# Bogus art? Bogus life!

words **Daniel Tobin**

YES, Rex Butler is right – let's get rid of all public art, "bogus art" as he calls it. And while we're at it, let's get rid of all the other failings of human endeavour: bogus architecture, bogus films, bogus literature and bogus critiques.

Nuke the lot! Remove it from our consciousness; permanently eradicate this mediocrity from our otherwise perfect world. Along with the bad public art, get rid of bad architecture, B-grade films, ill-considered literature and the trashy daily press.

Apparently "it would be better to have no public art at all than an art a public couldn't care less about", but let's not extrapolate that intriguing notion otherwise we might not have much left of anything at all.

Butler also says the solution "lies not in permanently installed but temporal works". I nod my head solemnly in agreement.

Yes, more temporary, more ephemeral, more transient, maybe more translucent – what the hell, why create anything at all?

I recently returned to Brisbane after 13 years away, and as I familiarised myself with the city I was astounded by the aspirational and intelligent transformation of its heart.

ART debate . . . Rex Butler's article in BAM last week.

The refurbishment of the Queen Street Mall and the popularity of the city centre stand testament to the foresight of politicians, civic planners, architects and, yes, public artists who collaborated to create this revitalised urban hub.

As I wander through the mall I see Brisbane City Council's Public Art Policy in action – Fiona Foley's *Bunya Nuts*, a scattering of laser-cut stainless steel embedded in the pavement. The work continues further up the mall, under the feet of aspiring musicians (best we get rid of them too, unless they can prove their potential to be the next Powderfinger!), a subtle spiral of sand-blasted leaves echoing indigenous culture and past histories.

Further along I discover one of Bronwyn Oliver's delicate stainless-steel feathers. It floats above a couple enjoying a banana smoothie. They're watching another artist spruik his wares, mask on, spraycan in hand and a crowd gathered round.

He may not be everyone's idea of an artist, but he sure gathers a crowd and it's an integral part of the vibrancy of this place.

Near the top of the mall I find Wendy Mills's *On An Auspicious Occasion*, and I have to agree with Butler: The work sits uncomfortably in the space and does little to engage the viewer.

The three kids playing in the water on its edge have other ideas, however. No need to pause here. I, like any other passer-by, have the ability to self-edit; others stop, play and enjoy.

Public art differs from work created by artists for the rarefied atmosphere of the museum – it needs to address the realities of public space, the culture of the community and the artist's own practice.

Public art policy has not emerged as a singular entity, formulated by art curators from the gallery sector. It stems from the reinterpretation of public space.

*New City Spaces*, by Gehl and Gemsoe, explores the issues of urban quality and conditions of public life. The authors address the changing attitudes to urban space over the past 30 years, which is about inviting people back to the city centre for commerce, urban and social interaction.

This has seen the reintroduction of pedestrian plazas, car traffic reduced and leisure opportunities increased. Outdoor cafes promote social interaction and city squares encourage pedestrian activity.

Public amenity also is improved with the introduction of more refined urban elements including street furniture, public artwork, high-quality paving materials and plantings.

Urban spaces are being transformed into livable cities for people to enjoy.

The Queensland Government's Art Built-In Policy is not the easiest system to work within, but neither is our tax system. Nothing's perfect, but move south of the border and you'll find Sydney's artists and architects are abuzz with this trail-blazing Queensland initiative.

Blanket "bagging" of public artwork is unintelligent, unproductive and irresponsible. What if we were to apply the same arguments to architecture? We would have few buildings left.

Most would be deemed inappropriate and removed, a kind of design-driven cultural cleansing – it brings back memories of the Bellevue Hotel, Cloudland and the notorious Deen Brothers.

These building were destroyed for political reasons – do we want the art intelligentsia to expel bogus public art in a similar way? Do we really need police policing the police?

What must be realised is that public space is democratic, it has uses and needs for all people, across all cultures and experiences and of all intellect. Public art needs to contend with that "democratic" space and interact and respond to it, question it and challenge it.

Butler makes some realistic comments and concedes that there have been successes created as part of the Art Built-In program, and I am sure many in the sector would applaud informed, intelligent and even-handed debate to further promote an improved urban environment.

Does anyone seriously think that all the public art being created today will be here tomorrow? Probably not, but to remove the opportunity for artists to create public works is unacceptable. History will do what some profess should be done now and history, I suspect, will be better informed and considerably more objective.

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