Premier’s COFA Visual Arts Scholarship

Creating Communities: Connecting Visual Arts Students with Socially Engaged Contemporary Art and Architecture Practices

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Contemporary art events such as the 2012 Sydney Biennale, *All Our Relations*, the City of Sydney *Curating Cities Project*,[[1]](#footnote-1) and the *Super Sydney* urban planning project highlight the significance of contemporary art and architectural practices that actively involve audiences and communities. In my recent work in western Sydney based on the innovative Campement Urbain urban plan, *Penrith of the Future/The Future of Penrith*,[[2]](#footnote-2) visual arts students have had the opportunity to see firsthand the value of active involvement with plans for local renewal in learning programs.

Scope of the study

This study was a broad-based investigation of how collaborative interventions between artists, architects and communities have provided opportunities for re-engagement, renewal or regeneration and to generate positive change. Specifically, the study focused on areas of social and cultural change in Paris and Marseilles in France, London, England, and both rural and urban regions in Japan.

Visits to sites and institutions and interviews with key practitioners, including artists, architects, curators, educators and community members, built an archive of material focused on two key areas:

* + collaborative interventions, projects or events within each city or region and their impact
	+ ways that these examples provide content and models for teaching and learning in NSW visual arts programs.

Significant Findings

*Relevant and engaging examples for study*

City-wide changes in Marseille, the regional revitalisation of the Seto Islands and the Echigo Tsumari Art Field, and the work of Campement Urbain and artists Heather and Ivan Morison provide current examples of the ways that artists, architects and curators have intervened in communities to provoke debate and initiate positive change. Studying examples such as these and others has the potential to engage students in the changes within their own communities. The ideas and issues addressed in these examples have great relevance for local debates here in Sydney around the development of sites like Barangaroo, Western Sydney Parklands and the recent release of public sculpture in the City of Sydney.

*Models for practice*

Examples in this study provide models for teachers to structure artmaking practices in teaching programs that engage with the community. Sylvie Blocher and Francois Daune’s imaginative use of questions to investigate ideas about place; Fram Kitagawa’s use of students to engage local residents in the Echigo Tsumari Art Field and Triennale and the immersive experience of his recent Ichihara Art x Mix project, and the Tate Gallery’s engagement with the Bankside area and others studied provide accessible approaches for structuring artmaking activities in visual arts programs

*Extending and revising our understanding of the visual arts syllabus content*

The symbiotic roles and relationships of artists, architects and curators in these collaborative works and interventions require a layered understanding of the relationships in the conceptual framework. Hannah Chapman[[3]](#footnote-3) in her scholarship study has already explored this in relation to the Venice and Shanghai Biennales. In my study, the inter-subjective artworld relationships in the work of practitioners such as Heather and Ivan Morison, curator Fram Kitagawa or Campement Urbain members, Sylvie Blocher and Francois Daune signal a need to extend our ways of engaging the conceptual framework.

Recent theoretical frameworks such as Nicolas Bourriard’s[[4]](#footnote-4) writing on relational aesthetics provide more appropriate ways of developing student explanations of collaborative practices and relationships. Bouriarrd defines collaborative and relational works as ‘… a set of artistic practices which take as their theoretical and practical point of departure the whole of human relations and their social context, rather than an independent and private space …’[[5]](#footnote-5) While the cultural frame in the current visual arts syllabus provides some access for students, Bouriarrd’s work and other domains of knowledge outlined by Brown[[6]](#footnote-6) in his review would extend student explanations.

Sites of Collaborative Intervention

*Marseille, European Capital of Culture 2013*

For Marseille, the status as the European Capital of Culture in 2013 provided funds and impetus for a longer-term development, known as *Euro Mediterannée*, of the docklands area of the city as well as other sites in the city. Such leading architects and architectural firms as Norman Foster, Kengo Kuma, Boeri Studio, Tramoni and Zaha Hadid have been engaged to build a series of dazzling new buildings that establish an architectural dialogue with existing sites in the city.

