20th Century Heritage  :  Our Recent Cultural Legacy
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# The City of bits ….. and pieces
## Abstract: Richard Brecknock

This paper will take a journey through the streets, squares and parklands of Australian cities to experience the diversity, quality and quantity of the public art that constitutes part of our recent cultural legacy. It will provide an overview of public art activity and for developing a framework for analysis and review.

Issues relating to public art's role as a cultural marker of relevance to the contemporary and historic urban landscape will be explored. Among the questions the paper will address are; how will city governments and citizens of the future regard the legacy of 20th Century public art?  Will public art that has so often been contentious at the time of its inception be seen as culturally relevant and to be revered or as leftover detritus to be replaced by a new generation of contemporary artists?  Who's to say what stays and what goes and are decisions to be based on artistic standards only or on broader cultural criteria?  Will future city governments be prepared or wish to commit the funds required to adequately maintain and conserve the large number of 20th Century public art objects that were so eagerly commissioned by their predecessors.

The paper will consider current policy and attitudes relating to the planning of public art programmes especially with regard to future management and preservation of "permanent" artworks.  Including an exploration of policy options available to today's city and state governments to provide for the 20th century public art legacy.

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# The city of bits ….. and pieces

Richard Brecknock, MA Cultural & Media Policy, Griffith University

## Introduction

The 20th Century has been a dynamic and evolutionary period in the practice of what has become known as Public Art. Indeed the practice has become a major area of the arts in its own right. As such it has become the focus of academic research, critical analysis and public debate. Much has been written and discussed over the last few years, Miles 1989,1997, Lacy 1995 and Kramer 1994, Finkelpearl 2000 about public art. They looked at critical assessment of individual pieces of work and public art making as a genre or indeed as a 'new genre', Lacy 1995. It is noticeable that the debate has taken place in an environment where there is a lack of definition as to what exactly is meant by public art. Although there have been attempts at clarifying terminology, Brecknock 1992, the term public art, as Finkelpearl 2000 reminds us, has entered common usage. Unfortunately the term has become all encompassing and therefore inclusive of significant works of art in public spaces, community art projects and artist and craftspeople being engaged to develop functional items of street furniture or decorative elements of buildings. Indeed the area seems to be riddled with concepts and terminology that are often quite contradictory.

## Sorting the bits and pieces:

In order that there can be meaningful review, assessment and debate it is important to consider the bits and pieces that go to make up the whole that is public art. In an effort to gain an overall perspective it is necessary to consider public art activity from three separate points of view. The first being exploration of the scope of practice from unambiguous fine art objects through to process focused projects involving local communities. The second being the issues associated with the diversity of public space considerations and finally, establishment of a framework for understanding the working relationship between artist and other design practitioners.

Before proposing the analytical framework it is important to state that I believe it is vital that our public spaces and buildings are enriched with culturally relevant and visually pleasing artworks. The critical consideration in undertaking new work is to be very clear as to the desired outcomes and select an appropriate artwork approach to achieve that aim. For the critic it is equally important that an effort is made to put work to be reviewed into its context and review accordingly. Just as it is necessary when reviewing works of a earlier century to have an understanding of the cultural traditions of the times it is necessary to research and understand the many different contemporary influences on artworks found in public spaces around the world.

## Framework context

In the early nineteenth century, as Gombrich 1951 reminds us, artists started to focus on individual freedom and expression and to shake off the traditions of the guilds and 'shock

the burghers'. Previously the artist's role of providing the church, state and ruling classes with the artistic refinements befitting a civilised society was clearly understood. By the beginnings of the twentieth century artists had completely thrown off the traditions of the past and as we know began a dynamic period of exploration and change. Due to this break with tradition it has been necessary to rediscover and reframe the work of art in public spaces and redefine the interaction of artist and the public. Admittedly any attempt to categorise twentieth century art will inevitably lead to many grey areas and ambiguities. The notion of public art is also extremely value laden with many perceived hierarchies affecting the viewer's judgement. This is to be expected but does not, I believe, prevent the development of a robust analytical framework.

