

Podcast: The Placemakers

Episode: Dr. Michael Cohen – Art, Memory & Creating Safer Places

Host: Stephen Burton

Guest: Dr. Michael Cohen, Director of City People

Stephen Burton: Today we're talking to Dr. Michael Cohen, and he's the director of City People, which is an Australian organization committed to strategizing, planning, and implementing arts and cultural programs that build stronger communities and better places. With a background as a performing artist, Michael toured internationally for many years before returning to Sydney to establish a theater company that specialized in making works for non-arts spaces and audiences. He also ran the Fringe Festival in Sydney and subsequently spent 12 years working as a creative producer for local and state government in New South Wales. There he worked at the forefront of strategy and implementation for arts and cultural-led placemaking projects in some of Australia's most visited precincts. City People was a business founded in 2017 because Michael and the directors saw a gap between arts and cultural policy and the actual experiences of people on the ground, and they decided to fill that gap as experts who could speak the language of artists, communities, and government. Michael, thanks for being here today, and welcome to the Placemakers.

Michael Cohen: Thank you so much, great to be here chatting.

Stephen Burton: Michael, can you tell us a little bit about your background as a performer? So where did all of this begin for you, and where does your interest in public space come from?

Michael Cohen: Yeah, look, I, very early on in my theater work, I was really attracted to this idea that you can do art in all sorts of places. I remember very early on just jumping on a train with a bunch of other performers and just off our own—you know, we were in rehearsal for something else—and suddenly thought, "Wow, wouldn't it be great if there was theater on trains? Let's go and do it now!" And so we just went out there and jumped on, you know, the trains in suburban peak hour and just made people laugh, made people cringe, made people cry, whatever. I'm sure it was variable in its output, but that really sort of, I think, that early exposure to thinking, "Okay, art can have an impact on people in their everyday environment. How could we do that?" And so that kicked off a, you know, I guess the next 20 years of my career was mostly making art and performance in spaces that were not made for art—just places where people would come across and experience. And I just was really—I really loved that unexpected encounter with something that is a little bit strange or a little bit interesting or a little bit beautiful or a little bit you don't know what, that just makes you feel like something different and unexpected is happening in your everyday life.

Stephen Burton: So out of the theater and onto the street and challenging that notion that you've got to be in a particular environment to experience art.

Michael Cohen: Yeah, exactly, and getting away from the sense that art is only for people who go to a gallery or only for people who go to, you know, buy a ticket to a concert or that kind of thing, and just really enjoying the kind of happenstance that happens and the unexpected surprises. And so then I went on to—you know, I did make shows for theaters and things, but the part that really ignited for me and really got me excited was working outdoors, often in festival environments. I was often—you know, I did do some busking for a few years there, but mostly I was engaged as, you know, as an artist on festivals and things, but just not typically in a sided, ticketed venue. Often just I'd be put outside somewhere wonderful, and, you know, I worked all over Japan for about 10 years, I toured to Vietnam, I toured to Korea, I toured all around Europe for several years, and I just had this extraordinary experience seeing what art can do in a whole range of different public places.

Stephen Burton: Which leads me to the next question: what is it that you think art can do in a whole range of public places, and what's kept you interested in that?

Michael Cohen: I think artists have just a different way of seeing the world. Whether it's the way a sculptor makes a form and uses that form to help you see a place differently... you know, there's a great piece on Sydney Harbour here by an artist called Robin Backen, and it's right on the waterfront and it's got this expansive view of the harbor looking kind of east across towards the Harbour Bridge, it's from the western side of the harbor. And to experience Robin's piece, you step inside it—you step inside this small dome—and your view of that vista is constricted, it's actually very small. But you're in this little—you're in this little artwork, you can actually—you're standing over the ocean so you can hear and smell the ocean below you, it's coming through a grill. And you can't see very much of this amazing place, but your whole experience of that place is really accentuated by how the artist has framed the experience for you. And so that's an example of, you know, an artist thinking, "Oh, right, we've got this great view. Let's let people enjoy it by giving them less of it," you know? And so that's one example. I think, you know, the street performance example is another one where people have unexpected experiences in places and they just go on to remember those places in a very different way than if there was no art in that place.

