

SPIRIT OF



There is still a tendency to think of public space as 'off-cuts' of a public design or thoroughfare plan. After all, like much in our easy and commodified lives, we use it, we pass through it, and we take it for granted. Here, Federation Square CEO Kate Brennan asks while industries or major events are evaluated for the economic and/or social contribution, are public spaces considered in the same vein?

SPACE

While public space for this purpose is defined as 'all those parts of the built and natural environment, where the public has free access (streets, squares, rights of way, open spaces and parks, and public/private space where the public has access)¹, I've used examples of the impact and value of major public spaces while assuming that this value applies to smaller, less well-defined or obvious public space.

It is appropriate to draw a link between access for citizens to public space, and the quality of democracy. The early Greek 'polis' or city-state emphasised communal behaviour, and as cities evolved, designed public space for religious, secular and commercial activities became increasingly important (for example, the Agora). These spaces had multiple functions; citizens interacted and discussed

issues pertaining to the city, aesthetic and pleasurable qualities were valued, commerce thrived, and informal and community activity space developed. Indeed the privileges of 'citizenship' were reflected in the public space whereas women, foreigners and slaves were not deemed to be citizens, their access to certain public spaces (the most 'democratic') was prohibited²

As important conceptually to public space, is the age-old African world view of Ubuntu. Ubuntu weaves together the humanity of each individual and is at the heart of human security in relation to the existence of, compassion and respect for, and sharing and living with others. One's identity as an individual and his/her existence and meaningfulness depends on the existence and survival of other individuals, and on human

interdependence. Sharing with and caring for each other gives a social and traditional base to individuals and communities to live together and ensure that the survival, livelihood and dignity of individuals and communities are respected.³

Whether the discourse around public space has an environmental/livability or quality of life/wellbeing approach at its core, it is clear that there is a growing body of evidence that getting public space right contributes directly to social capital, that is, 'As a stage to encourage social cohesion and interaction and build social capital, as a venue for economic exchange and as an element in determining economic competitiveness and investment decisions; as an environmental resource and direct influence on energy use and as an important

contributor to the livability of urban places and an influence on the health and wellbeing of local populations.'⁴

But there is every risk that our public space gets reworked or developed with only the most superficial understanding of what 'great public places' are about. Major cities have become enamoured with branded designers, some of whom have created new spaces which are unfit for human activity and new buildings which stand alone and are emerging as untended, unusable and isolated. A narrow emphasis on design rather than a rounded appreciation of humanity and democracy has the potential to create dysfunctional future cities and communities.

William Whyte wrote that the social life in public spaces contributes to the quality of life of individuals and society, and that there is a moral responsibility to create physical spaces that encourage civic engagement and community interaction. His observation of pedestrian behaviour as early as 'The Street Life' project led him to a bottom up approach to planning public space. He believed that one should observe the way people moved through, used and re-used a space and this should be the basis of planning.⁵

Having emerged from William Whyte's work, the New York based Project for Public Spaces has evaluated thousands of public spaces around the world and found that successful ones are "much more about activities, uses, comfort and image, and sociability than they are about some design statement... We're

¹ Carmona, de Magalhães, Hammond 1980, *Public Space, the Management Dimension*, Routledge, London.

² Ibid.

³ Sen, A, Ogata, S et al, 1999, *Positive Forces for Change or Fuel for Violence*, United Nations Human Security and Public Participation, p.10.

⁴ Carmona et al, op. cit.

⁵ Whyte, William H 1980, *The Social Life of Small Urban Spaces*, Conservation Foundation.

Kate Brennan, CEO, Federation Square



...discovering management is the key to making these public spaces work. Design needs to take a back seat to management so that the natural human activity that evolves can really guide the management and the design of these facilities.”⁶

In a similar vein, Nikos Salingaros in his *Principles of Urban Structure* argues that urban networks are the foundation for healthy urban fabric, with living cities depending on ‘an enormous number of different paths and connections’.⁷ He also seeks to re-humanise our cities and establishes the priority of the pedestrian realm as the foundation of a human-based conception of urbanism.

Myriad organisations, both private and public, explore and provide tools and case studies for obtaining good outcomes for communities and public space. The UK Commission for Architecture and the Built Environment (www.cabe.org.uk) is just one which provides vast case study and guideline resource material focusing on exemplars for everything from great design to civilised streets.

Opened at the end of 2002, Federation Square is Melbourne’s civic and community heart. Over 55 million people (more than 8 million a year) have visited since opening and currently, more than 2000 activities occur in the public spaces each year, the majority of which are free. On any given day there is ‘something for everyone’, from permanent exhibitions to screen content, places to meet, eat and drink and activities which touch the mind and soul. The city’s most contemporary architectural statement has become a thriving meeting place for locals and visitors alike, a focal point for community and cultural activity, its most significant public place, and one of Australia’s most awarded developments. Principles embodied in its Civic and Cultural Charter have been part of the basis of this success which has seen it achieve more than 40 national and international awards, including for its contribution to community harmony. Staying in touch with the sentiment of the community is given particular attention, whether by being available to host a protest, broadcasting the National Apology to the Stolen Generation, marking the death of a respected community member, or celebrating a sporting success.

