

The Link Between Culture and Environment

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It's always the lot of the fourth up speaker to find that most of what he or she is intending to say has already been said. It's a humbling reminder that there's nothing new under the sun, so please bear with me while I attempt to apply my idiosyncratic spin on the connections between culture and environment. The most important link is:

Always was, always will be blackfella country. I'm a boat person (a ship person, actually). I thank those who know what it means to belong this country, for the opportunity they may offer my daughter (who was born here) to learn what belonging may mean. The fact that this gift may still be available, in the face of all that has happened in the last two hundred years, constantly fills me with wonder and with gratitude.

But, if we really want to authentically belong this country, to transcend being simply occupiers, we must, beyond reaching a mutually agreed accommodation with the custodians, be prepared to learn from them what the responsibilities are that go with nurturing, rather than exploiting, country.

But before I go there, you'll need some of my story to know whether I'm worth listening to. I've spent hours trying to work out which bits of my story might give me cred with you folks. What is there in my experience, that gives me the right to expect you to listen to me for the next half hour?

I'll start with my parents: they were formed by the Depression and World War II. There was a drawer full of brown paper bags, a constantly expanding ball of string, saturday dinner was always the week's left-overs, my first suit was my father's. None of this was because we were particularly poor: it was in response to their visceral understanding that resources were limited. In their culture, waste was a sin, conservation a virtue. To this day, I find it hard to throw anything away, to buy anything new, other than a book or a CD. Repair is infinitely more 'right' than replacement.

After a childhood introduction to Australia in King Island and the backblocks of Tasmania, followed by student activism at Monash University during the Vietnam War, I discovered journalism and then, theatre.

And I have to say that I find the current analysis of the sixties (my formative decade) as being the era of libertarian revolution, to be at total odds with my experience. I remember once at

the time being asked what I saw as my future occupation. I responded that I didn't care, as long as whatever I was doing, it was in a collective.

For me, and I believe, for many like me, that was the essence of the sixties: our dream was that we would spend the rest of our lives changing the world and ourselves, hand in hand with our brothers and sisters. Well, it didn't turn out quite like that, but that dream is a far cry from the vision of history that credits the sixties as the rise of individual and unfettered free choice.

In this context it is right to pay tribute to this town as one of the sites of the foundation of Australian unionism. The idea of union, of joining together to achieve shared goals, was transformed into practical reality by this movement, and became one of the key facets of the basis of the culture of this continent. The attacks on this movement are an indication of its success.

Not coincidentally, joining together to achieve shared goals is also the basis of coimmunity. And it was in this spirit of collectivism that we established the Australian Performing Group at the Pram Factory.

It was also with the intention of not only changing the face of Australian theatre but of discovering what being an Australian meant, of finding our own voices.

I think we succeeded, but that's another story. What is relevant to this topic is our attempts to distribute the responsibility for maintaining a space. Along with believing that anyone could do anything, we also believed that everyone should do everything, in particular, cleaning the dunnies.

Recently I was going through my Pram Factory files and came across a report to the collective entitled 'An Ode to Cleaning'. It's gestetnered on foolscap so must be from the mid-seventies or earlier.

It begins with three quotes:

The flush toilet is the basis of Western civilization. (Alan Coult)

Our ideas are based on the Toilet Assumption – unwanted matter, difficulties, complexities and obstacles will disappear if they are removed from our immediate field of vision. Our approach to social problems is to decrease their visibility: out of sight, out of mind ... prior to the widespread use of the flush toilet all humanity was daily confronted with the immediate reality of human waste and its disposal. Nothing miraculously vanished. (Philip Slater)

Keep up with your shit. (anonymous kitchen grafitti)

We were absolutely serious about cleaning up afterwards. One of the Indian swamis whose sayings we devoured at the time, in response to a disciple who talked of wanting to make his mark on the world, mused that he would die happy if could confidently say that he had left absolutely no mark at all. It's a maxim that has stuck with me.

