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Redefining Places for Art: The Contemporary Metropolis as ‘Many Cities’

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Introduction

In the novel *Invisible cities* (1972), Italo Calvino relates an imaginary meeting between the aged Kublai Khan and the young Marco Polo. The latter tells of the many cities he has visited: trading cities, thin cities, continuous cities, hidden cities, cities and memories, cities and desire ... After more than fifty stories, the Tartar emperor begins to realize that all the cities Marco Polo describes in fact represent different aspects of the storyteller’s home town, Venice. This sense of diversity may well be one of the keys to successful urban cultural policies for the new millennium.

Most cities in Australia derive their sense of artistic prestige from centrally located cultural icons and precincts, based on nineteenth-century European models. The opera, the concert hall, the theatre, the museum and the art gallery have pride of place in the public face of the city, as do the companies that inhabit them.

However, many of these buildings and organisations struggle with audiences that feel disenfranchised from their offerings (Costantoura, 2001: 82). The changing cultural landscape of contemporary urban areas is rapidly transforming the ways in which people engage with the arts. These transformations have triggered the development of new sites for artistic creation and consumption. While traditional centres still play an important role in the artistic life of contemporary cities, less conventional spaces – such as alternative exhibition halls, festivals, community events, public spaces and online exchanges – are emerging as vital hubs of creativity in urban areas. As Miles (1989: 1) describes, “the place of art, as an imaginative presence, perhaps an agent for wider change, is gaining recognition.”

When exploring the ways that these artistic places interact with the ever-changing cultural dynamics of a city, the emerging metropolis of Brisbane, Australia provides a stimulating case study. Similar to other developing cities around the world, such as Rotterdam and Birmingham rather than Amsterdam or London, Brisbane has not traditionally been associated with iconic artistic companies or landmarks. Nonetheless, with Brisbane’s position at the centre of the fastest growing region in Australia, and its proximity to other cultures in the Asia-Pacific Region, it has successfully positioned itself as an up-and-coming centre for vibrant creative activity (cf. Brisbane City Council, 2003: 1). With its young artistic history, and recent expansion of traditional and contemporary artistic locations, the city of Brisbane provides fertile ground for a rethinking of ‘artistic places’ in contemporary urban culture, and the search for a balance between various modes of engagement.

In November 2004, Griffith University initiated a forum between cultural industry leaders to provide a new impulse to this 'rethinking' of places for art in Brisbane. Experts included executive directors of major performing arts companies and centres, arts policy-makers, academics, filmmakers, creative arts industry professionals, and international guests. The purpose of the forum was to identify key issues in the urban dynamics of cultural spaces in Brisbane, and by implication in other major cities across the world. Discussions focused on the city's expanding locations for art, how these spaces engage or disengage with the residents of Brisbane, and how they can play a part in creating a unique urban identity. They also explored the challenges facing Brisbane's cultural industries on social, political and commercial levels, and discussed strategies for meeting these new realities.

This article reflects the ideas exchanged at the forum, and fuses these with current literature on urban planning, public art, new media, musicology, social theory and cultural studies, to illustrate a discourse that may inform future cultural policy, programs and practical initiatives. It also outlines a number of subsequent issues that have been raised by this forum, and reflects their opinions and recommendations on these. As a result, it represents the beginning of an ongoing research trajectory that examines connections between art, place, and people.

Rethinking the cultural urban environment

As metropolitan Brisbane rapidly expands, some perceive a growing divide between the city centre and its surrounding suburbs. Unlike many metropolitan areas across the world, Brisbane has a very low population density, even in the 'inner city suburbs.' Consequently, there is a considerable physical distance between the city centre and most of the 1.5 million inhabitants. This separation between urban and suburban areas has engendered divisions in the way that art is being produced and consumed in Brisbane.

The city centre has conventionally housed large traditional artistic venues, specifically designed for 'high art,' most of which are located in a central cultural precinct on South Bank: the Queensland Performing Arts Centre, the Queensland Museum, and the Art Gallery are flanked by the Queensland State Library, the Queensland Conservatorium and the Queensland College of Art (Griffith University). These institutions and buildings are still largely modelled on nineteenth-century European 'cultural museums,' with an important role in preserving and presenting cultural heritage.

Such 'cultural museums' suggest an artistic connection with a European past, being partially built on what Hobsbawm calls 'invented traditions,' "a set of practices, normally governed by overtly or tacitly accepted rules and of a ritual or symbolic nature, which seek to inculcate certain values and norms of behaviour by repetition, which automatically implies continuity with the past" (1992: 1). As Bourdieu & Darbel suggest, the values and norms of behaviour associated with these traditions are only legible and attainable for those who have the means of "appropriating them, that is, of deciphering them" (1990: 39). Those sufficiently initiated in these traditions have been elite artists and a well-defined audience demographic who possess the

“cultural competence” to understand them. Bourdieu critiques these practices for fulfilling a social function of “legitimizing social differences” (1984: 7).

