: Mark McLelland Transcript

Podcast: The Placemakers
Episode: Mark McLelland – Cultural Placemaking & Public Art
Host: Stephen Burton
Guest: Mark McLelland, Founder & Creative Director at Cultural Capita
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Stephen Burton: Today we're talking with Mark McLelland, who is an artist and a designer and the founder and creative director of a business called Cultural Capital based in Sydney, Australia. He's an urban commentator and an advocate for cultural placemaking. Mark, thanks for talking to us today and welcome to the Placemakers.

Mark McLelland: Thanks Stephen, good to be here chatting with you.

Stephen Burton: Your business, Cultural Capital, I understand you guys are involved in a lot of public art delivery. How did you come to find yourself doing that kind of work?

Mark McLelland: Cultural Capital has been running for about 11 years now. Prior to that, I was working as an artist and starting to do public commissions. If you wind back 11 years, the process by which a lot of public commissions were being done wasn't great. I was often brought in late in the urban development process. I felt like that squandered the true opportunities of creativity that artists can bring to urban development.

So I thought it would be interesting to come up with a business model that enabled artists to get higher up the food chain and more involved earlier in the urban development process. I approached a couple of people I knew—Harry Partridge and Axel Arnot (who was the head curator of Sculpture by the Sea)—and said why don't we get together and have a bit more muscle with the three of us than me as a single artist on my own, and see if we can do something with art that elevates it in the urban development landscape.

Stephen Burton: When you say elevated and get higher up the food chain, what were the problems you were facing that made you decide to make that jump?

Mark McLelland: It was an undervaluing of art, art thinking, art process, and the role of the artist. It was often a tick box, and you'd be called in late in the process. The result would be a standalone artwork that wasn't necessarily terribly well integrated with site, architecture, landscape, country—all those considerations that are second nature to us now. My big thing at that time was wanting to integrate art more into those other professions of urban design, landscape, and architecture. We've all seen those lonely, isolated individual artworks that just aren't really connecting as well as they could with the place or the people.

Stephen Burton: Sounds like you're talking about the phenomenon of "plonk art."

Mark McLelland: Yeah, absolutely. That's a perfect description. I'm happy to say that the whole thing has moved incredibly quickly—not just with us, but the context we're working in. There are very few people doing or wanting plonk art anymore. Our client base is increasingly sophisticated and often after the same results that we are.

Stephen Burton: Do you observe a difference in your client base between what's going on in the public sector vs. the private sector? Is there a difference in the way they conceptualize art and the role of art in their projects?

Mark McLelland: Yes, but I'll answer it not quite in the way you might imagine. In the private development sector, you've got a massive range from huge developers like AMP and Lendlease through to small developers. Anyone across that spectrum can be really committed and thoughtful about getting good outcomes.

The biggest difference I find between government and developers is that by the time government has a project—a brief for us to respond to—they have a project. They know it's at the point where they're ready to go, and those projects move forward in a fairly logical manner. What we often find with developers, particularly now that we are brought in earlier, is there's an incredible amount of chopping and changing. Developments getting postponed, put on hold, sold to another developer... it can be harder to find that consistent line through.

Stephen Burton: Do you feel as though what's going on in the art world, development world, and public realm is improving the role that artists have? Are they getting more respect, are fees becoming more realistic, are outcomes improving?

Mark McLelland: I would say yes, yes, yes to all those questions. Specifically for artists (not urban development generally), it's improving a lot—more respect, many more opportunities. There are organizations like your own who spend a lot of energy supporting the work of artists. That's a whole sector that probably didn't exist 10 years ago. The strength of opportunity within the overall world of public art in Australia has been very expansive over the 10 or 11 years we've been involved.

Stephen Burton: Do you put that down to anything in particular? Is it a general change globally?

Mark McLelland: Globally, Australia is sort of late to that party. Some of it is legislative. Brisbane City Council legislated years ago for a percentage for art program. Urban Art Projects rode the wave of that legislation pretty well early on. In Sydney, certain sized developments have a percentage for art. Schemes have their pluses and minuses, but certainly there's been legislative support.

Also, the understanding of the concept of placemaking and what art can bring to placemaking is a huge contributor. And connecting with country frameworks (like in NSW) create enormous opportunities for Indigenous art and creative expression. So it's partly policy, partly awareness. There have been advocates—we had to advocate early in our practice for the benefits of art, building case studies from global examples about art in economic terms. We really don't have to do that anymore because people are more aware of the intrinsic value.

Stephen Burton: Assuming for a minute that some listeners may not be aware of those intrinsic values, what are some of the arguments you would make about why they should have art in the public realm?

Mark McLelland: What people wanted to hear back then was the economic case for art. But underneath Cultural Capital on our letterhead, it says "bringing meaning to place." That is something that art in the public realm does. It creates a narrative connection with place that is accessible to greater or lesser degrees to groups of people. It creates opportunities for welcoming people to place, for cultural inclusivity. For me, that is a particularly important one.

Here in Australia, the opportunities for Australian Indigenous artists have changed massively, which is a fantastic thing—that the voices of Aboriginal artists are now used to express Indigenous culture, about which non-Indigenous Australians knew very little not very long ago.

At the same time, in a city like Sydney, we have 200-something cultures from around the world. What I want is for all the people that come to Sydney to find places where they can recognize both themselves and others in their exploration of the public realm. That's how you get a sense of cultural inclusivity. If you can't see yourself in the public realm—can't recognize yourself and your culture—there's no sense of place for you here.

Stephen Burton: It creates advocates out of those communities when we're making changes to the public realm in their name. There's an opportunity to bring those people into the process and share their stories creatively.