**Analytical framework**

Much of our thinking about art in public places has to be conditioned on a series of sliding scales, the first of these scales relates to the intent of art making. [see Fig 1] At one end of the scale the intent can be to generate a high level of public involvement in the conception and creation of the artwork itself. Such approaches have become known as community art, a mode of practice where the artist subjugates individual expression in order to draw others into the art making process and to generate a high degree of community ownership and pride in the resulting artwork. At the other extreme is the stand alone art object created by an individual and totally uncompromising with regard to its siting in public. It is a fact that between these two extremes there are many diverse modes of practice that help to create culturally rich public environments.

As we move along the scale from the true community art project we can position the creation of street furniture and other functional objects by artists who are responding to the community's desires and aspirations while being the individual creator of the objects. Towards the other end of our scale the site-specific artwork is a unique blend of individual expression informed by an understanding of site and society. I believe that one of the crucial considerations is not to allow value judgements to get in the way of validating all these variants and acknowledging their role in the total public art sector. This is not to say that one does not apply aesthetic judgement to work but it must be done with an understanding of the intent of the work.

Perhaps two of the most debated concepts of recent times are integration and collaboration. They are often used interchangeably whereas they have quite different meanings. An artwork becomes integrated as the result of a process: the process of integration, while collaboration is a coming together of two or more individuals to work towards a common goal.

I have previously presented, Brecknock 1996, what I refer to as the concept of convergent practice [Fig 2]. This is a graphic representation of the potential working relationships between artists and other design professionals , such as architects. The chart shows the converging relationships starting with works created in total isolation from each other. For example a sculpture created for a building that already exists or the purchase of an artwork that already exists. At the other extreme, total collaboration is where there is no way of differentiating between the input of either discipline.

Therefore critique of public artwork must first consider the intent behind the work. Was it intended to represent itself as an integrated artwork? If so it should not be reviewed with the same criteria as might be applied to a stand-alone work. In Adelaide these examples could be illustrated by contrasting the Crafers to Adelaide Gateway walls with the Victor Meertens sculptures in front of the Riverside Building on North Terrace. Whilst the Meertens work could be sited in the gallery or in front of any number of buildings, the gateway walls by artists Neil Cranney and Marijana Tadic and the project architects is an example of an integrated art outcome restricted to its setting that must be read in relation to the total intersection and driving experience.

**Cultural values**
Public artworks during the early stages of the century were relatively simplistic in their approach. The artists who were responding to the new notions of art as an independent discipline were no longer tied to the apron strings of the architects, public or private patrons. Through to the 1970's Australian artists were predominately focused on international trends and were often striving for modernist principles generated by London or New York.

During the second half of the $20^{th}$ Century public space has been the stage for an ongoing conflict between the notions of fine art and concepts of community cultural development and a range of practices between. While commentators such as Greenberg 1967 argued for artists to stand outside the demands of working with a site and addressing any of the constraints of public space regulations others such as Lacey 1995 put the case for artists entering into a new dialogue with the public and public space.

During the 1980-90's the community cultural development approach to public art had strong backing from the Australia Council through its grant giving to community groups and Local Government to enable artists to work with local communities on culturally significant projects. The significance of this focus was also reflected in the number of publications on the artist's role in place making and community building such as *Places not Spaces* edited by Winikoff 1995.

Running parallel with the growth of community cultural development activity, visual artists working in public were reacting against the "Plonk Art" approach of siting large scale stand alone sculptures in front of buildings. This repositioning focused on the concept of "Site Specific Art" that required the artist seeking a deeper understanding of the site, history and local culture and conceiving an artwork that reflected relevant cultural values or developed a narrative around local stories. The outcome being a work that could only be read in the context of the site, with the result that relocation or changing the surrounding environment would significantly compromise the artistic intent of the work.

The other growth area of public art has been the involvement of artists creating streetscape and functional urban elements such as street furniture. Many of the artists involved in these projects had a background in the crafts and applied arts.

Added to the complexity of the multiple art making perspectives there is the issue of the reasoning behind the commissioning of public art works by the public or private entity. Artwork can be commissioned for many reasons; as a statement of power, to commemorate a significant event or person, to enliven a public place or as signifier of the cultural elite. Is it surprising then that as Senie et al [1992] reminds us, 'public art and controversy seem joined at birth'?