The dialogue between architecture and community in this transformation of the city is exemplified in MuCEM, the *Musee de Civilisations Euro et Mediterannée*. Mikael Mohamed, Director of International Relations at the MuCEM, sees Marseille as re-positioning itself as a new force in the Mediterranean. Mohammed sees the role of the MuCEM in its exhibition program as asking new questions and offering new perspectives about what it is to be part of the Mediterranean world, both in the past and in the future.

MuCEM incorporates the layered historical site of Fort St Jean and leads to the remarkable contemporary structure known as J4, designed by architect Rudy Ricciotti, that looks from the pier through a pierced concrete screen to the Mediterranean. Situated at the mouth of the old port, MuCEM is designed design to embrace its immediate community and the Marsellaise, while also attracting huge numbers of tourists. Access to the museum precinct is free, and gardens and seating have been designed to make this a public space for people to enjoy.

The current architectural program in Marseille recognises that the city cannot just remain a museum but must continue to build architectural and artistic responses to acknowledge its layered history and future. For visual arts students, this dynamic relationship provides relevant material for critical debates about the directions taken by architects and planners in our local urban spaces.

*Sites in Japan: where nature, art and architecture conspire*

Population decline in local rural communities, the ecological impact of industry, and the need to preserve aspects of local culture and communities have led to unique collaborations between artists, architects and communities in two areas in Japan, Naoshima and the Seto Islands, and the Echigo Tsumari Art Field. The ‘regional revitalisation’[[7]](#footnote-7) of these internationally recognised art sites has relevance for NSW students in regional areas and in Western Sydney with developments in Penrith and in the Western Sydney Parklands.

Naoshima and the Seto Islands

Naoshima and the Seto Islands are a group of islands in the Inland Sea between the main island of Honshu and the smaller island of Shikoku. Formerly polluted sites for mining and the dumping of industrial waste, the Benesse Art Site Naoshima on Naoshima Island and the other art sites on the islands of Teshima and Inujima are part of a large-scale cultural redevelopment program initiated by the Fukutake Foundation, established by Soichiro Fukutake. He has worked with the island communities to establish a place focused on living well and ‘full of smiling senior citizens’[[8]](#footnote-8) that now welcomes over 185,000 visitors a year.

The development began in 1992 with a combined hotel and art museum, Benesse House, in which architect Tadeo Ando created a place where ‘… the architecture brings art, life and nature into a relationship of mutual engagement.’[[9]](#footnote-9) Ando has subsequently expanded on this with two more remarkable museums as well as additional hotel accommodation. Ando’s work calibrates strong geometric forms, axes and lines of sight, and neutral materials such as stone, concrete and glass with space and light to create framed and mediative views that highlight the natural environment of the island.

While the primary instrument for achieving transformation of the Seto Island sites is architecture, Fukutake[[10]](#footnote-10) also believes that that contemporary art possesses a magnificent ability to inspire people and transform an area. His architectural spaces are curated experiences that set up dialogues with the works installed and with the specific site on each island. Outside the Naoshima Cultural Village, abandoned houses in the villages of Honmura and Miyanoura have been acquired and converted in the art house project. On the islands of Teshima and Inujima, new art house projects are scattered amongst the small village settlements. Artists use ‘what exists to create what is to be’[[11]](#footnote-11), marrying the context and history of the original house with the artist’s interpretation. Visitors to the art house projects engage not only with the physical space of the work but with the village and community as they wander to find each work.

Echigo Tsumari

The Echigo Tsumari Art Field is a 760-square-kilometre area covering six municipal areas in a mountainous valley about two hours northwest of Tokyo. Similar to the Seto Islands, its aging population and declining agricultural economy prompted local authorities to engage curator and community-based art pioneer Fram Kitagawa and Art Front Gallery to develop solutions through contemporary art to revitalise the region.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Within the art field, 160 works by significant Japanese and international artists and architects are permanently installed in four museums. Every three years, Echigo Tsumari Art Triennale (ETAT), one of the largest art festivals in the world is held in the field. To see these works viewers journey amongst the 200 villages in the field, the audience is forced to take the “absolutely inefficient” journey to visit them by travelling through the region. According to Rei Maeda, Coordinator at Art Front Gallery, the active role of contemporary art in the region is to ‘… act as a medium to connect people to the place, people to people and also to bring people from outside the place to discover the potential of the place.’[[13]](#footnote-13) By wandering across the region, the viewer encounters the Satoyama, the rural environment in Japan where people and nature coexist

