THE NEW NEXUS BETWEEN ART, COMMUNITY AND GOVERNMENT

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Abstract: *Contrary to the myth of bush or beach, the suburbs are where most Australians live their daily lives. Neither city nor rural, this third space is steeped in the paradoxes of an Anglo-American urban phenomenon.   While leading the field of community building and public art in the 1980, the City of Knox appears static as an exemplar of post WWII suburbia. Sitting at the apex of 40 kilometres of suburban growth, the contradictions of environmental sustainability and car dependent sprawl, placemaking of non places and culture as consumption pose spatial, social and creative challenges for research. This research uses a series of public art projects to investigate suburban social space and concerns the relationship between artists, spatial practice and the production of space.*

Keywords: public art, suburbia, placemaking, City of Knox
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Public Art Practice and Suburban Social Spaces

Introduction

By way of qualification, I have spent 33 of my 47 years, including my infancy and youth, in the suburban condition and I would like to refer to Anmol Vellani's presentation when he talked about being repelled and fascinated with one's own community. I am limiting my discussion to settler society but will note the announcement today by Tim Costello that World Vision will be delivering the home ownership model to indigenous communities based on the idea of self esteem ownership and the economic efficiency of this form of tenure.

In Bourgeois Utopias, Robert Fishman, referring to the US, argues that 'the massive rebuilding that began after 1945 is not the culmination of a 200 year history of suburbia but rather its end'.   Fishman also argues that suburbia is an Anglo American phenomenon, to which the Australian phenomenon is positioned between our shifting alliance from Mother country to Big Brother country in or about 1945. The suburban phenomenon originated in the rising middle class of the industrial revolutions of England and was based on separation.

In general, the separation of class, but in particular the separation of children from the corrupting influence of the broader society, the separation of country from the pathological

city, the separation of white collar working men in the city from women who kept the suburban home to raise these children. The rising middle class provided, in the words of social theorist David Harvey, 'the militant particularism' that acknowledged the need for urban and social reform of the industrial city. Within this we see the central ideas of 20th century suburbia - the nuclear family and the residential suburb coupled with social reform through a rising middle class. These two centuries of suburban evolution are inseparable from transport and land speculation.

We see this firstly in the rail suburb in the late 19th century and then the car suburb in the early 20th. Post war prosperity, the car and state sanctioned land speculation created the dormitory suburb. In the late 20th century, these infills between the spokes of the radial rail network, produces two, three and four car households. They are places from which productive employment performs a daily exodus. In Australia, Fishman's end of suburbia is brought about through mobility and alienation manifest in an expanded psychological, spatial and social separation of work, leisure and private life.

1. Post WWII suburbia as a distinct urban reality

Quite simply, this is where most people in Australia live, as illustrated by the comparison between metropolitan Melbourne in 1951 (population of 1.4 million) and the growth and growth patterns in the 21st Century (population of 3.5 million).   Despite the term used in Australia to describe outer suburban municipalities as cities, these places bear no resemblance to a city. Jane Jacob's idea of foot people and car people cannot be contemplated let alone contended in such non cities. The City of Knox represents the prototypical suburb of the late 1960s that is the template for the growth corridors of metropolitan Melbourne.

2. What are the places deemed to be public in this urban reality?

Since its inception in 1968, the City of Knox has been devoid of a central place of public gathering. There is no city centre or square, no town hall that deserves the name, no theatre or concert hall. It is into this vacuum of the 1970s that three curious anomalies of the architectural imagination emerged.

- the private enclosed shopping mall, aptly named 'Knox City'
- the entrepreneurial, themed restaurant/reception centre, incongruously named Rembrandt's and
- the self constructed spaces that inspired the skatepark.

3. What intrinsic value does art bring to these places ?

In public space, art is not constrained by the same utilitarian outcomes of architecture or urban design and does not need to demonstrate an instrumental social benefit. Art brings something else to the built and social environment. In the places deemed to be public, in non cities or non places, the role of art is critical. Critical in its multiple meanings - essential, precarious, analytical.

Projects

To explore these ideas I have selected three projects and aligned them to the themes of this conference – art, community and government. Starting with the last first.

Government

Local government cannot compensate for the paucity of urban planning. Dispersed car-dependent centreless suburbs not only exist but are being replicated and promoted by State and Federal policy. Local government cannot compensate for the failure of State and Federal governments' cultural policy. For example, if your children attend a public school they have only a one in seven chance of having any meaningful engagement with music. In a private school this is 7 in 10.

