

Unitec ePress Occasional and Discussion Paper Series

Suburban Interventions

Understanding the values of
place and belonging through
collaboration

Author: P. Woodruffe

the everyday **collective** laboratory

Suburban Interventions

Understanding the values of place and belonging
through collaboration.



Woodruffe, Paul

Lecturer, Department of Design and Visual Arts, UNITEC New Zealand

pwoodruffe@unitec.ac.nz

Published in 2012 by Unitec ePress



ISBN - 978-1-927214-00-8

© 2012. Copyright for this publication remains with the authors.

All rights reserved. No part of this publication may be reproduced in any form or by any means without written permission of the research team.



Abstract

How can a socially defined project facilitate meaningful knowledge transfer between community, corporate and institution? In order to address this question, this paper focuses on an ongoing live project in suburban Auckland New Zealand begun in 2010, undertaken by a post-graduate student and researcher collective. The collective currently creates subtle interventions sited within local cyberspace, and through this current project will employ impermanent and small-scale design to advocate for a series of neglected and disputed sites. It explores the impact and value the presence of artists and designers working within local communities can have, and “champions the role of the artist in the development of the public realm, and their intuitive response to spaces, places, people and wildlife” (Wood 2009, p.26). The significance of this project is that it promotes a collaborative and multi-disciplinary methodology that works with community groups to advocate to corporate entities for a wider social and environmental awareness of specific sites. This paper aims to explain the processes and findings of the project to date through both its successes and failures. It also proposes the possibility of the methodology being transferred to undergraduate and post-graduate study as a tool to promote multi-disciplined collaborate project briefs that focus on community well being.

Working together from outside

“Art translates the language of nature into the language of man”

This project was undertaken by the UNITEC research group; “the everyday collective laboratory.” It is a multi-disciplinary group of Post Graduate researchers and practitioners who are interested in discovering and articulating sense of place through the use of synectics. The approach taken can be best described as addressing a perceived lack of recognition within local governance of the level of inter-connectedness and inter-dependence required between the social and physical landscape of a community, an example is Marot’s comment on the nature of site and design as being “fields of relations rather than arrangements of objects” (Marot 2003, p.iii). The primary focus is on social and environmental advocacy, especially in regard to heritage and memorial sites. Clifford expresses this succinctly when discussing the contributions of artists to the Parish Maps Project in the UK;

“It begins with, and is sustained by, inclusive gestures and encouraging questions. What is important to you about this place, what does it mean to you? What makes it different from other places? What do you value here? What do we know, what do we want to know? How can we share our understandings? What could we change for the better? Turning each other into experts in this way helps to liberate all kinds of quiet knowledge, as well as passion, about the place” (Clifford, 2008).

The Parish Maps Project has been a big influence in the methodology used by the collective in applying fine art practices to the search for connections between, and special character within places. The individuals within the collective work intuitively and are not assigned specific roles, and it is a given within the group that “art that deals with ideas is more interesting than art that deals with technique” (Bayles & Orland, 2001, p.97), and that the everyday collective artists are foremost using their artistic expression to convey nature of place, rather than comment on contemporary art practice. The group establish their individual goals within the collective’s wider goal, which in this case is an outcome for a political and town planning action. This process is begun by selecting a specific site or sites from the map of the area, ones that by using their particular interest and interpretation of the project contain possibilities for interventions. The collective project progresses as the timeframes for local events dictate, such as city authority board meetings, local public events and community group committee meetings. These are not unlike the rhythms and seasons found within nature, and as Griffith observes, by “rendering visible some of the rhythms and forces operating in the landscape. It is hoped that this will enable forces that have always operated in the landscape to be uncovered” (Griffith 2005).

The philosophy that has been adopted is based on the idea that the artist firstly becomes familiar to the community, and is prepared to make compromises, such as the ability of being able to surrender ownership of an idea in order to see it reach fruition, or to willingly accept conditions imposed by the community regarding what is acceptable to them in terms of scale if any interventions are to appear in the landscape. On the surface these conditions may seem like creative integrity could be severely eroded, but the findings of the previous research project undertaken by the group within a similar community found that flexibility and adaptation produced the most creative outcomes, and that lack of compromise meant nothing would be possible. It is a case of the end justifying the means. Participation in the collective requires that the creative satisfaction for the individual be primarily the collaborative knowledge sharing experience between group members, and in the understanding that “art that falls short often does so not because the artist failed to meet the challenge, but because there was never a challenge there in the first place” (Bayle & Orland, 2001, p.94).

