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Sustaining collaborations: creative research and cross-cultural engagement

Emily Potter¹ and Janet McGaw ²

¹ Deakin University, Melbourne, Australia
² The University of Melbourne, Melbourne, Australia

Increasingly, the linear, instrumentalist and culturally hegemonic character of dominant sustainability discourse is under critique, with the term accruing new or expanded associations that challenge the its future-oriented, temporally stable, and ontologically determinate history. In Australia, these shifts take in a recognition that indigenous Australian understandings of and relationships with the environment profoundly challenge the generic claims of sustainability applied to both theory and practice. But how do these radically different and still marginal understandings actually enter into the process of producing sustainable designs on the world? This paper will report on the beginnings of a collaborative project that seeks to advance a proposal for an Aboriginal cultural precinct in the heart of Melbourne. This project's intention is to develop innovative methods for consultation and participation through collaborative creative research between Aboriginal artists and academic architects. The paper will discuss this method as a strategy for moving beyond traditional modes of cross-cultural engagement in the design and construction of sustainable cultural precincts.

INTRODUCTION

The imperative to interrogate “sustainability” may well now be as banal as the ubiquitous use of the word itself. Given its mainstream place in contemporary environmental, social, cultural and economic discourse – for these are the four named “pillars” of sustainability – the backlash against sustainability speak is a matter of course. Sustainability as a goal and as a practice is now widely integrated into domestic, state, and corporate agendas, and as such has become a not undue target for cynicism and critique. As the recent book by Adrian Parr attests, the “hijacking of sustainability” by the self interests of private and public institutions has come to indicate the problematic nature of the term, its lack of specificity and critical rigour in particular (2009). Our paper does not intend to rehearse these same arguments. While the concept of ‘sustainability’ has been undoubtably hollowed out by an uncritical and rhetorical application across fields of practice, we want to draw attention to a neglected concern in sustainability critiques: a failure to engage with the logic that underlies its broadly accepted and applied definitions. For sustainability is not only a value-laden ideal, it is a form of ontological design. That is, as a discourse, it carries within it particular visions of the world and its spatial, temporal and ecological organisation. Taking this as a starting point for a critical engagement with sustainability (as an idea and as a practice) means that questions other than the politics of appropriation begin to surface – questions such as: just whose vision of the world are we sustaining through our sustainability efforts? What might sustainability mean for different communities?

1. A VICTORIAN INDIGENOUS CULTURAL EDUCATION AND KNOWLEDGE CENTRE

We come to these questions in light of a project in progress, a proposal to support the design and construction of an Indigenous cultural centre in the heart of Melbourne’s CAD. This was initiated in 2008 by representatives from the Victorian Traditional Owners Land Justice Group, Reconciliation Victoria, the Melbourne City Council Arts and Culture branch, and the authors of this paper, with our colleague Dr Anoma Pieris. The proposal has received in principle support from key agencies in the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Community and local government and is currently gathering broader support. Indeed, on 22 April 2009 the federal government released its response to the 2020 Summit, which included a commitment to advancing, through consultation and feasibility studies, a National Indigenous Cultural Education and Knowledge Centre.

Until now, Indigenous cultural centres have been dispersed, small, and on the whole, located in regional Australia. Although the City of Melbourne has boasted a “China Town” and a “Greek Precinct” for decades, Indigenous culture has been confined to specific facilities, such as Bunjilaka in the Melbourne Museum and the Koorie Heritage Trust in a converted office building in the north-west corner of the city. This is the first proposal for a major civic precinct owned and managed by and for all Victorian Aboriginals. The Victorian Indigenous Cultural Education and Knowledge Centre, its proposed name, will showcase the variety of Victorian Aboriginal cultures, both in their traditional and contemporary expression, be a gateway for tourism strategies in South-East Australia, house spaces for education and entertainment, exhibitions and performances, conferences and public events. It will also offer office space for ATSIC organisations and a central commercial precinct for Indigenous business initiatives. But most significantly, with dedicated space for the cultural expression of each Traditional Owner Language Group in south-east Australia, it will be a place that all Victorian Aboriginals can call ‘home’ in some way.
2. SUSTAINABLE DESIGN