Local Government is traditional seen as a major creator of places deemed to be public. However, the production of suburban spaces challenge this on several fronts. The expanding metropolitan boundaries exacerbate the capacity to build social infrastructure. New forms of residential development, gated communities, retirement living and housing developments that self fund civic infrastructure or services, simultaneously diminish the cost and the role of local government in provided public space through privatisation.

New forms of social space, like shopping centres, challenge the notions of public space in the absence of places of public gathering and cultural production. Global shopping centres are described by French anthropologist Marc Auges as non-places, places without history, relations or identity. Placemaking in a non place was not the agenda for the Next Wave project in 2004 entitled *Colliding Worlds* but it brought to the fore this very issue. Knox was mistakenly chosen to participate because it is the physical dead centre of metropolitan Melbourne's urban expanse. Knox, is not a high needs, at risk community which was the intended target of *Colliding Worlds*. It is middle Australia, and the place that gave us Senator Steve Fielding.

Colliding Worlds was a project about young people's sense of belonging in the world. The place dubbed the centre by young people in Knox was Knox City : a Gruenesque enclosed shopping centre. New media artist Pip Shea conducted a series of workshops with young people who produced the images for a light-based work.   Knox City Shopping Centre supported the project with studio space to develop the works and the site for the final images. Projected onto the front of the shopping centre, the developed works were viewed by an audience of tens of thousands of motorists on their way home in evening peak hour traffic along Burwood Highway.

Lessons from this project

- The changing notion of what constitutes places deemed to be public and how we might work with these ideas. The project has led to a whole series of works and potentialities with this space.

- Council and the shopping centre accepted from its inception that the project was open-ended. There was no site selected, no prescribed scale or level of engagement and no known outcome. The timelines were long – ten months. In this way, a cultural change was achieved.

- In an opportunistic sense, external funding that came second hand, achieved by mistake through an established festival, matched by internal funds, allowed the autonomy to achieve the above.

- The success of the project moved the thinking of local government towards temporary works. This project led to five other major temporary works.

- Young people engaged in the project were not targeted as high risk or at risk but simply invited to participate in an art project about transforming public space. The broad cross section involved in the project demonstrated this intuitive principle and did not further marginalising people who are marginalised.

- Finding the right artist for the art practice and separately resourcing the issues of duty of care.

Community

Social theorist David Harvey defines community as being both a process, or processes and a thing.   When we consider the idea of *communities* we are immediately confronted with identity *and* difference with which we can understand the dynamic of the process and the thing that might be created.   Skate culture is particularly Australian and suburban. It prefigures social networking, virtual community and digital technology through the creation, use and distribution of media[1] to a self defining and diversified, yet predominantly young, social network: zines, music, cassette, film, street art, fashion, self constructed spaces all occurred in the 70s.

Council built skate parks emerged in the 1980s as a response this social reality. Architectural historian and urban commentator, Iain Borden says

> *In spatial-architectural terms, the modernist space of suburbia was appropriated and re-conceived as another kind of space, as a concrete wave; second nature was returned to first nature.*

Skate parks replicate both first nature and the built environment; the perfect metaphor for the third space of the suburbs being neither rural nor city. The original skate park at Knox was built in the 1980s. The self organizing community of skaters and BMX riders successfully lobbied Council to build a new skatepark. In 2006, a commissioning process with RMIT University was undertaken to develop concepts that would treat the skate park as a public artwork in itself. This was a speculative process that simply paid artists to come up with ideas that might or might not be realised.

Two proposals were considered, based on the notion of an ongoing act of interaction with this particular community.   Tim Ryan's proposal was to create a responsive environment[2] using high speed, super slow motion cameras. High speed slow motion cameras have been used in public artworks before and high speed photography is used in elite sports training. Tim proposed to place this technology in the hands of skaters. Centrally, Tim's method was to observe and work with existing social networks and connect the virtual with the physical

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[1] There is a 40 year history of the generation, use and distribution of film, photography, zines, graffiti, fashion and music within skate culture which has influenced street, screen and publishing cultures.

[2] Responsive environments are by definition spaces that interact with the people who use them.

4

world; not as an imitation of the physical world but as an augmentation of the physical experience.

The parasitic and viral nature of user-generated content was proposed as the financial model and as the distribution network for the cultural appropriation of this scientific and military photographic technology. He proposed to embed cameras into the infrastructure of the skate park in locations inaccessible to even to most agile skater to complement the skaters' hand held footage.   Activated by a switch integrated into the line of flight of the skater, a recording of the action would be downloaded as free, high resolution, slow motion footage from an on site kiosk to mobile devices.

