

## ART IN A PUBLIC PLACE

'Edge of the Trees' By Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley

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*In many cases, the location of creation and generation, has shifted from the studio to the work's location of being; the place where its meaning is generated. The content is not solely enclosed within the work, but arises from its environment and interaction with the viewer. I feel this sense of place goes unrecognised as a key to the potential of artworks.*

Janet Laurence<sup>i</sup>

### Art and Architecture

Art in the Public Realm has been a consistent theme in the design of public spaces in the 20th Century. In partnership with modern architecture, public art was to be part of a democratising of public spaces. Art was to be delivered from the patrician surrounds of the court and the museum to the communal spaces of the city. Linked with Utopian and moralist ideals, public spaces sought social cohesion and transformation via their architecture, and through extension, their art. This at least was the theory – it very rarely actually happened.

In the first half of this century, when the ancestry of modern art and modern architecture were still closely aligned, the integration of art and architecture seemed natural. Modernist art was at home on the unpolluted walls and in the pure spaces created by the early modernist architects.

Yet as art made its journey through cubism, to abstract expressionism and beyond, it gained a physical independence from architecture. Whilst modern architecture lost the support of mainstream culture along the ultimately dry path of high modernism, with the stoically dull and glum buildings in the post war period of the late 40s and 50s, the concerns of art and architecture suddenly seemed vastly disparate. Only in individual cases has a convincing connection between art and architecture been maintained.

Sparse and lonely forecourts or lobbies now provided the setting for so much public art by the second half of this century, be they a Richard Serra, a Henry Moore or an Alexander Calder. On the whole, art in the public realm has become conceptually detached from the architecture that supplies its setting. Relegated once more to the subordinate role of adornment, it is not surprising that many artists choose to work on site specific pieces outside of the official spaces set aside by often well meaning public officials and architects.

The significance of the '*Edge of the Trees*' as public art is that it reminds us that the artist can be meaningfully involved in the public realm and that the artist's work can be integrated within an architectural and civic program.

### **The Role of the Curator**

It is not possible to discuss the significance of the '*Edge of the Trees*' as public art without direct reference to the Museum of Sydney as a whole.

The driving force behind the Museum of Sydney concept was the Historic Houses Trust, and the senior curator, Peter Emmett. In viewing the installation it is important to remember that this is a heavily curated piece. Before the artists were even chosen, the '*Edge of the Trees*' was already a well-developed concept within the Museum of Sydney thesis. Laurence was one of a number of artists originally invited to submit a proposal as part of a limited competition. She invited Aboriginal artist Fiona Foley to collaborate with her because the concept brief required the artists to respond directly to the culturally charged symbolism inherent within the site. Foley was able to bring to the project a genuine cultural input and authority to deal with material, that a non-Aboriginal artist could not have.

As part of the competition process, Senior Curator Peter Emmett prepared a concept brief which defined the role and message the sculpture was to encompass. The concept brief is itself an extraordinary document, which perhaps deserves as much critical acclaim as the completed installation. There is a fine line in the art of brief writing - between making clear what is required and being overly prescriptive. This brief managed to explain the interpretative role of the installation and its place within the Museum of Sydney.

The concept brief invited the artists to '*engage with the architecture in dialogue, counterpoint, even tension*'.<sup>ii</sup> It defined the role and message the sculpture was to encompass, and then proceeded to enthuse the imagination with a rich collection of text and visual based images and concepts.

### **A Site Specific Work of Art.**

The relationship between the installation and the Museum of Sydney building and plaza is one of the rare recent circumstances that art and architecture meaningfully engage. It is rare because the artists and architects have worked to respond to the design concepts already in place in an engagement that works with mutual respect. Laurence in particular was experienced in the process of working with architects and had collaborated with the Museum of Sydney architect, Richard Johnson of the architectural firm Denton Corker Marshall, on a previous installation. With this project, the artists and architects were in a direct dialogue with each other and the curatorial intentions as a whole. The '*Edge of the Trees*' is just the first chapter in the narrative that links the plaza, the building and the exhibits within.

