

Public artists working with nature in suburban Fairfield

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Art, for us, has the potential power to activate the soul, the conscience and the imagination of society. We are public artists working with nature in the urban and suburban contexts. The topic of the paper is an environment rehabilitation project in Fairfield, in western Sydney, called Restoring the Waters. The project is to restore Clear Paddock Creek, currently a concrete storm water canal in Sydney's western suburbs, to a natural creek. To engage the community through our role as artists, the concept of the 'Memory Line' was created. It is a 3 kilometre long ephemeral environmental artwork. With the high school students, we organised site visits and worked with them to create environmental artworks to be exhibited on site. With primary students we focused on habitat loss and we began by helping them to imagine the creek that had gone. The spirit of the project was distilled to one theme - In the Stream - one large-scale work of the native fauna that had returned to inhabit its rightful place along the creek line. It was a 50-metre long installation of over 400 wetland creatures made by hundreds of local school children. The art project creatively elaborated on the relationship, rather than the schism, between the cultures of 'nature' and 'suburbia'.

Key words: environmental art, community art; wetland restoration, 'nature' and 'suburbia'.

[Editors' note: The main body of the artwork that accompanies this chapter is displayed on the cover of this book with the images from separate photos merged into one display on the front cover. There are also some black and white images of colour slides among the text in these pages.]

Introduction

As artists among scientists, we feel like a bit like ring-ins, so we thought we would open with a brief rundown on our view of the meaning and the function of art. Art, for us, has the potential power to activate the soul, the conscience and the imagination of society. It is about evoking certain emotive responses. It affects the way we feel about something. It is about new ways of seeing, or seeing something that is familiar in a new way. It is a game of awakening us to something that we may have become used to. It is often about making the familiar look odd, about the transformation of perception and this can happen in the simplest and subtlest ways. Art is about changing society, and thus it has a huge potential to change the views of society and play an important role in the cultural politics of the environment.

We are public artists working in the public realm with specific, on-site art projects, working with nature in the urban and suburban contexts. We work on projects that seek to invoke the nature in all of us. As public artists, we feel a particular responsibility towards both the site and the audience. It is not nature as some kind of separate entity that is the subject of our work, rather it is the interplay between art, nature, the urban environment and the audience. Our work is about making connections, or allowing connections to be made: connections with ourselves, our bodies, the natural world around us; connections that are often hidden, elemental or forgotten. We work with communities to allow individuals to enter their own imaginative responses. It is an heuristic approach of learning by doing. Let us take you to one of work sites - a degraded stormwater channel - that is the subject of this chapter.

Restoring the waters

The topic of the paper is an environment rehabilitation project in Fairfield, in western Sydney, called Restoring the Waters. It began five years ago and the first phase of its implementation is now complete. It was launched by the Premier a few weeks before this urban wildlife forum and was funded by the Federal Storm Water Trust and the Australia Council for the Arts. Its aim is to restore Clear Paddock Creek to a natural creek system. The original creek was replaced in the 1970s with a storm water canal, typical of the concrete channels that have usurped creeks throughout the contemporary urban environment. Here engineering expediency has undermined the complexities of a fragile ecosystem and made storm water a major pollutant of our waterways and oceans. By contrast, natural creek systems sustain biological diversity and wildlife habitats and are superior managers for the urban storm water.

The project is underway with the first 500 m of creek now restored to a 'natural' state. It was initiated by the visionary Landscape Architect Barbara Schaffer (from Schaffer Barnsley LA) in conjunction with the Australian Conservation Foundation and Fairfield City Council, which is now directing it. The project is to restore the whole 4 km of Clear Paddock Creek, currently a concrete storm water canal in Sydney's western suburbs, to a natural creek. The creek had been converted to a concrete channel in the 1970s for engineering reasons; the restoration includes removing all the concrete of the canal and re-establishing a more natural ecosystem. The project has the following objectives: to improve the quality of stormwater and thereby restore the quality of the

stream, river, harbour, bay and ocean waters; to manage the quantity of stormwater; to increase biological diversity in the urban environment through the creation of wildlife habitats and ecological corridors; to increase cooperation between agencies involved in stormwater management, particularly local government; to manage stormwater as a valuable resource; increase community understanding of the hydrological cycle; and to beautify the area and offer more leisure activities. It was envisaged that a restored wetland will appear, and this is now starting to happen

In the early design stage, a multi disciplinary team was set up including a fluvial geomorphologist, a habitat ecologist, storm water and structural engineers, landscape architects, and we were included as the project artists. Our role was to engage the community. It was recognised that the project would be successful only if the community took on a sense of ownership.