The methodology that has been adopted by the collective for bringing together various community groups has been succinctly put by Crouch in the statement; “Like songs, Maps are at their richest when people working on them are inspired by their own lives, making their own rules, only faintly observing what somebody else somewhere else has done” (Crouch 1996, p.64). This bringing together is facilitated through two actions; firstly the collective acts as a focal point for the collection of disparate pieces of information and images that can be put together in an aesthetically pleasing and easily understood form and distributed to the interested parties. Secondly the collective offers mentoring to the community groups through the expertise available through its members, this can take such forms as the design of posters advertising local events, presentation design for deputations to the local authorities and strategies for membership drives. It has also been noted as the collective is based within Unitec, a New Zealand Institute of Technology, the collective is

seen as politically neutral and without a profit motive that could be otherwise seen as a threat.

The starting point

In 2009, the everyday collective laboratory: www.collectivelab.wordpress.com succeeded in identifying a neglected and overgrown Centenary and War Memorial called Memorial Avenue, an almost half a kilometre long double row planting of native Pohutukawa trees. This memorial was not acknowledged in any of the city authorities planning schedules or maps, and its history had been lost to all but a few local residents. After undertaking research, site analysis and public consultation, a visual arts based presentation was made to the local communities and city authorities. This methodology was chosen to demonstrate that “the turn toward artistic forms of representation brings social research to broader audiences, mitigating some of the educational and social biases that have traditionally dictated the beneficiaries of academic scholarship” (Leavy 2009, p. 55). This document succeeded in having the avenue listed as a heritage site and given the necessary protection. But there was no money available or an agreement able to be reached with the local community groups on how to go about restoring the avenue. Financial problems were identified as a major factor in restoring the avenue to a recreational asset for walking, and planning consent issues made a built design solution impossible in restoring the War Memorial aspect of the avenue. These problems are due to the isolation the avenue has from other important heritage sites, and to an almost complete aversion to the addition of any built structures on the site by the local community. What was required now by our methodology, was to identify and explore any relationships the avenue had to other heritage sites or social groups within the local area, this would allow it to be somehow connected to the larger picture of heritage and community in Auckland City and fields of relations established.

Neighbouring places

To collect data and research the wider landscape in order to discover other sites or structures that could be connected to the history of Memorial Avenue, two approaches were taken. The first was to use heritage image research and the mapping techniques of GIS imagery with multiple walking excursions through the area utilizing drawing and photography. The second was to identify all local interest groups and neighbourhood organizations.

From this research, two sites within a 1.5 kilometre radius were identified as having significant heritage status and shared some interesting connections with Memorial Avenue, these sites were; Rahopara Pa and Kennedy Park. But these sites including Memorial Avenue straddled two local authorities, the Pa site and Kennedy Park in one, and Memorial Avenue in the other. What was needed, was something that connected the sites and over riding the politically separated cadastral boundaries. What was discovered through walking through every public walkway and street in the area, was that the local school; Campbells Bay Primary that lay between the sites, had an area called the Community Forest, this contained

a wonderful series of raised wooden walkways through a native forest restoration project. This walkway could connect Memorial Avenue to Kennedy Park.

Synergies

Walking, observing and conducting conversations about the narratives discovered within the sites through our individual research, revealed interesting synergies between the sites, as Potteiger proposes; "...narrative offers ways of knowing and shaping landscapes not typically acknowledged in conventional documentation, mapping, surveys, or even the formal concerns of design" (Potteiger 1998, p.ix). It was discovered all sites shared three common histories; Maori cultural history, the Second World War and documented memorial tree planting. An example found of how these histories are inter-twinned is the fact that in 1940, local children from Campbells Bay school planted many of the trees named for the volunteer soldiers leaving for war, and the Community Forest begun 60 years later in the school grounds, is also composed of trees planted by school children also named after individuals. These sites both represent memorial, one to sacrifice and hope, one to life and the promise of future. It was observed in the process of creating connectivity between individuals, connections within the landscape formed, and that possibly collective seeking is the best way to find collective being.

