



Expanding Cultures

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PUTTING THE PUBLIC IN PUBLIC ART

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Abstract

Whether because of complexity or prejudice, the development and commissioning of major public art projects is one of the few areas of local government arts that generally remains outside the community cultural development framework. Aside from the occasional community mural or mosaic project, larger public art projects are generally commissioned by panels of 'experts', and the idea that the development of artists' briefs and the task of selecting final artworks can be devolved to the community is almost heresy. However, for more than a decade now the Cities of Darebin and Whittlesea have been fostering just such a heresy, gradually putting their public into public art. It would be a brave 'expert' indeed who would conclude that the works commissioned through this community engagement process rank any less than the best of public art commissions elsewhere. This presentation will challenge attendees to utilise public art as a means of building and strengthening inclusive community cultural development and not allow other agendas to determine and dominate our civic and communal spaces.

INTRODUCTION

We are going to describe the process that both of our Councils, Darebin and Whittlesea, utilise to build and strengthen communities through the commissioning of public art. We will then present the plethora of benefits of that process, to: Council's elected members, individuals on the Reference Group, art and artists, the broader community, visitors and property developers. Okay, we admit it, there are a few challenges too, as a result of the collaborative process, but none that can't be overcome...read on!

Process:

This process emphasizes the use of a comprehensive community consultation in order to successfully incorporate public art into our public spaces. The approach invites members of the community to become involved in the process, leading up to and including, the selection of the final work. It offers the community an opportunity to see their local environment in new ways, to interpret that environment, and to have a say in its future function and visual appearance. This approach instills a sense of 'ownership' in the project and invites people to feel that they can make a 'difference' to their environment.

In practice over the last decade there has evolved two models for engaging the community in public art projects.

Model A begins with a series of focus groups with members of the community to elicit a comprehensive understanding of what they feel about their neighbourhood and what they would like the new piece of public art to reflect. The next step is to form a reference group from interested participants in these focus groups to refine the discussions into a brief for artists. This brief would involve specifics about the site and the themes the community would like the artist to address. Following this comes a tendering process where expressions of interest are invited from artists. The community reference group would shortlist these and the short-listed artist would be paid a fee to develop a maquette (model) of their proposal and provide Council with all the necessary drawings and engineering specifications for the construction of their work. The reference group would then select one work for construction and put their recommendation to Council. *FIDO* in Station Street Fairfield, *Sailing Down the Steps*, in Thornbury and the artworks at Thomastown Library are all works developed using this model.

Model B begins with a similar series of focus groups from which a reference group is drawn. However under this model the reference group elects to take a more active role in supporting the artist create a design. In this model the reference group develops the artist brief and selects, through an advertised process, an artist or artists to conduct a series of design workshops with members of the community. This would involve the artists talking over the themes with the workshop participants, coming back with some preliminary drawings for discussion at a second or further workshop and then from this feedback develop a maquette and engineering specifications. This is then put as a recommendation from the reference group to Council. *Well Place Preston*, adjacent to the Preston Library, and the *Shadow Creek* at Ruthven Reserve were works created using this consultative model.

THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF THE PROJECT MANAGER / FACILITATOR

The project manager/facilitator needs to genuinely appreciate the diversity of opinion and variety of perspectives inherent in a handful of community members who randomly elect to come onto the Reference Group. You cannot fake it...people will know that you are not genuine!

The project manager/facilitator plays an essential role as a broker and communicator between the artists and the community representatives. They drive the process, manage the acquisition and installation of the artwork for the entire project and are able to adjust the overall aesthetics, as the design progresses, in consultation with the artists. A project manager, who is also a trained artist, will understand materials, construction processes, installation, engineering requirements, fabrication techniques, insurance requirements and planning requirements.

REDUCING BARRIERS TO PARTICIPATION

Attempts should be made to ensure that there are increased opportunities for community participation and 'perceived' or real barriers are reduced. An environment is encouraged where individuals are able to speak freely, feel welcome and be physically and linguistically able to participate in community consultation meetings and design brief meetings. In such diverse communities, where a plethora of individual requirements apply, plans need to be put in place to provide for as many individual requirements as early as possible in the project. This will encourage inclusiveness and ownership and make sure that the community consultations are as representative of the population as possible.

BENEFITS OF THE PROCESS

Benefits of the process to individuals on the Focus Groups & Reference Group

- Build their awareness of Council business, processes and responsibilities.
- Meet other individuals who live in the same area and have similar concerns about a range of issues.
- Experience a unique local process in which they can take part and look back on until they die (people still bail me up about FIDO when walking my dog in the local park...and the consultation took place in 1998?). Individuals can feel a strong sense of responsibility and commitment to their local community 'their place'.
- All the inherent benefits of participation in a community cultural development project such as an improved sense of engagement and well being.