Stephen Burton: So do you think there's a connection between art and memory? And if so, what do you think that connection is? How would you express that?

Michael Cohen: Oh yeah, totally. And I don't know whether you're going to go to this question or not, but for me, that issue of memory is the most important thing when you think about creating places. Because for me, the creative arts are a way to get us to really have a feelingful experience that we might not anticipate, and it's probably a person-to-person experience. So even that, you know, if you look at a—you know, Sydney has this whole range of new amazing art in the metro lines that they've made recently, as you probably know. And you go and look at some of those pieces and you think, "Oh yeah, look," you know, you might be looking at the color, but you also go into that piece of public art by thinking about the mind of the person who made it. And so you're in a kind of personal experience with thinking, "Why did they do that? You know, what is that person's—why would you do that?" And suddenly you're kind of experiencing a place through a kind of feelingful, person-to-person kind of interaction. Of course, you know, if you're watching a street performance and somebody grabs you out of the crowd and suddenly you're there with 200 other people around you, you have a very different person-to-person experience,

but nonetheless, it is that way of having a very connected experience of a place that is through an art form which really tries to get you in touch with your feelings on some level. Surprise, you know, there's a whole range of different feelings. So for me, that issue of creating memory comes from having those feelings. And I think that's stronger—for me, it's stronger than something that is very really just about shape and form. I think that can go a long way, so of course, you know, design—the design of our built environment and how we experience that is huge, has a huge impact. But for me, it's how you build memories and build feelings about a place that is the most important.

Stephen Burton: So would you say that if someone asked you what the most important ingredient is for creating a successful public place, would you say that it is memory?

Michael Cohen: Yeah, it's memory. For me, it's definitely memory. Because memory is all about—memory is where we hold feelings, memory is where we change our associations. So you might—you know, we did a project in Blacktown last year—maybe it was the year before last—and it was a project done by Transport for New South Wales, and they were really interested in changing the way people feel when they're in different hubs, you know, transport hubs. So the whole area around the station, a lot of women and gender-diverse people felt unsafe. And so they had some research that showed them that people feel safer when they are around, you know, an arts-driven experience, whether it's public art, whatever it might be. So, you know, we got a whole bunch of—we ran a—our team ran a whole bunch of workshops with women and gender-diverse people who used that area, and they made this temporary artwork which was all a whole bunch of poetry. And the little bits of poetry that they'd written, and then we just changed all the street signs. So the street signs had all bits of poetry all around them. It's a temporary project, and I guess I'm not delving into the merits of the work or not, but for me, it was really about getting people to think about their feelings and how that momentary kind of encounter with something beautiful or strange or wonderful changes how you feel. And yeah, so that's a—that's a real driver in our work.

Stephen Burton: It's interesting you should be talking about this concept of how people feel in places, and it seems to be something that's left out of a lot of the conversations that we have about our public places, unless we're talking about certain things like safety or perhaps health benefits or health impacts. And I'm wondering, how can we get better at creating places that people feel good in? I mean, from your point of view, would I be right in assuming that art and performance and creative and cultural expression is one of those ways that we can create a place that feels better for people?

Michael Cohen: Yeah, definitely. I mean, we've all been to places where there's no shade and no seats and that are windy and it's dangerous for kids to play on the road or near the road, or, you know, there's big glass edifice buildings that just make you feel strange and small. So they are really—they are a host of problems that good design can solve. And, you know, there's thankfully more and more of that thinking around that, around that experience—personal experience in place. But for me, I think that there's a role that artists can play which can touch on all different parts of that spectrum. Like, you know, there's a lot of—there's a lot of engagement happens on any big sort of infrastructure development, you know, because people recognize that talk to the community is, of course, important. And yet, having been involved in a lot of those, both as just a participant and, I guess, on in a kind of professional capacity, you do come away from some of them thinking, "Oh yeah, those

people felt like they were listened to. But did they actually have any impact on when they come back to visit the place? How's it going to affect their feelings of the place? Like, how is it going to change their place associations or their attachment?" So actually, I think there's a role for artists—and this is not all artists—but artists who are good with social engaged practice or co-creation or co-design practices that enroll communities in a process of making something wonderful and beyond their, you know, beyond their wildest dreams. That kind of process, I think, has a way to really lift people's experience beyond just, "Oh, look, yeah, we've done this development and said we had to put a percent towards public art, so that corner over there, that's where we're going to put your art." That is a very thin addition, I think. I think there are much more interesting ways for artists to be involved in that process.

