

The Right to Happiness in the City

With the size of our cities growing rapidly each year, can our urban spaces be designed in a more socially and environmentally sustainable way? **Cherise Asmah** visits an exhibition that explores some possibilities.

The key to happiness is all about connections. It manifests in developing relationships with our fellow humans in a community, and in experiencing a bond with the natural world. This conclusion surfaces in everything I am engaged in, from formal panel discussions to eavesdropping on a conversation at a local cafe. This was certainly one of the more salient messages in the recent interdisciplinary exhibition *The Right to the City*, which was held in Tin Sheds Gallery and in various locations around the centre of Sydney. How we design our urban communities was explored by architects, artists and activists alike to consider the question- what kind of city do we want to live in?

The curatorial project was based on an article by David Harvey published in the *New Left Review* in 2008, which discusses notions of wellbeing in large-scale urban centres. He suggests that we need to adopt a grassroots approach to urban planning, and that our city design is directly related to our relationships with nature and our neighbours. Harvey poses the notion that perhaps these metropolitan spaces have failed to enhance our sense of wellbeing. This seems to be a fair assumption to make, with a United Nations Development Program 'Human Development Report' in 1998 stating that people's happiness levels in Western nations peaked in the 1950s, prior to the significant increase in industrialisation and consumerism. Furthermore, the United Nations 'Harmonious Cities' report of 2008/09 predicts that 70 per cent of the world's population will live in cities by 2050, and discussions on how the world's resources will support this shift are already well underway.

I grew up in a small town of 2000 people. City dwelling, even after seven years, still feels somewhat alien. My introduction to city life was Brisbane in 2004, which back then could still be regarded as a big country town. People were relatively friendly; and I suspect this was spurred on by the climate. This languid population is a common

phenomenon I have witnessed in many tropical places. The stifling cloak of the humid air seems to pacify any sense of edginess; one's personal boundaries quietly melt into the next person's. Now living in Sydney, however, it is a different story. Here I am confronted with a dizzying pace, mass commercialism and chilly temperaments. The old adage describing this city as a rat race has proven true. People are so concerned with paying their mortgage and climbing the corporate ladder that there is little time for anything else, and no time for anyone else.

Sydney is the thirteenth most expensive city in the world in terms of real estate. For those who do not want (or are not able) to conform to this system, where are they to live? As inner city areas become increasingly gentrified, more urban dwellers are being pushed further to the outskirts. An activist community called *The Squatspace Collective* challenged this reality 10 years ago; the documentation of which was screened in the gallery. They essentially inhabited abandoned buildings in the inner city regions and fought with councils and landlords to develop a caretaker lease. While they were successful for a period they found that the strict regulations of an intensely bureaucratic system gradually wore down their anarchic spirit. The collaborative fight did serve to strengthen the close-knit fabric of the group. There is something incredibly powerful about a shared fight for injustice or a collective vision for a better world.

I watched this process unfurl on a television in a corner of the china white-walled Tin Sheds gallery. There seemed to be something oddly surreal about this, as though I were a voyeur looking into someone else's make-believe world. I felt a strange juxtaposition between the raw alternative characters on the screen and the sterile environment of a gallery. The building's architecture and surrounding areas were interwoven into this experience. A slim window revealed a chaotic multi-laned road, bringing home the relevance of the works, while in the carpark behind the gallery a large CRT television sat defiantly on top of an open wheelie bin. The bin was far too small for the TV, so it perched in an almost anarchic fashion, refusing to become obsolete in the wake of a rapidly progressive economy. The exhibition seemed to be more of a documentation of the real works, which are out in the streets and in the communities in various countries. This is one of the key curatorial strengths- the

gallery itself is a means to an end, a space in which to contextualise the projects from around the globe.

I can relate to *SquatSpace*'s frustration with bureaucracy. Have we not all felt exasperated with lengthy forms and computer-operated telephone voices? I am sometimes tempted by the idea of getting off the grid altogether, to live a life of autonomy that is not subjected to the regulations and red tape of "the system". There is always an underlying fear in the back of my mind of ending up in a Huxley-esque "Brave New World", where people no longer think for themselves and become subsumed into a centralised establishment. Perhaps I could live in one of D.V. Rogers' Hexayurts? Rogers is a New Zealander artist who has engineered self-sustaining dwellings as a fast and effective response to the many natural disasters that seem to be occurring in the world. His mobile hexagonal structure is an example of how we are entirely dependent upon a central body for our energy in urban centres, and therefore we're also vulnerable should this schema be compromised.

