

Feeding, Greening, Caring

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Keywords

collaborative design

community planning

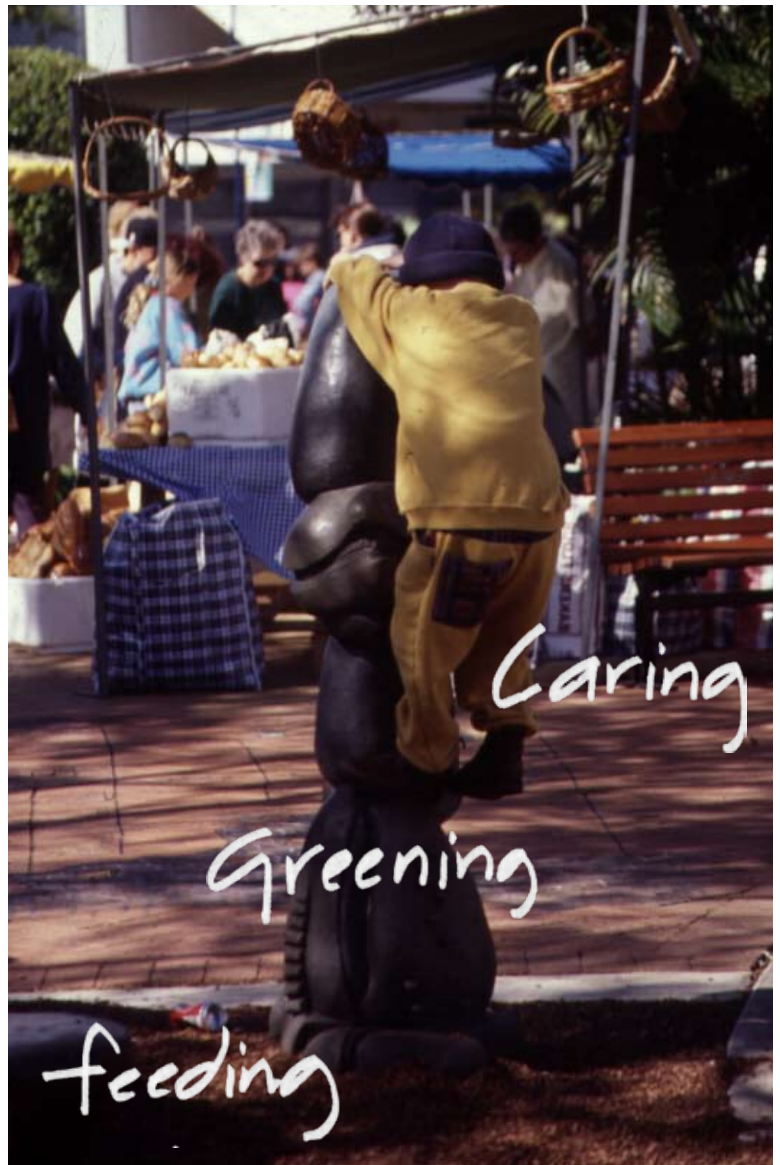
productive gardens

sustainability

urban agriculture

urban design

visionary landscapes



Abstract

The global financial crisis ended the decades of market triumphalism, which took privatisation to the economy, and bolted it onto public life and space. Professor Michael Sandel in the 2009 Reith lectures called this process the “hollowing out of the public realm”. He notes how Barak Obama is raising hope for a politics of civic renewal: that this is the right moment to advocate for a more morally engaged civic life.

The challenge for designers in this moment of change is to re-conceptualise people as citizens rather than consumers, to place value on civic life and to create a shared democratic citizenship. This paper focuses on three important actions required to achieve a more ethical public realm: feeding/greening/caring.

