

The Art of the Eco-City

Working with artists to further urban sustainability

REPORT FOR THE CITY OF MELBOURNE
DRAFT FOR CONSULTATION

Introduction

Cultural programming, arts production, sustainability and climate change

Background

Melbourne is a city that has a reputation for being a leader in both the arts and sustainability. It is therefore fitting that in recent years, the City has been home to a growing group of individuals and organisations¹ that join an international community in recognising the value of a cultural response to climate change; and the need for environmental leadership within the cultural sector.

.....

“More recently, the role of the artists and cultural workers, as catalysts of change in society, has come to be widely discussed in the context of climate change.”

- Olaf Gerlach-Hansen, Culture | Futures,
Danish Cultural Institute

.....

In terms of sustainability, the City has set out five primary goals to become an eco-city under the banner of Future Melbourne, including achieving zero net emissions, managing climate change risks and leading the way in sustainable water management. It is a member of C40, a global network of cities implementing meaningful and sustainable climate-related actions. Pioneering initiatives, such as the 1200 Buildings program, work towards meeting these goals.

Culturally speaking, the City is renowned for its high caliber of programming and the vibrancy of the artistic community that is supported. Under Future Melbourne the City aims to be bolder and more inspirational, fostering uniqueness and invention, and demonstrating leadership. The arts sector has

been particularly proactive in retrofitting its own building stock to achieve high standards of energy efficiency through its work with Sustainability Victoria, in particular.

A key aspect in the City of Melbourne’s Public Art Program’s immediate and mid term planning, is the intention to address and investigate issues relating to sustainability and climate change in relation to cultural programs and production. The Program has already begun to innovate in this regard, for example, with a public art commission responding to green buildings (the 1200 Buildings Commission) and in its call to all public art submissions in 2011 to address sustainability requirements in their proposals.

There is significant opportunity to further leverage the arts, particularly in the public sphere, to further the eco-city vision of the City of Melbourne.

About this report

This report seeks to provide recommendations based on:

- Innovative examples from around the world where artists have been supported to engage with environmental issues
- Experience with the 1200 Buildings Public Art Commission
- Opportunities for cooperation and collaboration with ongoing initiatives within City of Melbourne and Australia.

These three areas of inquiry form the first three sections of this report and are followed by conclusions and recommendations.

The report does not pretend to be an exhaustive review of all relevant projects and initiatives in the areas covered, as this was beyond the scope and resources agreed for the report. Instead, it provides recommendations for future initiatives, based on illustrative case studies and some recent and relevant experience.

While there is an explicit focus on the built environment and cities, many of the models and outcomes could equally be applied in another context. Focus is also on the role of the artist and what makes an artist's contribution unique. At a time when we need to rethink many of our modes of operation which have led us down an unsustainable path, the role of creativity, and in particular, the value of interdisciplinary collaboration is worth detailed examination.

An extensive set of Annexes accompanies this report, in digital form. Those relating to the implementation of the 1200 Buildings Public Art Commission are intended to support anyone new to the project with all the materials related to its implementation.

Endotes:

1. Melbourne-based organizations focused on arts and climate change, include Tipping Point Australia, Climarte, Seven Thousand Oaks and Carbon Arts.

International Case Studies

Artists as planners, barometers and disruptive innovators

Overview

Globally, a number of public art and design projects have demonstrated the capacity of art and artists to effect positive environmental change in the urban context. Such projects have mobilised communities around contaminated soil, food production, air pollution and clean energy; contributed to urban renewal and master planning for sustainable neighbourhoods; and brought greater awareness to green infrastructure and environmental health issues. In doing so they have challenged conventional patterns of consumption and behaviour, promoting—and actively realising—forms of sustainable urban living. A small but growing number of projects have been able to affect larger-scale urban transformation, revealing art's capacity to innovate where planning or existing administrative arrangements have failed.

These projects have been initiated in a variety of traditional and non-traditional ways, through for example a percent for the arts policy, a festival or competition, pilot grant funding initiatives, private philanthropy or through direct commissions and fee-for-service. They often involve the environment and public arts and culture branches of city councils, with partnership from urban developers, water, energy or waste utilities and building owners and managers. Most aim to improve the public's awareness and understanding of the environment to encourage greater stewardship or provoke debate and engagement on key issues. A number are pilot schemes that are pioneering new modes of art-making and new interpretations of the role of the artist.