Finding common ground

Rahopara Pa, Kennedy Park and Memorial Avenue all individually contained important heritage landscape features and architecture, and individually these sites had undergone degrees of neglect. The solution to enable a restoration of Memorial Avenue, and give protection to the collection of heritage architecture that was under threat, was to connect the sites together physically so they would instead of remaining marginalized individual sites, could become one significant site of regional importance. This could create interest from outside the local area and attract funding from wider than the local government. Mapping and research into narrative had identified the Community Forest as the connecting piece that now made it possible to consider all the sites as one entity, to be seen as belonging together.

Presentation and dissemination

Custodianship of the sites is vested in seven separate organizations; five community groups and one local and one central government body. Two of the community groups have an interest in Memorial Avenue, as it lays within a park they consider themselves guardians of. Both are openly hostile towards each other due to conflicting ideas of tree plantings and removal. This reinforced the necessity to "talk in languages that different groups will comprehend, not because of any hierarchy of knowledge but difference" (Crouch 1996, p.62).

The first task of the collective's project was to gather all the knowledge from these disparate groups. This knowledge was then used to design a publication design containing a plain non-

academic style English text that focused on the narratives extracted from the sites by collective members and from individuals or organisations having expert knowledge. This was supported by paintings and drawings. The layout and typography is designed to be both an inexpensively printed and bound document, and a Pdf file placed online through a wordpress site and distributed on Pen Drives. A completed printed document was distributed to the school library, the local public library, and all the local community groups.

The most important thing

One of the most important findings from the first project in Memorial Avenue was the fact that the local residents had a complete aversion to what they perceived as a “design” proposition. The notion of a designer coming into their neighbourhood with a plan to place a design into or onto the landscape without their request was unacceptable to them. So the document prepared for the heritage walkway proposal contained nothing that could be called landscape design for construction, and it was vital that no sense of urgency or externally driven timetables were introduced to the process, and that the document was seen as a gift and a celebration of their landscape, culture and heritage instead of a plan and an agenda for development.

An exhibition of multi-disciplinarity

To clarify and to display the multi-disciplinary nature of the collective, an exhibition was held at an art gallery sampling the work undertaken on the project so far. The exhibited work consisted of photography, jewellery, painting and drawing. The research component was displayed within copies of the catalogue.

Each artist and discipline dealt with a specific aspect or feature of the proposed walkway, and were chosen based on the potential power of the medium to become a storyteller and advocate for its subject. It was an acknowledgment of “how one recognizes sites through design, especially in reaction to the general state of environmental and cultural amnesia that characterizes our time” (Giro, 1999).

The advocating artists and their subjects are:

Edith Amituanai; photographer

This body of work involved photographing the old house on Kennedy Park, this house was once the Officers Mess, part of the military camp and gun battery installation, and was subsequently, along with a dozen others turned into state housing. These houses with the exception of this one have all now been demolished; this house is the only surviving example and compliments the still standing gun battery structures and the Observation Post, a listed heritage building. The house although still owned by the state is abandoned, deemed unfit for rental and faces an uncertain future. After a great deal of difficulty access to the interior of this house was granted and a series of images were made. The photographs were taken without a flash and relied on only natural light; this made the images remarkably descriptive of the experience of being within the archaic originality of the interior in the old house,

achieving the goal of placing this 1940's architecture considered by many as just ugly, within the milieu of the vintage and historic.

