

Public Art Rave: Public Art in Brisbane & South-East Qld - a subtropical aesthetic?

Beth Jackson

Living in Brisbane over the past decade one could hardly fail to notice talk around the subtropical city. At the very least one can't help but see timber battening spreading like a rash across the suburbs. The term subtropical is being used by the built environment and design sectors and by government to capture a character of Brisbane – how the city has evolved and might continue to evolve in relation to its climate and geographical location. It's a fertile platform (pardon the pun), because it brings together environmental concerns, sustainability issues, heritage character, contemporary expression, aspirations and identity. Does it also fold public art into its catch-all net? As public art plays a vital role in placemaking, it is certainly worth considering whether the subtropical climate and environment of our region is being addressed and is worth being addressed by artists to communicate an abiding sense of place.

The Melbourne Street subtropical boulevard project 2002-03 was one of the early examples of a deliberate attempt at rethinking traditional urban design principles through a 'subtropical lens'. The Brisbane City Council design team chose to articulate the pedestrian environment through an informal series of planting and seating nodes along the street. These shady rest points also feature a series of integrated artworks by artists Sarah Rayner and Andrew Macdonald (1), exploring subtropical flora in a whimsical manner. The fake Latin text and hybrid sculptural forms, part clothing part plant, evoke a playful juncture between organic/built, work/leisure in an urban streetscape which is now far more walkable and liveable.

A more iconic sculptural work commissioned as part of the Melbourne Street subtropical boulevard project is Luke Roberts' *UFO* (2). Again a humorous and quirky approach resulted in this strange structure which features a lighting sequence and water misting. The alien craft invites people to stand beneath and ask to be beamed up. The sculpture also doubles as a shade structure and the water misting provides a cooling micro-climate.

What is interesting to me as a curator involved in this project are the ways in which the subtropical design objectives were translated by the artists into conceptual ideas. For me the notion of subtropical still remained largely at a palette-based approach but the artworks successfully provided a bridge between the functional streetscape and other imaginative dimensions.

More recently Council commissioned a *City Centre Public Art Master Plan* as a support document to the *City Centre Master Plan*. The *City Centre Public Art Master Plan* was conceived as a high level strategic approach to thinking about both conceptual and practical considerations, with the goal of encouraging artwork that would be of and for Brisbane. While subtropicality was not an explicit directive, our resultant thinking certainly finds a sympathetic resonance.

In developing a *City Centre Public Art Master Plan* for Brisbane Brecknock Consulting drew the conceptual focus from the notion of interstitial space. Taking David Malouf as a starting point, his writings described the interstitial spaces of the traditional Queensland house as core to identity formation in and of Brisbane.



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These are the 'half-way' spaces of the verandah, the sleep-out (semi-enclosed verandah), or under the house, which are neither inside nor outside the house but somewhere in-between. In-between and interstitial spaces may be said to characterise the lived, subtropical Brisbane environment: louvers which are neither windows nor walls but somehow both; the outdoor kitchen experience of the bar-b-que; the outdoor 'rooms' of giant fig-trees with their dense canopies filtering light and heat. Transposing Malouf's thinking as a metaphor, the CBD of Brisbane may be thought of as a series of rooms/houses and the open public spaces between as the interstitial verandahs and sleep-outs, patios and decks. Malouf enables this shift from a palette-based approach to a character-based approach.

Then upon further consideration we asserted that the attractiveness of Brisbane, its endearing and enduring qualities, are not so much in its built or even natural forms which are not nearly so iconic, memorable, dominant and imposing as many capital cities, but rather in the lifestyle which these built and natural forms engender and sponsor, its mild climate, subtropical vegetation, hills and a river which ripple their forms subtly and strongly through the urban and suburban fabrics. Brisbane can be seen and felt to be an accessible and inclusive city, growing its built and natural form expressions from ground level, rather than imposing structures from above. Permeable structures and interstitial spaces may well lie at the core of the lived Brisbane experience. This for me is starting to move beyond palette and character towards thinking about subtropicality as a conceptual approach.

As the experience of the Queensland house and the back yard becomes less common with urban densification, there is an increased need and opportunity for the public realm to function as interstitial spaces, spaces of lived environment which are neither inside nor out, public and private, informal and non-prescriptive in use. Urban public space is increasingly mixed-use and multi-purpose,

needing to cater to wide demographics and extended hours of access. Public art can function, at both macro and micro levels, as a permeable concept - an interstitial, in-between layer linking: public and private; work, home and play; past, present and future; day and night; winter and summer; virtual and real environments.

Brisbane's CBD is no longer simply a commercial and retail centre; it is likely to become Brisbane's most populated residential area. The rise of inner-city living generates new forms of community, new ways of home-making, recreation and work practices. There is a trend towards single bedroom apartments and as private space become more singular, public spaces increase in demand and complexity. Brisbane is faced with an opportunity and a challenge to develop a CBD environment which is at once high civic in character and openly domestic in feeling. Public art can really help to achieve this, introducing elements that are humorous, playful, culturally meaningful and also strategically placed and of high quality materials and design.

The 15 spheres of *Steam* by Donna Marcus (3) were installed as a public artwork in the new Brisbane Square, Queensland, in October 2006. Known for her sculptures, made from aluminum kitchenware from second-hand shops, Marcus uses recycled materials to bring memories of past uses into new contexts. The spheres are constructed from a die cast of a single vegetable steamer (7000 steamers were used in total!). *Steam* refers to the geodesic domes of 1940s architect and inventor, Buckminster Fuller and his popular maxim 'Doing the most with the least'. Several of the spheres incorporate a water-misting feature. This economical artwork for the people creates a provocative juncture between the urban and the domestic, the new and the old, organic and inorganic form and materials. At night they shine like giant lanterns.



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Artists Adrian Davis and Lubi Thomas have been making works which reflect and respond to the local environment and in their work it is possible to perceive an expression of the subtropical. *Drift* (4) 2006-07 consists of a series of sculptural elements which float on the surface of a lake situated in a housing development in the Gold Coast hinterland. Each work, made up of a fan of stainless steel fins, is anchored on a chain, enabling them to move and circle in response to the wind and waves. The works reflect sunlight and moonlight, merging themselves with the mirror-like form of the lake's surface. They express the preciousness of water and the lake as a circular magnetic centre for this suburban community which walk and play in the parklands at the lake's edge.

Another work by these artists entitled *Roost* (5) 2007-08 is also located at the Gold Coast, in the mouth of the Nerang River. The artwork is designed to function as a nesting site for an osprey. It comprises a central nesting platform with a series of smaller side platforms for food preparation – ospreys catch whole fish from coastal waters, bring them to the nest and tear them into pieces for feeding to their young. Ospreys nest in the same place for years at a time and so build up quite a mass of branches which are sculptural forms in their own right. One of these smaller platforms may also be used to locate a video-camera for webcasting the net in the future. The challenge for the artists was to create a form which is highly functional for the birds but, when not inhabited, also functions as an iconic sculpture. The beautiful interplay between animal and human structures and practices of habitation make an inspiring subject and hopefully the artwork promotes environmental awareness and community conservation practices.

One of the most significant aspects of taking a conceptual approach to the subtropical is the potential it affords in addressing issues of

sustainability and liveability in combination. There is no point in creating 5 green star developments if they are not great places, and conversely the cost of creating great places will be too high if they are not sustainable. Once again public art can play a key role in bringing these two directives together and making places of true local distinctiveness and lasting cultural value.



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