

Memory Pond

Robert Owen

Article by Adrian Parr

At a time when public art projects abound throughout the urban precinct of Melbourne there really is very little that captures the imagination or escapes the pitfalls of monumentality. Furthermore, the complex nature of how milieu, time, and the specificity of place interact is seldom addressed let alone expanded upon to engage with the broader urban fabric through which these factors come to life. However, the *Memory Pond* that is part of a larger project in collaboration with Landscape Architects Taylor and Cullity, recently completed at Prahran's Grattan Gardens by Australian artist Robert Owen, is one public art project that successfully synthesises these elements, whilst also affirming the possibility of experiences that lie beyond the physical parameters of its design. With an acute sensitivity towards the social and cultural history of the site Owen has made a valuable contribution to the area and a significant gesture of reconciliation without dumbing down the complexity of European and indigenous relations.

Owen has made extensive use of the aboriginal history specific to the area to develop the design. As such, the design process took on the distinct flavor of anthropological research. What he discovered was that the overall area, now given over to the Grattan Gardens, was once a billabong where Victoria's aboriginal peoples regularly visited to fish, gather food, and engage in communal sharing and exchange. The most common food sourced in the area included swan eggs, fish, and eels. Baskets were used as fishing scoops and from here the spiral form of these artifacts has been redeveloped into the design shape for the fountains that lie at the Greville Street entrance to the Gardens.

Visitors to the area experience a delicate and subtle inflection of landscape with habitat. Six water fountains, made from laser-cut stainless steel, loosely organised into a triangular

formation, reference traditional aboriginal patterns and habitat. From the centre of the spiral fountains, which barely rise up out of the ground, water quietly percolates away. Here a lovely metaphor for the silence surrounding the whole issue of aboriginal reconciliation is formed. What is more is that the solid shape water forms when spurting from figurines is undermined by the undramatic and slow gurgling of the fountains dispersed at the entry. In this instance the shapes the water produce are soft and malleable. Also by repeating the basket forms differently in his design of the water fountains Owen concomitantly references the lilies that would have once floated across the surface of the billabong.

Bringing an immaterial presence to the park blue LED (light emitting diodes) low voltage down lighting has been fixed into the paved area so as to diagram the stars above. The lighting also acts as a mnemonic residue for the stars once reflected in the billabong. Through the use of gentle illumination, his scheme brings to life the sinuous threads of a difficult history and the passing of time in an unexpected part of the city.

Lights and text delicately accent the geometric regularity of the pedestrian walkway, that leads into the Gardens from Greville Street. The perimeter of the walkway is bordered with a slightly raised wall where visitors can sit and reflect as they try to read the faint traces of text in the paving. Owen's use of framing does not tidy up or physically enclose the walkway space, in as much as it brings cultural and historical structures to light. In this respect the walkway still functions as a key linear element that directs the visitor into the park itself, where the recreational spaces, picnic areas, playground and gazebo are, but the interplay of textual inscriptions in the dark grey stone along with the seemingly random spread of lighting produce an inversion. Here the visitor is encouraged to look down and think of the silence surrounding the whole issue of aboriginal history; instead of simply walking head up and shoulders back straight into the garden itself. The paving presents the following five statements: 'swan-egg bed', 'put out of place', 'stars and stones', 'side by side', and 'in the stream'. With these the

visitor is invited to consider and reflect upon the history of both the site and the implications European settlement has had for aboriginal peoples. The long walkway into the Gardens tempts the visitor to probe the history of the site, inciting them to question the notion of reconciliation and their place in a history that is still very much in the making.

Owen has offset the articulate and precise organisation of a European garden with an elegant extension of the axial order and regular symmetry typical of such gardens. The physical coherence of the area does not come from filling up the space or producing fixed relationships with built elements in and around the area. Instead, Owen, through the language of water, stone, bronze and steel has created a textual dialogue with the history of the site by disrupting its spatial coherency in its reference to temporal conditions.

Owen's design relies heavily on the productive potential of repetition, a repetition not of the same but of difference. Interestingly enough, currently the area also functions as a craft market as it once did for the aboriginal peoples who frequented there. What is more is that the current market also sells mats and baskets similar to those once used by the aboriginal peoples for fishing. The *Memory Pond* shows how landscape design can diagram temporal conditions and elements to give expression to spatial connections between milieu and place.

Instead of a fixed interpretation of history Owen announces the possibility of transgression and transformation. Ultimately reconciliation if it is to carry any weight or value for Australian society and culture is a process of change that can transform how Australians think history. In this light Owen's use of the pathway in his design transcends the uniformity of the path's order, for the connection between past, present and future is not linear. Time - as multidimensional - contains the possibility of a variety of paths the future may take: all of them unpredictable. It is here where Owen's design process successfully resists the end result being too literal in its representation of what has been washed away over time. For the overall design owes more to

memory and its traces than it does to symbolic gestures. Put differently, the design gives expression to the history already present within the site. Rather than colonise history then, which would be to simply mimic it in the form of the design, he essentially combines the present life of the site with its past.

Too often public art marries history and landscape to monumentality without acknowledging how both are cultural constructions. Monumentality just reinforces the cultural control of history and is in effect another form of colonisation. Public art if it is to engage with the difficulties of indigenous history, especially in the hands of white artists, needs to form a critical relationship with the past and how the past is represented. In other words public art needs to be sensitive to issues of power. A great deal of public art under the sponsorship of large corporations, such as much of the Docklands public art projects, is part of producing an environment that can promote a unified vision of Australian identity at a time when that identity and its history is far from resolved. The problem here is one of being sensitive towards who benefits from public art and who is excluded by it. In the case of the Docklands it is the corporate investor who profiteers off Australia's history of oppression. Public art at the Docklands may reference aboriginal oppression and struggles but much of it does so in tractable form so as not to disturb the investment value it brings to the environment in which it is situated.

Owen prefers to be inspired by the way in which both history and landscape tension and confound the clarity of each other. Monumental designs neatly gloss over the difficulties of the past. Contrarily, as a white artist Owen's approach to design and site refuses to participate in the erasure of that past as neatly confined to the past and separate to the present. The convergence of physical and metaphysical spaces that the *Memory Pond* presents to the visitor contribute to an overall sense of contemplation and reflection on the fractured nature of history. In other words, Owen does not design *on* the landscape but *through* it.

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