

A RESPONSE TO HERITAGE NEEDS: THE SWAN BELLS IN PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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SUMMARY

The Swan Bells is a bell tower project within the Barrack Square Redevelopment Project in Perth, Western Australia. It poses a philosophic architectural and heritage problem: how to respond to the often conflicting requirements that monuments embody both celebration and critique. The Swan Bells is a problematic response to Perth's heritage needs for a mature city icon.

1. INTRODUCTION

Bells made famous in the old English nursery rhyme, "Oranges and Lemons", are to be hung twenty thousand kilometres from their London home in Perth, Western Australia (WA). Generations of children in Anglo-Saxon countries have grown up with the old nursery rhyme which includes the line, "You owe me five farthings say the bells of Saint Martin". First cast in the fourteenth century, these twelve bells hung for centuries in the tower of the church of St Martin-in-the-Fields in Trafalgar Square, London. With the addition of six new bells, they are now the largest set of change ringing bells in the world and effectively one of the biggest musical instruments.

In 1988 the Cities of London and Westminster gave the bells to the people of Perth as part of a series of national projects which commemorated the bicentennial of British settlement in Australia. In 1999, the WA government began building a bell tower in a landmark location to house what are now called The Swan Bells. The tower is sited on the riverfront with the state capital city, Perth, as a backdrop. The tower project and surrounding landscaping, in an area referred to as Barrack Square, are due for completion in 2000 with a second stage to follow.

The Swan Bells is as an example of a contemporary philosophic architectural and heritage problem. In undertaking the project, the WA government is responding to the heritage movement which operates, at one level, as a vague feeling of loss by the general population. The complexity

of heritage is rarely articulated outside of academic institutions and heritage agencies. This is part of the reason why The Swan Bells are a somewhat crisis-ridden response to the city's need of an icon. An icon for a mature city identity should encompass ideally both celebration and critique. Planning for this project ignores the opportunity to make a critical contribution to the city's understanding of its many pasts and ethnically diverse present. The Swan Bells presents an acute problem because it would be the first icon for the city, it does not add to a landscape which is already rich with symbols of identity. Much is demanded from a first icon, it needs to speak for and to the whole community.

2. PERTH: THE LACK OF *GENIUS LOCI*

Until the 1960s, the centre of Perth was architecturally a late nineteenth century-early twentieth century environment. The earliest convict constructions were part of a rich Europeanised landscape which, although historically recent, still encompassed more than a century of buildings and styles. The landscape reflected the changing fortunes of the isolated British Swan River Colony as it developed from a struggling community at its foundation in 1829.

A booming mineral-based economy of the 1960s was the catalyst for the dramatic change of city landscape. Under the impact of the ethos of modernisation and progress, old streetscapes were swept away. Few landmark quality central city buildings survived the demolition of the 1960s and 1970s. The few that remain are isolated from each other and devoid of the context of a sympathetic landscape. At the end of the twentieth century, Perth finds itself stripped of the architectural detail which could have defined its *genius loci*, or sense of place. For some people, the city is, therefore, full of the memories of lost icons and lost ways of representing the place. The lack of icons and *genius loci* are heritage problems for Perth's residents who frequently lament the city's inability to symbolise itself in architectural terms.

3. THE PROJECT

The Swan Bells is the centre piece of the Barrack Square Project. Barrack Square encompasses several elements and is intended to harmonise with a variety of existing buildings including the heritage-listed 1905 WA Rowing Club boat shed and the 1995 Old Perth Port, a complex of shops and restaurants designed to echo architecturally the boat shed. When at its most popular in the 1920s, the port was embellished with gardens in the shape of a Union Jack, remnants of which remain and will be preserved. The second stage of the project includes a children's beach and the revitalisation of the long neglected river foreshore.

