



Site Specific

Designers and agencies enjoy working with arts organisations because – despite tight budgets – they're creative clients. But are they doing a good job? Mark Braddock investigates.

WITH GALLERIES and museums and giant ferris-wheels and festivals popping up all over our urban landscapes like some globalised, culturally-infectious venereal disease, it's seems like a good time to ask, what is the place of branding in all of this?

If you take a broad view of branding and define it as the intangible 'personality' of an organisation, product or, indeed a place, then I would suggest branding has everything to do with the proliferation and success of our galleries, events, theatres and festivals.

Why, for example, is Federation Square (basically a brick-paved open space surrounded by over-sized Meccano buildings) an experience that you must partake in when visiting Melbourne, when the Perth Convention Centre is a massive white elephant masquerading as a giant grey cockroach laying at the feet of the city of Perth? Even if you find a reason to come to Perth, I am confident that you will be hard pressed for a reason to visit the PCC.

Perhaps the easy response would be to look to the urban planning and architecture of a place – many would argue Federation Square is simply a more interesting architectural design. But that would be reducing the 'spirit' of a place down to its mechanics. The real difference I believe lies in an exciting

vision that is well executed – a 'brand vision' if you will – and that has been followed through and is the intangible sum off all the parts.

Why is it the most interesting places also seem to have the most successful graphics systems, for instance?

I don't believe the world's greatest way-finding system could save an ill-conceived venue any more than 'bad' architecture alone will condemn a place to failure. However, when there is a strong shared vision in a place, the individual elements are elevated by their common aim.

The branding and signage system in Fed Square works so well because it is designed with the intent of the architecture in mind. The architecture challenges its location in such an interesting way that you can't help but be drawn into it, even if it's just to spend some time sitting, having a beer and debating whether it works or not.

Similarly, there is nothing fatally wrong with the graphics for the Perth Convention Centre, but the project is so entirely ill conceived that the massive orange numbers of the signage system seem to haunt the huge space and become almost fascist in their dominance.

Why does this matter?

In a globalised world, arts

organisations and events play a vital role in the growth and attractiveness of cities, which are competing for a mobile workforce like never before.

As the over-quoted Richard Florida has pointed out, we in the Western world are able to 'up-stakes' and relocate wherever we are needed or desire to go at the drop of the hat.

As a result, cities are increasingly being packaged as products that need to be marketed globally to 'customers' who are young, educated, mobile employees. As our populations age, we need the young to come to our cities and produce (in both the vocational and biblical sense) and consume in equal measure to keep the capitalistic wheels well oiled and turning.

If this is the case, the social and cultural features that our cities offer become the points by which we distinguish the 'products'. And this is where it becomes difficult for our city fathers (and mothers). The creation and management of the intangible social and cultural equity and perception of a community is even more difficult than managing the economy.

We live in a time in which cities believe they must have, and acquire if necessary, cultural and social features for economic reasons.

So, where once the development of culture and society was a somewhat organic reaction to the prevailing conditions, it is now a function of engineering and planning. Cities around the world engineer grand statements in culture not with the intent of elevating their existing citizens but to appeal to a mythical audience of 'knowledge workers' and 'experiential tourists'. It is not even necessary to build your own from scratch. If you have the resources you can buy a franchise such as a Guggenheim off-the-shelf and hit the ground running without the pesky problem of having to build your own reputation and infrastructure.

Urban planners and arts bureaucracies believe they need cultural venues and festivals and galleries, but they've got little idea how to create, promote or brand them beyond the development of the physical structures. The phrase, 'Build it and they will come,' isn't true. A sense of purpose and personality can make the difference between creating a mere 'location', and creating a 'destination'.

I am sure there are many examples where successful places and destinations have been created as a result of pure good luck. But I think it's more likely those places that work do so because the team whose job it was to imagine and build the project had a strong shared vision that was clearly and broadly articulated to the entire team.

Most importantly, destination marketing requires a vision that isn't jealously guarded by any one group but is generously, collectively owned. ©

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