

# Chapter 9

## Fremantle on the Edge: A Community Collaboration

Anne Farren and Nancy Spanbroek

**Abstract** This chapter addresses community engagement presented through a large local, inner urban project held in the City of Fremantle in 2009. It was an ambitious project with many challenges. This is a timely reflection on the benefits and pitfalls of a project of this scale, which included a large community-based exhibition presented in sites throughout the city and a closing event that became an interactive performance engaging both exhibitor and viewer. The project was carried out within a very tight time frame of 5 months from conception through to completion, and required the coordination of a complex set of inter-related tasks associated with the securing of funding, liaison with key stakeholders and general management of the processes associated with working with community and the presentation of a range of events that, on reflection, represented a mini festival.

**Keywords** Student community engagement · Inner urban design project

### Introduction

Fremantle has a unique local identity shaped by: its indigenous history as a meeting place for Aboriginal people during pre-European settlement; its geophysical location at the mouth of the Swan River; its history as the Western Gateway to Australia and the first point of arrival for many immigrants; its importance as a working harbour and fishing centre; its significant heritage buildings; its strong labour history; its arts, cultural and sporting activities, and its binding community spirit (City of Fremantle 2009–2010).

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N. Spanbroek (✉)  
Department of Architecture and Interior Architecture, Curtin University, Perth, Australia  
e-mail: n.spanbroek@iinet.net.au

A. Farren  
Department of Design, Curtin University, Perth, Australia  
e-mail: a.farren@curtin.edu.au

To meet the changing needs of Fremantle's City Centre, the City of Fremantle established an Action Plan in 2008 for the central city mall and streets, designed to enrich the existing social, cultural and business environment. Their vision was to create a precinct that was cohesive and coherent and that retained the unique sense of place of each of its public spaces. Our development of the Fremantle on the Edge project in 2009 was timely because the City was at a crossroads with a change of leadership, political divisions within the community, social problems and ongoing social changes within the community and local business. We were inspired by the potential that a large creative arts event developed over a period of years could provide, by profiling Fremantle in an international arena, and stimulating local business and community engagement.

This chapter reflects on the processes applied to the development and implementation of the project. It presents explorations into the design process, exhibition and the outcomes, and is contextualised through descriptions of the scope of the project and considerations presented to participating international artists and students. The community engagement achieved through the exhibition and performance stage and capacity building aspects of the project are outlined in the later part of the chapter. The conclusion provides a reflection on the project, its success and the overall outcomes.

## The Project

Fremantle on the Edge was an interdisciplinary project involving 260 Curtin University students from a range of cultural and discipline backgrounds, which reflected the community of the City of Fremantle. The project involved City Councillors, international visiting artists, retailers and the general public, and engaged students in a work integrated learning experience. As professional curators and project managers we were instrumental in facilitating this experience.

The benefits of a project of this calibre were highlighted to the Council. They were perceived and presented as follows:

- This project would promote the City as accessible, responsive and forward thinking, actively engaging the local community in dialogue and interaction with the 're-visioning' process and re-examination of ideas about the city. This would be facilitated through interaction with artists and students involved in research activity to be carried out in the streets of the city, together with symposia, exhibition and displays over an 8 week period.
- The project outcomes would enhance the perception of the city as 'A beautiful, accessible and liveable city that recognises, protects and promotes its social, cultural and built heritage' (City of Fremantle 2011a, p. 33), in response to the City's Mission Statement.
- The unique character and strong sense of identity which exemplifies the City of Fremantle is embedded in its cultural history and diversity. This history would

inform the development of new ideas by participants in the project. As part of the presentation of their ideas, students were required to research and include the historical/cultural and contextual considerations that were significant to their selected sites. It was envisaged that this material would provide recognition of the cultural diversity and reinforcement for the strong sense of identity which characterises the Fremantle community. Additionally, it was expected that:

- The view of Fremantle would be enhanced through activities to draw attention to local creative industries such as architectural practices, fashion houses and artists, craftsmen, potters, sculptors, jewellery designers and art organisations based throughout the city;
- Students would engage in a re-examination of the city. Part of the process involved students researching the social, cultural and built heritage; exploring the nature of its beauty; and developing ideas which presented a potential new vision for sites in the City of Fremantle, with a focus on issues of accessibility and liveability;
- The visual material developed for the presentation of these ideas would provide a good database of ideas and materials that enabled the local community to see their city through fresh eyes.

The Mayor and councillors recognized Fremantle on the Edge as a good fit with identified community needs and supported the implementation of this project. A key value that was identified was the potential for this project to support the local business community, and much of our liaison with the City of Fremantle was through the Strategic Marketing Consultant who had been engaged to work on strategies that would enliven the West End of the city.

