

This article is an extension of a paper by Sandy Caldwell presented at a two day forum titled, "Take Place, Be Placed or Displaced? Art in the Public Domain" hosted by the Cities of Darebin and Whittlesea.
© Sandy Caldwell All Rights Reserved

Constraint and Freedom

Working with Community in Public Art Projects

Sandy Caldwell

Pierre Boulez the French Composer said "it is a generalisation to speak of concert audiences. There is no one audience. There are as many audiences as there are programs. Each one has a right to its own taste." When discussing public art it must be remembered that different projects are designed with different intentions.

Public art has offered the one major growth area for work and commission opportunities for artists in the last decade and a half. It is one of the few areas that has offered paid employment to artists to produce works within a context, and the work is usually seen by a far larger audience than is usual, and often for a much longer time.

Cultural theorist Donald Horne suggests that citizens have the right to engage with the heritage of past intellectual and artistic activity, as well as the right to engage with new intellectual and artistic activity, and the right to engage in their own forms of intellectual and artistic activity.

The opportunity to participate and the potential access to these projects gives different cultures and cultural values a potential voice.

There's no doubt that this is a small step (but it is something) towards various constituencies being represented and expressing and trying to maintain their own cultural traditions and tastes.

Community involvement in Public Art has and is generally regarded as being a second or third-rate type of art (like a C or D grade movie) or as merely being some exercise in cultural development. Sometimes the community are involved in the projects long before the artist even hears of them. The community often selects the site, and tells stories about the landscape and their experiences with it. These stories may be included in the project brief to help inform the artists in the design of the works. Basically the artists job is to edit the brief by translating it through their own aesthetic (ultimately telling their own stories within it). Every person who is involved translates the project through his/her own aesthetic.

When community are involved in public art projects aesthetics is only one of the aims. Apart from aesthetics, diversity and inclusion, creative thinking, health, social connectedness and sense of place are all factors to be considered and to have impact upon the work. Public art isn't a solitary act.

Public art humanises the public space and helps us individually and collectively develop a relationship with the land, a sense of place. Of course virtually all artists (if they had the choice) would prefer to design art by themselves using their own peculiar set of stylistic motifs. Most artists would happily repeat their favourite symbols forever. Community input can benefit artist's work by forcing them to break away from their standard formulaic approaches. It can shake artists from their comfort zones, and expand their art.

There are two concepts that I want to discuss in this paper, that I believe inform all public art, and these are the notion of Constraint and the notion of the Dialogical. I'll start with the dialogical and why it is important to public art.

The dialogical refers to a term used by the Russian Literary Critic Mikhail Bakhtin in the first half of the twentieth century. It means the many voices and layers of peoples experience, never the singular voice or the myth of the misunderstood genius. Saying that the artist's voice is singular is like saying that art can be made in a vacuum.

I'd like to tell you a story. Last year in one of the City of Melbourne's "Laneways Projects" the pavement of an inner city laneway was brightly painted in stripes (like licorice assortments with text amidst the coloured stripes.) When I entered the laneway art space (in an area known for its drug dealing), I walked passed small recessed doorways. As I was looking at the art two junkies stepped out from one of the doorways and their eyes locked onto my bag. I felt a huge rush of adrenaline and fear as I made a run for it out of the only entrance or exit.

What I got from that work was no doubt very different to the intention of the artists use of the space like a canvas in a gallery, however as the work is in a public realm the dialogical nature of that realm came at me with a real shock. What was the council's intention putting art so close to the hot spot for drug deals, did the council consider that, did the artist, is that one of the factors (social problems) that it was hoped that the art would solve?

Because of all the layers of people involved, the dialogical also provides incredible levels and experiences within the work, culturally, psychologically, socially and emotionally. The public sphere is always dialogical, as a result public art is dialogical, whether the work is permanent, transitory, auditory, virtual, collaborative or a single artist project, and all the levels of involvement bring their own history to the project and effect the project.

You may choose not to work with the community, but it is still with layers of voices coming through. The point is that this is the nature of public art and how it is different to other art forms. Of course for any public art to be good the vision of the artist is of utmost importance, and care must be taken not to undermine that vision.

The second factor that is important to consider is the notion of constraint, and of how to use it successfully when writing project briefs, designing public artworks or selecting projects to work on as artists. The idea of working successfully with and benefiting from constraints was a theory held by a French literary movement in the 1950's called the Oulipians. The primary premise that infuses all Oulipian art practice is that constraints do not inhibit the art but on the contrary can engender (or give rise to) creativity.

For example, in France in 1969 George Perec wrote an entire novel ("La Disparition") without the letter "e", and in the French language that would be difficult.

By introducing a constraint into a work of art the artist's mind is diverted from its usual tracks, its habitual grooves, and must strive for and aspire to words, forms, and patterns that would not otherwise enter their thoughts. Any teacher who has ever taught will tell you that students who have created one solid but utterly safe and conventional artwork after another will suddenly

generate visually and imaginatively varied pieces when forced to make art according to a set of constraints.

I was assisting on a project some years ago that involved children painting onto tiles. The artist who I was helping had instructed me to “make sure all the backgrounds are blue”. I told this to a five year old girl. I told her that she could do anything she wanted but that she needed to paint the background blue. As soon as I voiced the constraint she burst out crying floods of tears. No one likes the notion of constraint.

Projects tend to list too many constraints as they often take on a role of trying to do too much. When this happens, the amount of criteria that need to be met end up conflicting with each other and the projects cannot really succeed. Every level of involvement in each project (the dialogical of each project) brings its own set of constraints with it. There are constraints from the community, from the engineers, from the artists, from the project managers, from the landscape architects, from the council, from the fabricators etc.

It is important to have project managers and/or consultants that understand practical art processes, and about positive and negative constraints within an artwork. If they do, they can try to limit the number of constraints that are potentially unworkable. If there are too many constraints it can become ludicrous. All of this is relevant for one reason in that councils often can confuse the artist. How this can happen is that Council's sometimes give both positive and negative constraints or there are way too many constraints or rules. The constraints can end up conflicting with each other, and they can then cancel each other out. If the constraints conflict the project can't move forward and you get mediocrity.

Keep the constraints clear and not contradicting each other otherwise they will stall the project. Bring representatives together from the dialogical layers, from all the groups involved to design the constraints together. Public art is about working with constraints and doing it successfully.

Works in the urban landscape are important particularly when they have a public and historical significance. It is crucial that collaborations carefully evaluate their value in a dwindling public space. As a project manager and as an artist my number one concern is always to aim for the best art.

I'd like to finish this article by quoting Paul Carter who put it so well (in a conversation with me) when he said, “Public art should make erotically charged zones”.