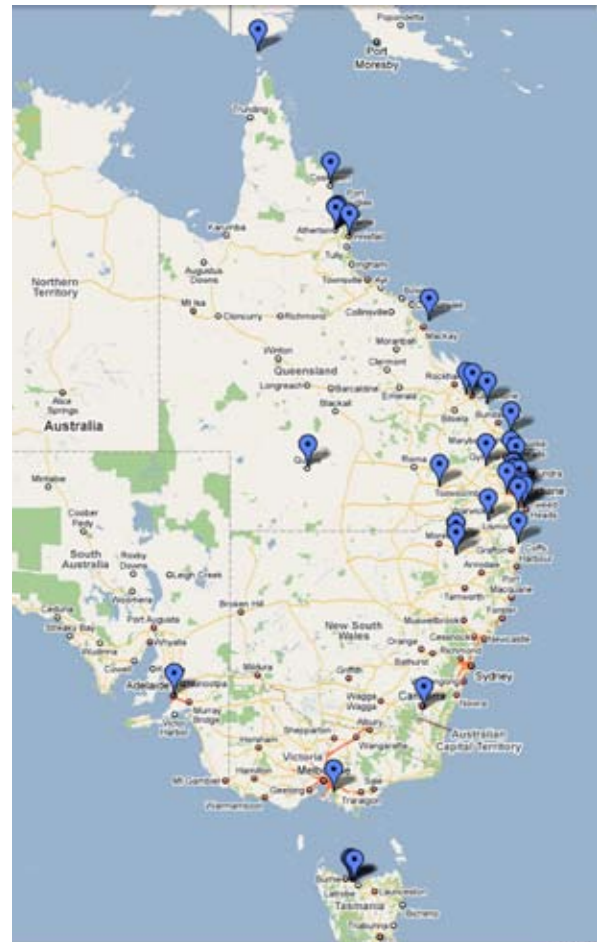
In the sustainable future, communities and their public realms will once again be meaningfully connected. Urban designers will actively facilitate this, so that people are passionately involved in the dreaming, designing, building and care of the public realm. Global climatic and economic patterns will have forced us to deal with the notion of feeding communities locally. People will need and demand for small and large, public and private places to grow food near home and work.

There are many Australian communities moving their neighbourhoods toward something like a feeding/greening/caring nexus. This paper explores rural and hinterland examples and then goes on to focus on the urban neighbourhood of West End. A collaborative process led by three local landscape architectural practices is being enacted to help the local West End community invent its own sustainable public realm. This is being done with local people involved at each step.

The Pull of the Market

In the late 1980s I spent two years designing a corporate park on the Gold Coast. On completion of the designs the market shifted and the site was on sold and became a flea market! At this point, I decided to find real people with real needs. We set up a practice with a community design paradigm. We went into Australia to create civic spaces where none existed. We set up a way of working with regional communities which required commitment over many years. In places like Kingaroy, Atherton and Cleveland, we reclaimed bitumen into public realms, which hopefully have become catalysts for civic life.

We tried to reshape and enliven town plans, codes and rules to promote a lively public realm, but it did not always work. In Kingaroy, we nominated future shopping centre sites so that the town would not fracture, and we wrote streetscape codes to create local character. The pull of the market was strong. Two new shopping centres have been built on peripheral locations, which will dislocate the town centre. The developers used the codes to mimic the streetscapes built with success in the town's cultural precinct. With no windows or doors onto the main street and no intention for gathering, it was bound to fail in its civic duties.

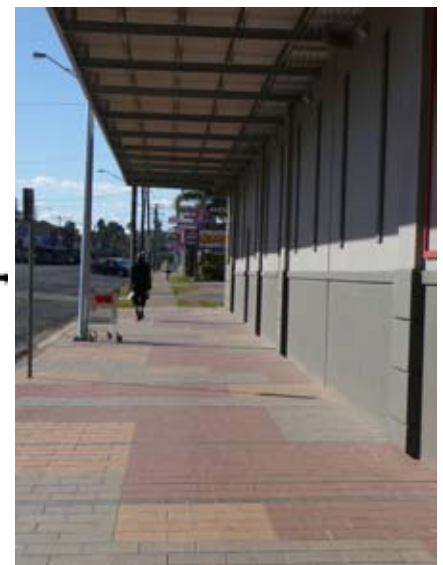
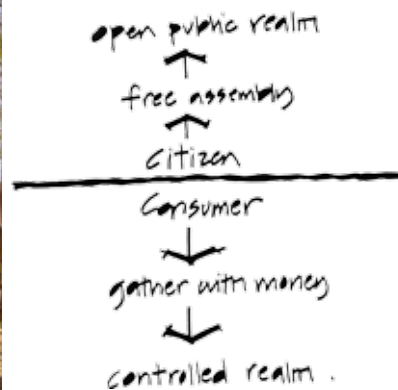


