‘T’ Turning Diverse Memories into Public Art: Community Consultation in the Public Art Process

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‘T’ Turning Diverse Memories into Public Art: Community Consultation in the Public Art Process

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Abstract: Niel MacGregor Director of the British Museum (2005) states: for individuals as for communities, it may be said that memory is identity. At the very least it is an essential part of it. All societies have therefore devised systems and structures, objects and rituals to help them remember those things that are needed if the community is to be strong - the individuals and the moments that have shaped the past, the beliefs and the habits which should determine the future. These monuments and aide-memoires point not only to what we were, but to what we want to be. The challenge to represent a local culture through archival research and demographic studies continues to provide impetus for my research. Ultimately my aim is to identify a most suitable process where a community through their experience of place can contribute their knowledge and inspire the artist to produce a public statement which reflects and informs the culture of place, past present and future. This paper through a collection of case studies based on my own art practice and that of other artists, discusses and illustrates the significance of community consultation in the creation of public art. It looks at a collection of artworks which reference history, resources, ethnic and multicultural diversity, and ultimately communicate the marriage of oral histories translated through both image and text.

Keywords: Public Art, Community Consultation, Community Ownership, Translations, Oral Histories, Aide-memoires, Narratives of Place, The Culture of Place, Cultural Diversity

Introduction

This paper argues that the collaboration between artist and community is a valued component of the public art process and one, which results in a stronger connection to, and ownership of the artwork, by the broader community.

The first part of the paper will explore how ownership can be achieved through the showcasing of process. And how tapping into a local knowledge base can strengthen the connection to place for the artist, while at the same time empower and build confidence within the local community.

The second part of the paper will discuss the process and explore issues of the local in relation to creation and fabrication. It will also discuss sponsorship at the local level and how it can instill confidence and broaden the community’s acceptance of the artwork.

I will also draw attention to the significance of place and location in the placement of art in public spaces and how this can also serve to reconcile aspects of the past.

These issues will be discussed and communicated visually through reference to a collection of case studies, these will include:

- River Reflections Innisfail
- Ulysses Link Mission Beach
- River of Life Cooktown
Backpacker Memorial Childers

My History

For approximately ten years I had been occupied with the creation of artworks for ‘gallery’ exhibition purposes. These collections sat comfortably together to communicate a sense of time and place to the visitor to the exhibition.

The collections represented a place within a place where the visitor was able to move through this fabricated world where their journey would be informed and directed by carefully choreographed reference points.

With my first public art commission in 1997 came the realization that the interpretation of place was something, which I needed to take beyond the gallery context. Kabakov P174 draws attention to the difference between gallery and public space, as the place of art, identifying that while the gallery is about the temporary the public space is about permanence.

He continues his argument in relation to the viewer and in reference to the viewer, states that it is also entirely different, while one tends to marginalize the viewer, he sees the viewer of public art as an active and perhaps even the main character at the site.

When embarking on a public art commission I immediately begin to feel an enormous interest and a sort of spontaneous energy as I start to investigate people and place. How can I provide them with something, which could ultimately reinforce and support their identity? Meeting all sorts of people from diverse cultural and ethnic backgrounds and all the while stimulating and informing my process of becoming one with place. Resolutions at this stage are furthest from my mind, instead I see my role being that of a hunter-gatherer, ‘collect now and construe later’.

Connection to and Ownership of Place

Kabakov P174 argues that too often the artist has used the proposed public place exclusively as an exhibition space for his or her own creations. He objects to the artist taking ownership of place, and to the fact that, the artist often sees the environment simply as a backdrop for his own artistic creation. He states that it is perhaps a consequence of modernism.

The perceptions of the artist by the community can at times be read differently to what the artist may have originally intended. In trying to come to terms with the situation/topic or with an event far removed from his scope of experience, his good intentions could easily be mis-read and result in miss understandings. The Childers Backpacker Memorial proposal was initially rejected by the representative family of the deceased comments alluding to this included:

- You are making a SHRINE of the Palace Hotel full of artistic merit and the complexities that seem to go with artistic license!
- The original suggestion was: a simple mural by a first rate realism artist

This project lies in strong contrast to others. While it reflects the joy of a life lived, the Ulysses Link, River Reflections and The River of Life artworks, celebrate the lives and stories of the past and aspirations for the future. The artist has perhaps a lighter but none the less responsible role to play in these projects where inclusions and exclusions can be debated
compared to the context of the memorial where the direct connection to the event through the parents required a much more sensitive and understanding ear.