After the Pram Factory came Circus Oz. We performed at countless benefits for environmental, land rights and anti-nuclear campaigns and were totally upfront about our socio-political positions (even encouraging a Greenpeace person with an inflatable whale to accompany us on our English tour in the early eighties – a classic culture/ environment link). I recall in one of our deepest self-sufficiency fantasies, we imagined including a methane powered generator in the touring convoy and accepting shit as payment. We toyed with feeding everyone at interval, and then not allowing them to leave the circus lot until they'd done the appropriate business.

Enough of human waste, at least for the moment.

Twenty years ago, while touring Europe with Circus Oz, we arrived in a Dutch town where the presenters of our show had already designed and distributed their own poster. Across an image of a human pyramid was imposed a very long Dutch word that I couldn't understand. Upon asking, I was told that the English translation was 'highstanders' and it referred to those brave souls who climbed to the top of these human walls of flesh.

And what was the word to describe the poor buggers on the bottom, I asked. 'Understanders', I was told. It was an epiphany. Suddenly I understood my vocation. As a direct result, here I am now.

But there's one more page of my story to tell. Somehow, after Circus Oz, I became a senior public servant for five years, as Director of the Community Arts Board of the Australia Council. Lots was achieved in this time but I think we made a couple of serious errors, chief amongst them being the marginalisation of the concept of place. In those days, the traditional definition of the concept of community presumed a geographical focus – a community was a group of people who lived in a particular place.

From our advanced analytical position, we decided that location was an insufficient foundation upon which to establish community and that, instead, we'd focus on 'communities of interest' – communities that shared values based on class, gender, age,

sexual preference, language, occupation and so on. There is undoubtedly merit in building community on the basis of already shared values – what we overlooked was that places have and make values too.

In retrospect, it's not so surprising really, that a generation that valorised rootlessness couldn't come to terms with the idea that people have deep connections with particular pieces of earth. We thought that such connections were obscenely proprietorial without realising that the ownership might run in the opposite direction.

It's been a very long journey for me to reach a point where I can confidently answer the question, 'Where are you from?'. The answer, by the way, is Melbourne. Which is to say that I'm not from any of the places I lived before I was eighteen (Cardiff, Trinidad, King Island). This alienation, which I once embraced with pride, is now something I feel a sort of detached sorrow about.

But it has meant that I've spent a great deal of my 57 and a half years on this earth pondering questions like, 'Who am I?' and 'Where do I belong?' and 'What is my culture?'; questions of identity – perhaps this is always the lot of rootless, or uprooted, people.

It has taken me a long time to accept that Melbourne is my home – perhaps it took having a child – and what it has made me realise is that this is not such an uncommon condition in Australia.

Two weeks ago, Michael Findley, the Director of the Victorian National Parks Association wrote a letter to *The Age* that the sub-editors entitled 'Why we're still struggling to call Australia home'. It was written in response to this month being the two hundredth anniversary of the first, failed, attempt by whitefellas to settle in Victoria. His letter concludes:

So, how far have we come in living with nature? How much are we 'at home' in Victoria? Two hundred years doesn't seem to be long enough to come to terms with our water limitations, our fire-prone environment, our infertile soils.

Collins could leave. We neither should nor really can, as there are no new environments to pass through with a sort of 'drive-by' mentality. How long, then, will it take until we are at home? Not before we make the fundamental statement, in our hearts and in our minds: 'Let us stay'.

Which is a great start, except that 'Let us stay' should not be a 'statement'. It should be a request.

Peter Read begins his fabulous book, 'Belonging', by asking:

'How can we non-Indigenous Australians justify our continuous presence and our love for this country while the Indigenous people remain dispossessed and their history unacknowledged?'

He concludes the book by saying that his 'sense of the native-born has come - is coming ... from believing that belonging means sharing and that sharing demands equal partnership.'

But this idea of being able to righteously identify oneself as native born also requires an other than economically rational attitude to the land. The concept 'Mother Earth' is often dismissed as either a cute metaphor or primitive superstition. It is neither. It describes with scientific exactitude our relationship (whether we acknowledge it or not) with the planet. We are born of it, we belong to it (not the reverse) and until we can become humble enough to cope with this way of seeing things, we'll continue to mess everything up.