**Cultural legacy**

As my area of expertise relates to the modernist and contemporary art periods I intend to focus on the cultural legacy from the post war period starting from 1950 to today. When we look at the legacy of permanent artworks in Australia's public spaces we can clearly see the evidence of the swinging pendulum associated with the identified modes of practice. The works of the fifties represent the first abstract public art works that are self contained artworks located, at times quite sensitively, in front of the first modernist buildings to appear in our cities. For example the combination of Melbourne's ICI Building and the Gerald Lewers fountain of 1958 or Adelaide's David Jones building and Lyndon Dadswell's wall mounted sculpture, Progress. As can be seen from publications reviewing this era, Parr 1961, Scarlet 1980, Hedger 1995, during the 1950-70's a number of artists such as Tom Bass, Margel Hinder, Lenton Parr, Norma Redpath, Lyndon Dadswell and Frank Lumb were extremely active producing modern art for architectural commissions all over Australia. In some instances these early modernist works have outlived their host buildings. For example the Tom Bass that once adorned the AMP building in King William Street in Adelaide has been unpinned and re pinned to the wall in Stock Exchange Place. Over the last couple of years there has also been debate over the pros and cons of moving the David Jones Dadswell which I am pleased to say is still in situ.

As we move through the 1970-80's we see a continuation of the existing tradition of placing stand alone artwork in front of, or in, the foyers of buildings. This trend was greatly heightened by the property boom of the 1980's when corporations competed with each other to build bigger and better. Part of the one-up-man-ship included commissioning major artworks, especially works by internationally recognised artists such as Clement Meadmore and prolific Australian artists such as Akio Makigawa. Indeed almost all the Australian capital cities can boast at least one Makigawa.

It is however during the late1980's and early 1990's that we start to see the focus shift to more site specific works by Australian artists such as Richard Goodwin, Hossein Valamanesh and Janet Laurence. With these works the emphasis was on a strong response to place and recognising and celebrating past and current cultural life.

Running parallel to these artform practices was the alternative agenda of community involvement that starts to impact on the notion of public art and extends the concept to such a degree that the terminology becomes confused. When considering the legacy of community art it is important to keep in mind that in many cases the process is as important as the resulting artwork. From this period there are many examples of great community building projects such as those at Knox and Box Hill in Victoria, Wanneroo and Gosnells in Western Australia, Cabramatta and Marrickville in New South Wales and the South

Australian examples of Prospect and Port Pirie. Most of this work was intended to be relevant to, valued by and owned by the community of the time rather than to be of lasting value in perpetuity.

Perhaps the area that has seen the greatest growth from the 1990's to today has been the involvement of artists as designers and makers of functional or decorative elements for streetscape improvement projects. Much of this work has its foundations in the early community development ethic when projects such as the much published Joondalup street furniture provided a model for councils with limited funds to be seen to make a mark through the installation of unique street elements. The largest exponent of this genre would have to be the Brisbane City Council, which through the Suburban Centres Improvement Scheme [SCIP] has made an ongoing commitment to employing artists on all their projects aimed at placemaking and economic development.

What then has the physical legacy amounted to across Australia? If we take the cities of Adelaide, Melbourne, Sydney and Brisbane as case studies we can see a different focus of each of the three main areas of public art practice. The focus has often been due to the agenda of an individual or the decision making group within the state or local government of the day. As has been stated, the dominant focus of the Brisbane City Council has been heavily weighted in favour of works with a community focus and very little commissioning of stand-alone art in public places. Melbourne on the other hand over the last ten years or so, has been commissioning both functional integrated artwork and a significant collection of sculptural works as can be seen on Swanston Walk or South Bank. Until recently little in the way of publicly commissioned art has graced the streets and parks of Sydney with public art being predominately initiated by private sector developers. More recently however, perhaps heightened by the need to ready the city for the Olympics, Sydney City Council has developed the Sydney Sculpture Walk as a civic collection in public space within the city centre and in the parks on the harbour foreshore. In Adelaide it is necessary to take into account the works commissioned by the State Government and those for which the Council has been responsible. The major commissions of stand alone sculptural works have been those involving the State through the ASER agreement that led to the commissioning of some ten sculptures in the restricted area around the Hyatt Hotel. The Adelaide City Council's focus has predominately taken the alternative approach of involving artists in placemaking projects.

**Assessing the legacy**
In order to review and reach conclusions regarding the vast legacy of bits and pieces of art scattering our urban environment it is important to go back to the analytical framework and ensure that the various artwork practices are considered in their context of time and intent.