It is most likely that a project such as this would have sustainability objectives built into its design: environmentally sensitive architecture, for example, and of course by its very nature, social inclusion and the representation of diversity. What is also likely if this project were to proceed by standard measures of consultation, design and construction, is that the ontological significance of sustainable design, and sustainability as an objective, would not be unaccounted. What we mean by this is that design that narrates an understanding of ‘self in the world’ particular to Indigenous Australians would be unlikely to evolve. As Pieris points out, perhaps the most difficult issue faced in the design of Indigenous cultural centres is the identity of the architect, typically a non-indigenous professional from an urban background quite remote from the realities of the community he or she is serving. Reconciling the cultural practices of the client group with the dominant architectural culture of Australia is a complex task. There are many artists, both visual and performing, in the Victorian Aboriginal community, yet there is only one architect (to our knowledge) who has graduated in Victoria. While it is widely acknowledged that any work for Aboriginal communities by non-indigenous practitioners should emphasise consultation and participation throughout all phases of any building project, there are limited traditions through which this kind of collaboration takes place, for example, highly structured verbal exchanges. Rarely, we argue, does collaboration take place in modes that admit the ontology of design and seek to understand sustainability goals through this register.

Part of the reason for this, we argue, is that sustainability as a concept is overwhelmingly constituted through instrumentalist and linear logic, that similarly informs western approaches to environmental crises: a logic in which the well-being of environments depends on what humans do to them, and where calculations of economic value can be attached to all aspects of environmental change. As a result, sustainability is framed in terms of a problem to be managed or fixed. The focus of the instrumentalist ethos is inevitably the horizon: it is trained outward, in a straight line, toward future images of place and community. The prevalent definition of sustainability replicates this temporal focus, defined by the ultimate consideration of economic growth in the present, “without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own needs” (United Nations, 1987). This is where the ontological nature of sustainability discourse and practice emerges. It ultimately narrates (that is, performs) particular understandings of the self in the world.

3. ONTOLOGICAL DIFFERENCE

That Indigenous understandings of the self, the environment and community, profoundly differ to the Western conceptions informed by Enlightenment reason is commonly registered in Australia, but the implications of this difference are profound and are often ill-considered, as if the recognition of difference alone were sufficient. Sustainability discourse illuminates this. Indigenous environmental practice, for example, is held in contrast to traditions of non-indigenous environmental management – the frequently invoked Indigenous practice of burning back bush to enable regeneration is a case in point – and the ideals of living within limits, re-using resources and rethinking environmental relations in ethical terms are extrapolated from Indigenous cultures. Yet rather than challenging sustainability discourse, these differences are incorporated as pedagogic or instrumental points into its existing frame: the idea that non-Indigenous Australians have “a lot to learn” from Indigenous peoples in terms of environmental well-being is a repeated one that obscures the perpetuation of uniform ontological visions across environmental design and architectural practice.

We now want to consider how a sustainability agenda could be reconfigured ontologically, so that the sustaining nature of the design comes out of multiple, diverse and even conflicting understandings of the world. For if, as Tony Fry suggests (supporting the ontological thesis of design), design keeps on designing, a renewed approach to sustainability must take this into account so as to acknowledge architecture’s capacity to produce new potentially collaborative worlds in continual arrangement (2009). The diversity within Victorian Aboriginal communities, where Aboriginal culture is defined by membership of a Traditional Owner Language Group, alone indicates the importance of such a project. There were thirty-eight language groups across Victoria at the time of European settlement (which can be sub-grouped into six broader language affiliations). Only twenty-five continue to operate at various levels of capacity, and few members of these groups would speak their language as their mother tongue. Membership of a Traditional Owner Language Group is as much about defining family, ancestors, art, stories, traditions, ongoing cultural practices and location of “country” as it is about “language” per se.