The Museum of Sydney as a whole is an interpreter of place and the architecture sets up the fundamental ideas of form, material and space for the interpretation to begin and for the '*Edge of the Trees*' and other installations to inhabit. Conceptually the architecture was formed very early in the process, while the museum brief was very broad and the content of the museum as yet unfinalised, therefore it was for the architects to make the first move to interpret the site meaningfully. The architecture is symbolic of many of the aspirations of the colonisers and the European culture of their age. Formalist and classicist, it takes charge of the plaza with the authority of the imposing sandstone wall. The plan is composed of a series of substantial walls that geometrically and symbolically reference the foundations of First Government House, the grid of the archaeological dig laid over it, and the contemporary street grid.

Peter Emmett writes '*the museum is not the architecture, but it engages the symbolism of the architectural elements within a holistic statement - performing within and in counterpoint to the architecture*'.<sup>iii</sup> This separation between the

museum 'the building' and the museum 'the exhibition' sets up a juxtaposition between the formal and the ephemeral that metaphorically underscores much of the interpretative themes of the Museum of Sydney, and the relationship between the art and the architecture.

Consequently the *'Edge of the Tress'* is not an isolated piece of public art, but works as part of an overall narrative that is built upon the *genius loci* of the site of the First Government House. Little is left of First Government House now, just some footings that are for the most part permanently concealed under the tarmac of Bridge and Phillip Streets. It is understood in absentia, and its presence evoked by the architecture of the Museum, responding too and at times mimicking an imagined reconstruction of the house. The symbolism of the site is what is overwhelming. It represents a defining moment of contact between cultures when *'..... the 'discoverers' struggling through the surf were met on the beaches by other people looking at them from the edge of the trees.'*<sup>iv</sup>

The installation responds to the implied authority of the architecture in counterpoint. Originally the installation was intended to be located to the side of the plaza against the backs of the restored terrace houses. The artists proposed expanding the poles out across the plaza, as a mapping of the 29 Aboriginal clans of the Sydney area, and so that visitors would move through the installation to enter the museum. This was resisted by the architects for a number of reasons; the loose gravel would be walked into the museum, the layout of poles would interfere with the mapping out of the First Government House footings within the ground plane and the design intentions of the building had always assumed an open public space as a forecourt.

As the footprint of the installation was squeezed back to its current location, the placement of individual poles started to respond more directly to the architecture. The corten steel pillars, a clear symbol of the great technological achievements of the European culture, are placed as an extension of the building grid of the new building. The yellowblock sandstone pillars, cut directly from the earth and the preferred building material of colonial Sydney, are positioned with direct reference to the archeological grid and the footings of First Government House. The circular timber columns, split in two and sourced from the demolition site of the old

McWilliam's Wine store in Pyrmont, refer to the absent stand of trees that once grew in the site and as such most directly reference the literal theme of the edge of the trees. Their locations are more organic and placed to suit the spaces available between the other poles.

### **Process in the Making of Public Art**

The artists were given permission by the Ministry for the Arts to set up a studio within the Wharf level space of Wharf 4/5 within Walsh Bay. The importance of this studio was not just to provide a space large enough to store and produce the pillars, but gave the artists an address close to the site itself, allowing daily supervision of the work on the site.

In the making of the '*The Edge of the Trees*', the continuous hand of the artists has ensured a level of authenticity and detail not apparent in the early design sketches by themselves. Had the design been documented and packaged as a '*piece*', to be built by others in a tender situation, (in the way that much public art is procured), the result would have been entirely different.

The reality is that an installation like this cannot be successfully documented. The design is as much a product of its making, as the conceptual idea that initiated it. In the tradition of the studio process, the artists directed others in the making of the poles. Once on site, even though the locations for the poles were documented, their final locations were massaged by the artists in response to specifics of the site.

The production of the installation involved its own research that ran parallel to the more academic activities ongoing at the museum, drawing on the resources and expertise of others to add authenticity and rigour to the final product. This gave the artists an unprecedented access to primary material not readily available to those outside the museum confines. Whilst much of this '*research*' is not obvious to the viewer, it is critical to the integrity of the work and removes the temptation to resort to purely pictorial based decision making. The interaction between the artists and a range of specialists, from the architects to the archeologists, enabled the design process to actively engage the act of construction, and involved a collaboration beyond the expertise and knowledge of the artists themselves.