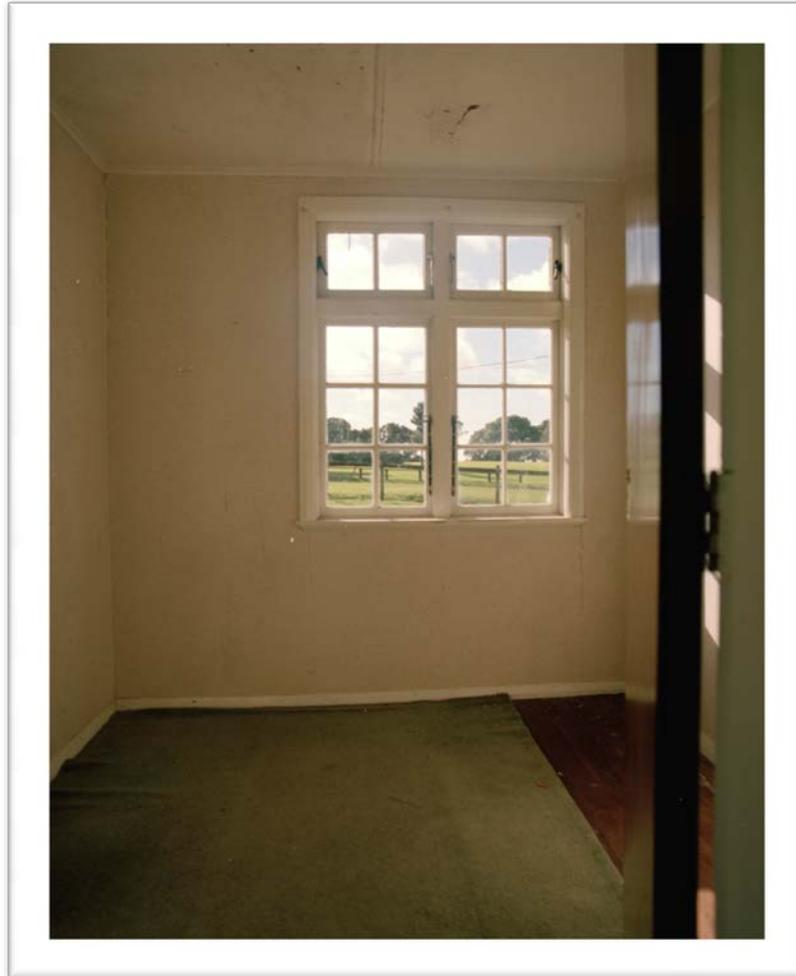


Image 1. Edith Amituanai - Interior of the old Barracks House

Ilse-Marie Erl and Simon Gamble; contemporary craft artists

The connection between the landscape and what we find, our stories and what becomes of them and the questioning of ownership can be addressed through these made objects. In New Zealand/Aotearoa the indigenous Maori people have a word called "Taonga," this can mean "treasure" in English, but it is not a true translation, as it is not necessarily value for materiality such as gold, the object is valued for, rather being of family, place and belonging. The research and artwork document the collective has compiled and created on the sites has in its digital form been placed into miniature data storage devices, and these in turn have been placed into objects made from material from the three heritage sites. A wooden bullet made from a fallen tree branch in Memorial Avenue, a fragment of concrete fallen from one of the gun emplacements in Kennedy Park, and an old cockle shell found in one of the middens at the Pa site.



Image 2. Ilse-Marie Erl and Simon Gamble - Wooden bullet memory, Pohutukawa wood from Memorial Tree No. 8

Paul Woodruffe; painter

Drawing and painting were chosen as an effective medium to reveal the narratives extracted from the sites, to celebrate the key places within the sites that determine character and to articulate the connections discovered between architectural and landscape elements. The paintings were a key part in the extraordinary being able to be seen in the ordinary, and to elevate perception to over ride categorization in the evaluation of the landscape elements.

