

The Art of Process

"Where there is artistic excellence there is human dignity"

Mine Pire-Sciascia 1970



If artistic excellence is in fact the beacon of human dignity, then it is art in public places that is thrust into the spotlight as the herald of their people and their place.

The recent completion of the Dunedin Botanic Garden entranceway by an artist-led team has gestured to a landmark in public arts practice in New Zealand. The development of the entranceway as a sculptural piece has provided an enduring cultural statement, a rigorous process and a strong precedent for the future involvement of artists in public places.

The project's beginnings came about through divergent means. Stuart Griffiths, a prominent Dunedin artist had secured Creative New Zealand funding for a work of public art but was in search of an appropriate site. The Dunedin City Council was aware of potential sites and it was through liaison with Lloyd Edwards (Dunedin City Council Community Arts Adviser) that wheels were set in motion and relationships were formed with the staff of Dunedin Botanical Garden.

Community and client participation was a strong element of the process from the initial stages. As Lloyd Edwards outlines: "We'd already done some homework on the gardens and some liaison through running a small temporary exhibition project called "Graft" and that introduced the staff to a range of artists... this was vital in achieving the trust and respect of the staff towards the artists and art processes."

A clear brief was written by the council that allowed the artist to drive the project team from the initial stages. "We were then in a position where we had the friends of the Botanic Garden, the artist, the staff of the Botanic Garden and Dunedin City Council all saying, with one voice, that they wanted this work to go ahead and they were happy to attract funding to the project. So, we had a community... all behind an artist, all wanting to achieve one thing." The project also happened to coincide with the 150th anniversary of Otago celebrations and for this reason was able to attract additional funding from the Alexander McMillan Trust and the Community Trust of Otago. Stuart reinforces this view: "Having many masters can actually be the undoing of a lot of good work, however in this case it provided a broad understanding on which to build the project."

As the human inertia of the project began to roll over, other vital contacts were made in forming technical relationships with local artisans Longbeach Masons and Zeal Steel. Both of these teams contributed to design and construction brainstorming with the artist. The final product has become a credit to their professional integrity and skill on a project that had to have the quality of a work of art and not merely a standardised design that infects many of this country's urban locales.

In many ways the project had to move beyond the traditional designer/contractor

relationship. A perilous task, were it not for the immaculate skills of the artist Stuart Griffiths. As Lloyd Edwards outlines, "I think there are certain artists who would find this process unacceptable to their practice and there are certain artists who would love to do this who shouldn't go anywhere near a project like this. It's very much a site-specific project and we were fortunate to have an artist who had an understanding of that, combined with the technical skills and the communication skills to be able to interpret a wide range of opinion. Stuart took great pains to educate the team on all aspects of the site, most significantly the people."

The physical characteristics of the work take much of their language from an intriguing mix of classical landscape architecture with a contemporary twist. The basalt stone inlay set in textured concrete draws its pattern from the intricate designs of the iron gates, which defend the entrance to the garden. The four bluestone sentinels capture the point of decision in the design in impressive form, which will eventually be absorbed as part of the surrounding canopy.

From the artist's perspective the work sets out to remind Otago people of their diverse heritage. As Stuart elaborates, "The work is designed to invite the attention of the passer-by without underestimating him or her as the addressee. The project does justice to its environment without condescension or

compromise to the inherent values and function of the site and avoids the perception of mere decoration.”

As Stuart outlines: “The physical and artistic aspects of this project are important yet the purity of that vision among the political and administrative aspects was the real key to its success... It’s encouraging for an artist to be involved in a project that has an integrated plan of development within the site. It’s this aspect of planned integration that gives contemporary art a warmer reception in public places.”

Whilst the work exists in the design and artistic worlds, it is the monumental nature of the work that takes us a step further. “Monumental works tend to represent a wide range of interests over a long period of time... their iconic nature tends to ensure a more rigorous process in which the artist is just one spoke in a large wheel.” The monument also inferred a much longer timescale than conventional work which further intensifies the need to have strong consultation and community processes at the expense of some artistic ownership. Because of the enduring nature of the work it seems the form has been a subtle expansion of the iconography that existed on the site rather than introducing a new language.

As an artist who has an impeccable understanding of integrating the artistic process with the community process Stuart has been able to achieve a work that is a strong statement of place and not of the artist’s style or personal agenda. “I hope in 50 years time it will have the look of being of its place rather than a reflection of the individual.”

The Botanic Gardens entranceway project has paved the way for similar arts projects in New Zealand. It has set a benchmark for arts practice in public places that will enable a move away from traumas of the past. As Lloyd Edwards states: “I think the Botanic Garden project has created a model for public arts practice... this has been a rigorous public process that has been able to inform the landscape, inform arts practice, inform public debate and demystify the creative process. New Zealand hasn’t got a great history for public art and the reason why is because people don’t communicate... and up until now there hasn’t been a process for doing so.” ■■

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Photography by Matt Vance.*

Enduring artistic statement evident in Dunedin Botanic Garden entranceway.