I have often heard a philosophical saying that for any change to take place we must first deconstruct our world, (whether that be inner or outer), in order to reconstruct something better. While I cannot begin to imagine the horror of living in an environment that has been decimated by "Mother Nature", if there could be any silver lining, perhaps this concept is part of it. The recent events in Japan have forced us to reconsider the viability of nuclear power as an energy source, and indeed Germany has decided to gradually phase out its nuclear plants as a result. Similarly, the locals of Christchurch have received the town's devastation as a unique opportunity to rebuild a greener city. There are proposals for an increase in rooftop gardens on three-storey buildings to create more public spaces. The architecture then becomes a facilitator of connection between nature and the community, rather than a separation, as is commonly the case. Indeed there are several online forum sites where the residents can play a vital role in the decision-making process.

One of the pivotal arguments in *The Right to the City* exhibition is a grassroots approach whereby consultation with the locals is imperative. Sydney Collective *Milkcrate Urbanism* takes up this idea in their work, 'The North Eveleigh Propositional'. A mobile box was placed in areas around the inner city to receive

proposals on the planning for a large disused site in Redfern. These ideas were then printed up in a newspaper that was distributed in the same fashion. This bottom-up approach taps into one of the core processes of a shift towards collaborative construction. Who better to inform the designs of the spaces people live in than the residents themselves? While architects and planners may formally implement the designs, the main theory is that the best results arise when people work together as a community.

Several works in the exhibition explore the implications of community gardening. One of those, a temporary urban garden built on the doorstep of the gallery, brought this concept to life for the visitor. I am not accustomed to encountering a live herb garden when entering an art exhibition. Yet here I was, nibbling at the parsley like a kid. Seeing a bit of greenery in the dense, urban area surrounding Sydney University was a refreshing garnish to the exhibition.

Another work documenting a community garden project was inside the gallery space in the form of vibrant mind maps. The drawings depict the central concepts for a joint project initiated by the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, which established a community garden to share with the surrounding neighbourhood. People had become disenchanted with their regulated system and instead wanted to reinvent their city areas into smaller, localised zones. They envisioned creating a kind of social architecture, whereby people become the focal point in spaces rather than buildings.

The ECObox project went a step further in creating this kind of social architecture. Images of the ECObox formed in Paris in 2001 were projected before me in six fragments on the gallery wall. The project was devised among the locals, architects and philosophers to create a mobile community space with gardens, a shared kitchen, library, media lounge, gallery and open spaces. The precinct was designed for people to share their knowledge with one another, in many ways challenging the conventional top down model of education. The temporary nature of the project allowed it to remain fluid and resist being bound by rules imposed by society. A desire for experience over materialism motivated the locals to create a kind of living utopia.

I have been growing food for a number of years now and have regularly participated in local permaculture groups. I always knew there was a deeper aspect to it, that it is not just about growing produce for the sake of utility. However, the works in *The Right to the City* truly illuminated the profound power of something as humble as food in bringing people together. Food often unites people at the table to share a meal (though undoubtedly less so in homes with a TV). In many cultures it is still common for the cooking process to connect families. But in the west the coming together of people to plant, grow and harvest food was an old fashioned notion until recently when the popularisation of community gardening in urban spaces re-emerged. We have become largely dependent on sourcing our food imported from monoculture farms. Our produce is so engineered that Michael Pollan, author of *In defence of food*, claims it is hardly real food anymore. These modest community gardens have become a symbol for something so much greater. They provide a sense of autonomy and local power, an opportunity to reconnect with the natural world by digging our hands into the earth, and the joy of building relationships with fellow human beings and learning from one another.

I walked away from this exhibition feeling slightly puzzled that these everyday processes of growing food and connecting with the local community become works of art. In an area of such dense population, is the notion that our cities should be designed to enhance people's relationships with one another and the environment particularly groundbreaking? This taps into the core philosophy of *The Right to the City*. We have become so disconnected in these urban, industrialised spaces we have created for ourselves that, ironically, it takes creative minds thinking outside of the box to reinstate these fundamental ideas.

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