

Our Place in the Sun It's all about the Destiny! Isn't it?

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Published

2006

Journal Title

The Artreader: APT5 Companion

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Our Place in the Sun It's all about the Destiny! Isn't it?

Holly Arden

No house should ever be on a hill or on anything. It should be of the hill. Belonging to it. Hill and house should live together each the happier for each other. — Frank Lloyd Wright

In November 2006, the neon-tipped Stefan Skyneedle in Brisbane's West End burst into flames. Word on the street was that wet weather or a build-up of bird poo might have short-circuited the tower's rainbow lights. Embarking on repairs, the Skyneedle owner, local hairdressing magnate Stefan, was quoted as saying, "It will now be whatever the best in the world is, because I think the Skyneedle's part of our life now."

I begin with a local anecdote because Stefan's monument has, purportedly, a special significance within Brisbane's landscape. For one, it's a highly visible — some would say garish — reminder of Expo '88, after which (it's said locally) Brisbane as a city "came into its own". For my part, I was glad it was OK — I've gotten used to it being there. How does a building like Stefan's come to belong within a landscape?

Another anecdote, this one local and personal: my family emigrated to Australia from Scotland in the mid 1990s. My first experience of Brisbane, not unusual for an immigrant, was that I didn't belong. Orientation — fixing myself to the landscape — wasn't aided by the fact that the city has few major landmarks (Skyneedle aside): no Eiffel Tower, no Sydney Opera House and certainly no Edinburgh Castle. The Brisbane River anchors two sides of a CBD that are undergoing major development. My eventual sense of belonging to Brisbane came via a number of factors: familiarity with the city over time, the fostering of personal connections and, perversely, going back to Scotland and realising I no longer quite belonged there either. So how does a person come to belong within a landscape?

There's a great deal of discourse, broad and localised, about "belonging" and "ownership" surrounding the opening of GoMA: that the building belongs within a region (Queensland, Australia and the Asia-Pacific), that GoMA's Queensland design grounds it in localised cultural memory, that State Government has worked on our behalf to deliver it, that the art collection belongs to "us", and so forth. There's also talk of the breaking down or "opening up" of institutional space — returning this space to public ownership.

The architects' statement on the QAG/ GoMA website asserts: "The Gallery building, through its transparency, a long linear connective spine, and a series of expansive, open verandahs, becomes one with the public space in which it is connected. An art gallery is a public building. Its significance for the public consciousness is characterised by the fact that it returns enclosed public space to the city."

Lindsay Clare, GoMA co-architect, adds, "We felt that this building had to not be intimidating or imposing, and that people would be encouraged to enter it and enjoy entering it." The building's architecture conforms to surrounding environs. It's adjacent to the Brisbane River, with glass to let in light and an overhanging roof to keep it out.

Local journalist Matthew Condon writes, "the new cultural precinct is a physical monument to how radically Queenslanders have changed their relationship with their own space even in the past 20 years. Where once we turned inward, away from the river and the sun and heat, today we open our arms to our subtropical conditions, and work with them." (Courier-Mail 25-26 November 2006)

Public access is prioritised through outreach education, including dedicated children's programming. Such championing of collective civic space, of accessibility and openness of course has financial and political prerogatives, including increasing visitor numbers and community spirit, support for the team, etc. And there are many positives to this.

I'd like to reflect more widely, however, on some of the claims made for Brisbane's new civic space. My questions are: how does a building come to belong to us, and us to it?

How does GoMA as a structure represent the Gallery's wider sense of place within the Asia-Pacific, the regional purview of its flagship APT exhibition?

These questions are important because of GoMA's own focus on place and site, amidst what are seemingly areas of conflict and ambiguity. There's been a deal of this with the precinct built on traditional — some would say still occupied — Turrbal lands at Kurilpa Point. Community and government groups have worked to assist with the relocation of Indigenous and non-Indigenous homeless living around the area.

According to some, the State Government has continued to miss the mark. Papers cited Aboriginal elder Auntie Valda Coolwell's comment that, despite spending \$100 million on the Gallery, the Government had not started the new Aboriginal Cultural Centre in West End.

