Process and (As) Community in Public Art: Audience Participation in Creating Art, Place and Meaning

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Abstract: Public art has the potential to create meaning and a sense of place/community for the built environment and can contribute to an enrichment of the user experience. However, there are a range of problems and opportunities associated with the expectations of client, architect, building employees and users/community. Budget and technical issues also impact on the process and it is sometimes difficult for an artist to maintain the integrity of the creative process and to satisfy competing expectations. Using several of his public art projects in Queensland as examples, Kevin Todd will give an artist's view of his creative engagement with audience and challenge traditional notions of art practice. Is the traditional concept of the artist as an autonomous, creative individual useful for public art or should projects be approached and framed much like a design problem? To what extent should context shape the creative process/content and what consideration should be given to the audience (the public in public art) and the reception of the finished works? Shouldn’t successful public art essentially be local even if we sometimes frame artistic/cultural discourse as global? The process of involving audience in the creation of artworks in an inclusive and cooperative manner will serve as a case study for creating a sense of community, meaning and ownership in relation to place. Kevin will discuss the role of public artworks in bringing a disparate audience together and the value of an inclusive creative engagement/process in creating a community through participation.

Keywords: Public Art, Art in Community, Children and Youth Audiences, Artist/Audience Boundary, Participatory Art, Global/Local Arts

I would like to discuss the opportunities and problems associated with public art in the context of my own creative practice and to look at the outcomes from three recent projects in creating a sense of place for the audience/community.

In an era where anything in a gallery can qualify as art, approaching public art can be problematic given that the audience/community generally does not have any specialist knowledge of contemporary art. The location of public artworks also means that they have a long term presence for the audience and this is particularly the case when the location is in/on a building, which serves as a workplace and as a location for others to visit or use on a regular basis.

There is a sense in which all artworks rely on the audience participating in context and for some artworks, such as found objects the artist relies on the audience visiting the gallery to validate the object as art. For something to be classified as art it simply needs to be accepted as such. Historically, the artist invested the object with meaning through its creation, now the audience can invest meaning through the acceptance of something as art. However, this assertion usually occurs in the gallery where both artist and audience are aware of the “openness” of art and where the viewer goes to actively participate, unlike public art where the work comes to the viewer often as part of their everyday experience.
A second consideration for public art is the relationship to the architecture/context of the building or site and by inference the relationship to the architect. This is especially the case for new buildings/projects, where the artwork is planned during the design process and there is an opportunity for possible integration with the architecture. Because we are conscious of architecture as design there is an expectation of consultation with the client and an artist will often interact with an already established reference group as part of the concept and design development for artworks.

There are a range of possibilities for the relationship between art and architecture, from discreet artworks with no particular relationship to the building or context through to the complete involvement of an artist in the design process. The potential for an overlap between art and architecture is often dependent on factors such as budget, the willingness of the client and the openness of the architect to engage with an artist.

The third area of concern for an artist involved with public art relates to material considerations such as; budget, health and safety, maintenance, access and the construction schedule. Any proposed artwork needs to be achievable and will involve collaboration to facilitate fabrication and installation. This aspect of a project is likely to resemble a design process and is perhaps the least compatible with the traditional concept of the autonomous, creative artist.

Figure 1: The Artist Designs and Manages a Process to Create an Outcome Incorporating Overlapping Interests

The design context of the architectural and material considerations introduces a need/opportunity for a consultative approach by artists engaged in public art and invites the participation of other stakeholders in the project. In the case of the three projects being discussed in this paper; Kelvin Grove State Junior School, Mountain Creek State High School and Nundah Community Health Centre the approach involved adapting the principles of User Centered
Design\(^1\) to public art projects as a means of building a sense of community around the creation
and realization of the artworks based specifically on user and context.