Small (1998: 25-27) suggests that the sites which house such traditions can be seen to celebrate and preserve cultural heritage, but also to symbolically exclude the ‘outside’ and ‘non-artistic’ elements of the city. Audiences are required to pay a financial premium for the privilege of attending these celebrated buildings, and are expected to comply with their conventions and regulations. Considerable public financial support is given to such places, despite the fact that they leave many suburban residents removed from the artistic experiences they offer.

Meanwhile, the suburbs have housed informal cultural venues, specifically designed for so-called ‘low art.’ These locations have been the home of community organisations, and have drawn on local residents and amateurs, rather than highly-specialised professionals. Such locations have also had stronger connections to Indigenous cultural activities and symbolic places, and encouraged community participation, often related to a growing cultural diversity. Less financial support has been invested in such suburban spaces.

The cultural leaders at the forum identified that this division and its correlating levels of artistic value and financial support do not reflect the interests and desires of a large proportion of Brisbane’s population. Recent reports, such as the Australia Council’s *Australians and the Arts*, affirm this by stating that Australians feel excluded from many of these ‘high art’ venues, and desire to feel more at ease within arts settings (Costantoura, 2001: 82). Ongoing coverage in Brisbane’s local press – in particular *The Courier-Mail* – has also suggested that Brisbane residents wish to cultivate more than just traditional ‘high art’ in their city (Walker, 2004: 29; Yallamus, 2004: 13). As Lyndon Terracini, Director of the Queensland Music Festival, argued: “There’s a perception that culture equates to traditional European art forms. I am not convinced you can judge the cultural life of a city in contemporary Australia by the opera company it has, the orchestra it has, the theatre or ballet company” (qtd. in Walker, 2004: 32). Furthermore Yallamus (2004: 13) reports, “Population growth may be booming in Southeast Queensland, but the state’s flagship performing arts companies are struggling to convert that to a rise in audience numbers. . . . This is disappointing, given that more people now live in Brisbane’s city centre – close to theatres – and southeast Queensland’s population grows by 1000 people every week.”

In this complex environment, some cultural leaders have been at the forefront of building synergies and pathways between urban and suburban areas, ‘high art’ and ‘low art,’ performance and participation, curation and creation. They have worked strategically to connect residents with their dynamic cultural environment by staging free family concerts by artistic companies in outdoor city venues, presenting popular music in traditional ‘high art’ venues, bringing suburban performers into city locations, taking prominent entertainers into suburban shopping centres, organising food and music festivals on Brisbane’s topographic sites, such as parks and the landmark river, and converting historic sites, such as the city’s old Powerhouse into performance venues (see Figure 1). This process of ‘recontextualising’ art has been successful in attracting new audiences, particularly in settings such as the Queensland Music Festival, which reached over 200,000 people in more than 20 centres around Queensland in 2005.



Figure 1. Brisbane Powerhouse: Centre for the arts.
Photographer: Jon Linkins.

Parallels

Such initiatives are in line with projects being undertaken in other enterprising urban areas around the world. For example, Rotterdam Cultural Capital of Europe 2001 propagated a culturally dynamic city directed by the everyday lives of its inhabitants. As the world's second largest harbour, Rotterdam has primarily been regarded for decades as a city of trade and industry. The city has also been one of the principal destinations for immigrants across the globe, with over 50% of young people hailing from parents who were not born in The Netherlands. People from Turkey, Morocco, Surinam and the Cape Verdes form a large part of the population.

Being at the southern extreme of the densely populated area in the west of the Netherlands known as the Randstad (comprising Amsterdam, Utrecht, the Hague and Rotterdam itself), which in population only marginally exceeds metropolitan Sydney, Rotterdam has never been considered a player of any significance in the cultural life of the Netherlands. At less than 20 kilometres from The Hague, 35 from Utrecht, and some 70 kilometres from Amsterdam, in an area with excellent public transport connections, it was unable to compete for an image of traditional cultural excellence in the proximity of icons like the Concertgebouw, Opera, Rijksmuseum, and Van Gogh Museum.

From the early 1990s, however, a remarkable change occurred. A central driver in this process was Hans Kombrink, a visionary alderman for culture from 1994-2002, who governed a portfolio that combined the arts and public spaces. A number of cutting-edge arts organisations, disillusioned with the arrogance of the established Amsterdam art scene and municipal politics, were lured to Rotterdam by Kombrink.