Social Inclusion

Kabakov refers to the “multi-tiered” viewer and classifies him into one of three types:

The first, the master of the place—the inhabitant of the city, where the artist has been invited to build his work. *They, who will accept, accommodate or discard this extraneous, repulsive and completely useless thing.* Hence the inter-relationship between the public project, and the viewer by virtue of the viewer’s living in the place where the artist is a guest, turns out to be fundamental.

The second the tourist – is interested in the unique characteristics of place. He should see the artwork as an important spot among the other tourist impressions.

The third the viewer is the occasional solitary passer-by, who pauses before something that suddenly seems interesting to him.

Empowering Locals and Building Confidence

It is often argued that people harbour prejudice about the arts, questioning the legitimacy for such spending, particularly in difficult times. The Ulysses Link project generated much heated debate in its early stages. Letters to the editor were constantly questioning why money should be spent on public art projects when it could be spent on libraries and hospitals. They soon realized that the members of their community who sought out opportunities where specific funding could be accessed did not have a false sense of priority but on the contrary were visionary thinkers who saw the need for the community to celebrate their identity. To this end understanding the origins of funds for a public art project is important.

Sharing Local Knowledge

Kabakov argues that the viewer will perceive the work in the context of the space where he finds himself, and that the space that existed before the artwork was installed & was a place, which the viewer had already developed a strong connection to.

In the Ulysses Link project surveys were conducted over an extended period of time to determine how the site was used and traversed by the local and the tourist population. Access paths were identified which then helped to plot out formal pathways and return the location of artworks.

The Ulysses Link site basically continues to remain as it has been for decades, an open parkland setting which acts as a gathering place for Markets on a Saturday, a picnic spot for families at other times and a connection point for pathways which link the local communities along the coastal foreshore. The only disruption that the artwork could be seen to have created has been to shift the mental focus of the user and provide them with points of connection to place, on their journey across the site. This project achieved what it is hoped public artwork will achieve:
To attract companies and investment
To feature in cultural tourism
To humanise and improve the environment
And above all to engage community, 13 local artists plus, collaborated on this project, while the broader community contributed their knowledge of place and their in-kind support.

In the case of the Backpacker Memorial the location was dictated by government ‘it must be in the place where the backpackers died’. The locals were familiar with the specifics of the disaster and understood well the implications of the memorials specific location. In this instance site was not decided based on economics or availability, but on much deeper direct references to the disaster.

Responding To Place

As we discussed the benefits of art in public spaces, are broad, far reaching and on going. I believe that artworks should be accessible connection points they may be suggestive, abstract or direct references to the narrative of place.

Collaboration Between Artist and Community is Paramount to

the public art process. If sensitively implemented by the artist, it provides the community with an access and contribution point; it gives them an opportunity to begin to establish a sense of ownership with something, which is ultimately theirs, and a reflection of who they are. While many urban development projects invite the community to participate and contribute, some can at times be overwhelming in their scale and intensity. There is often a fear of saying the wrong thing or speaking about issues, which they may not fully understand, be they technical or otherwise.

On the other hand the creation of a public artwork can function as a catalyst to draw the community together and generate a more direct connection point for its members who may have felt isolated or removed for a diversity of reasons. Personal experiences, understanding of place, stories, personal histories etc. are presented, discussed and recorded, within the gathering of people. Martzner P12 argues that public art:

*Is not about the myth of the artist but it is about civic ness.
Is not to make people feel diminished and insignificant, but it is to glorify them. It is not about the gap between culture and public, but it’s to make art public, and artists citizens again?*