Karen Abernethy's proposal similarly centred on a methodology rather than an outcome. To give meaning to public artworks, she works through a process of social and environmental research to uncover place as the starting point. Her central idea was based on the image she discovered through research of a young boy riding a cow on the exact same site as the skate park. This image would be expressed in the form of a billboard that would then be the platform for ongoing series of works.

As ideas do, they unfold with multiple meaning and are re interpreted once manifest. The image is from 1939, the year that WWII was declared, in what I have argued is the principal event that created the suburban form of Knox.   Ken, the young boy riding the cow, is now 82. The other person in the photo is Ken's older friend who enlisted in the war and died the following year. Ken's father died the same year and Ken ran the dairy farm with his mother from the age of 11.   This eternal image of youthful exuberance resonates on the site for many reasons unknown at the outset of Karen's process, which was to;

- employ artists and pay them well for their ideas
- generate and promote the suburbs as urban forms worthy of consideration as the subject and object of creativity
- support them in developing concepts into ideas that may be able to materialise
- take risks and fund research not to yield results but to expand the possibilities – Tim's project and venture capitalism
- keep long and flexible time lines. Have contingencies as a project manager to allow for false starts, unrealised potential and final resolution
- fund projects adequately and piggy back capital works programs from their inception

Art

The distinction between artist initiated works or artist centred practice and the utilitarian and instrumental employment of artists needs to be made. Rembrandt's 9 installations, engaged six artists and members of three architecture studios to develop nine works about place, memory and transformation in the suburbs.   Rembrandts is a faux French Chateau built in the 1970s: a suburban aspiration for a culture centre. The installations were in part of a public farewell to this de facto town hall and ceremonial place of public assembly but also a serious engagement of artists with the suburban form.

Two works explore these ideas directly. The first work is an interior installation by Sally Mannall.[3] Through an exploration of the 'mechanisms that link social and cultural experience,

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[3] Sally Mannall is a video artist and lecturer in the MFA (Master of Fine Art) program at RMIT.

political landscape and the personal events' [4] she has created an untitled work based on the ritual of preparing for ritual and the Sisyphusian task of daily labour. Her video installation is a recording of an on-site performance in which a waiter walks (and acts) backwards while un-setting the tables of this 600 seat theatre restaurant. Played backwards, the waiter appears to be setting up the restaurant for the last supper in this place of public ceremony. The slight discontinuities in this choreographed work amplify the surreality and significance of this place – the table cloths miraculously adhere to the tables like vacuum sealed packages – and the projection of this full scale, moving image onto the stage-screen mirrors the static and real dining area set for guests who will arrive no more.

The second work is read from the suburban surrounds. In *Eight Crosses, Eight Windows*, Sean Loughery subtly intervenes in the windows on the façade of Rembrandt's with brightly coloured crosses that emphasize the existing form through the notion of heraldry. As a symbol, heraldry describes the aspirational elements of suburban life – the idea of unity through family groupings, weddings, coat of arms or the bands of colour of sporting clubs – a major social relationship in the suburbs. Sean's installation seeks to 'unify a building with an incongruous visual element' that shifts the audience thinking about the relevance of suburbia's 'built icons with the social underpinning of this Australian urbanism'[5]. *Eight Crosses, Eight Windows* is visible at 80 km/h from the six lane highway and is photographically reproduced as a brandless, anonymous image in the illuminated advertising billboard of a bus shelter opposite the site.

Learnings from this project;
- strange bedfellows – Departments of Planning and Community Development as part of making better places – an art project
- Re thinking about urban renewal – a model of speculation that marks the cultural importance of suburban anomalies such as the authentic fake – and in a perverse way, preserves them.
- The serious consideration of these spaces and the role of artists by the professions of the built environment
- Art practice – extending the notion of art in public space.

Biography: *Anthony McInneny is an artist, arts educator and arts administrator. He crosses these three fields through art in public spaces and is currently engaged in a research project focussed on the civic spaces of mid 20th century suburbia. He teaches at RMIT University, School of Art, Art in Public Space and is the coordinator of Cultural Services for the City of Knox. Anthony explores public space through a combination of creating and commissioning works and through joint studios between the schools of art and architecture and design together with curatorial and speculative works. E58684@ems.rmit.edu.au*

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[4] Rembrant's: 9 installations. Catalogue. Artist Biography

[5] Rembrant's: 9 installations. Catalogue. Artist Biography