**Kelvin Grove State College, Junior School** is one of the older schools in Brisbane, Queensland with approximately 250 students from age four to ten. In 2005 the school decided
to erect a gateway to celebrate its 130th anniversary and the opening of a new preschool building. The site for the gateway was near the already constructed preschool and adjacent
the existing playground. Two existing gateways marked more serious events in the school’s
history; one commemorates students who died in the First World War and the other an an-
niversary in 1930.

Initial discussion with the school principal and the art department centered on developing
an educational component for the children as the project was organized through an artist-in-
residence program. The school was particularly interested in my experience with digital
art/fabrication and how older children might learn about the interface between art and tech-
nology. These early discussions did not consider the children’s involvement in producing
or contributing to the artwork but a number of factors led me to consider this as an option;

1. On initial sketches and concept designs I found it difficult to create an aesthetic reflective
of children and felt I needed to “unlearn” my approach to formal aspects of the design
such as colour. In short, I found it impossible to “fake” an aesthetic that reflected art-
works produced by children.
2. The educational component would facilitate contact with each class and I felt this would
be more meaningful for students if the class content related to the actual artwork.
3. Having the children’s artwork included in the gateway would create a sense of com-
munity/ownership among students, parents and staff.
4. The children’s artwork would better reflect the school to the public and create a sense
of history by providing a “snapshot” of the children’s work at the time.

The school was receptive to including work by children on a gateway on the provision that
each student had an opportunity to contribute and that we did not name the students whose
work was chosen. This approach allowed the younger children in particular to feel they had
contributed. My initial trepidation revolved around the risk that working with young children
might not produce suitable material and that I was committing to an unwieldy process over
which I had no control. Trusting the process was an important step in developing an inclusive
project and necessitated an adjustment from my usual independence of the artist.


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Conceiving of a framework for interaction with the students involved developing a concept for the finished artwork that was achievable in terms of budget, technical management and the physical achievement of student’s contributions. The concept also needed to facilitate computer use by older children and drawings by the younger ones. Digital technologies provided an opportunity to involve the children in the project in that their drawings, whether on computer or paper could be translated into a file format that facilitated the cutting of material using CNC (computer-numeric-control) technology. In this sense conceiving of a framework involved working backwards from a perceived outcome open enough to incorporate student’s work.

After discussion with staff at the school it was agreed that each child would be asked to draw a figure (self-portrait) representing themselves. This concept was explained to the children visually and the basic form for the gate was designed to accommodate a range of figures. This approach allowed us to reflect something of the children’s creativity and self-image and to allow a large number of children to make a contribution. Fixing the form of the gate also facilitated production planning in that we could proceed with manufacture while the children were working on their figures.
Over two hundred children contributed images, which reflected the full range of development/ability for four to ten year olds. Many children depicted themselves involved in an activity such as sport or music and I chose images that were expressive and could be translated (cut) in aluminum for inclusion.
Figure 5: Student Drawing (Year 4), Vector Image and Image on Gate

Figure 6: Student Drawing (Preparatory School), Vector Image and Image on Gate
Figure 7: Student Inspection!
The school community was happy with the project and outcome and it was well received by parents. Comments included:

“I think these are great. I like the idea that it is a modern, up-to-date influence in our school which is old.”

“It is fantastic having the capacity to include all students in the process...”

Involving students and using the school newsletter to communicate with parents helped create a sense of community around the project and resulted in an outcome that had meaning for the school.

Mountain Creek State High School, Mooloolaba, Queensland built a new performing art centre in 2005 and the project presented an opportunity to develop an artist’s residency focused on creating artwork for the building, which was already completed when the project began.

Through discussion with the school it was agreed that twelve senior art students, ages sixteen and seventeen would be involved with the project and that there would be a significant education component involving art and technology. It was also agreed that students would develop the format and content of the mural as part of the process, which meant the outcome was open and my role was more as a facilitator rather than creator of the work. However, the project also needed a direction and we agreed that the production of the work would involve CNC processes to translate the computer files into material format.