There is plenty of evidence to suggest that the artworks that are likely to resist the effects of time and changing community attitudes are the robust sculptural objects. The effects of weathering and abuse are taking a heavy toll on many community art projects that due to budget constraints were created with materials of limited life span. An interesting dilemma can therefore arise with regard to conservation of works that might be of great pride to a local community but which however cannot realistically be conserved due to the type of

material or the likely cost.  Should the community allow the works to stay and deteriorate or should they remove the work and start again?  With the large number of integrated artworks that have resulted from placemaking streetscape projects there is the issue of time span and future refurbishment.  In most cases these artworks have resulted for a desire to redo and modernise run down street environments as part of government's cycle of infrastructure replacement.  They often have a life cycle of around ten to twenty years.  Therefore is there any reason to consider integrated art as sacrosanct or as just another bit of street furniture to be changed when new fashions, public uses or political pressures demand makeovers?  As the unit cost and relative monetary value of individual integrated artworks might be minimal it is likely that unless there is a very high level of community "ownership" these works are likely to be disposable.  Once again it is unlikely that significant funds will be made available for conservation work on streetscape elements.

It is likely that the test of time will also be the main threat to Site Specific artwork that will in most cases have been built to last.  Rather than the effects of weathering the problem will be the constantly changing nature of urban environments.  Our cities are in flux, with changes in building stock and pedestrian environments meaning that few spaces are left untouched forever.  How then do we address the retention of an artwork wedded to that place if all around it changes?  Would it not be preferable to destroy the work rather than to leave it out of context or to try and find a new compromise location?  Once again the question of funding must be considered, especially in relation to the cost of relocation, as it might be as expensive to move an existing twenty year old work as to commission a contemporary artist to create a new work for the location.

The stand-alone artwork will clearly be the winner in the time stakes from the perspective of perceived monetary value and from the movable collection approach.  Works that are sensitive to their environment but not totally reliant on place present an ability to be moved if required to another location of significance.  The greater monetary value is also more likely to ensure that public owners will commit funds to the ongoing maintenance and required conservation work in order to ensure the continuing value of the asset.

To some degree all three areas of activity are reliant upon the artwork being perceived as being of cultural value to the community.  No politician will be prepared to commit public funds to the retention of artwork universally disliked by the public, even if the experts deem it to be of artistic value. Public art is often contentious at the time of commissioning however it seems that over time the public often simply accepts artwork as a given.  It is also likely that successive governments will perceive public artworks as evidence of previous political eras that they may or may not wish to perpetuate.  We are perhaps unlikely to see the likes of those momentous images from Eastern Europe of Stalinist sculptures being dragged to the ground by the people during the Soviet block collapse in the 1980's.

**Planning for the future**
In 2000 Adelaide City Council undertook a significant study of existing monuments and artworks and policy development to address the commissioning of future artworks.  These two initiatives have signalled the City's commitment to public art and recognises the role that the arts play in developing city viability and as a signifier of long term cultural life.  The

*"Watch this Place: Public Art Policy 2001-2005"*, prepared by the writer, addresses Council's role in supporting and nurturing diverse public art practice.  In developing the policy I have addressed the diversity of artwork by including three artwork categories.  Firstly the 'Outdoor Gallery', secondly 'Integrated Art' and finally "Community Art'.  The notion of the Outdoor Gallery is that of building a collection of significant art pieces sited in the public realm, artworks in their own right as individual expressions by artists that sit well within publicly accessible spaces.  This category is very much a response to artists concerns that the pressures of integration and placemaking are increasingly compromising their artwork.  This is not to say that the Outdoor Gallery works will not contribute to placemaking, obviously they will, but on their own terms.  It is also within this category that artists will respond by creating site specific works.  The focus however of the Integrated Artworks is to be specifically linked to infrastructure projects.  Artists will be engaged to create artworks in collaboration with the urban design teams and these works are likely to include functional elements and streetscape details such as paving designs.

Community Art projects are also recognised as having an important and valid role to play as part of the City's total public art program.  Funding for the program is to come from a percent for art policy based on a pooling of 1.3% of the annual capital works budget.  In addition to the public art policy Council has undertaken a Total Asset Management Plan [TAMP] for the city's monuments and artworks.  The resulting TAMP will provide an ongoing assessment and management process with separate funding from the percent for art budget.