The first plans for the bell tower were rejected through lively public debate. However, the building of a second plan commenced finally in November 1999. The base of the bell tower suggests a yacht's spinnaker which appears to be sailing towards the Swan River. The plan is for a glass and steel structure with a steel spire tip finishing 81 metres off the ground. The bells are positioned at the same height as they were in London, 23.5 metres from the ground. It will be the first bell tower to enable visitors to see how bells work with sound proofing which will permit visitors to be in the tower during the ringing of the bells.

4. OFFICIAL MEANINGS

With this project, the state government plans to achieve several aims. It intends that the area provide a vibrant meeting place in the centre of the city, especially for families, that it draw international tourism and, most importantly, provide the state with a strong symbol of itself. The Barrack Square homepage described the bells in May 1999 as a “symbol for the people of Western Australia... an icon for the millennium” [1]. The State Premier, Richard Court, said “in 100 years time people can look back and say this State has made these advances and has now become a sophisticated society” [2].

The bell tower project has two dominant histories which frame its meanings. The first draws on the English history of the bells, and the second, the history of Barrack Square and the bells since their arrival in WA. The first history is cited in press releases and web sites where quantifiable details are repeated. The “Oranges and Lemons” bells were first cast in the fourteenth century, and recast in the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. The original twelve bells are the first diatonic set of bells ever cast, that is, they have been cast as one instrument. They have rung out from St Martin-in-the-Fields on many great English occasions, for example, the defeat of the Armada, the battles of Trafalgar and El Alamein and to commemorate great voyages. This last element makes an historic link to Australia because the voyages which are remembered include those of Captain James Cook, the Englishman who first sighted the east coast of the continent.

The second history starts when the bells were presented to Western Australia in 1988. The original intention was to site them on the river, but away from the city centre. The project fell into abeyance and when resurrected became associated with millennium celebrations, the bells were to ring in the year 2000. The project was rejected because the stainless steel cladding at the base of the tower was considered too modern and unsympathetic for the historic bells. Other criticisms were that the money, about A\$5.5M for the bell tower, within a bigger landscaping budget, at one point about A\$88M, should have been used for hospitals and schools and that this use of money was a sign of a government with ill-considered priorities. The history which is now promoted is that of the newly named Barrack Square itself. It was built between 1904 and 1908 and always referred to popularly as Barrack Street Jetty.

The two histories are related problematically. First, there is the embarrassing delay in deciding what to do with the gift. Secondly, more problematically, is how to deal with English Christian objects in a society which today is committed politically to multi-culturalism. Bill Hames of Hames Sharley, the architects for the project, told me in June 1999 that any suggestion of a church bell tower had been abandoned by the design team in the attempt to make the church bells an acceptable symbol for the state’s diverse population which includes Aborigines, people drawn from British and Irish backgrounds and many Asian and European ethnicities. As most criticisms have been focused on the architecture and alternative uses for the project money, the government has not had to defend its use of an English Christian symbol, but has been able to insist on the role of the bell tower in the promotion of the family, tourism and as a city symbol.

5. THE PROBLEMS

With the rapid development of heritage philosophy in the second half of the twentieth century, there have been increasing demands from critics that heritage spaces produce sophisticated,

complex texts [3,4,5]. It is not acceptable in critical terms to produce flat, one-dimensional spaces, these sorts of spaces are in danger of promoting the culture of “amnesia” argued by Huyssen [6]. The kind of heritage texts which are valued by critics are open, polysemic, visitor-oriented and pose questions rather than answer them.

Heritage debate has focussed on a variety of textual aspects. Among the most important has been the dialogic potential of a space, whether it facilitates broad discussion and the airing of different points of view or seems to close down discussion. Difficulties in developing sophisticated heritage spaces are exacerbated by heritage agencies which, while often acting in complex ways which fulfil the value of critique now demanded by much heritage philosophy, also perpetuate the non-critical celebratory status of heritage with sentimental slogans such as that used by the Australian Heritage Commission - “places in the heart”. In the light of heritage philosophy which aims to enrich public memory with provocative spaces, this paper now looks at the WA government’s themes: family, tourism and city symbol.