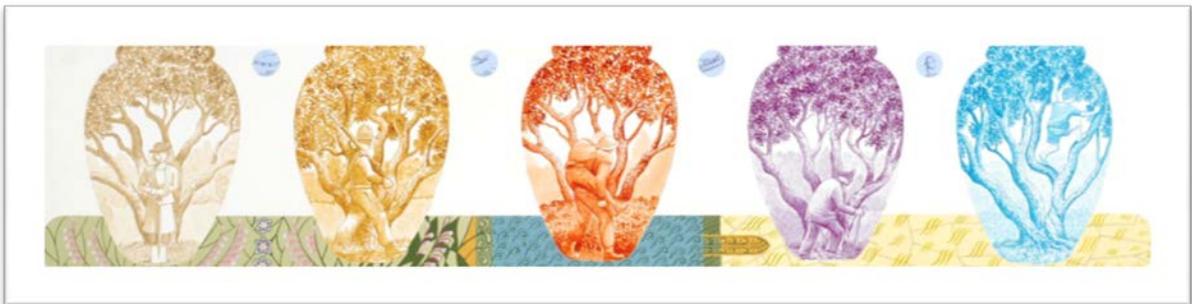


Image 2. Paul Woodruffe - The Soldiers Trees, oil on board

Ian Henderson; Landscape Designer

This work explores the values of place and belonging through the concept of code and identity. It does this with a series of breastplates made from steel wire and plastic, these plates designed to be worn as a form of body adornment, are similar to many used by the peoples of Polynesia as form of identification. On these plates are painted bar codes that

when activated give the longitude and latitude of the sites. The value within this work is not only that it discusses identity and belonging, but also brings into question the use of codes in accessing information.



Image 4. Ian Henderson - Place and Identity plate, plastic and steel wire

Exhibition not only acted as another way to deliver the research to the wider public, but it assisted the collective in understanding how the various approaches could highlight the multiple dimensions possible in the perception of place. This connective diversity of enquiry happened in an entirely intuitive way, and reflected the experimental nature of the collective.

Artists within a community

“ We have departed from a world of forms and objects and entered a world of relationships and events. But we still desperately need art and maps”
(Kanarinka, 2006)

The first problem the project had to solve was to identify what defines the community in terms of the project, and ask the question is this community one that is represented solely by the organized groups that exist within the area? Or should some attempt be made to enter into dialog with the wider population? The failure of the exhibition to attract reasonable numbers of local residents despite an extensive mail drop, demonstrated the futility of this approach, and so it became evident that the established community organizations contained the individuals who are willing to engage with outside agencies in developing new ideas.

The local community groups that were encountered, maintained a healthy cynicism of the city authorities, and were deeply suspicious of outsiders with plans for development or change. So these groups understood that “how we assess and address landscape issues depends on how landscape is defined” (Smith 2009, p.30), and that “so much surveying, measuring, fact gathering, analysis and policy-making leaves out the very things which make a place significant to the people who know it well” (Clifford 1996, p.4). An observation was that the word “artist” provoked a far warmer reception from the local groups than word “designer” in describing our activity; this I believe was due to the perception that an artist observes and records, as opposed to a designer who is someone who wishes to alter the landscape in some way. But this “artistic activity” was seen as making their places special by “someone who knows” about the agreed values of landscape, and was able to recognize that the landscape is “neither simply a total of bio-physical elements, patterns and processes occurring over time, even though these are regarded as formative factors” (Smith 2009, p.31).

The mono-cultural nature of the location was found to be the source of the few negative experiences encountered, and this related to a certain attitude to strangers evident in one of the neighbourhood groups active in the project. This area has a reputation among central city residents as being deeply conservative, suburban in nature and lacking in cultural activity. Some experiences we had in presenting examples of visual art in relation to sense of place were initially met with suspicion, this was addressed by the use of extensive supporting factual information accompanied by conventional mapping as it is easily understood in describing what already exists and conformed to normative site analysis practices. This was done with the knowledge that it is “possible to think of a map not as a representation of reality but as a tool to produce reality” (Kanarinka 2006, p.8), and this creative mapping is how the concept was introduced.

After 18 months of establishing contact and dialog with all the various groups and authorities, an understanding of how the local people viewed and valued their places was being compiled, and only after this period of time could any interventions within the landscape be created with any integrity, and it was quite apparent that initially any such interventions would have to be either of a temporary nature or very small in scale. In order to make this project truly collaborative the local resident groups had to become partners, as they saw themselves as guardians, and rightly so, after many of these groups had been formed to fight environmentally damaging and intrusive development by outsiders.