Map of emerging civic spaces by John Mongard Landscape Architects

This pattern has followed throughout regional Australia. Shopping centres may be economically valuable, but like their cousins, the big box whitegood warehouses, they have stripped out our public realms, taking people off the street and out of shared space. Main streets have often become boutique or tourism focused once the key retail role has been removed. The decades of market triumphalism have shaped us to be consumers, and we have lost the space and skills of civic life, citizenship and local resilience. As a consequence we no longer know basic things like how food is grown, how much water we need to live or indeed where things come from. We are dislocated from materials and nature and need help to wean ourselves as designers, and the people we design for, away from this co-dependency of market-led landscapes and lifestyles.



Kingaroy cultural precinct: cultural response



Kingaroy shopping centre

FEEDING

In the last 6 months it is estimated that 30 million hectares of agricultural land has been bought from poor countries who can't feed themselves, in order to grow food for countries such as China and the Gulf states, which cannot produce enough food for their own. In Africa, an area half the size of Europe's arable land has been bought this year for feeding other continents (Guardian Weekly 10/07/09, p. 10).

Food in the Country

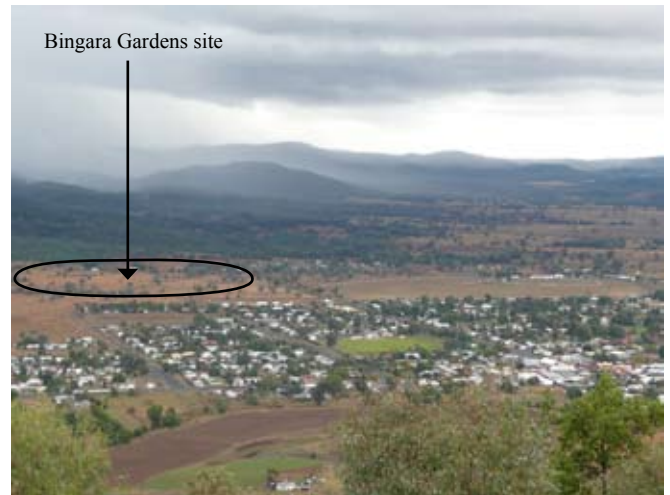
Food will increasingly create contested space. How can we more ethically feed people? Simply put, we need to grow food close to our kitchens, and within our neighbourhoods. We have to take the transport and handling out of food, to reduce its massive carbon footprint in Australia. Examples of how to do this are emerging in Australia, despite the market, which seeks to monopolise supply and distance us from what we eat. In a small town called Bingara, in NSW cattle and corn country, leaders in the local community envisage the regeneration of the district by 2020 to enable the town to feed itself. Using commons grazing land, a plan has emerged for an organic cropping and stock park where research, education and production of local food will occur. The agricultural skill in the local community would be a point of focus, and the park would become an international exemplar and destination. If Cuba can do this, with little space and few resources, surely Australian towns can also succeed.



Bingara Commons, the site for Bingara Gardens agricultural park



Bingara Gardens: Productive and interpretive



The town of Bingara, NSW



Bingara's vision for 2020



productive gardens in Bingara

At the Ecovillage in Currumbin Valley, another experiment is underway which seeks to reconnect food, water and natural resources back onto the template for growth in the hinterland. Despite government resistance over the four or so long years of its approval, it has now become an environmental exemplar. Places are designated for community agriculture using recycled water. Each lot in its covenant identifies the best place for vegetable gardens. By simply trapping water in gullies and ponds, the water table is charged up and the land becomes fitter for food production. People who seek these ways of living are now building their homes. The affirmation of civic life and sustainable living are in the culture of the project. They are central, not peripheral concerns, or purely marketing ploys.