## **The Implementation Process**

In retrospect, the implementation of this project can be seen as having occurred in two distinct phases: firstly, the ‘Design in Context’ phase was characterized by the 3 day workshop with the international artists, Maria Blaisse and Cocky Eek, and the ‘Design Exploration’ phase conducted at Curtin University and the Curtin Urban Sustainable Project (CUSP), which became our home base in Pakenham Street. This base enabled students to meet in groups, hold tutorial discussions, workshops and student presentations within the centre of Fremantle. This proved a convenient option, particularly for students working directly with the visiting international artists (Fig. 9.1).

### ***Design in Context Phase***

Students engaged in the initial 3 day intense workshop, with international artist and academic staff each assigned a group of students to mentor and guide through



**Fig. 9.1** Fremantle on the Edge project: CUSP workshop presentations. (Photo Richelle Doney 2009)

their investigations. Students were assigned to groups randomly, regardless of their discipline or year of study. This later emerged as development of interdisciplinary skills within the student cohort. An initial forum was held to introduce the project, the format and how the outcomes would be exhibited. Visiting artists also made presentations on their 'European' perspective of the city, its site and its value.

The investigations carried out in the city by student groups during the initial 3 day workshop activity were presented to all the participants back at Pakenham Street base at Curtin University's Urban Sustainable Project (CUSP) as the final component of the introductory component of the program. Each group focused on different aspects of the city, ranging from the ephemeral to practical environmental factors, from light and shade to streetscapes. The closing seminar fueled a rich cross-disciplinary exchange of responses to the city environs and its cultural context. This was the entrée to the project, where ideas were stimulated, appetites whetted and energy levels high.

### ***Design Exploration Stage***

Following the 3 day workshop, students worked with their disciplinary leaders on the review and further explored the development of their ideas with a more specific

discipline focus. As part of the design exploration stage, students were briefed to engage with the ‘main course’: the analysis of relationships between space and form, between interior and exterior space, between body and space and between spectators and performers, and the principles that organize them in our built environment. How we inhabit, engage with and occupy space are of critical importance in this new century, and an understanding of relationships between place, space, and its politics are indispensable for any sort of practice today. Occupation may be a state of mind where daily routines and activities are curtailed, molded and adapted to a particular environment. Equally, spaces may be composed or formed through processes and layers of inhabitation (City of Fremantle 2011b). Following the introductory lectures held during the first stage of the project, a series of talks was delivered by invited guests from visual arts disciplines from within the state. The talks were delivered to both the students and the public at a selected venue in the City. This process served to provide a base knowledge about the city, and perspectives of how the experts viewed the city from their respective disciplines. The talks also acted as stimuli for the exploration of ideas, and possible approaches to tackling the development of ideas within the project context.

As is typical of studio based learning, students regularly presented their work to other disciplinary groups, inviting positive critique and guidance on how to move forward. Each group’s approach was different, thus inspiring students to reflect on their approach, experiment and discuss alternative approaches. Students were also curious about the progress and direction of others involved in the project, and we observed a level of friendly competition amongst groups driven to excel in their project outcome.

### *Setting the Scene*

The design briefs given to participants were intended to act as a directional guide for students, allowing them to move into the final stage of their projects. Project participants, in this case primarily tertiary students, were asked to design and build models or full scale insertions that investigated the social, cultural and physical requirements of the space. Interior space can be that space between, the street space and the spaces beyond. They were required to consider points of reference, connection, framing and vistas, to understand the spatial qualities formed by insertions, controlled viewing angles, disguised forms and masked connections, and by qualities of filtered light, movement and shadow.

The participants needed to address real life situations, the pragmatic aspect of their selected site, natural light and security, and to gain an understanding of the users and uses through observation: their needs, their movements, their day and night activities. How is the street used; how does one respond to the shop front, office window, laneway and roadway? The shop windows became key exhibition sites offering a viewing spectacle both during the day and the night (Fig. 9.2). Baudrillard suggests:



**Fig. 9.2** Love in Tokyo installation. (Photo: Lara Mackintosh 2009)

Whether as packaging, window or partition, glass is the basis of a transparency without transition: we see, but cannot touch. The message is universal and abstract. A shop window is both magical and frustrating—the strategy of advertising an epitome. It is this immaterial materiality that ushers in a new theatricality to the city. (Baudrillard 2005, p. 42)

Students were invited to study the scale, the materiality of their environment and the existing light conditions, and to question how the buildings were being used, and how their site could be better utilized.

Participants studied the spatial organisation, the relationship of surrounding form and the space in between. Analysing the character of the site—the built form, textures and materials, the activity patterns and movement network in the area—what is the ‘sense’ of the place or its identity? Designs were to fully explore the relationship to the surrounding area, interrelationship of pedestrian movements, relationship between the spectators and performers, and the significance and shaping of the public domain. Students were asked to test and explore their intentions and assumptions so as to realize a convincing final design. Models and drawings were used in the process of developing an architectural proposition. Selected materials and fabric were employed to add to and enhance the poetics of space.