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We arranged with the University of the Sunshine Coast for students to access a computer lab with vector-based software for one three-hour workshop every week for a semester (14 weeks). Having students leave the school environment was important as they needed to relate to the project as something more than homework. Students also needed to “own” the project and therefore go beyond the usual context of feeling they were required to satisfy the teacher’s requirements. Teachers were also somewhat nervous about this change in relationship and how it might affect the outcome and particularly the content of the mural. To quote the final report:\footnote{See: http://www.learningplace.com.au/deliver/content.asp?pid=28614}:

"As teachers, we found it challenging to allow students so much control over the project...."

Much of the early part of the project involved students learning to use software creatively and discussions at this stage focused on how to develop content that would allow each student to participate equally. I felt we struggled a little in allowing students the latitude needed for them to generate the work themselves and that the students were also unsure about this aspect of the process. Finding an appropriate level of intervention in relation to the idea development and the content of student’s work was problematic. There were weeks when we appeared not to be making progress and making an “executive” decision was tempting. As one student stated;
“The project required many students from diverse backgrounds to work together. This seemed impossible at the start however through teamwork and discussions about the creative process we all had a very successful experience”

While the workshops were in progress I was also exploring production options and this led to a collaboration with a local manufacturer that use a CNC hot wire technology to cut foam, which was then coated in polyurethane before painting. The manufacturer was willing to allow students to visit and to undertake painting of the finished design at the factory. This industry connection also helped move students from “homework” mode and created a focus for the project.

Figure 10: Individual Letters were CNC Cut in Foam Using a Hot-wire System and then Coated with Polyurethane (The Yellow Colour) before Painting by Students

An additional challenge was a reluctance of students to critically engage with each other’s work and at times I felt we were reaching a consensus around work that was well within their comfort zone. As one student stated;

“I found it challenging to try to consider everyone’s ideas in the creative design process but learnt to voice my opinion and justify my ideas.”

Students eventually agreed that the diversity of the group, which included students from Malaysia and Mexico would best be reflected if each student made an individual contribution around an agreed theme; their experience of the school. Again, teachers were somewhat nervous about this but we agreed that the point of the project was to facilitate the student’s expression. A crucial element was the decision by students to express their words in the format of a mathematical equation as this introduced an element of humor but also allowed the disparate works to be unified.
Nundah Community Health Centre in suburban Brisbane is a Queensland Health facility opened in 2008. Although the form of the building had largely been decided before the public art was developed, the interior of the building was still in design development. The architects, in conjunction with the client and the building reference group had identified the main entry glazing as a potential location for art before my involvement but a theme had not...
been discussed. However, the client requested that the artworks should relate to the local community and “welcome” people to the institutional context of the building.

The inclusion of a playground in the building design provided the catalyst for my initial concept development as did the idea that we usually associate flowers with health/hospitals and that they also mark significant milestones in people’s lives; weddings, funerals, etc. Studies have also shown that images relating to landscape and nature\(^4\) have the strongest appeal in a health environment and are well received by hospital patients.

![Figure 13: Styles for Representing Flora; Line art, Child’s Drawing and 3d Computer Model](image)

An additional consideration at Nundah was the large number of indigenous Australians in the local community and the building’s location near Boondal Wetlands Nature Reserve and its significance to local Aboriginal people. Queensland Health arranged for me to meet with their Coordinator of Indigenous Health who helped me understand something of the local Aboriginal culture and history.

Although my initial images appeared generic it was apparent that my own cultural preference was an influence and that the images were suggestive of European flora. There was therefore an implied but unintended cultural reference in the works and it was suggested that native Australian flora would be more appropriate and more welcoming to the local community.

The playground provided an opportunity to include works by children and my previous experience at Kelvin Grove had taught me that trying to personally replicate the aesthetic of children’s work led to images that were awkward and lacked the very qualities that created the aesthetic. A local school kindly agreed to provide images, which I used as the basis for developing appropriate works. However, I did not want to use a child-like aesthetic throughout the building as the playground was at the rear entry, so I decided to develop the complexity of the work as the visitor moved in to the building. In this sense the depiction
of the flora moved from simple line drawings depicting the classification of Australian flora
to children’s representation and then to 3D modeled and computer-generated images.

