

LUNA PARK - DELIVERING ART TO THE PUBLIC REALM

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"Delivering Art to the Public Realm."

A series of articles leading up to the re-opening of Luna Park promised us that artists would have a significant input into the final form and spirit of Luna Park. Not high art, but the art of the carnival. The art of inversions, profanity and buffoonery. Sam Marshall, a member of the Luna Park Reserve Trust wrote, 'Despite a team of consultants with all the best intentions, it will be the artists that will give Luna Park its "otherness" or "Luna Parkness".'¹

Now that Luna Park is open and operating, there seems to be something vital missing. The bones are there. We walk under Luna Park's principal icon, the smiling face. We can see the ferris wheel, the big dipper, the wild mouse, the merry-go round. There are skittles to knock over and the crazy crooners to feed ping-pong balls to. But that "otherness" has yet to be layered over the park as a whole. As one of the artists I spoke to remarked, "It's a bit bland and wholesome." Like the park workers and their uniforms, appearing as they do resembling the collected alumni from a MacDonald's University, the impression of the park is one of safeness and predicability. Where is the contribution of the artists? Where is the spirit of the carnival?

The intention to involve artists was certainly there. Ross Harley was commissioned by the Park's architects, Ken Maher and Partners in association with Paul Berkmeier, to prepare a list of artists for various tasks, the idea being to "create the opportunity for artists to contribute to the visual and sensual promiscuity that is so much a part of the fun park."²

Reg Mombassa was commissioned to look at the ferris wheel. Jennifer Turpin was engaged to design a series of floating sculptures at the western entry to the park that turned into an anthropomorphic floating bridge, gently swaying to the motions of the harbour. Maria Kozic, Richard Allen, Robyn Stacey and Matthew Martin were each invited to develop concepts for the face. Michael Leunig was to design a memorial to the Ghost Train Fire of 1979. Mark Willett of MSJ with Melody Brisbane prepared facade designs for the rides. Peter Kingston advised on the internal refurbishments of Coney Island and much of the colour selections.

Little of this work has proceeded as planned to date. Reg Mombassa's ferris wheel awaits a sponsor. Jennifer Turpin's bridge is on hold due to budget restrictions and a cost over-run, and would also benefit from a sponsor. Much of Mark Willett's work has had to be heavily modified due to time and money running out. All four of the face concepts were considered inappropriate in the end, and a reinterpretation of the Barton face of the '50s was finally built. The Ghost Train Memorial became too expensive, and a new design by Martin

Sharp that incorporates sculptures by Michael Leunig is to open in June, the anniversary of the fire. The Coney Island refurbishments did occur, and as part artefact, part artifice, most successfully recaptures the spirit of the original park.

This is not to say that artists have not been involved in what we now see. A series of artists including, Richard Liney, Ashley Taylor, Suzanne Holman, Peter Callas and others have painted the backdrops and murals that are there, and this process still continues.

Paul Berkmeier quite rightly points out that what is there should be seen as the first stage, and that the park should never really be considered 'complete'. In the tradition of the park, evolution and reinvention will continue. However, so little of the artists' work that was specifically promoted in prepublicity for the park, (and that clearly was to be the highlight of the park), is in evidence, even in this first stage, that we must question the process of involving them in the first place.

There was nothing greatly wrong with the process of collaboration itself. Both Reg Mombassa and Jennifer Turpin said they found the process very complicated, stressful and at times disappointing, as they negotiated the inevitable design modifications in order to meet budgets, but their ideas still survived. The designs I have seen, and I have only seen some, seemed to both capture the spirit of the original Luna Park, and at the same time, update the park so that it did not become a slavish nostalgia trip.

But the park had baggage to carry in the form of community expectations. It had to have a smiling face. It had to have a ferris wheel. It had to have a big dipper. It had to have a museum, (Coney Island). And for commercial reasons, it needed a certain number of paying rides. In a literal sense, the artists involvement was not mandatory, and the new Luna Park could be delivered on time and to a budget, whether the artists contributed or not. A ferris wheel is a ferris wheel is a ferris wheel - whether Reg Mombassa has touched it or not.

To deliver Luna Park, the consultants and project managers had an unenviable job. There was an endless list of authorities that required approvals and reports. The client, that is the Luna Park Trust, was a committee. As late as August last year, a politically motivated deadline of January '95 was imposed for the opening when construction had not even begun. This not only pushed the project into a fast track situation, but caused major budget problems. The budget got tighter as a redesign of the big dipper foundations and legal costs associated with the residents actions and the serving on the Trust of several Freedom of Information applications, ate into the budgets for other parts of the park. The wrangling with a few hostile local

residents over noise issues continues and just got worse with the February ruling by the EPA.

In the end, the Park has become a victim of a complex political process that will invariably knock the stuffing out of most design in the public realm. It is a process that sooner or later exerts an inevitable gravitational pull towards the safe and predictable. The profane and artistic are difficult. They offend delicate sensibilities, they cause budget problems, they have trouble complying with ordinances, they never follow construction programs and they require a masterful juggling of egos. It was a similar process that nearly derailed the Opera House thirty years ago, and it is a similar process that is making a mockery of the design competition for the Olympics Village. Artists on this project have been introduced to the stressful and often disappointing world of construction that architects now take for granted.

It is a wondrous thing that the park exists at all, and we should be thankful that it does. In talking to people about the park, the most common remark I have heard is, "at least it is there". This in the end will not be enough to guarantee it life into the next century. It is not enough to just be satisfied with the park's existence. Mark Willett commented that "there is a density missing from the park - it needs to be worked and layered up." This should happen in the future and will depend as much on community support as it does on the flair and imagination of the operators and the Trust.

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¹ Marshall, Sam. Pollis - Issue No2 September 1994, The Politics and Art of Luna Park, p.44.

² Harley, Ross as quoted by Sam Marshall. Summer 92 Object, p.12.