To this end it is paramount to me as an artist creating public art that my initial inspiration for the generation of ideas must be based on research, which comes from place. The aura that generates around me when I embark on a commission is ‘they’ oriented. I want to understand place from ‘their’ the local’s experience, and relationship to place, through the stories, which have been handed down to them. I also seek to understand place from the perspective of the youth, who, while less experienced in relation to place are nonetheless the place keepers of the future.
I Achieve Ownership By The Community By identifying opportunities where and when the locals can participate/contribute/advise and assist. The River of Life project in Cooktown evolved through a series of workshops held in the local Community Centre where an open door approach was taken. Locals were invited and informed through the media when and where these workshops would take place. Works in progress displays were on going throughout the process these would consist of anything from a table display set up outside the community hall to securing an empty retail space and turning it into a gallery for the display of the concept. While similar works in progress exhibition venues have been used on most of my projects, other alternatives have included displays at the local Annual Agricultural Show, Shire Council window displays, foyer displays etc. However of all these venues, I have found that works in progress displays at the site seem to provide a more immediate point of connection for the community.

Trying to achieve the sense of ownership when the focus group are not only the locals but people from a handful of countries from around the globe was more difficult and required much more coordination. The families of the deceased in the Childers Backpacker disaster were from about seven different countries English was not the first language to many of these people. Unlike the locals, they couldn’t visit the community centre when I was in town working on the project, to observe the process and discuss it with me, they couldn’t attend the public meeting held with the locals and the councillors, they had never visited the town and had little if any background knowledge of the towns past let alone the building and what it meant to the locals. To this end the concept was resolved to a point where its form could be realized and in turn a mock up of the idea was created.

In an effort to inform the parents a video was produced. The video made reference to the building program including the memorial concept and its location.

One of the main aims in my work is to seek out innovative ways of connecting and reconnecting with the community at large. Over the past decade I have evolved a couple of models, which have endeavoured to engage community in the public art process.

Model A

On Gathering of Information-community Engagement

I introduce the project to the interested persons, who have been made aware of it through the local media newspaper and radio. At this time they are told where the idea to create an artwork has come from and who the key players are in the project.

They are asked to confirm their interest to be involved, by way of a short profile of themselves and their availability to participate. They are reminded that the curatorial team including the commissioned artist will review their expression of interest and that only a certain number of artists will be selected to participate.

The focus here is to generate within the local community a sense of worth and well-being this is achieved by: clarifying their understanding of the project background, encouraging people to contribute their stories of place and that in doing so they will assist the artist with his/her understanding of place, and for the community to be aware of the progress of the project through ongoing exposure to process.
Model B

Gathering of Skills

This model explores issues of the local in relation to creation and fabrication. It reiterates how sponsorship by well-known identities in the community can instill confidence and accelerate the community’s acceptance of the artwork.

Why do local business people craft and trades practitioners wish to play an active part in something, which is outside of their mainstream line of work? The answer lies in the most part with a desire to be seen to be supporting something, which is less about economic benefits to self and more about participating in the showcasing of local culture. A case in point was River Reflections the public artwork for the Innisfail in North Queensland where the local developer provided several days of his own labour and that of his staff and family. When asked why they chose to give so generously of their time the reply was to give back to the community who were so supportive of himself, his family, and his company.

It has been evident in the projects in which I have been involved that success is heavily reliant on the key player the coordinator who is not necessarily the person who is receiving the most reimbursement for their commitment but on the contrary the person/persons whose passions revolve around the desire to showcase the qualities of place.

In kind support is also high on the agenda of public artwork. Local skills are identified in an effort to gather together a collection of craft and trades people to participate in the fabrication process, and again this further encourages local ownership.

In Conclusion

At the outset of the presentation I stated a list of criteria, which related to community wellness and which would manifest through the creation of a public artwork with a community focus.

While these points remain significant milestones for the artist to aim to achieve. In the big picture it all comes down to a singular issue of engagement across all areas on an ongoing basis within the community, and that all else falls into place if this is the main focus of the artist at the outset of the project.

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About the Author

Salvatore M. Di Mauro

Salvatore Di Mauro is a Senior Lecturer in Design at Griffith University. Since the 1980s his art and design practice has been informed by the relationship between vernacular culture, object and environment. His recent commissions have included public artwork for Innisfail, Mission Beach, Childers and Brisbane. A major commission, the Childers Backpacker Memorial was completed in 2002. Salvatore is currently investigating issues around the culture of remembering and memorialising.
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