The case studies presented in this report have been selected to highlight a diversity of artistic response,

origination and project delivery mechanism, as well as a range of natural resource management themes from water, air, waste and energy. Case studies are divided into two sections. Artists as Planners focuses on the engagement of artists in master planning and urban development, where for the most part projects were less intent on the delivery of specific projects than on the artist's contribution to a creative and collaborative process. Artists as Barometers examines a number of public art projects that act as instruments for measuring and making legible our urban environment.

.....

“...public art, in collaboration with other disciplines, can create remarkable places that encourage sustainability and stewardship of the environment.” – Calgary City's Public Art Plan for the Expressive Potential of Utility Infrastructure

.....

By no means a comprehensive review of the discipline, the intention with these case studies is simply to illustrate a range of possibilities for engaging artists in the project of making an Eco-City. The emphasis is intentionally on examples from overseas, with the expectation that these will be less known to the Australian audience of this report. However, there are no doubt some equally relevant examples exist closer to home, and some of these are referenced in the analysis. Interviews have been conducted with artists, collaborators and project managers to inform case study content. Websites, and in some cases, evaluation reports and other documentation were available to provide further insight. All of these sources and references are listed at the end of each case study.

Artists as Planners: working with public utilities and master planning

The engagement of artists in sustainable urban planning and design has a number of precedents in North America and the UK. Artists like Buster Simpson, Lorna Jordan and Frances Whitehead have been working, sometimes since the early 1980s, at the intersect of nature have been working, sometimes since the early 1980s, at the intersect of nature, art and infrastructure, developing art master plans for waterworks, brown-field redevelopments or forming part of a team of engineers and designers on environmental remediation projects or green infrastructure delivery.

In Sydney, artists Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, have been developing environmentally driven public art for urban development, and are engaged with the new Central Park development as artists in residence, guiding the arts master plan. In Melbourne, Broadmeadows 2032 showcased a series of design projects from Melbourne University, RMIT, Monash University and Swinburne University to be further developed by Hume City Council in new and emerging strategic planning.

Public art and infrastructure projects realise benefits both in terms of cultural value, but also in terms of education and engagement as artworks seek to make legible the hidden aspects of infrastructure, or, for example creating poetic interpretations of storm water drains. As part of a multi-disciplinary team, artists on infrastructure projects are valued for the unique skills, processes and methodologies they bring. Artists are also sought for their creative and alternative visions for the future design and use of cities, as counterpoints for traditional master planning approaches.

The four case studies selected present a range of approaches for engaging artists in planning:

Case study 1: *A Public Art Plan for the Expressive Potential of Utility Infrastructure* is the City of Calgary's innovative approach to strategic arts planning in relation to a major natural asset, the Bow River. By pooling percent for arts funding, this plan sought to provide a visual and aesthetic legacy highlighting the Council's management of the watershed and encouraging stewardship of the environment by the public. Through a coordinated series of temporary and permanent public art commissions and specific roles for artists in design teams, the plan will deliver a new level of understanding and engagement with the city's water infrastructure.

Case Study 2: *Civic Action: A Vision for Long Island City* is an exhibition and project of the Noguchi Museum and Socrates Sculpture Park in Long Island City, which invited four established artists to form teams and don the hat of urban planners to provide alternative, non-competing visions for the booming Long Island City neighbourhood. From repurposing smoke stacks as monitors of the city's move to green energy to the introduction of zip lines for alternative, clean forms of transportation, the proposals are strong on sustainability, community and industrial ecology.