Through a variety of art projects we sought to engage the community physically, emotionally and intellectually - to provide a mechanism through which the community could understand the aims at a level deeper than could be gained by reading a brochure about storm water management and creek restoration.

Fairfield is a multicultural community with many new migrant groups. At the outset it was clear to us that so many residents, particularly those new to the area, or those born after the creek was converted to a concrete channel, had no idea that a natural creek used to there in the first place. Somehow, for many people, a concrete stormwater canal had become natural because it was what was in their backyard.

This is symptomatic of a kind of cultural amnesia - a collective memory loss that sets in as natural environments are displaced by urban sprawl. Every erasure of a landscape results in a community's disconnection from its natural environment. Increasing urbanisation has turned tributaries into drains, and creeks into concrete canals, rendering water merely utilitarian and virtually invisible.

The 'Memory Line'

To engage the community through our role as artists, the concept of the 'Memory Line' was created. It is a 3 kilometre long ephemeral environmental artwork, which marks on site in a 4 metre wide strip of rye grass along the course of the original Clear Paddock Creek before it was straightened into a concrete channel. It is an ecological and cultural memorial to a lost natural environment. It is also a creative and poetic act celebrating the future restoration of the creek and the changed social attitudes that now seek to undertake the rehabilitation process. Increasing urbanisation has turned tributaries and creeks into drains, rendering water as merely utilitarian and virtually invisible. That led us to the concept of the 'Memory Line'.

With the 'Memory Line', we sought to begin the process of healing this urban alienation by igniting the memory of the original creek for older residents and providing an enlightening discovery for those unaware of its history. Cultural memory, we felt, is crucial to the development of the relationship between the community and the environment.



The 'Memory Line' 1996, Clear Paddock Creek, Fairfield. Photo: Ian Hobbs.

The 'Memory Line' grew on the site running across the landscape, creating a strong physical reminder of the past. It became something people talked about, experienced on their walks with the wind running through it. It recalled the natural meanders, crossing roads and bridges in its travel. The photos are on the cover of this book on Urban Wildlife and some are set throughout this chapter. The 'Memory Line' followed the blue line. It is an ecological and cultural memorial to a lost natural environment, and a creative act of celebrating a future restoration of the creek. With the Memory Line, we sought to begin a process of healing, if you like, by igniting the memory of what has been lost. There was no point, we thought, in trying to turn people's minds to the future restoration without having an understanding what had been lost.

So the 'Memory Line' - you can it in the photos on the day of planting, it is the green line, next to the channel - was something that meandered its way across the landscape. It grew, it billowed, the wind blew through it. It became something in the landscape that people could experience on their walks. It recalled the natural meanders, and it did what it liked. It crossed roads willy-nilly. The 'Memory Line' became the unifying concept to which the whole community art project was hinged. We used it to fire the imagination of about 2000 people that we worked with over a 10-month period of on a variety of associated projects focusing on the importance of water. We shall touch on just a few.



'In the Stream' detail of wetland creatures 'swimming' downstream made by school students for 'Fairfield's Festival of the Waters' June 1996. Photo: Bill Royal.

St Johns park high school students

School children, we felt, were the best way to access the community at large. With the high school students, we organised site visits and worked with them to create environmental artworks to be exhibited on site. Their brief was to examine the specific elements of the site, respond with their understanding of the importance of water in their lives, and to take into account their particular cultural background, and their attitude to water. Three girls of Italian and Scandinavian background from year 11 produced a kind of Viking boat/animal, with a Mediterranean feel. It was a piece of great beauty and detail. Another very moving artwork was by a Vietnamese boy who wanted to make a wading bird - an indigenous bird. He spent much time spent in the library drawing precise scientific details. He was not enjoying the process, so we tried to loosen him up by suggesting he make a bird out of his imagination. We gave him some materials and he started making what became a magnificent mythical, very Asian-looking water bird. By moving away from the strict guidelines and allowing him to partake so he could also be part of his own culture, he produced something of great beauty of which he was unbelievably proud.

St Johns park primary students

With primary students we focused on habitat loss and we began by helping them to imagine the creek that had gone. We took them on walks from their school. We followed the

lines of the storm water drains and asked them to tie blue ribbons where the drains were seen and to lay down lines of bird seed to help them imagine that the little tributaries to the creek would have provided food and water for the creatures. They are now storm water drains. The students drew indigenous creatures on the footpaths. At the canal they drew pictures of all the creatures from the list that had been given to us by the Dr Peter Breen, the habitat ecologist on the project, that would once have inhabited the creek. The students then make masks of wetland animals. They wore them at the school masked ball and thereby literally embodied the memory of the now-vanished wetland creatures. The students were photographed and a large mural, made in the shape of the creek, now hangs in the school. We exhibited all the work at a gala festival day.