### ***Presentation: The Event***

On a small strip of beach sitting on the edge between city and coast, guests watched white figures perform, silhouetted against the embers of fading summer light. Others ‘played’

with bamboo structures in the small limestone building edging on to the beach. As a cool evening breeze settled over the streets of Fremantle, small excited groups began to break away from the milieu that had formed at the front of Kidogo Art House<sup>1</sup> and move towards the centre of the city. Gatherings of intrigued onlookers could be seen clustered around patches of ‘grassed’ pavement or watching as ice hands melted away while others peered into retail windows. These were not casual window shoppers passing the evening away, they were guests at the opening of the exhibition. (Farren 2009, p. 71)

The presentation of works created by participating students became a performative event with works installed, inserted into a range of public places, private spaces and retail environments extending from Bathers Beach on the edge of the ocean and across the city precinct. A heritage wall in Cliff Street became the theatre for the projection of images narrating an 8 week investigation into the insertion of inflatable forms into the city and urban landscapes. High Street became host to a series of mini exhibitions presenting collaborative responses to the westerly winds, falling leaves, heritage textures and the smooth skins of modern buildings that are characteristic of the city. The empty windows into a local business showcased the veiled ghostly forms documented in the Roundhouse Tunnel that had once provided whalers access to the beach. The South Terrace promenade played host to poignant messages suspended from street trees and lamp posts. Components dangling from the branches of a tree invited passers-by to take a message home. Interaction with these works was allowed if not encouraged. The empty corner store that was once a lively fish market adjacent to the busy and bustling Fremantle markets was ‘transformed into a maze of structures and images reflecting on the ebb and flow of the city nestled on the edge of the ocean’ (Farren 2009, p. 72).

As the light faded on the opening evening events, steam and sounds echoing stories of the past escaped from a cardboard tram sitting on the fragments of track from a past era, and the performance was repeated one last time to cries for an encore. With map in hand, explorers engaged in an excursion through the displays, events and installations that mapped a journey into the city and its stories (Figs. 9.3, 9.4, 9.5 and 9.6).

‘Architecture, rituals, festivals, businesses, domestic and market gardens, churches, industries, clothing, foods, history and peoples distinguish one community from another’ (Kins and Peddie 1996, p. 10). The Fremantle on the Edge project culminated in a major event that presented a re-visioning of the local community through visual presentations of interpretations of the narratives drawn together by the students, and based on their experience of Fremantle—its people, buildings and spaces, all those elements that come together to define a culture.

Tangible community benefits resulted from this project for local business, the community and student participants. This community based project enabled students to engage in real situations, where the scale of the laneway, the street, the doorways and the shop fronts were tangible within the street as part of community life, engaged in activity, changing throughout the day and offering an accessible

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<sup>1</sup> Kidogo Art House is located on the small beach, Bathers Beach, that defines the edge of the city of Fremantle and housed the bamboo works created by visiting international artist, Maria Blaisse for the duration of the *Fremantle on the Edge* exhibition.





Fig. 9.3 Fish shop Fremantle markets. (Photo Lara Mackintosh 2009)



Fig. 9.4 High street window. (Photo Ashley de Prazer 2009)





**Fig. 9.5** Melting hands outside Myer Department Store. (Photo Lara Mackintosh 2009)

**Fig. 9.6** Fish shop installation. (Photo Lara Mackintosh 2009)



and familiar framework to work in. Students were required to address real life situations—the pragmatics of their site, natural light, security, day and night street activities, together with identifying and observing the needs of the users of the area, and how they occupied their city.

The project contributed further to the reinforcement of the distinctive nature of the Fremantle community and the significance of the architecture, history, food, clothing and local stories to their culture.

## Capacity Building

The project utilised a cross-sector approach, engaging businesses, council, educators, and the private sector. Community support was evidenced by the sponsorship response which was secured from 11 local Architectural and Design practices. In addition local businesses throughout the city offered their shops and offices as sites for the exhibition. An expression of interest in the project was received from the Fremantle Public Art Task Force, and representatives from the project were invited to give a presentation to a Task Force meeting on the outcomes and future potentials of the Fremantle on the Edge Project.

In general retailers were keen to see this project continued in the future because they saw it as an effective means by which to enliven the City's business district. This opportunity was of particular relevance to members of the High Street west end precinct. Other retailers not involved in the exhibition also expressed interest in being involved in future projects of this nature.

Eyewitness reports stated approximate numbers of public visitors to be in the order of 2,500 on the opening night activities. Tour groups were escorted throughout the city by academic leaders. There was general amazement at the quality and range of work amongst tour participants and visitors to sites over the duration of the exhibition.