Suburban interventions

“Social intervention in continually creating and recreating the particularity of a place is not easy, it reminds us that communities are driven by tension as much as compassion, that the fluidity of insiders and outsiders needs constant bridge building, that it is hard work sustaining enthusiasm and effort. The biggest step is the first one.” (Clifford 2008, p.5)

In order to involve as many of the local and wider populations as possible, and to bring on board the local authorities in creating the heritage walkway, a single event was needed to focus the disparate groups to the potential the project offered their environment. The Annual Heritage Week event in September 2011 was identified as the ideal platform to do this, even though it was six months away it fitted into the rhythm of the politics involved. This celebration is sponsored by the Auckland Council and is city wide with extensive publishing of events, promotional tours and most importantly a budget for project materials. The collective decided to stage an event in partnership with the local residents association, with interventions on and across all sites, and the methodology acknowledges the validity of de Sola Morales' theory of "Urban Acupuncture" that contends; "The urban skin also channels qualitative energy. And if acupuncture speaks of "cold" and "hot" energy, the qualities of the urban epidermis are also blunt or sharp, mental or sensorial." (de Sola Morales 2008.p.24). The intention of this methodology is to also address the issue of "the gradual withdrawal from landscape as a place to landscape as a piece of paper or a computer screen" (Girof 1999, p.95) and in doing so allow the narratives from within the sites to become an environmental experience.

Once the sensitive points within the landscape have been identified, QR Codes and "Drop Boxes will be placed so as to enable access to the information, images and narratives within cyberspace. All supporting objects will be biodegradable, removable or made at a scale that renders them unobtrusive to the environment.



Image 5. QR Code for
www.collectivelab.wordpress.com

To begin the conversations that need to happen between the collective, the organizers and the community, it is necessary to visually match the selected sensitive points with the information and narratives. This is done using a collage technique that avoids "the sterile securities of analysis" (de Sola Morales 2008, p.197), and enables the raw data from the research in the form of images and text, to be placed within raw images of the sites. And so "the resultant cognitive shift enables preconceptions about landscapes to be downplayed, and ways of analyzing landscapes to be enhanced" (Griffiths 2005).

These composite images are designed to work on two levels; the first being a way of starting the creative process for ideas within the collective; the second is to make visible and easily understood to the community, the connection between the research data and the sites. The images are catalysts for the synthesizing of collaborative partnerships between researchers, artists, and community members, and this enables a discussion based on common ground to dictate the structure of the project. It is clear that at the heart of this project is collective map making through collaborative artistic practice. As Wood contends when he refers to mapping as something that synthesizes “diverse landscapes, projecting them onto and into one another, with less than subtle hints that one is correlative to another or that this is an agent or effect for that” (Wood 1992, p.138).