And the subject of messing things up, brings me back to why I've been invited to speak to you.

Two and a half years ago, under commission from the Cultural Development Network of Victoria, I wrote a monograph entitled *The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning* . This publication was specifically designed for local government readership and begins with this summary:

'A society's values are the basis upon which all else is built. These values and the ways they are expressed are a society's culture. The way a society governs itself cannot be fully democratic without there being clear avenues for the expression of community values, and unless these expressions directly affect the directions society takes. These processes are culture at work.

'Cultural vitality is as essential to a healthy and sustainable society as social equity, environmental responsibility and economic viability. In order for public planning to be more effective, its methodology should include an integrated framework of cultural evaluation along similar lines to those being developed for social, environmental and economic impact assessment.'

As you can see, I was trying to introduce the idea that we add an extra perspective to the triple bottom line. In fact, at the time of writing I accepted the triple bottom line as a reasonable concept, simply requiring the addition of a fourth line to make it work effectively.

What I have realised since writing *The Fourth Pillar* is that the triple bottom line is, in reality, a spectacular scam.

Its rhetoric sounds like a profound development from the singular perspective of the economic fundamentalists, but in fact, all it really is is an attempt to bring social and environmental issues into an economic context – unless the workers and consumers are comfy, business will not be able to achieve maximum performance; unless the environment is still there, business will be unable to continue to make a profit from it. Humanising the market, yes, but simultaneously, marketising the human.

What I am beginning to understand now is that the concept of ‘environment’ has been at least as manipulated and misused as ‘culture’.

In *The Fourth Pillar*, I use ‘culture’ in what is known as its ‘anthropological’ sense (it is also the sense in which it is used in the 1996 UNESCO Declaration of Cultural Rights).

In this context, the concept ‘culture’ describes:

- our values and aspirations;
- the ways we develop, receive and transmit these values, and
- the ways of life these processes produce.

While this outline is fine as a dictionary definition, it misses the heart and the guts of culture.

Some months ago, I was asked by Deborah Mills to comment on a draft of Cultural Planning Guidelines for Local Government in New South Wales. Building on her original work, I suggested this preamble as a description of culture:

Our culture embodies the sense we make of our lives; it is built on the values we share and the ways we come to terms with our differences; it deals with what matters to people and communities: relationships, memories, experiences, identities, backgrounds, hopes and dreams in all their diversity. And most of all, our culture expresses our visions of the future: what it is we want to pass on to future generations.

Our culture connects our present with our pasts and with the future we imagine. It is with culture that we make the connections, the networks of meanings and values, and of friendship and interest, that hold us together in time, in place and in society.

Our culture describes the ways we tell each other our stories, how we create our sense of ourselves, how we remember who we are, how we imagine who we want to become, how we

relax, how we celebrate, how we argue, how we bring up our children, the spaces we make for ourselves.

Our culture is the expression of our desires to be happy, our desires to belong, our desires to survive and, above all, our desires to be creative.

This description demonstrates that culture describes those facets of our being that make us human; it embodies our essence.

This usage of 'culture' can be summarised as 'the social production of meaning', or simply 'making sense'.

And, of all the things we make, 'sense' is the most important; we need to recognise and facilitate this process in the ways we organise our society.

Never has there been more political rhetoric about values than now. But current public planning tools contain no mechanisms that formally facilitate ongoing, regular and accessible ways of connecting the generation, expression and influence of community values and aspirations to the development and evaluation of public planning. This is why I support the application of a fourth, cultural, perspective to stand alongside the standard triangle of social, environmental and economic 'pillars'.

Not least, because it is through cultural action:

- that we make sense of our existence and the environment we inhabit;
- that we find common expressions of our values and needs, and,
- that we meet the challenges presented by our continuing stewardship of the planet.

Without culture, we are, quite literally, not human.

So how do these ideas connect with environmental thinking?