A range of supportive responses were received from participating and supporting businesses, who generally felt the event was of great benefit to the community and should be repeated on an annual basis.

The Current Mayor of Fremantle, Brad Pettitt, stated:

The Fremantle on the Edge project did make a great contribution towards the appreciation of arts in Fremantle. I think this can be put down to the innovate and creative way it brought art out of the usual gallery spaces and brought it to life it into the street and other familiar places that people would not normally expect to see art and engage with it. I also think its ephemeral nature really captured the public imagination and made people appreciate it and engage with it more as they know it may not be there when they next returned.

Past Mayor Peter Tagliaferrie stated:

I have been involved in Local Government since 1983, first as an activist, a councillor and then as Mayor for the City of Fremantle for eight years until I retired in October 2009. In that time I have been involved in a period of immense change in Fremantle both social and in urban renewal, witnessing many significant events both on a national and international

scale. Nothing interested or stimulated all my senses more than when I was made the presentation by Nancy Spanbroek and Anne Farren from Curtin University for Fremantle to host a pilot project for the inaugural Fremantle Biennale programme for 2012. What an opportunity, what a privilege. Biennales around the world are huge defining events for a city and a nation. (Tagliaferri 2009)

## Conclusion

On reflection, more time for planning and development would have further enhanced the potential for a project of this scale. With limited resources, staff working on Fremantle on the Edge were stretched to their limits attempting to maintain their day to day duties at the University together with teaching support, administration, supervision, publicity, function coordination and security of the students whilst engaged on site. In future it is recommended that a similar event be held outside normal semester time, which would allow the students to fully immerse themselves in the project without the added distraction of having to attend to other areas of study, and the staff to devote their time to the complex supervision and management duties.

The involvement of international artists was key to the success of the project and of great benefit to the students. There is an opportunity here to engage local artists to participate in a project of this scale, to be directed by academic staff, to design and create their own street installation. The cross fertilization of ideas and design approach can still occur through workshops and presentations; however, the students would be better positioned to remain within their academic groups, ensuring academic direction by University staff. The project proved to be an outstanding and positive learning experience for students and staff, due to community engagement, and exposure to the internationally renowned artists Maria Blaisse and Cocky Eek.

Student projects in the disciplines of design tend to focus on hypothetical scenarios that isolate them from community engagement and testing of ideas in real world settings. Each project was unique and focused on a different aspect of the city in various sites. Students worked with their tutors in developing their ideas and, at the end of the day, presented to students and staff from other disciplines, providing students with experience in community consultation, public presentation, and teamwork. This stage provided broad feedback from staff, students and the international artists. Fremantle on the Edge became a vehicle for direct engagement with community in the process of capacity building.

Research indicates that students strengthen their learning of design and technical skills through collaborative work, where sharing of ideas in intense learning environments with multi-disciplinary groups informs their knowledge and broadens their skill base. Reflective practice is essential for problem-solving among students, and this occurs at its best when students work with students who have different skills, discipline-specific knowledge, and who challenge students' 'ways of doing' during the design process (Smith et al. 2005).

The project responses provide evidence that Fremantle on the Edge was extremely successful as a pilot project, demonstrating the potential for the establishment of a Fremantle Biennale of Creative Arts. For the successful implementation of a Biennale we suggested that the City of Fremantle appoint an Events Coordinator to manage the professional artistic engagement of local artists and the community. We also recommended support for the continuation of student involvement and staff input in order to retain the engagement of the new generation of designers in this process of re-visioning of community.

This project was created in October 2008, approved in February 2009 and exhibited in April 2009. The time frame was tight and the outcomes, although preliminary, revealed the impact a project of this size could have on a city such as Fremantle. Imagine what could be achieved with more time, a bigger team, and an international star list of artists together with our talented local artists, university staff and students.

While the project has not resulted in the allocation of funding to support the establishment of a major festival, the Council and community maintain the focus on the integration of festival activity in their community. The 2011–2014 Cultural Development Strategy for the City of Fremantle identifies four key strategic action areas: A Festival City, Infrastructure, Public Art and Heritage.

There is recognition of the economic value and significance of cultural policy: ‘Cultural policy is increasing in a number of countries, extending beyond arts policy or heritage policy to embrace wider issues of cultural development and the role of culture in the national and international agenda’ (Throsby 1999, p. 10). This reflects the establishment of generic community value in the support for projects that engage the community in reflection on and identification of its unique status. The Fremantle on the Edge project provided such an opportunity for a local community, as well as ongoing support for activities centred on community cultural development, to achieve the Council’s vision ‘for Fremantle to be recognised as a unique city of cultural and economic significance’ (City of Fremantle 2010). Our project provides a case study for communities interested in building their community through the recognition and valuing of local culture.

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