Fairfield's festival of the waters

The festival was designed to celebrate the community involvement with the project. The 'Memory Line' was inaugurated and it included all the community works - banners, written stories, murals. They were all exhibited. The spirit of the project was distilled to one theme - In the Stream - one large-scale work of the native fauna that had returned to inhabit its rightful place along the creek line. It was a 50-metre long installation of over 400 wetland creatures made by hundreds of local school children. It was a moment of remembering what had been lost - but more importantly - it celebrated our shared enterprise of the restoration and thus our hope for the future. 'In the Stream' was a flotilla of aquatic creatures - fish, frogs, butterflies, turtles, herons, platypus and tadpoles - made from recycled materials. It was a playful and colourful representation of indigenous fauna, suspended in lines across the storm water canal, flapping in the breeze as if swimming down the memory of the original creek.

Conclusion

Central to the 'Memory Line' project is the belief that we have to understand what we have lost from the past to be able to understand what we hope to restore in the future. We therefore sought to generate community involvement and to develop a cultural memory. We needed to create a deeper understanding of our natural environment, and thus a responsibility towards it, through a close engagement by the community in the making the artworks that were ecological and cultural memorials. Together, these principles mark the significance of the site, celebrate community action through events and create installations that seek to foster the healing of the disenfranchised relationship between urban communities and their natural environments.

'Nature' is often thought of as separate to human culture and outside of the urban context. In 'Restoring the Waters', the rehabilitation of Clear Paddock Creek to a 'natural' environment necessarily engages in the nature/culture dichotomy. Nature to us, far from being 'out there', resides within and between the backyards of suburban culture. The art project sought to creatively elaborate on the relationship, rather than the schism, between the cultures of 'nature' and 'suburbia' to explore the possibilities of the eclectic nature of our contemporary urban ecology.

The 'Memory Line' and its related art projects such as "In the Stream" engaged something intangible. It is that yearning for nature felt by many alienated in contemporary urban environments. It is that yearning that finds political expression in ecological and conservation movements. Like much that is maligned or marginalised, it cannot be given quantifiable expression. While marking what has been lost in a very real form, the 'Memory Line' was most importantly about the poetics of place. As it sprawled across the entire

length of the landscape, incised by the canal, its meandering form suggested a journey, an intimate movement through a broad landscape where the wind through the grass could create an empathetic reverie in the mind. So too was a sense of reverie created with the "In the Stream" aquatic creatures. That intuitively-felt relationship between the natural world and ourselves should be honoured and fostered because it is at the heart of what will help us heal some of the damage we have selfishly wrought on nature.

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Heron wetland entry totem, 'Fairfield's Festival of the Waters' 29 June 1996. Photo: Bill Royal.



Before restoration - Clear Paddock creek in 1995 - a bleak concrete-lined storm water channel. Photo: M. Crawford



'Fairfield's Festival of the Waters' 29 June 1996, inauguration of the 'Memory Line'. Photo Bill Royal

Postscript. A note about the authors and their work.

'Restoring the Waters' was an environmental rehabilitation project that involved a multidisciplinary team of professionals working with the local Fairfield community to restore the lost ecology of a creek. Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford are artists who work on projects that seek to invoke the nature in all of us. They work in a way that is responsive to the interplay of the environmental context of their chosen sites and the random rhythms of the people who use it. To this interplay they bring an interest in the relationship between nature and culture. In some projects the creative use of water or wind as metaphor or conduit links aesthetic form and environmental function. Some recently completed public artworks include the award winning 'Storm Waters', a large stormwater sculpture for Landcom's Victoria Park site in Zetland, South Sydney, award winning 'Tied to Tide' a floating tidal, wave and wind activated installation at Pyrmont Point park and 'Drawers of Water' at the new Children's Hospital Western Sydney.

Such works invite the viewer to explore their own imaginative responses whilst developing a closer connection with the natural world. More energy than substance, water or wind in these designs involve aesthetics and formal elements to engage the viewer in an experience which may be contemplative and soothing, effervescent and spectacular, puzzling and intriguing, humorous or entertaining. As large scale popular artworks outside the realm of the art gallery these works aim to delight the viewer with a gentle optimism provoking a new perception of nature. In each case a natural phenomena is revealed in startling and unexpected ways.