They were housed in old industrial and public buildings, and created an atmosphere that in turn drew additional vibrant arts organisations and initiatives. This change in orientation led to a successful bid for *European Capital of Culture* in 2001, granted by the European Commission in May 1998 (Van Meggelen, 1999: 2).

In line with its idiosyncratic approach to culture, Rotterdam did not opt to commission operas or build new museums for 2001, but decided to energise the full range of art and culture, from so-called low to high. Inspired by Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (quoted above), curator Bert van Meggelen chose as an overarching theme "Rotterdam is many cities" (Van Meggelen, 2000: 24). This absolved Rotterdam from having to contrive a picture of cultural coherence, and opened the road to celebrating a diversity that characterises a city that is not weighed down by tradition, unlike its forerunners Athens (1985), Florence (1986), Amsterdam (1987), Berlin (1988), Paris (1989), and Madrid (1992). Instead, the natural strengths of the city were sought out and presented, either raw or slightly reformatted, but always close to its inhabitants:

The city, that is you: you listen, look, taste and touch it. The city becomes a living organism which, just like you, possesses a dynamic memory. A memory that is fed by and gives room to tales. What is told, written and imagined about her is the city. (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 22)

The ten subthemes that were chosen accordingly for 'R2001' emphasised the sense of inclusiveness and dynamics of the approach: *Pleasure City*; *City of Many Cultures*; *City of Stories*; *Vital City*; [*Young@Rotterdam*](#); *Living in a city and the city as home*; *Working City*; *The Periphery at the Centre*; *City of the Future*; *Flowing City*; and *City Culture, City of Cultures and City of Culture* (Van Meggelen, 2000: 17-24). Curators across seven 'domains' (including performing and visual arts, debate, public spaces, and multicultural) were commissioned to engage stakeholders from a broad cross-section of the city's population and organisations in the celebration of its multifaceted cultural identity, preferably with effects beyond 2001.

The call for projects and extensive consultations generated over 1,000 project proposals. 330 projects were realised with 200 partner organisations, with a total budget of 23.5 million euro (\$ 40 million); a combination of public and private funding (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 6-8). The activities included some well-tested choices, such as exhibitions and jazz festivals. But the majority of initiatives realised had a sense of exploration and inclusiveness.

In the domain of the performing arts, *Roots & Routes* explored the past and future of musicians with multiple frames of reference: "from a city of separated souls via an *avenue multiculturelle* to a cosmopolitan city," in the words of curator Naima Azough (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 65). In the visual domain, *Face to Face* highlighted the art of refugees (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 95), and *Unpacking Europe* broke the format of the static exhibition and single western reference for museum Boijmans Van Beuningen with a dynamic, multicultural approach (Hassan & Dadi, 2001). But everyday life became a museum as well: *At home in Rotterdam* made 24 houses across Rotterdam accessible to the public, who could experience not only how contemporary architects envisioned living in Rotterdam, but also how a Moroccan family made a home in a new environment (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 123-124). A

number of abandoned landmark buildings: the Calypso cinema, the Luxor theatre, and the warehouse Las Palmas, were revitalised as spaces for art.

Although a good number of activities received severe criticism from various quarters for being too popular/inclusive or too esoteric/idiosyncratic, an audience of 2.2 million visitors and almost 3,000 press hits succeeded in convincingly putting Rotterdam on the cultural map of the Netherlands as an inclusive, dynamic, cutting-edge place for art (Gemeente Rotterdam, 2003: 19-20). Initiatives such as those implemented in Rotterdam successfully counteract divisions in the cultural life of urban areas, and have obvious parallels to the realities and potential of Brisbane.

Creating social capital by connecting residents with artistic identity

Miles (1989: 4) suggests that the role of art is to transform spaces in places, the public into people, by a merging of individual with common interests. By making these connections art can offer more than objects to be received passively as in a gallery or concert hall; art can open a dialogue with its audience, drawing them together to consider wider issues than the aesthetic. Opening a dialogue is a valuable way for artists to use the process, rather than the products, of art to encourage residents to engage with creative activity in their city (Miles, 1989: 10-11). Mossop (2001: 11) adds that cities need to embrace difference and diversity, making places for all sectors of the population: “urban design needs to cater for all parts of the population, not just the rich or culturally privileged, so that all city dwellers are empowered to participate.” Such an approach to urban planning would allow a city to always be “legible” to its inhabitants.