How can architects bring multiple ontologies (or multiple expressions of “being” in the world) into design in more than symbolic or representative ways? And how can Indigenous ontologies give shape to design so as to “keep on designing” in social and political terms? The research project that we are proposing as a contributive adjunct to the development of a Victorian Indigenous Cultural Education and Knowledge Centre seeks to approach these questions methodologically. We have no findings to report as the research project is yet to commence, but its ambition suggests an approach to collaborative design practice that would imagine collaboration differently, and in turn, advance a much more radical concept of sustainable design.

4. DESIGNING DIFFERENTLY

We begin with an awareness that the historic division between theory and practice in the creative arts sets up parameters for knowledge gathering that tends to focus on product rather than process, usually locating academic inquiry in exegesis or analysis after the fact of a work’s production. Similarly, in traditional design practice community
consultation procedures are seen as chronologically distinct from the creative work. These conventions exclude the participation of many other forms of knowledge, despite making claims of representation and inclusivity.

While it is widely acknowledged that any architectural work for Aboriginal communities should emphasise consultation and participation throughout all phases of any building project (this is true both in scholarly writing and government frameworks) an inherent assumption is that communication happens primarily through verbal dialogue that is then transcribed into text (Memmott et al, 2000; Victorian Government 2007-2010). Shaneen Fantin argues, however, that verbal discourse tends to favour the culturally dominant group (Fantin, 2003).

To address this, our research project will develop a concept of “data” that will include stories, art/architectural practices (2D, 3D and performance) that represent a wide range of potential views at all stages of the process. Our method will include creative practices of conceptualisation, experimentation and production. Creative research offers a form of ‘radical empiricism’ in which all elements, atmospheres and happenings in the research process are of interest and effect (Massumi, 2000). This innovative form of creative research theorised recently by academics such as Carter, Barrett and Bolt has been practiced by architects such as muf to foreground visual, performative and other creative processes in the process of developing a design brief. Our project, a linkage with the Victorian Traditional Owners Land Justice Group and the Melbourne City Council, will invite Indigenous Victorian artists, recruited by the Indigenous arts officer at the Melbourne City Council, to work creatively together on the translation of concepts of place, culture and Aboriginality into form, space, materials and siting ideas with postgraduate architectural design students.

One aspect of the research project will be performative events and exhibitions of creative works resulting from the collaborative practices staged in the city as a means of raising community awareness for the project and engaging stakeholders who may not be directly linked in with the Victorian Aboriginal community. An on-going reconciliation, and indeed, cultural sustainability issue, is a reluctance of many children of the “stolen generation” to identify as Aboriginal. Events in the public realm will create opportunities that they might otherwise miss, to participate in the designing process. These events will also be designed to engage interest and support from non-indigenous Victorians.

5. EXPERIMENTS IN COLLABORATIVE CONSULTATION AND DESIGN

In the first half of 2008 one of the authors of this paper, Janet McGaw, conducted a design studio with Masters of Architecture design students which initiated this project. Gary Murray, of the Victorian Traditional Owners Land Justice Group briefed a design studio of 16 students, in the context of his desire for a cultural precinct. He shared aspects of the cultural heritage of Indigenous Victorians that included artworks and material artefacts such as the possum skin cloak, the stories of important ancestors and the stories of loss that have become important to their identity. Koorie artist, Mandy Nicholson, shared images of her paintings and sculptures and explained the significant visual symbols that she draws on, including concentric patterns and the Yarra river, that are a specific feature of Indigenous Victorian artwork. Both she and Gary gave the students informed consent to use these as a reference point to begin to translate into architecture. We did not have the funding to engage artists to work alongside our students at this point, however, they, and others, returned at various points to offer feedback.

Two key aspects of Victorian cultural heritage became a focus for creative investigation: firstly how to translate into architecture a history that has been communicated, not through text or built form as is traditional to Western culture, but through song and movement; and secondly, how to “make place” in a cultural centre for the multiple ontologies of 38 different language groups, 13 of which no longer exist. Indeed, how can “sustainability” be conceived in light of such loss?

