

Governments are planning to rival the architects of Rome

Who puts icing on the cake?

Allocating money to artworks in building budgets enriches public spaces — if the art is good, writes **Robert Bevan**

ADELAIDE Lord Mayor Michael Harbison is making a valiant attempt to describe a forthcoming public artwork commemorating the city's links with immigrant Afghan camel-drivers. "It is a very large platter, 6m across with an obelisk thing in the middle and, um... a bit of a mound and some lattice pattern and, err... some script."

The sculpture is part of improvements to Whitmore Square under the city's "per cent for art" policy, under which 1.3 per cent of its capital works budget is devoted to art.

The Afghan abstraction is one of many dozens of sculptures erected in the city in recent years in its drive to animate the public realm: bronze piggies serve as a children's climbing frame in Rundle Mall; Don Bradman guards the Adelaide Oval; folded "paper" boats, made of glass, float in Elder Park.

There are similar per cent for art policies formulated by city councils and state governments across Australia, a development that could be seen as the greatest flowering of philanthropy in this country since the 19th century or as an art tax imposed by stealth.

Per cent policies have been around for decades in the West — the Dutch system dates back to 1951 — and are particularly prevalent in the US. Tasmania's 2 per cent garnish on its state building projects, initiated in 1982, was the first home-grown version and has been emulated since in most states.

There is a case to be had for elected officials dispensing such cultural largesse in our name as long as quality control is in place. (The City of Seattle, a world leader in public art, recently fought off a court challenge to its own decades-old per cent for art policy.)

But what is happening increasingly is that planning authorities are demanding private developers set aside a proportion of their own building costs for art in exchange for permission to build.

When pushed, councils admit that this is an expectation rather than a requirement because planning laws as they stand don't allow such compulsion: it can only be a consideration, and even then, when it comes to a stouish, per cent for art policies only have statutory weight if encoded in local guidelines.

Developers, however, are often told that this is a must — a bluff, essentially — and an art component regularly appears as a condition of planning approvals.

Perth, if it approves a measure soon before council, will become the first city to impose a mandatory per cent for art policy on private projects: it will no longer need to deploy a strategy of allowing Perth's builders to go higher in exchange for commissioning art.

Property Council of Australia chief executive Peter Verwer is not impressed with the per cent approach. "We don't think that this art tax is appropriate," he says. "We already pay \$24 billion each year in tax and there shouldn't be this surcharge." Art in exchange for greater floor space is another matter: "It is a contribution to the community with a cost attached," he points out. "If the cost is ameliorated through a development bonus then it is acceptable."

This could be a win-win or a lose-lose, depending on the quality of the art and architecture that results.

Don O'Rourke, managing director of Consolidated Properties, has built big in Brisbane and is a supporter of per cent policies. He put 0.35 per cent of the construction costs of one of his developments, an office building at 175 Eagle Street (more than the city's required 0.25 per cent) on work including a \$140,000 sculpture, *Chat*, by Sebastian Di Mauro in the form of two gesturing hands.

The cabbies may call the entrance sculpture, with its pointing finger, Hopoate after controversial footballer John Hopoate, but, to O'Rourke, it is money well invested: "It's a really great outcome. It satisfies our obliga-

tions to the council and as a company it makes us feel good that we have contributed to the cultural life of the city."

Brisbane is crammed with public art "per cent funded" by city and state. Between March 1999 and May this year, the Queensland Government spent more than \$23 million on 251 projects, some still being completed. The new Brisbane Magistrates Court alone contains Queensland's biggest collection of public art.

Realistically, valuable art has to be gleaned from a significant amount of dross: a bronze Labrador clutching a wicker basket in its maw and a fountain shaped like a table and chairs with a sheet of water forming the tablecloth are also installed in Brisbane. It is not a Vatican-funded Bernini cascade or steely Richard Serra monumentality: per cent for art far too often results in populist art for the literal-minded.

Its promoters say one of the key benefits is being able to integrate art into a building early rather than having it just plonked in afterwards. The reality is often not as smooth: architects may have already completed their designs or the planning condition may arrive too late, passed on by a reluctant developer.

A way around this has been for public bodies to include a demand for art into successful bids for developing state-owned land, a strategy employed from Hobart to Darwin's waterfront.

In Melbourne Docklands, this is set at 1 per cent, payable up-front to state government agency VicUrban, which has employed a curator to ensure the pieces integrate across the development: 0.8 per cent is for art directly related to the new structure's precinct, 0.2 per cent can be spent by the agency anywhere in Docklands. So far, \$15 million has been splashed on public art there.

"Some developers are absolute champions, but others are very sluggish and resent it," says Bronwen Colman, director of urban art for VicUrban, and, in effect, the project manager for all Docklands' public art. "What I find is that they tend to realise the value once they have been through a project and can see what [art] can do. It is a process of conversion." She cites Virginia King's work *Reed Vessel*, a walk-through sculpture floating on water, that was made possible only with careful planning and engineering from the outset.