Case Study 3: *The Embedded Artist project* is a partnership of The School of the Art Institute and the City of Chicago. The goal of the pilot program is to "embed" practicing artists into city government in order to bring new perspectives, mindsets, and processes to planning projects that revolve around the city's future. A key project delivered through this program is Slow Clean Up, which is pioneering new models for the remediation of contaminated petrol stations using phyto-remediation. Slow Cleanup is a strategic part of a new planning initiative, focused on urban agriculture for sustainable economic development, Green Healthy Neighborhood, linking these new remediation techniques to soil and neighborhood revitalization planning efforts

Chicago: The Embedded Artist Project



Chicago: The Embedded Artist Project

Summary

The Embedded Artist Project began as an experimental civic collaboration between the City of Chicago and the School of the Art Institute that aims to increase local government's ability to creatively address major systems issues by embedding practicing artists in City departments at the management level. The first artist placements began in September 2008 and were piloted for two years. The Embedded Artist Project, led by artist Frances Whitehead, has now also being studied for implementation in Galway Ireland, while Whitehead is working in a less informal engagement with Metropolitan Lima, Peru. Whitehead is looking for more opportunities to spread the model that has been developed to further understand its potentials.

Aims and Outcomes

Leveraging the innovation capacity of artists as "change agents", the project creates a platform for engagement of artists with other professionals on matters relating to sustainability and/or city governance. The project aims to understand the cultural dimension of sustainability and asks the question 'What do artists know... that can be useful to climate change mitigation and adaptation?'.

The key tenants of the project are that:

- sustainability is largely a cultural problem and thus requires a cultural framework that deals with intangible cultural values to succeed.
- artists' particular expertise can be of great value to trans-disciplinary teams addressing major societal challenges due to largely unexamined tacit knowledge that contemporary artists deploy.
- artists create new knowledge and this is imperative for the simple reason that no discipline holds the expertise, vision, understanding, or procedure that will deliver a sustainable future.

The first lead artist, Frances Whitehead worked with the Planning Department on the 2040 Regional Food Plan, before developing SLOW Cleanup (see below). The second Lead artist, Adelheid Mers, was placed in the Dept of Innovation and Technology to create visual feedback and analyses on a city-wide broadband scheme, the Digital Excellence Action Agenda. She also created a data visualizations for the Mayor's Office, tracking Federal Stimulus spending.

.....

'The planning community is interested in artists because they are trying to disrupt the methodological habits that perpetuate wicked problems; what artists offer is "disruptive innovation".' – Frances Whitehead, professor of sculpture based at the School of the Art Institute of Chicago

.....

Keystone project: SLOW Cleanup

Part of the Embedded Artist project *SLOW Cleanup* began as a question to Frances Whitehead, one of the lead artists, by the Chicago Commissioner of the Environment: 'What is a whole-system, sustainable, brownfield cleanup?' The environmental problem being referred to was the clean up of abandoned gas stations in the City, a problem that until then had been approached by expensive and unsustainable soil removal. *SLOW Cleanup* employs plant-based "phytoremediation" processes, exploring the use of ornamental, flowering, and fruiting plants, along with the typical plants most associated with phytoremediation. Working with CDOE Geologist Dave Graham, and soil scientist Dr. A.P. Schwab, Whitehead, is testing new plant species that may be used on Chicago's 400+ abandoned gas stations.

The plantings will contribute to the aesthetics and passive economic revitalisation of the site areas, while

Chicago: The Embedded Artist Project

simultaneously adding environmental value. These phyto-scapes will be interpreted for the public, increasing awareness of the interconnectivity of natural and cultural systems in the urban ecology. One of the key outcomes of the project is that the team pioneered the concept of leveraging time as an under-utilized asset in brownfield properties; a concept which the US EPA is now considering applying at the national level.

Slow Cleanup is a strategic part of a new planning initiative, focused on urban agriculture for sustainable economic development, Green Healthy Neighborhood, linking these new remediation techniques to soil and neighborhood revitalization planning efforts

Links, references, sources: Interview with artist Frances Whitehead and documents supplied by the artist, <http://www.makeartwithpurpose.net/projects.php?id=15>

About Carbon Arts

Carbon Arts facilitates an increased role for the creative sector in generating awareness and action on climate change and the environment through public arts commissions, events, exhibitions and research. As well as its work with artists, Carbon Arts works across economics, science, and technology to encourage diverse and open dialogue as one way of meeting the environmental challenges facing contemporary society.

We seek to generate and evaluate positive models for engaging the public in imagining and shaping a more sustainable future. At the heart of our practice is the belief that creativity is essential in making this transition, and that the journey should be playful, fun and rewarding.

carbonarts.org