### **Relationship to the Body of the Viewer.**

There is a lot of trust in this installation. Usually art in the public realm is made to be defensive, in the assumption that sooner or later vandals will want to test their skills. Here the artists have placed potentially delicate pieces in a public place and expect that they will be respected. The work is not designed to be viewed from a distance, but experienced up close as part of a sensual and spatial encounter. There is a direct relationship to the body, as one moves through and amongst the poles. This gives the work a sense of scale that avoids the monumental and intimidating scale of many public works.

The installation is clearly designed to age and the viewer is encouraged to touch, to run their fingers along the engraved names and to feel the textures of wood, steel and stone. The open is not the controlled and contrived environment of the museum. There is wind, rain, pollution and daily changes in temperature - all of which will cause an unpredictable patina upon the work. In detailing and selecting materials, the artists have had to consider these issues. Over the years, an identifiable grease stain will develop on the sandstone at about the median arm height of the average person. Touching the steel, fingers will come away with red tips and the body acids left behind will speed the process of oxidation. Eventually the timber columns will become as polished as the seat of a church pew. As the timber columns age, they will split and distort, so date stamped zinc rings are planned to be slipped on to bandage and stabilize them, in time transforming the appearance from timber to zinc.

### **The Installation**

In the *'Edge of the Trees'*, myth and history are combined in a way that fuses the past tragedies of the Eora peoples, the discarded from England and the land stripped bare, so that the year 1788 might be seen in its context. Not merely as a beginning, but as a significant event in a continuous history.

Laurence and Foley have woven together historical and mythological symbolism to express a specifically Australian experience. The work does not aim to separate the experience of the two, that of the Eora and the Europeans, but concentrates on their interdependence through a common, though different, reliance on the land. There is

a constant merging and mingling of culture and nature as a metaphor for European and Aboriginal. At times the distinction is clear, at times it is not, as the notion of some kind of shared narrative is proposed.

The installation does not centre on the divisive elements of the shared history, instead it shows regard to those past: the indigenous, the displaced and the land. It is not that the work avoids debate, but its role is more one of interpretation than confrontation.

### **A Successful Outcome**

There is a point within all public projects when certain realities of budget, program and utility become unavoidable. It is often at this crucial point that public art falls by the wayside or becomes irreconcilably compromised. To involve an artist in the public realm does have its difficulties. They will regularly offend delicate sensibilities; they cause budget problems; they have trouble complying with ordinances and they never follow construction programs. There is also a masterful juggling required of egos, when the artist is simply one in a number to provide creative input to a project. Many public art proposals will fall victim to a complex political process that invariably exerts a gravitational pull towards the safe and the predictable.

At the Museum of Sydney this did not happen. The role of the artists was protected by the client/curator who ensured that the completed projects fulfilled their original brief. The official role of curator extended to supporting and critiquing the artists' work, as well as dealing with the many complex issues of politics and budget. As the installation has aged, the artists have continued to be consulted on any conservation works or modifications that have been required.

The *'Edge of the Trees'* is anchored to its location through a genuine engagement of the historical and cultural content of the site. It is enhanced through a meaningful interaction with the architect and architecture in the design of the museum plaza. In addition, it succeeds in bridging the current divide between modern public architecture and public art.

Andrew Nimmo

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<sup>i</sup> Laurence Janet, Housing the Arts – Conference Paper, presented at Intersection – A Meeting of Art and Architecture, RAlA National Convention, RAlA, ACT, 1996.

<sup>ii</sup> Historic Houses Trust of New South Wales, Edge of the Trees - Concept Brief., 1993.

<sup>iii</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>iv</sup> Rys Jones, "Ordering the Landscape" in I & T Donaldson, Seeing the First Australians, Sydney 1985, p 185.

Other references:

Edge of the Trees - Competition Submission. by Janet Laurence and Fiona Foley, 1993.