To counter initial resistance to his work, Kitagawa engaged art students from outside the region known as *kohebi-tai* (little shrimp gang) to work alongside residents and artists to foster relationships. Many of the works in the region, such as the art house projects *The Shedding House* and *GejoThatch Tower,[[14]](#footnote-14)* have been produced collaboratively with artists, architects and university students. Local residents now manage art works in abandoned houses and schools across the region and these projects have revived those small mountain communities.

One of the unique collaborations in the art field is with Australia through establishing Australia House and residencies for Australian artists and curators in the village of Urada. Designed by Australian architect Andrew Burns, Australia House marries Australian vernacular architecture with Japanese farmhouse (*minka*) architecture to house a gallery, workspace and living quarters.

Kitagawa has continued to apply the ‘Tsumari’ method in other projects such as the Setouchi Triennale in the Seto Islands. Ichihara Art x Mix on the Ichihara peninsula in Chiba prefecture, Kitagawa’s and Art Front’s latest regional revitalisation project, is based on four key principles: using abolished elementary schools, using local transport effectively, rediscovering such local resources as foods and the natural environment. The carnival-like contemporary art festival offers rich opportunities to engage with local people, culture and food, visiting art sites, and experiencing a performance of *Yubiwa Hotel* in which zombies or spirits were reconnected to the land.

Institutions and community outreach

Galleries and art centres visited actively engaged with their community through specially targeted programs. Generally more modest in scale, they could provide models for student artmaking or project-based programming in NSW schools as well as examples for study.

*La Cite de L’Architectureet du Patrimonie: Institut Francais d’Architecture (Ifa)*

The key focus of the Institut Francais d’Architecture is on promoting 20th and 21st-century architecture through a range of programs and exhibitions. It is described as a ‘watch centre concerned with the city, architecture and the environment’[[15]](#footnote-15) with an active responsibility and voice for directions and changes within the contemporary built environment. In 2014, Marie Helene Contal, Directeur-adjoint de l'Institut Français d'Architecture has curated a major exhibition, Re-enchanting the World,[[16]](#footnote-16) for the New Events Gallery, focusing on architecture as an act of resistance and transformation.

Fiona Meadows, architect, professor and project manager at Ifa develops projects that extend beyond the walls of the institution. Her programs promote an approach to architectural practice not simply about aesthetics or functionality but strongly connected to social responsibility and context. In her project, L’Ecole d’cabane (Cabins for Schools), schools submitted proposals that were linked to education programs focusing on sustainability and recycling, approaches to design or as artistic spaces and then students were mentored by an assigned architect to design their cabin.

*La Friche la Belle de Mai and Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers*

Funded by the French Ministry of Culture, these multi-disciplinary centres, located in some of the most socially disadvantaged areas in Marseille and Paris, establish a strong presence for the arts in the community. Both occupy former factories and provide ways that arts programs can engage positively with a community and re-purpose local ‘wastelands’.

La Friche la Belle de Mai, a former tobacco factory, is now occupied by more than 70 independent arts groups, and there are studios for designers, artists, filmmakers and digital arts production groups. Like a village or neighbourhood, La Friche is a place for life, not just for art, and it provides a program, *C’estOuvert* (It is Open), of facilities, events and workshops that engage with the local community and the city of Marseille

At Les Laboratoires d’Aubervilliers, the site itself and the participatory nature of the works by artists invited to work there has led to works that reflect a strong consciousness of place and community. An ongoing mission for this centre is, ‘… to get outside the walls to engage the community’[[17]](#footnote-17). One such project, by Berlin artist and architect, MarjeticaPotrč, is creating a kitchen garden, *La Semeuse* (The Sowing).Typically, Potrč works with a number of social, cultural and community institutions and at Les Laboratoires, the garden functions as a ‘relational object’ and becomes the means to initiate and negotiate issues of local concern.