Elsewhere in Docklands, artist Robert Owen worked with architects Denton Corker Marshall on the spectacular Webb Bridge. It was a proper collaboration with, unusually, the artist appointing the architect rather than vice versa. Neither party wanted a bridge with art stuck somewhere on it: the whole structure is the artwork.

Owen and DCM's work is a success, but a valid criticism of much of the art that has emerged across the country is that it is lowbrow stuff: cod-Aboriginal, conservative figurative pieces and the like.

Owen supports per cent for art, saying that good art is good art wherever it is, even if gallery art is very different from public work in terms of its intellectual accessibility. But he also says that "a lot of bad art gets propagated too. There is a lot of political correctness."

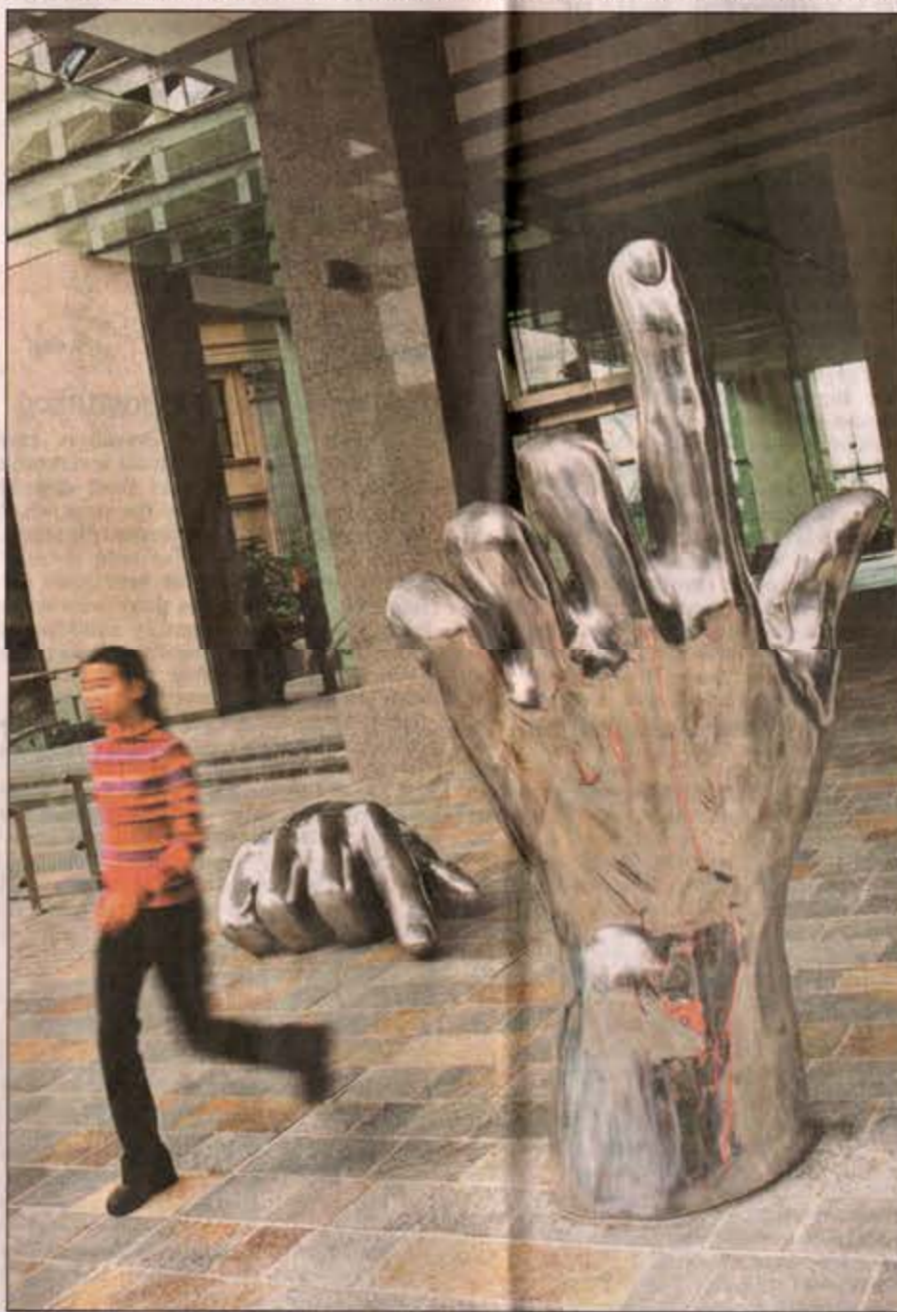
Bureaucracy and committees are the problem: Owen recommends a "democracy of one", a single, strong-minded curator, as the best solution.