We dealt with the first issue by conceiving of architecture very broadly as a spatial practice. Architect and theorist Jane Rendell coined the term ‘critical spatial practices’ (2006) to describe a range of temporal practices explored by architects since the 1960s as a way of liberating place making (in particular, architecture) from its traditional collusion with mechanisms of power – in particular land ownership and money. Echoing the Indigenous concept of “songlines” [as described by Gary], trajectories of movement and sung narrative that reiterated the sacredness of the land, students were asked to develop “critical spatial practices” in Melbourne’s central activities district or along the Yarra near to the city.

Students had the freedom to determine what form this would take – from a soundscape that is played in public places, to a line of ephemeral graffiti, or a line of movement for interested passers-by to tread, a mobile phone text, or even something material and fabricated but made of free material, such as rubbish. The only criteria were that they did not use a traditional site: that is, the site had to be appropriated and no exchange of money would be required. Furthermore, the material value of the ‘practice’ had to be less than $100. The purpose of the ‘critical spatial practice’ was to re-imagine place-making in the city in a way that challenged non-indigenous assumptions about the land, and its certainties of place-making.

6. THREE PROJECTS

We’d like to present three projects that were developed in response to this challenge: “I am Indigenous / I am not Indigenous” by Erkmen Kormaz, “Chalk tracks”, by Eleanor Fenton, and “$20 flash mob” by Jessica Wang.

Erkmen’s critical spatial practice was a reflection on the effects of European colonisation on the sustainability of Indigenous ecology. Two sites, Flagstaff Gardens and Enterprize Park, and the passage that connected them...
became the focus for his design investigation. They both have equally significant Indigenous and Colonial histories. Flagstaff Garden was a prominent place for public gatherings and communication in the early years of the colony but prior to that it was an important Wurrundjeri burial site and a lookout point from which the first saw white settlers were spotted sailing in to Port Philip Bay. Enterprize Park was the site of the turning circle, a deep, wide point in the Yarra River for early ships but also the site of Freshwater Falls, a pre-Colonial dividing line that separated the salty, estuarine water from the mouth of the Yarra from its freshwater upstream. It was also the only natural crossing point to the marshy south bank. This rocky bridge was used by the Wurrundjeri on food gathering expeditions. Enterprize Park is also one site that has been discussed as a possible site for the future VICKEC.

Erkmene noticed that while the vegetation in Melbourne is dominated by non-indigenous trees there is one enormous Eucalypt located in Flagstaff Gardens and a small stand of Eucalypts at Enterprize Park. Along the path that connects these sites the only trees are deciduous and European in origin. Erkmene proposed an installation of labels to be wrapped around the trees between these two sites: “I am Indigenous” and “I am not Indigenous.” The installation was to unfold as performance beginning at Flagstaff gardens and unfolding downhill along the median strip on William Street to Enterprize Park. It uses text and ritual to make visible the cultural and ecological consequence of colonisation.

Figure 1: Erkmene Kormaz “I am indigenous / I am not indigenous” installation. Signs wrapped around eucalypts at Enterprize Park, Melbourne.

Figure 2: Erkmene Kormaz “I am indigenous / I am not indigenous” installation. Signs wrapped around deciduous European trees along William St, Melbourne.
Eleanor Fenton was interested in the differing representations of place in the landscape between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. Norberg Schulz, the architectural phenomenologist, contended that “place” is made in the landscape only through human intervention (1980). His well known example is the bridge that he asserts makes a place on the river where previously there is only undifferentiated space. In contrast, Indigenous place is narrated
through a history that predates human occupation. Natural place-markers such as rocks, hills and river junctions speak of the ontology of the land itself, from which all else descend. These place myths are narrated through songs that are performed in the landscape. They are also represented through Indigenous visual art. Eleanor’s critical spatial practice highlighted these contrasting experiences of place. She proposed placing a deposit of chalk dust on the footpath under one of the Yarra bridges so that pedestrians would leave an ephemeral trace of footprints as they walked by. The tracks could be viewed from the vantage point of a bridge, the bird-eye view that is common to much Indigenous artwork. Eleanor’s “critical spatial practice” challenges architects to ask whose ontology do we express when we feel the need to mark “place” through making buildings in the landscape?