Stephen Burton: Absolutely, and you're certainly speaking my language there, Michael. It's almost a question of when communities go back into these places that have been built, you know, in theory for them and in their name, how can they see their own stories, their own memories, the histories, their cultures reflected in those outcomes? And it's a very difficult thing to do, as I'm sure you know, and artists do a great job of it. And I think the urban design industry are slowly learning that that's an important part of their work as well, it's an important part of their mandate to achieve that. What role do you think that community engagement can play in that process in order to see their fingerprints and to see some of their stories reflected in those places? How can we become better at engaging with communities in that sense?

Michael Cohen: I think people can sniff out a tick-box process. And you might not clock it straight away, but if you go into an engagement process, somebody encourages you to join a group that is talking about a new development or a parkland that's changing and we want to hear your voices... they're obligatory kind of processes. And so everybody that's in the room from the professional side knows that they have to get through this step in order to do the next step, whatever that might be. But participants can sniff that out pretty easily, I find. And so I think there's something about for everybody thinking about, "Okay, this thing's engagement and it's not just this phase of the project, it actually is going to run through." And also, if people say to us XYZ is important, then actually XYZ is important even if we don't think it is important. You know, we've been involved in some children's hospitals and we've done a lot of deep engagement through the building of these two new children's hospitals in Sydney. And we got kids in at the very beginning of the process when we were just sort of at the strategy phase, and we got a group of kids in, we called them the Big Voices Committee. And we got them to meet with all the architects and all the project leads and all the heads of department, and we got them to talk about what was important to them. And they drew pictures and they made plasticine and, you know, they talked to—they did this one-on-one engagement talking to them, and they said, "You know, we want to see this, this, this, and this." And a lot of that has gone into—into the project. But nonetheless, there are bumps along the way when you go where somebody will say, "Well, why—you know, we don't think that's important to have XYZ," or "We think that kids will find that scary" or whatever, whatever, whatever. And you just have to turn around and say, "Well, actually, remember this conversation we had back there? Well, this is how that—this is how that plays out, and this is what your people have said, so let's—let's stay true to that. Let's stay true all the way through." That is a part of that I think where we could get better, is staying true right through, because sometimes we just think of that engagement as a little process that we have to do and it actually, to my mind, needs to stick around.

Stephen Burton: Yeah, what a great story about the children's hospital and using the children's voices to help design the outcomes. It makes so much sense, but some—but, you know, we often wonder why we don't do these things more often. It seems a lot logical and obvious.

Michael Cohen: Yeah, and I think we forget that mostly hospitals are built for tall white men—everything, from the air conditioning to the door knobs to the everything, you know? And we have—you know, there is—you actually have to take some pretty big shifts in your own perspective to try to think about users, and whether that's, you know, from different cultural groups or how do you bring up the voices of underrepresented communities. That is a big chunk of the work that we do, and so a lot of the engagement we do as part of making, you know, integrating art into new infrastructure is working with those communities and working out ways for them to have a voice so that there's a cultural safety for them. Whether they are, you know, the big hospital we worked on in Liverpool where, you know, it was on Macquarie's land, and Governor Macquarie didn't have a great rap in terms of being a First Nations friendly guy, you know? And so generations of Aboriginal communities, hospitals just spell danger because that is often a place where generations were stolen, you know? And so there's a whole kind of, how do you bring people on a journey of feeling safe in these institutions that we need to stay healthy? And that is a lot of the work that we do. We've done a lot of those kind of projects working with underrepresented—underrepresented voices, helping them to find a way to feel like this is their place.

