PUBLIC ART, IDENTITY & PLACE-MAKING – THE PONDS, NSW

Carmen Osborne (1) and Marla Guppy (2)

(1) Development Director MPIA, Urban Development North, Landcom Parramatta NSW
(2) Cultural Planning Consultant, Guppy and Associates, Leichhardt, NSW

Corresponding Author:
Carmen Osborne
cosborne@landcom.nsw.gov.au

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Abstract
Public art has been used as a key place making tool for The Ponds community in north west Sydney. The role of both government and the corporate sector in ‘producing’ liveable places from the early stages of planning has matured in the last decade. This is particularly evident in the development of new housing areas. The approach has been a considered response to the poor planning outcomes of the past where housing was delivered without the supporting infrastructure to support sustainable communities. Upfront planning and delivery of open space, playgrounds, community facilities and community support is now required in the early stages of development. Within this scenario the early inclusion of public art and design is now part of the planning process in Landcom developments.

INTRODUCTION
The Ponds is a new suburb in the Blacktown City LGA, The rapidly growing city has 265,000 people and is located 34 kilometres from the centre of Sydney. The Ponds is being developed by Landcom and will have 3,200 homes when it is complete. Like other areas of Blacktown, it has an ethnically diverse, young population. Landcom has planned The Ponds as a liveable community by delivering key social infrastructure such as the public school and parks early.

Landcom also has a commitment to integrating public art as part of the development process and includes public art in its Design Guidelines. The Ponds Public Art Plan, coordinated by Guppy Associates has been in place for 6 years. The plan has a focus on site specific art that creates a sense of place and local distinctiveness.

The Ponds Public Art Strategy was developed around a series of themes to interpret the meaning of this place, including ‘the culture of water and harvest’. The Strategy provided the framework for public art, but also discussions with the local Council and more recently the community.

Work ranges from major public art commissions to projects involving the community with some overlap. There is an emphasis on engaging artists from greater western Sydney. The program also mentors young and emerging artists both through public art commissions and through placement with more experienced project artists. Close collaboration with the local Darug Aboriginal people has resulted in a series of artworks in situ and in fabrication exploring the relationship between the Darug people and Second Ponds Creek which flows through the suburb.

Creating journeys rather than gateways
Good places work because they enable a sense of connectedness. At The Ponds Landcom has avoided any sense of a gated community with legible street design and open space that is easily accessed by residents and the broader community. Public art has reinforced local identity, by providing way-finding rather than suburb entry statements. Art on Stanhope Parkway, a main road through The Ponds, has created an intriguing journey for all travellers as
well as acting as a place marker and providing legibility for navigating the new suburb. The early installation of the “Float” artwork has linked the new urban area to the local Stanhope Gardens town centre and its day and night presence is enjoyed by residents.

1. ‘Float’ by Milne Stonehouse, Stanhope Parkway, the Ponds This work also reflects Landcom’s vision for The Ponds as a place that respects water and the environment and for demonstrating sustainable living.

**Working with young and emerging artists**

Distinctive places are lively, provoking comment and visual interest. Engaging young artists and supporting artists to work in public contexts is an important aspect of this direction. Also on Stanhope Parkway Landcom commissioned 5 young artists from western Sydney to comment on ‘suburban culture’. The work has created energetic debate but more importantly it has supported the careers of emerging artists by enabling them to work at a scale and public exposure not open to their practice to date.

2. Left ‘Death is coming but I have to walk the dog’ by Johan Neve, Right ‘Suburban Poetry’ by Jan Cleveringa, Stanhope Parkway, The Ponds

The mentoring project ‘Creative Shift’ offers an emerging artist from Western Sydney the opportunity to work with experienced public artists, visit fabricators, participate in project development and assist with installation and other events. Assisting with the UWS Art Prize is part of this process. Artist Chris Edwards is currently engaged in this project, using it to move his visual arts practice into public art and design. In addition to working with established artists he will develop a public art project as part of The Lake neighbourhood community facility at The Ponds later this year.
**Linking place and Aboriginal heritage**

Second Ponds Creek which runs through The Ponds is an important site for local Darug people. Archaeological work on site recovered more than 15,000 artefacts. The indigenous community has been closely involved in the interpretation and understanding of place and in art that creates places of meaning for both indigenous and non-indigenous community members. A dramatic ‘keeping place’ with in floor panels painted by Danny Eastwood displays artefacts found on site.