As an overseas student, Jessica observed that Indigenous culture seemed to be most prominent in tourist shops in the form of cheap trinkets. She wondered what is lost through such processes of commodification. Koorie artist, Mandy Nicholson, talked about the differences between Victorian Indigenous art and the dot paintings of central Australia, which are the most instantly recognisable Indigenous art practice. Jessica devised a “critical spatial practice” that placed money and Indigenous art in a dialectical tension. She proposed a “flash mob” where people would be invited through email and internet to gather at Birrarung Marr at a stipulated time with a bottle top in one of the five most commonly used colours. The bottle tops would then be laid out, using a plan Jessica prepared, to form a “dot” painting of a $20 note. An hour later the crowd would disperse and the bottle tops would be swept up and sent to recycling.

These three “critical spatial practices” are offered as provocations: starting points to fuel further discussion, to disrupt preconceptions, to raise public awareness and to narrate different ontologies that challenge non-Indigenous occupation of the land.

The second issue, (how to “make place” in a cultural centre for the multiple ontologies of 38 different language groups, 13 of which no longer exist) was explored in the students’ design proposals for an Indigenous Cultural, Knowledge and Education Centre that responded to the brief prepared by Gary Murray.

Eleanor Fenton’s design used the possum skin cloak for inspiration. Gary had offered this as the most significant artefact of his people. The cloaks were made through a laborious collaborative process that began with preparing the skin, incising it with patterns that marked the wearer’s totem and their place in their clan tribe and country. Children were wrapped in them from birth and laid to rest in them when they died. Eleanor proposed the possum...
skin cloak as metaphor for the façade design for the Indigenous Cultural Knowledge and Education Centre: 38 panels, each designed by a different traditional owner language group, (13 of which might remain blank as an acknowledgment of the loss of those groups) would be inscribed with the significant totems and stories of their group as a contemporary marker of place in the urban environment.

Figure 3: Eleanor Fenton. Design for a Victorian Indigenous Cultural, Knowledge and Education Centre. The elevation is inspired by the possum skin cloak: representatives of each of the 38 language groups would design one panel to represent their group’s particular cultural heritage.

7. CONCLUSION

What is the value of such design studios, you might ask? What is their life after the semester is over? These designs have become part of a presentation that the VTOLJG are using to advance the idea for their cultural precinct. They have been used to inspire, to provoke discussion, to lobby for funding and sites, and as a model for ongoing consultation.

While the work that the students produced was sensitive and thoughtful there were obvious limitations to the process we have engaged in so far that we hope to address through future funding. The process we have proposed to the ARC is more intensely collaborative, with students and artists working alongside each other, quilting their ideas together, to come to new understandings that can be played out in a cultural precinct that more deeply reflects the processual ontologies of traditional owners, and the diverse and divergent ontologies of post-colonial multicultural societies. Just how collaborative creative research can, in practice, inform the work of commissioned architects requires further investigation. This paper attempts to raise some questions regarding the uncritical ubiquity of sustainability rhetoric, especially in the employ of community facilities, and suggest an expanded mode of sustainable design practice, that takes account of the kinds of worlds enabled, or disabled, by architecture. While the Victorian Indigenous Cultural and Education Centre will be more than its building, whatever form its design takes will be crucial to the lived experience of the Centre, and to the stories and communities it brings into being. In the terms we have sketched out here, and in the critical spatial practices employed by the students that we describe, “sustainable” design and architecture become something beyond instrumental practice and the application of bureaucratic convention. Instead, sustainability is reconceived as a refusal to exclude or privilege modes of being – and ways of seeing – within multiplicitous and mutable life worlds.
REFERENCES