Yet per cent for art policies often take the opposite tack. In places such as Brisbane and Adelaide, where committees ensure that the public viewpoint is taken into account, a work's wider reception is a powerful consideration. It is also tempting to incorporate a social agenda or didactic references to a local history.

Commissioning politicians, meanwhile, always have one eye on the voters and steer away from contentious work.



Big pig: Olivia McDonald seems to approve of a pig sculpture by artist Marguerite Derricourt in Adelaide's Rundle Mall



Eloquent gesture: Sebastian Di Mauro's hand sculpture entitled *Chat*

"It's important to engage people," argues VicUrban's Colman. "Cutting-edge work and abstraction alienates. You have got to have a balance. You have to find a way that [high-quality art] is broadly appealing."

Heritage consultant and public art historian Robyn Taylor is a supporter of per cent schemes but notes that art is often asked to substitute for vanished histories. The rebuilding of industrial East Perth is an example.

"I can't help being cynical about those things," Taylor says. "A budget is set up to interpret a local environment that is getting destroyed in the redevelopment process."

These problems with per cent for art are, in some ways, little different from wider public art programs, though the per cent approach at least has the benefit of providing certainty and a level playing field for developers. If properly

implemented, it can also mean that art is thought about early enough to be properly integrated. And it is true that great opportunities have been created for artists to work at a large scale in the public realm.

However, it is the sheer amount of art being paid for by the levy that is likely to create problems in the future. Only a fraction is likely to have long-term value, so eventually councils will be faced with big maintenance bills for art that may be shorn of its context or has weathered badly. Developers are footing the bill for this experiment.

Privately, even those government officials involved in commissioning admit that a lot of the art is "cringe-making" or trite. "There is nothing worse than mediocre public art. I'd rather have none," a senior bureaucrat bureaucrat says.



Total structure: Architect and artist worked together on Melbourne's Webb Bridge

PERCENTAGE REQUIREMENTS

QUEENSLAND

A mandatory 2 per cent of all state capital works budgets is devoted to public art. Brisbane City Council vigorously "encourages" 0.25 per cent for art in planning when negotiating with commercial developments, but has no fixed percentage for its own work.

VICTORIA

No official policy at state level, but developments under the government regeneration agency VicUrban demand public art be included in winning tenders on state land, such as Docklands, at 1 per cent of building costs. Melbourne City Council has an "unwritten" 1 per cent policy, encourages public art in its own schemes and pushes it hard in planning negotiations.

NSW

No policy at state level. City of Sydney has no specific percentage policy but expects a "substantial" public art component in major developments.

WESTERN AUSTRALIA

Up to 1 per cent for art is policy for new state development budgets over \$2 million.

Perth negotiates public art in some private developments in exchange for extra floor space. This may be replaced by a mandatory percentage scheme.

SOUTH AUSTRALIA

Adelaide devotes 1.3 per cent of its works budget to art, promotes art in development negotiations, though it's not mandatory, and as a condition of land disposals. There is no official per cent policy at state level, but requirements are similar to Adelaide's.

TASMANIA

Two per cent requirement for state capital works. Hobart has an ad hoc policy of encouragement on large developments, but no fixed percentage.

ACT

Two per cent of state capital works must be devoted to art on projects over \$5 million. No specific percentage is demanded of private developers, although in practice art is negotiated in significant schemes.

NORTHERN TERRITORY

No official percentage for art policy at territory or city level but public art is sought in major developments such as Darwin's Waterfront and Convention Centre.

Could all public art get a bad rap? Per cent for art seems an expensive method of commissioning works that may not last. Richard Brecknock, a public art consultant who has advised many Australian councils, says that these authorities are going to have to "bite the bullet" and carefully consider which existing artworks, or artworks in development, are worth retaining and which should be removed or relocated.

Architect John Denton, of DCM, who commissioned the notorious "yellow peril" sculpture in Melbourne that was twice shifted after becoming the focus of political machinations, suggests that money raised in cities under per cent for art schemes should be pooled and spent carefully, although not by politicians. "You can legislate for art but it is difficult to legislate for quality. You get a

plethora of art that you are stuck with," he argues. "Public money should only be spent on high-quality schemes."

Back in Adelaide, the city will guarantee only 40 years for its Afghan memorial. Harbison is an articulate advocate for per cent for art and has defended the Afghan work against attempts to dilute its agenda with claims for inclusion from other minority groups. "For sure, there are tensions between the artistic community and community groups who want something representational," he concedes. "Pragmatically, you deal with that by doing both. A successful city is culturally rich and diverse. Embedding information in the city, pointers to history, is something we subscribe to."

Robert Bevan is the author of *The Destruction of Memory: Architecture at War*.