I should at this point tell you that last Monday I came into some money and, as is my wont, I repaired to my local bookshop. There I discovered Val Plumwood's *'Environmental Culture'* which I found, to my simultaneous relief and consternation, said in 300 closely argued pages everything and more that I've been struggling to put into this address.

Of course, I recommend that, if you haven't already read it, you do so immediately. On the presumption that many of you haven't, I will continue.

There are at least three links between culture and environment.

First: our culture is created by our environment

The Earth is our mother, and, as we do from all mothers, we learn from her. Despite Marx's claim that consciousness is a social construct, there's no doubt in my mind that it's just as much an environmental or ecological construct. The meaning we make of life derives as much from our interaction with, and observation of, 'the elements' as it does from anywhere else.

But most important, whether we like it or not, we and our environment are one, are inseparable. No matter how much we might imagine otherwise, nature isn't in one corner with us in the other. When it comes down to it, there is only one ecology and everything's in it, humans included.

Even though our culture is profoundly influenced by our environment (and, of course, vice versa) it would be a mistake to think of culture as 'natural' – as an organism.

In the end, we make our culture – it is a construct, an aspect of the built environment; and, just as we can make it, so can we unmake it.

The social Darwinists would have us believe that there is something ineluctable about the ways that cultures develop, that we are all subject to natural laws that govern the way a society develops and operates.

This is a subterfuge, yet another means of validating the way things are in the interests of those reaping the most benefit.

Second: our culture is part of our environment

In *The Fourth Pillar* I write:

'Knowing where we have come from helps us to discover where we want to go. Our social memory and our repositories of insight and understanding are essential elements to our sense of belonging. Without a sense of our past, we are adrift in an endless present.'

We are born into complex surroundings. Our environment is more than paddocks and rivers, trees and climate, roads and buildings. We are also surrounded by memories, attitudes, songs and stories. These inheritances are as much a part of our environment as the earth beneath our feet and the air we breath.

They make us what we are. To know who we are, we need to know what made us.

What we become is deeply influenced by this heritage, both physical and spiritual. The meaning we make of our lives - what we call our culture, grows from this soil. The culture we make, the life we lead, the hopes we nourish, will be the richer from our understanding of our roots.

Losing touch with the stories of our predecessors risks our humanity and threatens our environment and our culture. It is impossible to make new stories, new songs, if we have forgotten the language, misplaced the music.

Third: our culture affects the environment

How and what we think shapes the world. Culture is a site of action.

At the moment the 'we' doing the shaping is a tiny minority devoted to short-term self interest that's been validated through slogans like 'free market', 'healthy competition', 'historical inevitability', 'progress', 'natural capital' and on and on.

We have one hell of a task ahead of us. Either the decision makers must change or the values of the decision makers must change.

These are as much cultural challenges as they are environmental, social and economic.

Which brings me to the idea of sustainability.

As Simon said last night, this concept has tended to be applied simply to notions of waste reduction, alternate energy sources and so on.

But, as he so rightly intimated, it is a much wider idea than that. A sustainable world is as much dependent on sustainable cultures as it on sustainable environments. Unless we can develop a culture that engages all its citizens, that embraces and cherishes all its members, no amount of recycling will save us.

And achieving this goal, that is, sustainability in its widest sense, embedding the notion of sustainability in our way of life, is a cultural process.

And changing the way we think (and by 'we', I mean our selves, our communities, our governments, our world) needs to be recognised as an imperative – a cultural imperative.

So, those are the links. Will making these links make saving the world any easier? Will understanding the connections between culture and environment allow us the space and time to act?

I really don't know.

When I notice that the Greenpeace slogan, 'Think Globally, Act Locally' has been appropriated to become 'Think Cosmically, Act Individually', I slip into despondency. But then, I remind myself that to give up hope is to become the living dead. We all have our different ways of struggling and we must all continue.

Finally, there is only one infinite resource: it is our imaginations. The more profligate we can be with it the better.

Thank you for listening.

The Fourth Pillar of Sustainability: culture's essential role in public planning is published by the Cultural Development Network of Victoria in association with Common Ground Publishing. Copies can be purchased from www.theHumanities.com

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