The computer-modelled flora evolved from discussions with the Coordinator of Indigenous
Health at Queensland Health, through research and visits to ‘indigenous’ gardens and visits
to Boondal Wetlands. Although the computer component proved a challenge it was possibly
the component of the project I enjoyed the most and particularly learning about the use of
native flora in traditional medicine and the awareness this creates of our connection with
nature. The flowers used in the finished internal works were;

Swamp Orchid\(^5\) (*Phaius Australis*) an endangered species, which grows at the edges of
swamps around Moreton Bay adjacent to Boondal Wetlands.

River Mangrove\(^6\) (*Aegiceras Corniculatum*) the inner bark was used to treat stingray and
stonefish stings, the seeds were eaten and the wood used to make shields.

Purslane\(^7\) (*Portulaca Oleracea*) the seeds are highly nutritious and were eaten by Abori-
ginal people.

Figure 16: Rear Reception Artwork. The Use of Pattern Evokes a Domestic Interior

\(^6\) ___p42
\(^7\) ___p39
A practical consideration for the project was safety and hygiene and the in-glass image technology allowed for easy cleaning and low maintenance. The installation of the works also needed to fit with the construction schedule and the inevitable delays due to weather,
etc. As such the artworks were designed to fit over the construction so that the builder could proceed with as little disruption as possible.

Figure 19: Main Entry Glazing – External View at Night. The Images are Printed on the Interlayer between the Laminated Glass Sheets

As part of the process, six months after the building opened I invited feedback via e-mail from staff, which was largely positive. Comments included:

“Inviting, dynamic and colourful. Wonderful work. Thank you for making my work place more exciting.”

“My colleagues and I love the art work at Nundah. It is subtle, welcoming and very pleasing to the eye. It creates a lovely ambiance and calm environment for staff and clients.”

In Conclusion, the use of public art in the contexts described can have a number of positive effects, notwithstanding that there will be people who feel the time and resources could be better spent on what might be considered more practical outcomes; this debate being particularly acute in the health care environment. However, psychology is often overlooked when discussing “practical” outcomes and indeed intangibles are an essential component of human interaction with each other and the environment. While I have argued that adopting a design focused approach to developing a process and managing the practical components of a project is essential for a successful outcome, art has an additional quality that can help to humanise and give meaning to an institution and workplace. By adopting an inclusive process to public
art it is possible to enrich the user’s experience of a building and to create a sense of meaning and belonging. There were also important educational outcomes for the children who participated and who learned to creatively use computer software – possibly the subject of another paper.

Finally, projects such as these happen because we value the openness of art. The client, architect, school principal and civil servant could each just as easily not make the effort as there are risks in entering into an art project. It is therefore important for the artist to ensure that the process is enjoyable and enriching for those involved. Although the outcome remains visible we should also value the process as a means of creating community through participation.

References

About the Author
Kevin Todd
Kevin Todd has wide-ranging experience with exhibition, public art and residencies/projects having worked in Australia, Asia, the UK, Ireland and the USA. His work has been recognised through grants from the New Media Arts Board of the Australia Council; Arts Tasmania; Arts Queensland; the Australian Network for Art and Technology; the Australian High Commission, Singapore; the Arts Council of England and The Asialink Centre at the University of Melbourne. The focus of his public art has been in developing site and context specific solutions within the parameters of project brief and budget and he has worked as both a consultant and artist on large-scale projects such as a sport stadium; technical college; hospital and community health centre. He has also worked on art projects with the Australian Antarctic Division; the Australian Museum, Sydney; Launceston General Hospital and the Australian Pulp and Paper Institute at Monash University, Melbourne. Kevin was a visiting professor at the State University of New York, Cortland (2001/02) and a visiting scholar at New York University (2008). More information on his work is available at; www.toddartist.com.
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