Catalytic images for intervention



Image 5. Concept for Rahopara Pa intervention

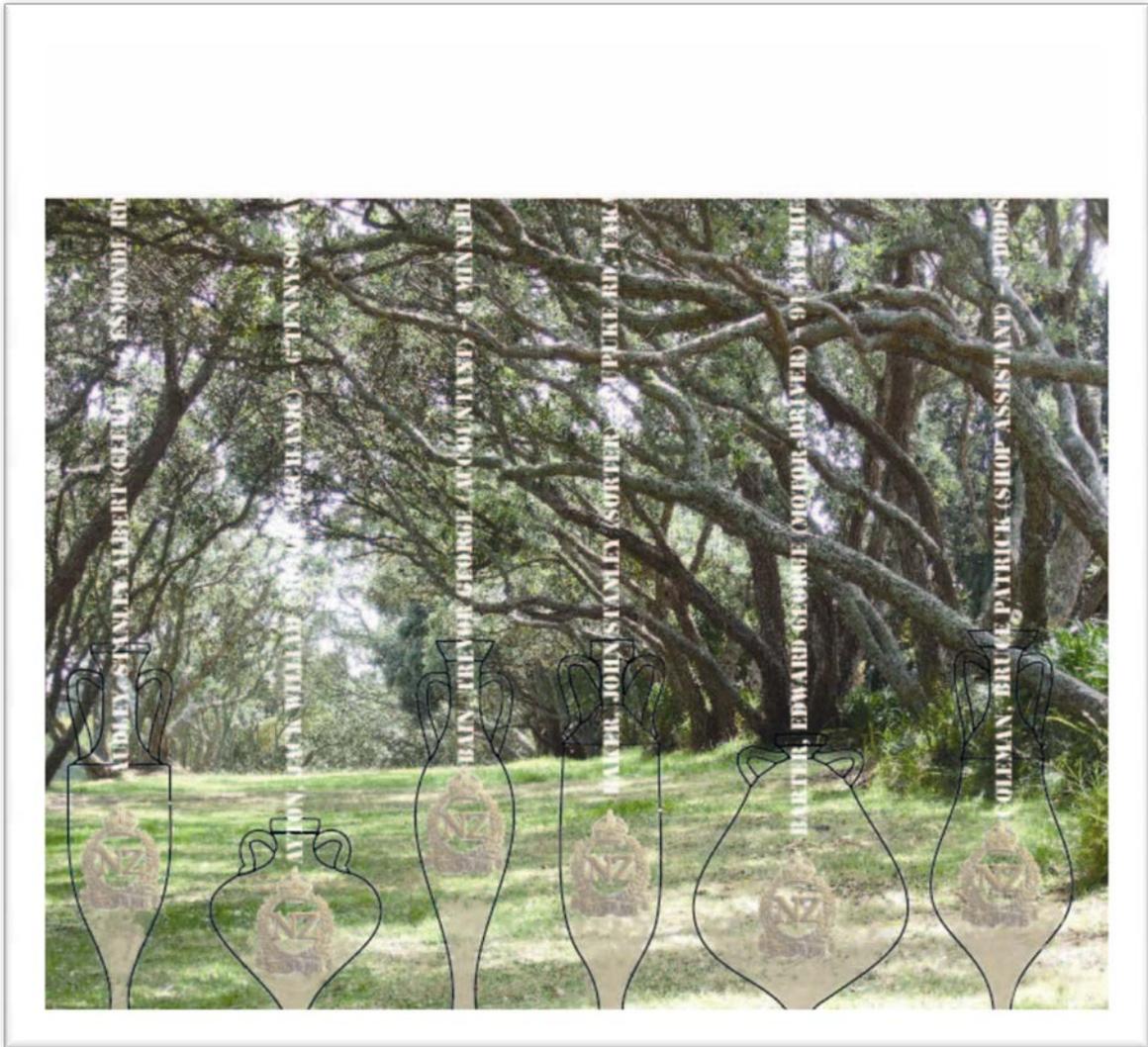


Image 6. Concept for Memorial Avenue intervention

Conclusion

What are we trying to achieve?

What we are asking is how our socially defined art and design project could effectively facilitate meaningful knowledge transfer between community, corporate and institution. Essentially experimenting through a project on how a group of artists and their works can be used to achieve an outcome usually attained through town planning and politics, and how research based knowledge from an institution and local knowledge from a community can be shared to advocate to corporate governance for environmental improvement.

Are we succeeding in realizing this? And how are we measuring success and failure? The answer to the first question is yes, and this is due to the collectives map making, unconventional cartography, but none the less mapping the place through artworks, and through this mapping discovering new knowledge about the sites and their relationships to each other. The maps are the vehicles in which are transferring this knowledge. And this is

clarified as Crouch proposes when the map-makers are, like the collective, new arrivals to the place; “what difference, if any, does this make to ways in which we not only make sense of where we are, but in terms of claims we may make on that place.” And Crouch goes on to describe the artist made maps as “vehicles for sensitivity and for action. They celebrate attachment. They can be used to steady the view, and the pulse in local disagreements; their ‘beauty’ and pleasing prospect can override the embedded tensions amongst the people in a place. Their singularity can conceal a deeper diversity” (Crouch, 1996, p.53). The presentation of the paintings and drawings to the community groups drew without exception, a positive response, especially within Centennial Park where the Centennial Park Bush Society and the rival group The Centennial Park Protection Society both saw common ground in the aesthetic representations of the parks narratives. The images acted as tables around which discussion could be held around, and conflicting aspirations for the preservation and improvement of the elements depicted within the images were mediated by the presence of the artwork, acting as both a starting point and a destination. The key to this is having images that are not strictly representational, stylisation and poetic interpretation along with multiple narrative referencing within the picture is vital to facilitate an open reading of it.

Are we succeeding?

The measurements for success and failure are being defined throughout the slow progress the project is making. This is due to the extended timeframes that occur when working within community politics. This causes problems when results are required from research projects by the annual academic timetable in regard to outputs and funding. A longer-term commitment is required of two, or even three years in order to establish meaningful relationships with communities that can lead to a projects conclusion. This issue is made difficult as unlike medicine or the social sciences, where precedents for timeframes have been established for studies within communities.