*Koganecho Area Management Center, Yokohama*

Situated hard against the elevated suburban railway, Koganecho Area Management Center and director Shingo Yamano coordinate art events and architectural redevelopments in the former red light district of Yokohama. Established as part of a major clean up of the area, artists’ studios, community workshops and gallery spaces now fill the spaces under the railway viaduct. Working on the theme of ‘community and art’, Koganecho Bazaar, an annual event held since 2008 in the spaces between two train stations, includes installations, residencies and symposiums engaging local and international artists and curators. In 2014, *Fictive Communities Asia–Koganecho Bazaar* was held as part of the Yokohama Triennale.

*Tate Modern and Bankside Urban Forest*

A notable feature across London’s boroughs was the number of contemporary art galleries working with local authorities on ongoing programs of community engagement that acknowledged their place and responsibilities within their local area. Within the burgeoning development of the Bankside area, Tate Modern and the Bankside Urban Forest work both separately and in collaboration on a wide range of projects that seek to enhance community spaces, celebrate the diversity of the community or support more marginalised groups such as refugees.

Artists, Architects and Curators: Agents for change

The collaborative practices in this study illustrate the need to develop more layered understandings of artists, architects, curators and audience roles for the visual arts curriculum. Architects and artists such as Taro Igarashi or RitsukoTaho adopt the role of curators in their practice. Architect Taro Igarashi , as curatorial director of the Aichi Triennale *Awakening - Where are we Standing? Earth, Memory and Resurrection* acknowledged and reflected on the Great East Japan Earthquake as a way of considering society and significant events through art. Fram Kitagawa’s Ichihara Art x Mix event is more than a curatorial selection of artists for an event – the curated experience of the event and place becomes a creative work in itself.

*Campement Urbain*

Campement Urbain is a group that works with communities on urban change. It is comprises of founding members Sylvie Blocher, international contemporary video artist, Francois Daune, French urban planner and architect, and others such as Australian architect, Tim Williams. Over 15 years, its work has ranged from small-scale projects in Parisian suburbs to visions for Paris in Le Grand Paris project to such international projects as the *Future of Penrith/Penrith of the Future[[18]](#footnote-18)*.

Typically, Campement Urbain works with communities on the fringe, where there are social needs. Based in Saint Denis, one of Paris’s northern suburbs with diverse immigrant populations, high levels of unemployment, social disadvantage and economic poverty, Blocher and Daune use creative approaches to connect the community to their artistic work. Communities are asked questions using postcards with whimsical propositions that prompt their own ideas, or their responses to questions about their hopes for their community are videoed. Rather than arriving with solutions, Campement Urbain is a process of posing questions about where we live, with whom and how that can be best for all.

*Heather and Ivan Morison*

Heather and Ivan Morison are contemporary British artists who work across a variety of forms, including sculpture, installations, site specific works, performance works, plays and works on paper. Their works are often associated with change – as markers of change, to herald changes to a place, to make people aware of change and to leave a residue in our memories of new myths about places.

The Morisons’ works are enigmatic, yet compel the audience to respond. Heather Morison describes the work they were preparing for installation in Australia, *Sleepers Awake*, as ‘shaking a little bit of apathy out of you’ as well as an essentially ‘sublime’[[19]](#footnote-19) work.

As part of their practice, Heather Morison has worked with schools and galleries and as an artist educator. Their work, *Shadow Curriculum*, commissioned by South London Gallery, is for a school of special needs students in Peckham who are moving to a new school. The 3- metre tree, felled with the students as audience, had been carved over the year in the old school yard ready to be installed in the new school yard, providing a metaphorical bridge between the two schools and marking the change positively.

Conclusion

While this study raises questions about the scope of the current visual arts curriculum, the fundamental focus has been to consider how the examples studied could provide meaningful and engaging ways of connecting visual arts students to their communities. To be able to meet with significant artists, architects and curators engaged with positive interventions in communities has been an inspiring and humbling privilege. Their ideas and practices form a rich storehouse of possibilities that I hope can form the basis of future programs, both at a school level and in collaboration with local agencies and institutions.

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Further details of projects are available on [Creating Communities](http://100mileart.wordpress.com/)

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