productive garden @ 215 the Ecovillage, Currumbin



An ecohamlet at the Ecovillage, Currumbin, Masterplan by JMLA

Food in the City

What then, is to be done in the city, where land is at a premium and where we seem to have concreted our way into an unsustainable urban realm? The urbanisation of our coastal strips will force us to design and structure new greening and feeding canopies, surfaces and ecological systems to shade us and to fight rapid heat sink. These canopies and forests will sometimes be on rooves and walls since we will have eaten up all the soft ground and we will need to clean our air. Our greening plans will tackle fundamental structures – we will reinvent soil, water and energy. Our landscapes will hybridize technology and nature. Our Greening will not be about just amenity, but about survival, health and food.



Ecovillage at Currumbin: ponds and waterways



Productive gardens at the Ecovillage at Currumbin



'Food Connect' Food Co-op, West End



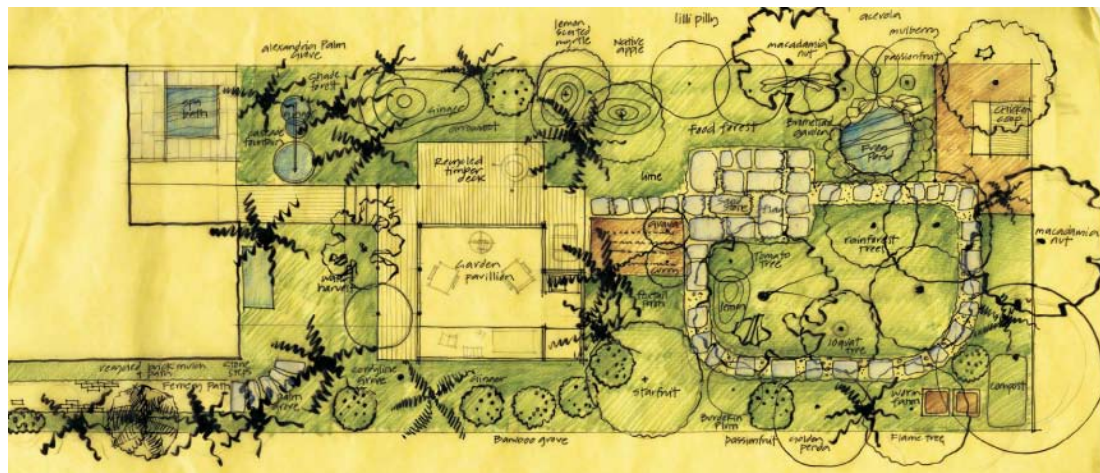
migrant gardens on Boundary Street, West End

The use of remnant space for productive lots in Havana, Cuba, is now well known. This has been achieved by local people with few means, although encouraged by government. In Australia, we have remnant post-war examples – vegetable gardens grown out of austerity principally by migrants. In West End, Greeks, Vietnamese, Italians and now post-modern hippies maintain food production in the older lots and homes of the neighbourhood.

We need to take things into our own hands. To plant seeds and relearn the skills of growing food. Using our own four hundred square metre site in West End, Australia, John Mongard Landscape Architects (JMLA) are testing our own ability to become sustainable. After installing three water tanks and twelve solar panels to provide water and power on site, we are trialing the idea of a food forest in the city. By planting productive trees and shrubs that can grow in dense or shady places, and by reclaiming lost spaces such as carport rooves, we hope to be able to grow food close to our kitchen. We cannot ask other people to change their lives and grow their own food if we do not do it ourselves!



vegetables growing on carport



Food Forest Display Garden by John Mongard Landscape Architects at Whynot St West End

GREENING

Global warming is changing the way we live. Whilst Australia debates whether to reduce carbon emissions to 20% by 2020, Monbiot (2007) thinks if we do not reduce these emissions to 97% by 2020 that the crisis created by 2 degrees celsius temperature rise will be enacted! We are toying on the edges of a crisis which we do not want to foresee. A 97% reduction of emissions requires wholesale change to our citymaking processes. Oxfam projects that by 2050 global warming will severely threaten the world's



food production through drought. Maize fields are forecast to drop by 15% in the next ten years in India and sub-Saharan Africa (The Guardian Weekly 10/07/09 p. 2). Additionally, the increasing temperatures will threaten vulnerable people such as the elderly. Projections for 2050 are for a 75% increase in deaths among old people in Australian cities from heat alone. Cities and towns in Australia must become greener now, not for aesthetic reasons, but for the survival and health of our citizens.