3. “Creeklines” An Aboriginal keeping place with panels painted by Blacktown artist Danny Eastwood displays artefacts from Second Ponds Creek

Three major projects now in development are creating places along the actual creek line where Darug artists can tell the story of place as well as enabling cultural tour and learning spaces. The art space ‘Gathering’ creates the spatial arrangement of the Darug campsite and encourages play as a way of understanding Darug life. ‘Understory’ explores the Darug relationship to the Cumberland Plains bushlands. ‘Julluk’, the Darug word for ‘moon’ symbolises the reality that The Ponds is ‘under the Darug moon’. Two linked artworks Moon Wall, an engineering and art element on a water catchment pond and ‘Julluk’ a major sculptural work explore the Darug and European understanding of the cosmos through image and text.

Using water to define place
The Ponds is located on Second Ponds Creek. Water is a major focus of the landscape and WSUD underpins the urban design work. Despite the recent rains the focus is on water in a dry landscape. Landcom have regenerated the creekline using collected seed stock and rehabilitated a large existing farm dam as a habitat and recreation area. Understanding and exploring our relationship to water has been the basis for ‘the culture of water’ a central theme in The Ponds Art Plan. Artwork encourage an appreciation of water in the landscape, the creek is a major focus as are the interconnectedness of human environments and natural resources.

Creating places where water can be enjoyed has been important. The main cycleway to Rouse Hill Town Centre follows the creekline and offers more intimate places to pause, reflect and play but the lake will provide the community with a significant gathering place. Public art is central to both the creation of people places and the celebration of water. Artists Bronwyn Berman and Jill Chism were selected by a panel with community representation to develop major works for the lake precinct. Bronwyn’s work will be located in the deep water area. Water movement from the artwork will assist with water quality management.

Jill Chism’s glass artwork won the People’s Choice Award at The Lake Art Competition. A community art project with locally developed imagery and interactive polished steel panels, the work will link the people focussed spaces in Lakeside Park with the water’s edge.

Building community capacity in art and place-making
Recent public artworks and public artists have worked with and been embraced by the local community. Most recently Jill Chism, an artist selected by The Ponds residents, has engaged the local community in creating art that reflects their response to the place. This work has involved both adults and local children and forms part of the panels on the plinths in her new work ‘Ponds Dreaming’. Community members have also created time capsules for installation in the work and later retrieval by the future community.
Working with an artist has been a positive aspect of the project. So too has a broader sense of involvement in the art program. As public art in The Ponds has gathered momentum and the community has grown there has been an emphasis on community involvement both in the selection of artists, the development of public art projects and the process of art-making. The scope of the art also allows the potential for different voices some contentious. There is an expectation that residents will play an active part in the dialogue, that public art should be discussed, engaged with and commented on, that it should be part of the life of the new suburb.

**Social justice and the fabrication of artworks for place-making projects**

While many projects engage communities in concepts and design, art engineering work is largely the province of specialist firms. Landcom is pioneering an innovative partnership with the metal workshop at Parklea Correctional Centre. Artist Russell Anderson has worked with inmates for over a year on designs for seating. Prototypes were developed by prisoners and reviewed by Landcom and Blacktown Council. The first 25 commissioned art seats are now in fabrication. Staff at Parklea report significant outcomes for men working on the project including a real level of engagement in the problem solving aspects of the design work and pride in the product. Men expect to leave Parklea with skills that will enable them to enter the workforce and the seating project will be part of their individual resumes.

6. Prototypes for seating developed by inmates from Parklea Correctional Centre with artist Russell Anderson

**CONCLUSION**

The Ponds Art Plan is now in its sixth year. Significant projects are in the ground. In the next 2 years a larger body of art that has been in design development will be installed. Artworks will engage residents, celebrate themes of environment, heritage and community life, and create spaces that draw people to them, encouraging interaction and communal experiences. As the community grows and the suburb nears completion public art continues to be central to way residents experience the places and spaces of everyday life.

**REFERENCES:**

Landcom, Public Art Guidelines, May 2008