5.1 Family

Children and families are necessarily present at this site because of the publicity refrain of the “Oranges and Lemons” nursery rhyme. The plan to make Barrack Square sympathetic to children with the special river beach does not appear supplementary to wider aims, the place of children appears to be central to the project. This is clear in the promotion of the bell tower through “Sign in 2000” in which primary schools are urged to foster children’s awareness of the development of the space by having students’ signatures recorded in tiles on the site. The idea of children and families is, therefore, imprinted on the space. This means that this central iconic site ought necessarily to take into account the wider history of children in WA. However, histories of the family, have been recently among some of the most explosive issues in Australia. Many Aboriginal children were taken from their families, by force in many cases, throughout the first half of the twentieth century and re-educated in missions and government-run institutions. Many of the children, as adults, have now revealed the years of abuse, misery and cultural dislocation which they suffered.

A second tragic strand of children’s history, child migration, has also been discussed widely in the past decade. For many decades, British and Irish children were sent from orphanages to remote parts of the British Empire. Some of them had been placed in orphanages only temporarily by their poor families and were sent away without parental approval. Similar to Aboriginal adults who grieve for their lost childhoods, these children as adults now grieve for the years that many of them spent in lonely and abusive situations. Sexual abuse, especially in WA in Christian Brothers’ institutions, has been the most shocking of the revelations.

5.2 Tourism

The question in relation to tourism is: what image of the local population is to be represented? The answer is: one that is responsive to family needs and seeks to assist in the definition of local identity. However, as can be seen from above, it also reveals a self-view which masks wider social problems and historic tragedies. On-going criticism of the project suggests that the confident, insouciant air of the bell tower is not coherent with wider community concerns. A celebratory view of the self is perhaps comfortable in leisure tourism, but it does not advance the self-understanding of local inhabitants.

5.3 Symbol

As a long awaited symbol for the city, the bell tower poses many problems. Enduring public criticism suggests that this is not the desired icon. It is, of course, the fate of many now-loved monuments to have been derided at the time of their building. However, the problem with the bell tower is that it is paradoxically a sign of excess and, part of the time, a sign of emptiness. First, it is a sign of excess which connotes Englishness and Christianity. The heritage value of the bells and their future attraction to an international tourism audience means that publicity for the project insists necessarily on the historic English and Christian connections, especially through the "Oranges and Lemons" rhyme. Simultaneously, and in excess, the connotations are virtually repressed by the plans which insist on non-church signification.

Secondly, the bell tower is used in government promotion as an empty sign which awaits imprinting with local meaning because publicity for the tower also insists that the meaning of the bell tower is primarily to be of and for Perth. Official meanings, therefore, attempt to mask the problems which arise from the historic context of the bells for the domestic population while, paradoxically, looking towards international tourism.

A sign of excess and emptiness is in crisis, in terms of symbolism, because it is unclear. In terms of dialogism the project has, therefore, the potential to promote discussion because of the way in which it attempts to break the bells from their national and religious contexts and reposition them. However, at this stage of the history of The Swan Bells this is aberrant decoding [7]. It seems that the dominant representation of the city through the bells is going to be one in which the English history is both promoted and muffled while the history of WA is almost effaced.

6. CONCLUSION: WHAT SHOULD WE ASK OF A NEW ICON?

Some of the contemporary issues which are highlighted by the bell tower project include the problem of suggesting iconic architectural "heritage" in a post-colonial, multi-cultural and multi-racial society. Why should a bell tower, a European concept, with English bells, be a symbol for a city which is composed of so many nationalities? What other projects could have been undertaken? It is difficult to find a project that will be both an affirmative and inspiring symbol for diverse people while also acknowledging the history which accompanies that diversity. It is very difficult to find the right first icon.

In order to fulfill the dialogic potential of The Swan Bells, the encouragement of public comment in Barrack Square could be planned. It could be accompanied by strong curatorial input. The placement of explanatory panels suggesting a range of sometimes conflicting meanings could help to use the contradiction, of semiotic excess and emptiness, as a rich background for the promotion of public debate.

7. REFERENCES

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