The Gallery's "two sites, one vision" mission statement, which incorporates the

new GoMA building, suggests a solid si(gh)ted programming direction. APT5 is touted as its flagship project, and into the two Galleries pour disparate sentiments and approaches towards place and culture. Comments have been made about APT5's open curatorial style or lack of overall theme compared with other biennials and triennials, despite intriguing and complex associations between art and place.

This gesture is not only distinctly untraditional, it's also, Rex Butler argues, the only way forward following the collapse of traditional thinking around dominant cultural centres (Europe, America) and the periphery (including Australia and the Asia-Pacific). He argues that given a dissolving of these historical centres, "there is no longer any way for the museum to exercise its traditional privilege of selecting important or significant works of art, identifying stylistic turning points or even the fusion and hybridising of these mainstream styles". (Courier-Mail 4 December 2006)

If APT5 is representative of GoMA as a structure, this quote from GoMA's architects could be telling: "The building creates a dialogue with the Asia-Pacific region and with ideas of lightness, transparency and openness, rather than solidity." (Artlines 2/3 2006)

Following Butler's line of argument, this situates the Gallery's curatorial model off-centre, or at least off-periphery: metaphorically in a kind of transparent no-place, maybe even an every-place. Still, the debate stands that by curating a show like this, there is an unavoidable burden of representation, a knowable, sited "us" and a "them". And despite Butler's argument, the Gallery continues to select "significant works of art" because 70 percent of APT5 has or will enter its collection. So the Gallery is, by default, thinking both historically and futuristically.

More intriguing, however, is to see what happens next for the APT and the triennial as a model; to see whether APT5 could be accused — for better or for worse — of being too uncentred or unfocused and consequently less iconic, despite the strength of individual works on display.

Some might say GoMA's relative understatedness as a building (at worst its lack of iconic punch) inspires the same response. In very simple terms, at stake are a reframing of history (and future), our consequent understandings of cultural interactions, and the types of exhibition models that might subsequently arise. Despite talk of "dissolving" histories and centres, GoMA and APT5 belong to a particular moment in time, and in the future may well be seen as strong statements of that time.

Back to the architecture. Place is a destination, but also a feeling, and maybe, as Eko Nugroho's mural suggests, a destiny. The ways in which sites gather a sense of place is fluid, almost too fluid to write about or to erect a building and

suggest it's more than just that. The South Bank precinct has been designated a Cultural Centre (again, the focus on sites and centres), however, in one sense it didn't or can't just become one, an "I am". This is Timothy Hill's view, the architect of the revamped State Library of Queensland, and it's one I tend to agree with.

Hill describes Brisbane's architecture as a network of interconnecting precincts, in which amenities of a similar type are held within distinct areas (the Cultural Centre as distinct from Grey Street's restaurants, for example, and from The Queen Street Mall's clothing stores). Suffice to say that there's a niggling tension between centre — prime sites for culture — and the democratic model of culture happening anywhere and everywhere.

Experience of place is informed from multiple, intersecting, and sometimes, weirdly anachronistic places. The feeling of déjà vu, even belonging, can arise, for instance, on a first visit to New York City because it's been so often already visited through film. Smells bring back old times and places. A deal of this has happened with the GoMA building, with reports in the news of its uncanny resemblance to the Copenhagen Opera building. GoMA publicity has linked it to "Greek and Roman times" and Asia-Pacific styles. With its overhanging roof, comparisons have also been made with the Lucerne Cultural and Congress Centre, which, unlike GoMA, is starkly at odds with a nearby medieval bridge and 19th-century district.

To return to my starting quote from the great modernist architect, Frank Lloyd Wright: a house "should be of the hill". This certainly applies to GoMA, much less so to the Lucerne Centre. GoMA's ambitions in belonging to its environment are expressed in terms of "transparency, readability and openness to the city". Let's take "transparency" out of that context for a moment. It's useful to define it: articulated, explicit, readable, see-through, clear, doesn't stick out. Here, one can become bogged down in metaphors, which are perhaps more appropriate as images than words. There's an air of transparency hanging over APT5 and GoMA, and with this a slight foggy sensation. It's possibly an old feeling of trying to situate oneself. How does one belong within this landscape? The cliché that time will tell is apt here. GoMA already belongs, as does Stefan's Skyneedle. So right there might be grounds for another type of belonging — that at first you have to stick out.