The other governments that have made significant changes in their approach to public art have been in Queensland, where both state and local councils have become active in policy making.  The Queensland Government has introduced the Art Built-in Policy that requires all government construction projects to commit 2% of the total value of the project to commissioning artwork. Although the policy has only been in place for twelve months, it is already adding significant numbers of artworks to government agencies' asset registers. One project, the Roma Street Parkland, resulted in the Department of Public Works being responsible for commissioning sixteen artworks.  It has been suggested that the policy will in time mean that up to $16million will be spent on artwork per year.  Part of the Art Built-in policy called for the development of an asset management plan. While potential maintenance strategies are currently being reviewed the big unanswered question is how will the various government agencies meet the challenge of maintaining this substantial and ever growing art collection?

Brisbane City Council on the other hand has a more integrated approach to involving artists, especially through its Suburban Centres Improvement Plan projects where artists form a major part of urban renewals teams.  On its major civic projects such as the upgrade of Queen Street Mall, Council has been allocating sufficient funds to commission quality works. The city has a policy that it has recently reviewed and though rather narrow in its focus continues to provide public art projects with adequate funds.  Like Brisbane City Council, other Queensland Councils are active in preparing public art policies.  This level of policy activity is also evident in Victoria where a number of metropolitan and regional councils have over the last couple of years prepared public art policies.  This has been a clear

demonstration of a commitment to public art by the public sector and a desire to ensure that there is a planned and managed process underpinning this practice.

The latter part of the 20th Century has therefore seen both a development of three equally important areas of art practice in the public realm and the responding involvement of governments being formalised through policy and implementation strategies. The result therefore of all these bits and pieces of public art is diversity. Represented as diversity of practice and outcomes for a wide range of public environments, liked by some, hated by others or perhaps tolerated by many. It is therefore perhaps appropriate to suggest that the real legacy of public art is to always be a 'contested notion'. It will continue to be debated and argued over by those with a specific art practice focus while the general public passes by shaking their heads and saying "I don't know anything about art but I know what I like".
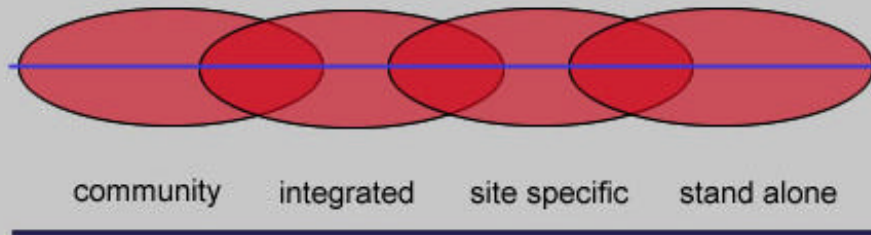
**Fig 1**

MODES OF PRACTICE

community   integrated   site specific   stand alone



**Fig 2**

CONVERGENT PRACTICE

artist

architect
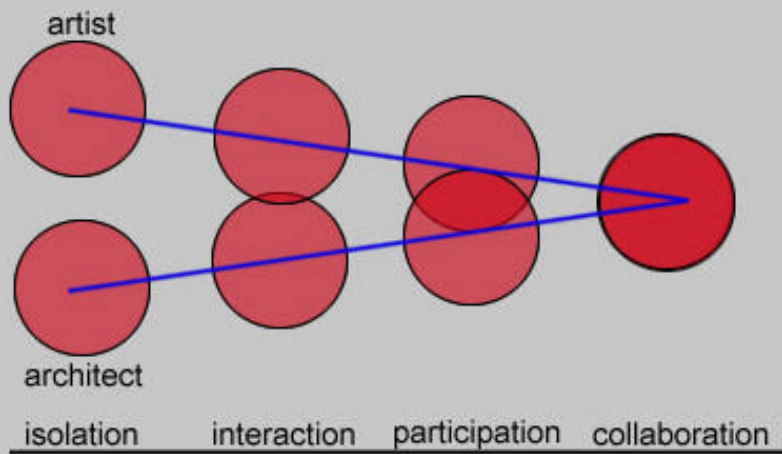
isolation   interaction   participation   collaboration

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