture in this case is also a hybrid : a bar, a picnicking area for families, a broad lounging chair, an edge to reclaim a public sitting place, and a piece of driftwood which hopefully engenders performance and event.

MEANINGLESS ACTION

As an ensemble, the Loo With A View project provided a focal point and a source of leadership to draw upon, as the rest of the Esplanade and commercial hub of Mooloolaba grew rapidly, upwards and away from its fibro shack roots. Across the road, a ten storey tourist hotel and unit development called 'Landmark Plaza' became the first of many new developments in more than \$200 million of new buildings built in the last four years, which some would say was prompted by the improvements around the Loo With A View. A simple idea was made policy in Mooloolaba through an urban design structure plan : that each new building creates a public space with it. This idea at Mooloolaba was partially funded by a strategy of swapping outdoor dining rights with public place funding.

At Landmark Plaza, we catered for over 220 outdoor dining seats and this, coupled with lease dispensations, led to the construction of a \$1 million public space funded by the developer. It took six months and four schemes to negotiate between Council and the developer what was an appropriate 'swap', and which spaces were to be for the public.

Without this level of time and commitment, it's easy for such a process to fall to the lowest common denominators of market pressure and the cheapest option. Some of the public spaces built in the last few years in Mooloolaba show signs of this kind of incremental reduction of quality and vision.

Even in the Landmark project, the things that got left to the last were the 'public' rights as opposed to the private ones. Hence the lack of seating and shade within the main built space, which is currently being attended to.

To create a poetics of place within a private tourist development process is an oxymoron unless the client is enlightened and clued into placemaking, as opposed to just money making. When developers

begin to dictate a placemaking process for a town and its public realm, what often eventuates is action without public meaning or significance. It is this particular realm that threatens our cities most. At Mooloolaba, a strong structure plan and some good public realm improvements gave a framework for the intense and sudden development pressure that it faced. In the rush to build new things, it's often hard to look after the spaces you've already made, and this 'maintenance' problem is common. High use public spaces demand the same level of maintenance as shopping centres, and this should not be underestimated in project costing.

CREATE IDEAS

Design is a process as well as a product: the important thing is to solve problems with good ideas. Great ideas rarely come out of a bad process, so it is worth pondering how they come about.

What is good for Mooloolaba could be very bad elsewhere. A landscape architect's response has to be of its time and of its place and should be grounded in local culture and meaning. Not all growth and tourism success leads to a better place, as towns like Kuranda and Byron Bay aptly show. Sometimes it is better to recycle places, and in most country towns this is the sustainable way to go.

People seem to like the Loo With A View and also appreciate the changes that have occurred at Mooloolaba. It seems to be popular, although this could be due to an increase in tourists and accommodation. It would be interesting to find out how people 'read' the changes to the place and whether any of the new public spaces are significant to their experiences. Are the Loo With A View and The Boat significant symbols and meaningful forms for its community of users?

Whether you believe there is some essential genius in the loci or just a shifting field of experiences and struggles, the main issue is probably to have a sense of purpose and conscious intention in the design process. People will continue to create meanings for themselves in the places we build for them, the question is how much passion we place in being a catalyst for these experiences.

Mooloolaba is a good test case for a town which grew quickly and where an urban design and placemaking philosophy attempted to mould this change. Time will tell whether it will succeed and not destroy what it sought to build upon.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Simons, K. '*The Art of Conversation: Making Sense of Place*'. Landscape Review 1998:4 (2)
- Heidegger, M. '*Poetry, Language, Thought*'. Harpers and Row, New York, 1971.
- Barnett, R. '*Gardens Without Meaning*'. Landscape Review, 1997:3 (2), pp. 22-41.
- Lavoie, C. '*The Wall / Ruin : Meaning and Memory in Landscape*'. Landscape Review, 1998:4 (1), pp. 27-38.

For Further Information Contact:

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