Stephen Burton: Yeah, and that reminds me of something you said earlier in our conversation. I think you were saying how you were working with women and gender-diverse communities, and they were talking—I think you said people felt safer in places where there is public art. And I found that to be a fascinating concept. Can you elaborate a little bit more on what was going on during that time when you guys were doing that work and what that was about?

Michael Cohen: So it was led by two women in my team, and I was kind of in the background, but nonetheless, I tracked it the whole way through. And yet the research that was run through an engagement company with a whole bunch of women and gender-diverse communities in that area showed that, yeah, when we feel like some effort has been made in the aesthetics of a place by things like public art, we feel safer. It was rated much higher than lighting, you know? And so how you get to that and how you get to that sense of safety is really—it's an interesting one, because safety is—is a very different—it's a perception-based thing, isn't it? And so it's different for all different people, and different cultures have different things of what makes them feel safe. So how you can do that in a cover-all is, of course, tricky. And I guess that's where the role of an artist who just thinks about things differently, and who thinks about place either through the physicality of the place or maybe they think about place through how communities use a space, or maybe they just think about old stories related to that place. But they have a way of diving in that is not typical, it's a bit lateral often. And that is where I think magic can happen that we can't anticipate, and that is—I think where good kind of thinking and masterplanning and curating of places gets that conversation started early. Because if you're trying to do it at the end when you've got that dodgy part of the car park that you don't know what to do with, and that's where you put your public art inclusion, it's all kind of stuck on too late.

Stephen Burton: Yeah, what I love about what you were saying before is it's pivoting the conversation away from, "Okay, yeah, we should just have some art for art's sake up on these walls, in these alleyways, on these buildings," and it's pivoting the conversation and changing the language to, "Well, actually, what we need to do is we need to create safer places for people. Oh, and by the way, art can create safer places for people, and we know that now from this research, we know that now from the engagement." And I find that so many of the conversations that we have around arts and culture in public places are so easily shot down by people that say, "Well, this is just a nice-to-have. You know, like, why are we spending this extra money on these extra embellishments where there's no return on it?" And now we need to be way smarter and we can start having these conversations around, "Well, places that are safe and people feel safe in are also places that are successful, with high footfall, with high economic return." So we are building collectively the evidence base to make these arguments stronger. And I think that's what's so exciting about placemaking right now, is that we're starting to get a handle on the way that we can hook up our creative agendas to other people's perspectives.

Michael Cohen: Yeah, and I think—exactly to your point, you know, I think the world doesn't need more objects, you know? We don't actually need more objects. We don't need more public art, we don't need it for its own sake. We definitely do not need another object for its own sake just because it is, you know, in somebody's eyes a thing of beauty. Actually, it's how you can have those conversations early in the piece, and we're involved much more and more in the early stage masterplanning of new precincts, and we're there with the flood consultants and the, you know, the traffic consultants and all of that, I'm sure you are too. And you're having conversations collectively about how all of those pieces can make for better places, can make for better dwell time, can make for better experience, better memory building. And I think you're right, you know, that conversation is happening more and it's happening earlier, which is the important one. And sometimes art comes—so we're doing this strange piece of work—it's a wonderful piece of work for Singapore at the moment, work with the National Arts Council. We're doing a public art study, like a 10-year public art study. And there's a park in a residential area where there was a big concrete canal went right through the middle of this park. And a team of landscape architects did the masterplanning and the kind of—the rejuvenation of that park, and they had an artist in the mix. You go to that park and you can't see art in—I mean, there are some sculptures, but I don't think the artist was involved in those, strangely. But the whole rejuvenation of the canal into what looks like now a natural riverbed took place with an artist in the planning team. And yet there's no little plaque that says this artist did this piece. So sometimes I think a metric of success for public art is that you can't kind of see it. I know people would hate me for saying that, but I actually think it's for the betterment of the place, and when the place feels good and you feel something different and you don't necessarily understand why, that is the great outcome.

Stephen Burton: Agree. Michael, when you think back across through your life where it began in your history in performance and where you are today, is there a moment, is there a project, is there something that you look back on with immense pride and think, "Wow, we really did something special there"? And if there is, could you share that with us?

