Public Art Rave: Placemaking and Beyond

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Place-making is a term that came out of the 1970s. It emerged out of the community movements and community-driven imperatives and aspirations of this period. But it's a term that stood the test of time and has ongoing validity and relevance. The difference between a space and place is like the difference between a house and a home. It's that simple and it's that tricky.

Having separated parents, my son goes to his dad's place every other weekend since he was small. And yet it wasn't until he was around 12 years old that he said he could call his dad's house 'home'. It took him that long to establish a sense of ownership and belonging and that was with the loving support of family and the trappings of privacy. How much harder then is it to establish a sense of belonging and ownership over the common urban spaces of our cities and suburbs? For locals, for visitors, for newly arrived migrants, for the poor, for the elderly, and so on?

The reason the term placemaking has ongoing value and resonance is precisely because there is no single solution or even set of solutions for achieving a successful outcome. Although, in my experience, 'the coffee shop' is often touted as the ultimate solution! Place is actually a concept. How any one site might become a place could involve any number of initiatives, and what might work for one site may actually cause another to fail. It's not placemaking as an ethos we need to focus on, it's making different places and making places differently that is the real challenge.

And what has this to do with art practice and with public art? Well like placemaking, a strong strand of public art practice came out of the 1970s with a community-based approach. With its anti-elitist and anti-institutional stance, and a focus on grass-roots process over product, much of this work suffered from a lack of quality and compromised outcomes. Even more detrimental, 'community art' developed a particular aesthetic and even content – an art version of the 'warm and fuzzy' which is still around today. Though this work claim/ed the moral high ground in terms of placemaking and community, it actually catered to a narrow margin of both arts practice and 'community'.

Art has to be practice-driven, ideas-driven. Take, for example the practice of graffiti. Thanks to the recent movement of stencilling, the cultures of gaming, anime and even texting via mobile phone, graffiti has launched itself into a new era. Melbourne's laneways are famous the world over as practitioners forge competitive reputations, carry on public debate and create new languages of style in this ephemeral and often illegal artform (1). In this case graffiti can be profoundly social, not anti-social, and truly enlivening of public spaces – that qualifies as placemaking.

Or, to go to the other end of the spectrum, take Andy Goldsworthy's *Angel of the North* (2). This iconic landmark work has become a symbol for England's North-East, and the experience of industrial decline and the region's efforts at socio-economic revitalisation. While this work is perhaps to some a giant 'piece of plonk', for me it is placemaking on a grand scale – engendering a deep sense of belonging and ownership for a whole region.

If I dare to claim both these extremes in the name of placemaking, should I not then conclude that the term placemaking is out-moded? Well no, because what I think is meaningful in the term and particularly for arts practice, is its implementation as a conceptual approach. Placemaking, for me, means a people-centred approach.
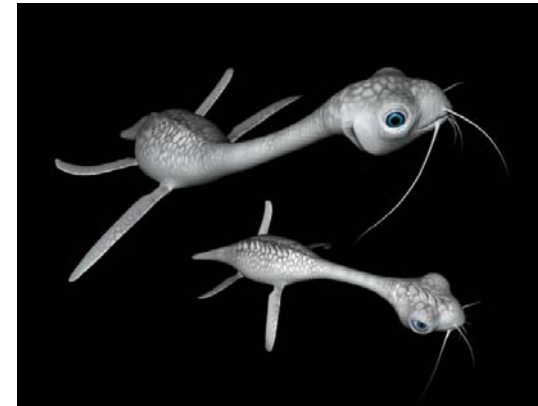

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This is not the same as 'warm and fuzzy' or even the same as 'community-based' which is always difficult to define. Placemaking is thinking, and hopefully thinking creatively, about the public use and function of spaces. And of course, there are many layers of use and function involved in any one space – different times and seasons, different groups of people, different activities and purposes.

For art practice this is profoundly different to the making of work for gallery exhibition and/or private sale. It is a complex challenge, but one which holds great rewards if successful. A people-centred approach, an experiential approach to space and place also provides a robust platform for interdisciplinary dialogue.

Craig Walsh's artwork, *Classification Pending* (3), commissioned by Ipswich City Council for their River Heart Parklands is an outstanding example of the role public art can play in placemaking. The commission was managed by Brecknock Consulting. One of the key objectives for the River Heart Parklands project was to connect the city with its river. This river, heavily poisoned by coal mining and other past industries, was separated by a steep embankment. The river's edge was an uninviting place and at times unsafe space. The parklands project, design by EDAW/AECOM, introduced terraced walkways, gathering spaces, seating and bbq areas, boardwalks and lighting along the embankment. Walsh's artwork consists of a series of data projectors, attached to the boardwalk structure and trained onto the river's surface. The projected images are of a computer animated water creature, a type of Loch Ness monster if you will, and the installation gives the illusion that the creature is swimming up from the deep. For the first few months only one creature was visible, then new video depicted a second creature – as though it had found a mate. And the third chapter of the artwork features, you guessed it, a baby. The artwork plays a central role in bringing people down to enjoy the river bank of an evening, enlivening this space and its local communities – a placemaking success.

Art can play a central role in placemaking. Rather than being isolated elements of symbolic content, artworks can, in creative dialogue with built and landscape design help to express and reflect a bigger, evolving story of place. With the challenges of environmental sustainability, urban densification, climate change and new technologies, artworks' relationship to public space is also set to deepen and evolve.

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