

Changing the change

Design Visions, Proposals and Tools

An international conference on the role and potential of design research in the transition towards sustainability

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PRODUCTIVE FRICTION

A case study of design research between practice, education and community in rural australia

Abstract

This paper offers the process of working between three divergent perspectives of practice, education and community as a vehicle for changing the change. These ideas will be explored through a case study of a design project in two remote rural towns in regional Australia where RMIT University entered a practice relationship with the local Government. The project was also run simultaneously as architecture and landscape architecture design studios. Students, practitioners, academics, local Government and community came together to towards developing design possibilities. This meeting of diverse experience and different perspectives (practice, education and community) inevitably involved conflict but these tensions are described as productive friction. Rather than see this tension as something to avoid, this paper argues that it is the very tension that produces an outcomes beyond the sum of its parts. This paper will track the process and outcomes of this project.

The hybrid consultancy/design studio obliged that the design ideas be relevant to the community, be able to be built and it also had stand up to academic scrutiny. The students and the consultant team were involved in extensive community engagement and in the production of design ideas. The studio teachers also doubled as consultants. There were a series of public meetings and an exhibition of student work to solicit feedback from the community who were considered as integral to the outcomes of the project, though not necessarily the final determinants of the outcomes. The design outcomes of this project are both speculative and also concrete design proposals for how this could happen. This paper argues that proposals are both more challenging and more possible as a consequence of working between three divergent perspectives of practice, education and local community. It is the friction between divergent paradigms that offers the potential to both think and act differently.

The project focuses on, Rainbow and Jeparit, two small agricultural towns in decline in rural Australia: a microcosm of larger global trends affecting rural towns. These towns have seen steady population losses and reduced services as a result of the trend toward larger farms run by fewer people. These towns are remote, situated some five hours from Melbourne, the closest main city and the location of the University. The level of site investigation and consultation carried out in this process would have been impossible on the small consultant fees allowed for small rural towns. The project involved extended visits to the towns where 30 or so people descended on populations of between 350 to 500 people. The straddling of practice, teaching and academia enabled more time and more heads to understand the specific dynamics of these towns and to consider the possibilities of design. It also allowed an engagement with the broader research agenda of shrinking cities and the role of design in declining communities rather than expanding ones. This project became a vehicle to imagine other possible futures where design is embraced as a catalyst for change rather than as something that should or could be turned around.

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Fig. 1: Landscape proposal for Jeparit town entrance –before and after