JMLA have run hundreds of workshops throughout Australia asking local people what they value and envisage for the future. In nearly every place, rural or urban, people want more trees, more green. We need to plant more and concrete less in the city. This is a challenge as we push to create density - rather than sprawl. Density without greening is yet another unsustainable end place. The healthy city of the future must provide sustenance and nature.



Innisfail Boulevard: 50% of hard space converted to green space



O'Neill Square, Kingaroy: from bitumen carpark to cultural precinct

Over the last twenty years JMLA have been engaged in the process of gradually removing grey space (concrete and bitumen) and creating green spaces in regional centres. These places have transformed centres into community places rather than roads. In general we have found that, there is 20-30% unused hard space in our streets which can be retrofitted to community green space. We have made these transformations in over forty regional towns however, in the big cities such as Brisbane where space is more contested, city spaces remain hot and hard and more difficult to transform due to governmental complexity.

A Model Neighbourhood in West End

There are many Australian communities moving their neighbourhoods toward something like a feeding/greening/caring nexus. West End in inner city Brisbane is one such place. West End is a model of sustainability for the rest of Queensland and Australia. There are probably only a handful of other places which have the diversity of people, housing, work, culture and city landscape that characterises West End. All of this is under threat because government cannot, or will not, plan for sustainability. The population will conservatively increase by three hundred per cent in the next five to ten years, yet there is no plan which tells the community how the impending buildings, traffic and people will be properly accommodated; nor how water, energy or heat gain will be sustainably dealt with. There is no plan to show how a dense city neighbourhood is to provide for new and more sustainable green spaces and active public realms.

The West End community is diverse, knowledgeable and involved in guiding its own future public realm. For over eight years, local groups such as the Local Push and the West End Community Association (WECA) have advocated a shift toward sustainability through planning, events, constructions and actually making their own public realms. They have created community gardens, revegetated creek ways, designed and helped build a streetscape, run a yearly street festival and helped establish a farmers market and farm product networks.



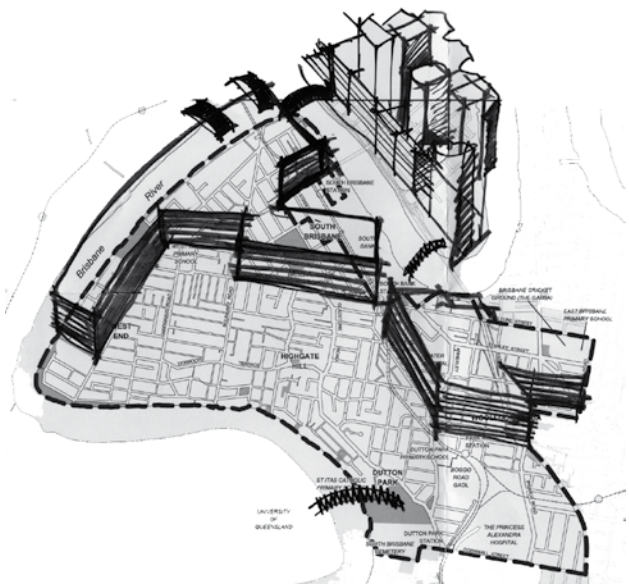
posters from West End (by West End Community Association and Local Push)