As part of this process, the challenge is to maintain the value and relevance of the city’s traditional performance venues, and also nurture the development of less traditional spaces. While the city’s landmark arts centres play a key role in preserving cultural heritage, their visual exterior and strong connections to nineteenth-century ideology make them somewhat intimidating and unapproachable for certain sections of the community. Rather than dismissing such venues as antiquated and elitist, Brisbane’s cultural leaders are assisting residents to engage with these spaces in innovative ways (Ferres, 2004). As Claire Booth, Chief Executive Officer of the Queensland Orchestra describes, “In this process, marketers are promoting art as an ‘experience,’ as opposed to an ‘untouchable’ revered masterpiece” (personal communication, November 25, 2004). Instead of presenting a product to an audience, they are increasingly offering interactivity as a cultural and artistic practice. In a similar vein, other centralised places for art, such as the thriving inner-city suburb Fortitude Valley, with its burgeoning club scene and centre of contemporary arts (see Figure 2), are cultivating popular culture as an ‘experience’ that people can negotiate and curate through their everyday lives. Such places are connecting Brisbane residents with art through curiosity towards inclusive ‘cultural rituals’ rather than a celebration of exclusive ‘cultural traditions’.



Figure 2. Judith Wright Centre of Contemporary Arts, Fortitude Valley.
Photographer: Stefan Jannides.

Western Sydney

Experiences and approaches from Rotterdam and Brisbane may be relevant to emerging, 'Post-suburban' centres like Western Sydney, which has a population that supports its claim to be the third largest city in Australia, but a proximity to the cultural facilities of the Eastern suburbs that has kept artistic infrastructure low. In its plans to make Western Sydney attractive to the type of workers that help create and maintain a robust economy, the regional government has committed to making the area more culturally vibrant (Manning, 2006). It seeks to appeal to the 'Creative Class' advocated by Florida (2002: 68), consisting of people who add significant economic value to a city through their creativity. Although Florida's views are not universally embraced, creating a culturally rich environment is emphatically and sensibly part of the plan for Western Sydney.

The Western Sydney Regional Organisation of [18 local] Councils is determined to play an active role in this process. Last year, they published a regional cultural strategy built on the principles of sustainability; dynamism and diversity; inclusion and community relevance; openness and continuity; integration and connectivity; distinctiveness; and creativity (WSROC, 2005: 3). It would appear that all the appropriate rhetoric is in place. However, the programming of the Parramatta Riverside Theatre, the central venue for performing arts in the area, is still surprisingly conventional, for instance. In Parramatta, like elsewhere, there is a tension between emerging and established formats and patterns.

Like Rotterdam and Brisbane (and many other urban areas), Western Sydney finds itself at a crossroads, with basically three choices:

- 1) Striving to emulate (Eastern) Sydney or Melbourne as a traditional, European-style centre of culture (and choose to be third-best at best)
- 2) Choosing to be radically different and shift policies and funding towards becoming a cutting-edge arts capital (like Rotterdam)
- 3) Breaking through the dichotomy, finding a balance between 'many cities' based on a joint vision for an artistic future between all stakeholders

The freedom to pursue any of these choices is growing. Recent changes to arts funding seem to partially acknowledge the multiple contexts in which art is now being positioned. While the majority of cultural funding in Australia is still spent on maintaining hubs of traditional 'high art' and their flagship artistic companies, funding structures increasingly leave room for supporting individuals (and groups) in the creation of cultural products, and assisting projects that facilitate partnerships with community, business, and 'non-arts' government departments (Gibson & O'Regan, 2002: 29). Such funding agendas heighten the chance of bringing places of cultural production and participation in line with current artistic trends, and contributing to their sustainability.

In terms of art, Post-suburban Sydney has the opportunity to build its own 'cities' in the West, not only as geographical spaces, but also as more ephemeral identities with a reach beyond the local. Embracing cultural diversity is likely to be a key success factor in this effort, and can be fast-tracked by attracting, nurturing and retaining creative individuals and cutting-edge initiatives in this field, in the manner of Rotterdam. In order to ensure sustainability, a phased development from specific communities to the local population at large would make sense, with a second phase reaching out to all of Sydney and beyond. Such a process can only be developed and implemented if informed by a continuous dialogue between all the major stakeholders involved with the complex cultural dynamics of a city. This includes creative arts workers, existing audiences and potential new participants, as well as industry, funding bodies and various levels of government.

With their implications of regarding the metropolitan area as 'many cities', initiatives such as those implemented in Rotterdam and being developed in Brisbane potentially provide models to counteract divisions in the cultural life of urban areas. In this way, residents can be encouraged to move fluidly between traditional and unconventional places for art on their own terms, curating their own artistic experiences while constructing their chosen cultural identity. The artistic strength of the modern metropolis may not lie in its uniformity, but in the celebration of its delightful, confusing diversity.

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