Benefits of the process to art and artists

- As a result of this process, artworks are designed for a specific site and to address a specific brief that has been prepared by members of the local community. This encourages artists to design artworks that are both unique and relevant to the local area.
- By inviting all applicants to develop a design response to the Artists Brief, artists who are emerging in that particular genre, or artform, can compete on an equal footing with more experienced artists.
- By being asked to respond to a tight brief, the artist can be set free and invited to create a unique artwork by expanding on new ideas. They are challenged to think outside the bounds of their normal studio practice.
- Such unique public artworks are contributing significantly to the visual landscape of Melbourne.
- Work is commissioned that responds to people and place and not agendas about what is 'good' art; agendas which are retrograde by their very nature.

Benefits of the Process to Council and Councillors

- Placing public art acquisition within a community development framework makes it easier to justify when it comes to arguing for share of scarce resources.
- Through this process, Councillors have an opportunity to meet people in the community who are not committed to specific agendas – these people can be more ‘balanced’ and ‘even headed’ in their attitudes and perspectives, and because of this, can be very beneficial to Councillors and to Council Officers.
- Often these processes ‘tease out’ potential community leaders who firstly become involved in this process, and through it, experience a greater awareness of Council business and then later become involved in other local issues.

Benefits of the Process to the Broader Community

- The broader community are invited to co-exist with art in public places which is relevant to the community and designed to suit the site in which it is located.
- When surrounded by unique public art, everyone is invited to participate in the ongoing community dialogue about public art. As a result many more people have an opinion about public art and knows something about public art. FIDO was very controversial when the design was initially presented to the broader community. However, the legacy of that debate was that many more people in Darebin had a greater understanding of what public art was, and had an opinion about it.
- The local traders bless ‘FIDO’...with the controversy came free promotion about Fairfield – there are now postcards of FIDO, street banners with an image of FIDO, and at Christmas last year, Council decorated FIDO with a Christmas collar!

Benefits of the Process to Visitors

- Public Artworks that are relevant and informative educate both visitors and local people.
- Relevant artworks promote our communities as unique places to visit and to live.

Benefits of the Process to Property Developers

- Currently, private developers in the City of Whittlesea are frequently using sculpture, signage and street furniture as a vehicle to enrich and promote the identity of each new estate. These items are also designed to encourage a sense of place in the new estate.
- An opportunity exists here, to create public art that promotes community identity for the whole municipality to experience.
- ***Brand New Estates with few residents:***
In order to create public places which have meaning in a local context Council encourages artworks which reflect themes and ideas derived from the specific stories and memories which are unique to that location.
- This can be achieved by researching history collections, old photographs, oral histories and publications.

- People living in the immediate vicinity can also be brought together to share memories, relate stories and impart knowledge of the history of the local area.
- This information can then be conveyed to the artist and the first public art can be constructed for the new estate.
- ***New Estates with up to 500 - 1,000 residents:***
We work with developers to encourage them to develop projects in collaboration with their new residents when only a few households have moved in.
- These people can be gathered together initially to workshop who they are and what they want.
- A smaller group can be invited to form a Reference Group who can finalise the specific themes and ideas of that location and thread them into an Artist's Brief.
- A local example is Laurimar on Yan Yean Road, Doreen. The community centre was built early on with rooms for hire and a coffee shop. Play groups and interest groups began, a development worker was employed. At this point local public art was commissioned in collaboration with local groups, and the estate enjoyed the benefits of the collaboration.

PROCESS CHALLENGES

- This process takes more time to undertake.
- It utilises more resources, which if not utilised could be expended on the artwork.
- The whole process is an 'unchartered' journey – you don't know how or when you are going to get to the end of the process – but the journey is rich, fulfilling and completely worthwhile.
- Convincing sceptics to trust the process
- The success of each project relies heavily on a project manager/facilitator who can undertake the responsibilities outlined previously and the ability for that project manager/facilitator to erode or reduce barriers to participation and to genuinely value community perspectives.

Sarah Poole is originally a visual artist. She has been a Cultural Development Officer with City of Yarra, managing the Brunswick Street Public Art Project, has directed festivals for the cities of Darebin and Whittlesea and was project manager for the controversial 'FIDO' project. In 2002-2005, Sarah was Team Leader, Arts and Culture, City of Whittlesea. She is now Public Art Officer completing Council's first Cultural Collection Strategy, which underpins the

management, facilitation and community engagement program for Council's Collections. She also manages new housing estates incorporating public art as a place making and marketing exercise.

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Mosaic Courtyard (Thomastown Library) by Glynis Bryden, *Photographer: Julie Best*



F.I.D.O. by David Davies, Alistair Knox, Ian Sinclair, Jackie Staude, *Photographer: Mark Wilkinson*