

An International Conference to explore approaches to the preservation of urban built heritage, with a focus on Melbourne

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When the Best of Intentions Miscue

Public art is a term which has ostensibly been with us forever and by definition suggests it has an important and enduring civic role. It certainly endures and springs up everywhere – from cemeteries to bank foyers - but most commissions are chancy encounters, unhappily a rendezvous between corporate and civic desire and self-assured blandness.

In a society of short attention spans, and a public restlessness for fast-paced experience, how might it be possible to create a single, absolute object that might hold lasting relevance beyond the occasion that caused its commissioning? The fall-back position for public art has become standard, where risk adversity is led by committee-driven decisions that follow over-prescriptive briefs.

We have created expanses of serialised dullness of well-manufactured objects of lasting unimportance. No one mistakes the reality that in commissioning public art, it's seldom an opportunity for artistic unilateralism. But uncompromising conformity is a gesture of civic neglect.

We might celebrate a novelist, a scientist who discovers something we knew nothing about, or movies that illuminate and surprise us in ways we'd not previously encountered. But it's architecture and public art that generates most reaction when we're intelligently presented with ways to imagine our world differently. There's a retreat to pre-existing knowledge and experience, and then ridicule and abuse is substituted for argument.

The great American critic Clement Greenberg (1909–1994) wrote an essay called 'Avant-Garde and Kitsch' (1939), which claimed modernism and the avant-garde was the bastion of taste and prevented art from collapsing into kitsch. But what happens when a reincarnated and faux avant-garde produces kitsch masquerading as something beyond its self-evident blandness?

Australians remain largely incurious about art, architecture and the built environment. We react to inconvenience, and only occasionally rail against artists. Usually it is architects whose work fails to lower its intellectual standard to that of the most dim-witted observer. Public art that is likely to make an enduring contribution to civic life is thin on the ground – or just above it. Why do so many commissioners still think public art should be vertical? Impeccably manufactured and large, 'plonk art on a plinth' too often becomes the demonstration of modest ideas writ large.

Arriving at Victoria Street, Richmond, from Hoddle – the stretch known as Little Saigon – is a huge structure commissioned by Yarra City Council which was launched in early 2014. It looks like a commissioned sculpture, of sorts. But it's the work of an architect, a gateway. It's culturally and symbolically kitschy, the kind of stuff that we see at national pavilions at World Expos, where nations invoke visual clichés as an image of self-representation. No element is mysteriously withheld - everything can be explained at the drop of a hat, well, a Vietnamese conical hat (a nón lá). Many coloured metal hats dance in suspended animation after the multi-symbolic representation of the gateway itself. What is the point in attempting to symbolise real experience in the presence of real experience?

When we watch AC/DC's music video, It's a long way to the top (if you wanna to rock 'n' roll) (1975), we see the band playing on the back of a tray-truck cruising down Swanston Street. It goes past the Town Hall where, in 1964, The Beatles waded to the adulation of a massive crowd. The truck moves on past City Square, long before Vault was commissioned, or the Burke and Wills sculpture found its final home. On the other side of Swanston Street is the old Capitol Theatre, designed by Walter Burley Griffin and his wife Marion. Next-door is the Buxton Building where Roberts, Streeton, McCubbin, Conder and others held their now celebrated 9 by 5 Impression Exhibition in 1889.

Recalling history happens in all sorts of unexpected ways, and triggers reflection, which is often unable to be encapsulated by tacky memorialising.

Corporate collections and art for new commercial building projects are more plentiful than many people might realise. And there are some very fine commissions. Equally there are tonnes of consultant-driven, so-called corporate-looking art – cultural retirement homes for once high-profile names whose art no longer attracts critical interest. Most are to the visual arts what Cuisenaire is to mathematics.

We should seek to commission works which make not only a wonderful civic contribution, but also stand a chance of becoming part of art history.

For too long public art has been hit and miss. In July 2011 Julia Gillard suggested the media should be more discerning in its reporting of the carbon debate, and I quote - “Don’t write crap. Can’t be that hard. And when you have written complete crap, then I think you should correct it.” Change a couple of verbs – commission for write - and those who seek to commission public art should too take heed.