A formal economic impact study conducted in 2007 to identify interstate and international visitor expenditures in Victoria revealed that Federation Square contributes \$51.3 million (in 2005-06 prices) annually. This translates into an annual \$88 million in Victorian gross state product at market prices, and 756 full time equivalent employment positions across the state. These results confirm the initial \$450 million investment by the Victorian Government and the City of Melbourne with support from the Federal Government as justified, creating an ongoing and positive contribution to Victoria.⁸

Increasingly a benchmark for other developments, Federation Square looks to large and small examples elsewhere as it continues its evolutionary journey, aspiring to be an engaging and relevant public place into the future.

Parallels with some of the bold historic and contemporary sites elsewhere in the world are obvious. Trafalgar Square, with which we have formed an information sharing partnership, ranks as the fourth most popular tourist attraction on earth with more than 15 million annual visitors. In 2003 the redevelopment of the north side of

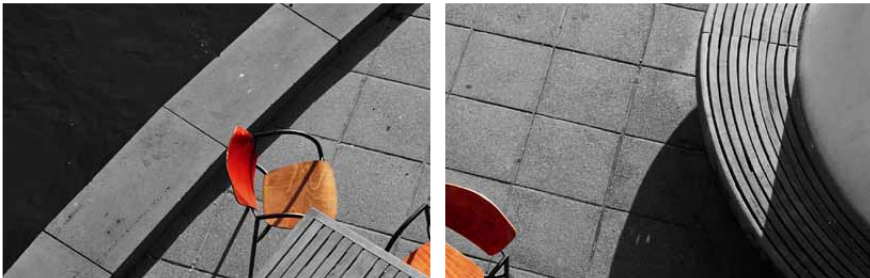
the square was completed. The work, carried out in the face of protests from both road users and pedestrians concerned that the diversion of traffic would lead to greater congestion elsewhere in London, involved permanently closing the main eastbound road, diverting it around the rest of the square and demolishing part of the wall and building a wide set of stairs. It includes lifts for disability access, public toilets, and a small café. Plans for a large staircase had long been discussed, even in original plans for the square. The new stairs lead to a large terrace or piazza in front of the National Gallery, in what was previously a road.

Like Federation Square, Trafalgar Square is increasingly defined by its public engagement and its contribution to humanity. In June 2002, 12,000 people gathered in the square to watch the England national football team’s World Cup quarter-final against Brazil on giant video screens erected specifically for the occasion. The square has also become the end location for victory parades, used by the England national rugby union team to celebrate its victory in the 2003 Rugby World Cup, and then for the England national cricket team’s victory against

⁶ Kent, Fred, www.pps.org.

⁷ Salingaros, N 2005, *Principles of Urban Structure*, Tech Press, Holland.

⁸ The National Institute of Economic and Industry Research, *Federation Square: Economic Impact Assessment July 2007*.



Australia in The Ashes. In 2005 it was a gathering place to hear the announcement that London had won the bid to host the 2012 Summer Olympics. The square was also the location of the successful 'World's Largest Coconut Orchestra' world record attempt on 23 April 2007. And the day after Michael Jackson's death, crowds gathered at Trafalgar Square for a mass moonwalk in his memory.

Millennium Park is an award winning centre for art, music, architecture and landscape design in downtown Chicago. What is now Millennium Park was first conceived in 1998 with the mission of creating new parkland within the larger Grant Park, to transform the unsightly railroad tracks and parking lots that had long dotted the lakefront. Over time, with Mayor Richard M. Daley's vision and Frank Gehry's involvement, the project evolved into the most ambitious public undertaking in Chicago's history. The 24.5-acre park is a result of a unique partnership between the City of Chicago and the

philanthropic community, featuring the work of world-renowned architects, planners, artists and designers, transforming an industrial wasteland into a new world class urban park.

Among Millennium Park's prominent features are the Frank Gehry-designed Jay Pritzker Pavilion, the most sophisticated outdoor concert venue of its kind in the United States; the interactive Crown Fountain by Jaume Plensa; the contemporary Lurie Garden designed by the team of Gustafson Guthrie Nichol Ltd, Piet Oudolf and Robert Israel; and Anish Kapoor's hugely popular Cloud Gate.

It is described as an extraordinary 21st century park, the result of a unique combination of private money (much of the project's cost expansions and over-runs were funded by private parties) and city power and influence, which has created a new iconic image of Chicago. From criticisms about expenditure to the operating procedures and opening hours

leading more to a 'private' rather than 'public' persona, Millennium Park has also been the subject of wide ranging antipathy. It appears that this is more to do with management than design and an expectation of access and engagement, occasionally denied, that defines whether this magnificent space works for people.

Aside from Trafalgar Square's amazing history and Millennium Park's exceptional resources, it seems that indicators of success are increasingly those used here in our own backyard at Federation Square and in other successful public realm work in our state. What I think this means is that with a deep understanding of the essence of the public space and our enviable track record as a city for people, we can lead the world with imagination and delivery. The new public spaces await us.