However, artists working within long timeframes, within specific geographic locations and for specific outcomes have no precedent in New Zealand. But the project has, when seemingly stalled received new life through the support of the local residents association who recognised the value of a partnership that can foster courage by association in regard to campaigning for the preservation of the heritage architecture. Both the Auckland Council Local Board and the Heritage Parks and Recreation Forum when acknowledging the value of the project in the public realm, added weight to the argument that the project is being successful in transferring knowledge, and goes some way to address the issues of values and place identified by Judge Smith in the Environment Court decision of 2009 when he contended; “How we assess and address landscape issues depends on how landscape is defined” (Smith, 2009. p.30-31). This statement identifies the problem faced by undertaking the study of place through purely scientific means, and opens the way for the visual arts to assist in the understanding of place and belonging. The acknowledgment of the collective’s document with its paintings and drawings, as being of great value to understanding place, may enable the role of the artist to be adapted to that of a communicator beyond the traditional forums of art galleries and street walls, and into the legal and democratic institutional processes that determine the fate of communities.



Image 7. Rahopara Pa to Memorial Avenue - 3 colour Lithograph. Paul Woodruffe in association with Auckland Print Studios Unitec

Is it worth it?

Knowledge transfer from the collective to the local residents is an ongoing occurrence and has been very successful in fostering trust and building relationships. The researchers in turn have gained valuable knowledge in the subtle workings of local politics and of the hierarchal structures within communities that control change in ways that can greatly assist other research projects that explore place and belonging. The project is adding to and expanding the use of synectics in environmental and town planning as it relates to advocacy and democracy, and pioneering the use of the visual arts as “industrial poetry”, the use of creative image-making to facilitate and assist the community to communicate what it is they see as of special character within there places. The use and distribution of free limited edition lithographic prints as agents for advocacy to key stakeholders, published and distributed site analysis mapping and artwork documents, and the staging of events and exhibitions dedicated to educate and promote harmonious ecology of place to legislators and decision makers are three of the proven strategies used by the collective.

One of the key findings is that once this project methodology has been started in a community, it would be unethical to suddenly uproot the project or terminate it. Once the relationships have been established, the artists and designers are seen as members of the community and partners in the projects the local groups are undertaking.

One partnership opportunity not yet explored is that of business and industry, this will be addressed in the second stage of the project when it is moved to the Rosebank Road area, where there exists an established community of industry and business. But as mentioned, to ensure ethics are correct, an on going relationship of assistance, mentoring and advocacy will continue with the north shore community group partners and more members for the collective will be recruited to assist in this.

The completion of this project in November 2011 will allow the publishing of the final findings from the project in 2012. This will be able us to define the possibilities for their direct application into official processes for community advocacy for heritage and special character in landscape.

References

References

Bayles, B & Orland, T. (2001). *Art and Fear - The Image*. Continuum Press: California.

Clifford, S. and King, A. (1996). *From place to place, maps and Parish maps*. Common Ground: London.

Crouch, D. 1996. *From place to place, maps and Parish maps*. Common Ground: London.

De Sola-Morales, M. 2008. *A Matter of Things*. NAI Publishers: Rotterdam.

Griot, C. 1999. Vision in Motion; Representing Landscape in Time. In *Recovering Landscape*, ed. James Corner. Princeton Architectural Press: New York.

Griffith, C. 2005. *Reframing the Given*. MLA Thesis, UNITEC.

Marot, S. 2003. *Sub- Urbanism and the art of memory*. AA Publishing: London.

Leavy, P. 2009. *Method meets art*. The Guilford Press: New York.

Smith, Judge J.A. 2009. *NZ Environment Court*. Decision No. A018/2009. New Zealand Government.

Potteiger & Purinton. 1998. *Landscape Narratives*. John Wiley & Sons: New York.

Wood, D, 2006. *Cartographic Perspectives*. North American Cartographic Information Society, Issue 53.

Wood, D. 1992. *The Power of Maps*. The Guilford press: New York, London.