Mark McLelland: For me, it doesn't have to be the big public artwork either. It's art process and art thinking as benefits of bringing artists into the urban design process. It's urban objects, furnishings—the things we sit on, handrails we touch, door handles, ground plane, lighting. It's bringing art thinking to the manifestation of all those objects and furnishings in our urban realm so things develop texture, like an urban patina, and layers of meaning.

We just traditionally have been absolutely crap at doing that in Australia. We've been quite happy to pave everything with the same un-relieved reflective concrete and whack up the cheapest construction method possible. Research by an urban academic and neuroscientist

in New York has shown that a textured urban environment with beautiful urban detailing vs. an un-relieved facade/curtain wall type situation... the latter actually gives rise to stress hormones in our body that ultimately make us sick. So it's no surprise we don't feel great when we're in those environments.

Stephen Burton: What do you think government could be doing better at the moment in terms of creating more artwork in our public places?

Mark McLelland: Our levels of government clients range from state to local. In NSW, state government agencies like Infrastructure NSW and Transport for NSW are large clients of ours. They've become really good at doing this stuff—they understand the value, seek professional guidance, and consult well.

Local government ranges from Brisbane City Council (massive) to small regional governments. Brisbane City Council and City of Sydney are really good. Suburban councils and regional governments often have briefs that come out all over the place—there's not as sophisticated a level of understanding as you might hope for. But generally, things have improved over the last decade or so. I'm mostly completely supportive of what our government clients are doing.

Stephen Burton: Mark, the question I ask all our guests: What do you think the most important ingredient is for creating a successful public place?

Mark McLelland: Like a lot of design-oriented people, I'm very aware of the role of the contextual. I'm going to contradict myself because here's a place where I can complain not specifically about government but client organizations generally—often there's this desire to replicate what's been successful in one place in another. And I am just not a believer in that formula at all.

By contextual, I mean understanding local context and responding in a local way. Great volumes of shade trees in Queensland translated to the area where I live (700m above sea level and freezing in winter) may not be the right solution. This whole notion of placemaking is about understanding local context and responding in a local way.

Having said that, shade and seating are obviously important requirements for people to be able to enjoy place. The ability to observe and interact with other people, or to some degree retreat from other people depending on the mood—that old idea of prospect and refuge. You know, I can see what's outside me, I can see what's going on, but I feel pretty safe and comfortable where I am.

I think layers of meaning brought through art and art process is the activator debate—to what degree do we choose to activate a place? Sometimes when developers are thinking about a new development, they'll be thinking about an activation calendar—year-round

activity. How do we tie into the big existing festivals? Then the question becomes: How much activation is the right level of activation? Do we actually want to fill the whole calendar or are there times of the year when we should go and experience the space just as a space?

I think a quality of **timelessness** in our public spaces often transcends some of the things people are looking for. At the moment in the development industry, it's "let's have a public space that's about wellness." Or "water sustainable urban design." None of those things will last—they're fashions. But its interpretation or expression is a fashion. Nobody's interested in water sustainable urban design once everybody's doing it. These are people trying too hard to look for a hook that's not always required. What can we do in that space that gives it a timeless expression that transcends the comings and goings of these fashions?

Stephen Burton: So what's the role art has to play in creating successful public places?

Mark McLelland: We use the term cultural placemaking to describe our work. Our idea of cultural placemaking is a process that employs art and creative expression to develop the holistic cultural experience of the urban landscape. In that sense, it is intended to use art and creative expression to encourage the flourishing of our human natures as individuals and in community.

If you think of walking into a plaza of grey concrete, the human spirit shrinks—it's compressed by that experience. What we're after is that urban experience where you walk into a new environment and your spirits are just lifted and you're kind of desperate to run around that place and explore it because it's elevating your spirits. That is so often achieved as the result of art.

It's by no means just art, but it can often be art outcomes in terms of public art as well as that art process and art thinking invested creating these narrative threads and lines that layer and overlap through the landscape. As well as the architecture, landscape architecture, details of the ground plane, details of urban furnishings—all of these things working together.

And on that subject, we talk about cultural placemaking, but one thing I say about it is: this is not a process that we exclusively own. It's a collaborative process. If we want to get good cultural places, we've got to be in deep collaboration with the urban designers, architects, landscape architects, with the client. And we're in those conversations—sometimes leading those conversations standing on our platform of art and culture—but we are only one party in a deeply collaborative process.

Without that collaboration, it's kind of all lip service. You've just got to have that collaboration to get these integrated outcomes. And the thing is, people talk about collaboration, but it's an investment to really collaborate. It takes longer. It's easier to do your work in isolation and send it in. But it doesn't get you the result. You need to budget for that collaboration, and you

need to be prepared to really, really invest in it.

Stephen Burton: Is there a place overseas that you look to as a peer in this type of work?

Mark McLelland: I've just come back to Australia from 8 months away on sabbatical. I visited family and friends in other parts of the world. Cities like Copenhagen and Prague are fantastic examples of cities where—when I'm in Copenhagen—I feel like everything I've been advocating for over the last decade or so, it's just *there*. It's all there in Copenhagen.

In Copenhagen, I almost never feel like I have to look up where I'm going. It just feels intuitively connected in some way that I can't even quite articulate. Those Danish cities now have the walking streets. But whether you're walking, on a bicycle, or taking public transport, the intuitive navigability of Copenhagen is absolutely unbelievable. And that is a huge part of placemaking.

If you look at a city like Copenhagen, it has done placemaking at a whole-of-city scale incredibly well. And art is just one tiny little part of that. An important part, but just a part.

Stephen Burton: Mark, thank you so much for joining us this afternoon on the Placemakers.

Mark McLelland: It's been great Stephen. Let's have that bottle of wine and keep the conversation going when I'm up there or you're down here soon.

Stephen Burton: Thanks for listening to the Placemakers.