Michael Cohen: Yeah, there are lots of moments out there. Look, I—actually, strangely, I had this experience doing a project not long ago, a year—two years ago, working with a

Dharawal elder from La Perouse in Sydney. And we had received some grants to work with a community association in Walsh Bay, which is right next to the Harbour Bridge. Walsh Bay, about in the '90s, I think, went through a whole kind of gentrification, and now a lot of kind of wealthy people own these mega apartments there in these old sort of industrial and colonial buildings. And it's—you know, it's got a real—doesn't have a middle to it, Walsh Bay. There is a kind of—some real experiences on the street that make you feel like there's no real sense of wanting to stop and be in the middle of this place. And the community, as I said, you know, are a little bit separate, they often just drive their cars into the underground car parks and don't have a sense of the public life of this place. And everywhere you look, there are relics of the colonial past and, you know, the industrial age and the Harbour Bridge soars over the top of you. And so we took this—we got the job and we said, "Okay, we want to work with this Dharawal artist because that First Nations story is nowhere to be seen." And this particular artist is Aunty Lola Ryan, her mother became famous for making those shell Harbour Bridges, and she used to sell them down in that area—like during the construction of, she started making them during the construction of the Harbour Bridge. She made these little things this big, and they are covered in shell art, so they—they used collected shells in the shoreline of La Perouse and made these little bridges. So we worked with the residents and with the businesses, and we devised this idea to build this giant Harbour Bridge that looked like her mum's Harbour Bridge. And so it was a piece in homage to her mother and her, like, the matrilineal line of shell art. Anyway, so it was a kind of firestorm project that happened in a very short period of time, but Aunty Lola sort of held—held us steady, and we got to the opening of this and it opened during the Sydney Festival, it was part of the Sydney Festival. We built this giant bridge—the dimensions that I can't totally remember, but I think it was like about 20 meters long and 10 meters high, and you could climb up it and walk over it. And when you're on the bridge, you're climbing over this kind of Dharawal shell art bridge, and then you're looking up and then right next to you are other people climbing over the actual Harbour Bridge. And so that, as a temporary artwork, it was there for three or four months, was great. People got to experience this great big pop-and-pink kind of artwork. But the thing that really struck me—and the thing that was, in response to your question, was we did the opening, it was a rainy day, the Governor came and the Minister for the Arts came, it was—it became this big deal. But the thing that was very striking for me was that all the Dharawal elders came from the local sort of the aged care home in La Perouse, and they all got on the bus together and like a whole big mob of them came, and they're all sitting in this little tent we'd put a tent up because it was raining. And then we had these community dancers from La Perouse come and do an opening dance before we started. And I was the MC, and I got up to speak, but I'd just seen this dance and I looked at all these little old granny elders and I looked at Aunty Lola and I was like—my eyes just brimmed with tears and I was like, "Oh my God, I can't speak." And I—trying to work out afterwards, there was something about, you know, there was something about that piece that was not that it was important for—you know, it was great, it was part of the Sydney Festival and all that sort of hoopla. But the fact that that community came and it was raining and they just felt great about it was just—I'm tearing up again. But there was something about that that was so striking for me because often when you do works with marginalized communities, it's kind of about—it's driven by appetite for a white-fella audience or for a mainstream audience. And for me, there was something great there because actually it was being celebrated by that community, and it was important to them, and it was kind of reclaiming in a great way a, you know, an icon as a kind of an Aboriginal icon. And it was great, and subsequently that work, you know, is now—it's now in—that temporary work is now in the collection of the

Powerhouse Museum. So a lot of that kind of makes me just think the intentions of the work that we do when we make temporary bits of art or those kind of temporary incursions into place, and their impact on community ownership, go a lot further than we can imagine sometimes. And when they do, they are kind of amazing. So, you know, for an old bastard like me this far into my career, to have a moment that still kind of made me feel like I was doing good work, I was like, "Oh, thank God for that. Okay, I'll do—I'll do it again tomorrow."

Stephen Burton: Dr. Michael Cohen, thank you so much for sharing that beautiful memory with us, and thank you so much for joining us today on the Placemakers.

Michael Cohen: It's a pleasure.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.