Greening West End

West End is one of Australia’s great urban neighbourhoods. It is also a place under threat. As a citizen of West End, I have over the last twenty years experienced the disempowerment from a change process led by economics. In the 1990s West Enders formed the Local Push, local people who wanted sustainably led change and greener city growth. The Local Push created forums, workshops, street festivals and even re-wrote the local area plan for the council. After nearly ten years of advocacy falling on deaf ears, most of the members were burnt out or become disillusioned with government. Around the beginning of the building boom, development pressure to increase height limits, to build bridges and build major infrastructure fuelled the impetus for a new community group called WECA (West End Community Association) to counteract this unsustainable growth. As a member of both the Local Push and WECA, I have been involved in advocating for more green space in West End. Whilst the population is set to triple in the next five years, not one single new open space was planned or built in the prior twenty years. The idea of greening West End using dead bitumen space was floated over ten years ago. Recently, WECA has run two community workshops to show Council and the community how to make new green spaces. Our practice, in collaboration with two other landscape practices in the neighbourhood (Landpartners and JFP) have facilitated these greening visions.

Hamstead Road to Hamstead Common

How can we create more parks to suit the growing population when there is no more space left in the city? Hampstead Road is a typical overly wide asphalt road in West End. It has 30% disused road surface which can be converted into the badly needed open space which the neighbourhood will need. Imagine if Hampstead road meandered its way down the hill in a way which allowed parklands, trees and open spaces to also be created. Hampstead Road could stay two-way, maintain parallel parking and driveway access and take up less than 70% of its current footprint. Hampstead Common could be created out of the left-over bits, as is commonly done in other towns where too much asphalt or concrete has been laid (Cleveland and Bundaberg main streets are two well-known examples).



West End’s growth: From 2 storeys to 17 storeys in 5 years

Productive gardens and orchards could be built and maintained by the community. The linear park can create areas for play, for relaxation and for meeting other people without taking up an inch of private



Community workshop on Hampstead Road



Park-ing on Boundary St, West End

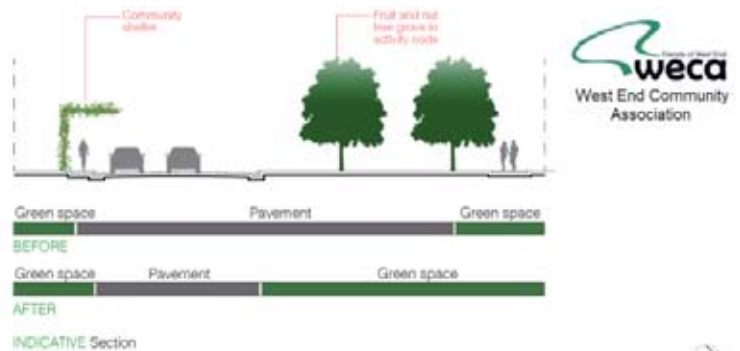


Community street festival

land. Despite having the resources of one of the world's largest local authorities, the Brisbane City Council have not provided sustainable public realms for the West End community. Politics and the speed of redevelopment have left no room for re-inventing a sustainable inner city realm through conventional planning and local authority delivery processes. So the community is pushing on, potentially beyond or even without these systems, and is shifting toward citizen design, and the invention and construction of infill public realms which address Feeding/Greening/Caring in an integrated way. Hampstead Common is an example of community led design toward sustainability. The implementation of this may also require innovative processes, and the establishment of funds through a community trust is the vehicle being considered by yhr local community to implement this project..

CARING

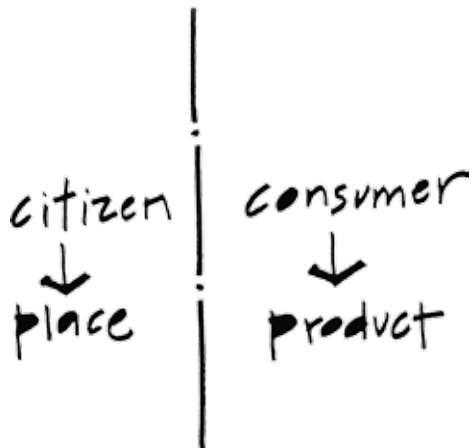
The US Census bureau has projected that there will be 1 billion pensioners by 2040. This is about 14% of the global population (Guardian Weekly, 24/07/09, p. 1). If we are failing to support our citizens and civic life today, how will we be like as a community in the year 2040? The need to care will become a major societal task. To care means to get inside of a person's shoes. This requires a placemaking process where designers become dwellers, and dwellers become designers. Placemaking is a conversation and a relationship, not a drawing or a contract. Our processes need to change to adopt an attitude and



Hampstead Road to Hampstead Common - Community Design Initiatives for West End

process centred around the notion of care. How we structure today's neighbourhoods will determine how our ageing community will cope in the city in the short term. Our shift to sustainability begins with a change in values. When we change the city making process and outcomes to focus on citizens rather than consumers, then we will begin to create an ethical and inclusive public realm. We need to take care of people better, particularly the aged, poor and infirm. This caring moves us from the 'me' generation to the 'we' period.

In the future, designers and planners will be asked to care. We will shift from being neutral bystanders in the development cycle, to being enablers and long-term carers of the public realm. We will move from site/project toward neighbourhood/network: we will be forced to address the long term care of the public realm through an ongoing relationship with local people and local business. This social responsibility will be a new dimension to the practice and training of built environment professionals. This future has already arrived but we have not yet shifted to meet its challenge.



West End as a Caring Place

West End has always been a share-house for a diverse community. The poor migrant workers built their cottages in tight rows on the gullies, and the rich folk built mansions on the hills. Aboriginal people have continued to inhabit the neighbourhood through a much older pattern of settlement and migration. West End was a key gathering point for indigenous Queensland, with Musgrave Park acting as central station.

When the Queensland Government gave up its role in mental health during the 1990s, the mentally-ill were housed in the boarding houses close to the city service providers, and West End forms home for many of them. The students, musicians and writers also moved into cheap rentals in the old workers cottages,



shopfront community design studio



community design in tents





Festival reclaiming the streets in West End

and West End's vibrant community became multi-layered. All of this diversity is likely to be smoothed out of the neighbourhood by the glut of upmarket apartment and office redevelopment underway. Gentrification is a genteel virus which deforms culture by slow economic strangulation. The increase in four wheel drive wagons in West End has been matched by an increase in homelessness and a rapidly declining pool of affordable housing, work and rental space.



West End: undergoing change and experiencing community dislocation

As pressure mounts in West End to convert it into a thirty storey extension of the CBD, a plethora of bridges, government buildings, apartments, and commercial precincts are set to iron out the eclectic and memorable parts of the neighbourhood. In this contested future, the role and value of the public realm has never been more important. We cannot build great cities without building great public spaces at each increment. We cannot let the market dictate our public spaces because the market will always aim to profit from any resource, whether environmental or spatial. The cared-for city is evident in its streets, spaces and neighbourhoods, and this has always been an outcome of the close match between city leaders and their communities working together in a real way.



The West End neighbourhood



Local residents making the Goanna skin



Local artists and unemployed labourers building the artwork



The Goanna meeting place under the fig tree, Boundary St West End

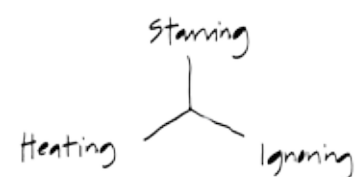
Memory of Place

Places made with care have memory. The dreaming and making of public space with citizens at the core creates enduring and loved places. We cannot make authentic public realms without the public. The caring process begins with designers shifting their values and their processes toward authentic collaboration. Without this we just create hopeful containers. In 1996 the main street of West End was retrofitted to incorporate an infill of park and public spaces without the loss of main street function and without the symbols of gentrification. Local people selected where benches, bins and trees would go. The streetscape has been robust, lasting over twenty years, and elements such as the goanna stage are places where community happens.

Conclusion: As If People Mattered

Without caring and feeding our communities, or providing them with the environments for wellbeing, we will replicate the soulless outcomes of our recent city building efforts. The city is a process as much as a product. Without a change of values or a fundamental change in development processes, we will continue to build unsustainable cities.

We have little time to waste. Our climate is changing before our eyes and our eyes are losing focus as we age collectively. Each small project matters. It matters to the people who will increasingly live in higher density cities away from nature. Feeding / Greening / Caring is a nexus of focus not just for our quality of life, but for our survival.





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October 2009