Defining Place

As detailed in our Cover Story, GPT engaged the services of Advanced Narrative, a creative writing team, to provide insights of the Wollongong region to assist them in their deliberations on the Wollongong Central Development. The document produced became the basis for the architectural brief.

Susanne Pini, Head of Retail at architects, Rice Daubney, gives a fascinating insight into how an architectural brief is interpreted. A fundamental requirement of the brief was to create a ‘sense of place’. Pini details how the narrative was used to achieve this.

Why is place making, seemingly and suddenly, so important in retail developments? A classic scenario:

**Shopkeeper to Customer:**
“**What’s it like outside?”**

**Customer to Shopkeeper:**
“**Raining.”**

**Shopkeeper to Customer:**
“**Oh, it was sunny when I started working this morning.”**

The removal of anything that exists outside itself is nothing new in retail; the bazaar, the galleries, the emporium, the mall; a long line of increasingly controlled environments largely monofunctional, inwardly focused and extracted intentionally from its place.

The notion of place relegated to perhaps the pylon sign at the carpark entry, or at best a thematic response; coastal locations coupled with images of the sun and leaping dolphins while anything tagged ‘village’ inherited a tasteful leaf motif.

The notion of an ‘international style’ which transcends place, time and culture is largely the norm in retail developments worldwide and this, coupled with a monotony of retail mix, leads to retail being a largely placeless, faceless; an alien form in the communities they inhabit.

Even the great masterpieces may have the best and most engaging design but often fail to provide anything much beyond themselves in terms of their communities; many may posit this is sufficient but when you consider that the local shopping centre may be the only ‘public building’ in the area, clearly its importance in urban terms is pivotal.

To date, much of the talk of ‘place making’ has been just that – talk. In reality retail has always made places for people – some better, some worse – but we have largely reserved this activity for how we might decorate the interior rather than how to design pieces of integral social infrastructure in a community. There is a real sense of uncharted territory and a lack of understanding of how this notion is relevant/desirable or even worthwhile in retail developments; and then, if we can convince ourselves as to ‘why’ the ‘how’ seems even more elusive.

**With this in mind I thought it relevant to perhaps provide an insight into the architect’s journey to find place in The GPT Group’s Wollongong Central development. The journey begins with a client needing no enticement, rhetoric or thesis as to why ‘being of place’ is so fundamental.**

In the case of the internationally renowned Rouse Hill Town Centre, The GPT Group embodied the story of place into its development. This journey also begins with a personal attachment; the chance to make a difference in your own home town for an architect is rare/daunting/exciting and simultaneously humbling. Yes, I’m a Wollongong girl!

The design of Wollongong Central’s expansion is a story; the story of Wollongong. Together with GPT, we spoke about the idea of a local heart and mind. “Our aim is to get the right space for the community, a building that speaks to Wollongong residents about the city they live in and which reflects how they feel about living there”, said GPT development manager Amanda Pieriboni.

This set the scene for the basis of the design. Advanced Narrative (Carol Major) was commissioned to unearth the stories of the region. “Establishing connections or recurring themes was the key to unearthing the city’s storyline”, said Major. She believed this centred around the notion of transformation.

The Advanced Narrative study culminated in nine unifying aspects or ‘complexions’ reflecting Wollongong, which spoke to culture, nature, industry and history.
The challenge then was how to take these words and give them an appropriate architectural expression which would allow the story to be understood.

How do you make a building out of words? How literally should the stories unfold? How do you ensure the interpretation is not glib or shallow or a one liner?

We concluded that in fact the story should unfold in many ways; some very obviously, some more slowly and subtly, some almost exclusively in that you need to be a local to appreciate it, like an ‘insiders only’ version, and some, fleetingly.

We started a process of setting up what we eventually called ‘spheres of influence’, which graphically started to collect what might be aspects of the Wollongong story which we could draw upon. They broadly took three key notions of the place; nature, artifice and culture.

‘Nature’ spoke about the landscape, which at its core, starts with the notion of the strong backdrop of the escarpment; a dense layer of vegetation characterised by the unique rainforest which only exists because the escarpment produces a very particular micro climate; rock platforms which jut into the ocean forming beaches and an undulating and dramatic coastline. The narrative talked about the notion of the coastline: ‘you might imagine yourself on the rim of a great amphitheatre in which a giant’s hand had arranged props for a play’.

‘Artifice’ referenced the man-made stories; industry, which is such an integral part of the Wollongong story and plays a key defining characteristic, as well as ports, the local history and habitation patterns.

The imagery of the blast furnace becomes a compelling metaphor: ‘Where the ingredients of technology, labour, community and the environment were fired in close confines’.

‘Culture’ reflected a strong and growing core of university students; a surf culture as the suburbs hugged the ribbon of the coastline; migrants and immigration as a strong historical tie to industry; a loyal sports following; and an amazing culture of food.

This analysis became the fundamental foundation for what would result in the final building design. The design conceptually takes the notion of the building as an escarpment, which is ‘cleaved’ open to reveal the interior core. This idea takes the language of a robust ‘outer shell’ (the escarpment), which protects a ‘soft inner core’; an appropriate analogy perhaps for the region which is often characterised by the severity of industry yet is blessed by an extraordinary natural beauty that is revealed almost as a guarded secret.

Incisions are then made into this shell forming laneways, forecourts and void spaces; it is at these points that the interior is revealed. Architecturally the building evokes the faceted and layered form of the escarpment that dominates the Illawarra coastline.

The form is heroic and iconic like the place, and almost civic in nature. But Wollongong is nothing if not diverse in every sense of the word and we contrasted these heroic forms with the apparent delicacy of the Illawarra Flame Tree, represented as a delicate embossed floral ‘blush’ on the façade. This sense of contradiction is also an enduring aspect of the design; soft yet hard; proud yet humble; harsh yet beautiful… These are the elements which defined the nature of Wollongong.
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We sought to embed in the design an aspect of ‘artifice’, which we did by studying the historical and current subdivision patterns of the land. Unsurprisingly we discovered a fine grained pattern of habitation largely obliterated in any built form less than 100 years old.

We used this finer street patterned to set a rhythm which gave the building a much finer grain more suitable at street level with a commensurate finer level of detail appropriate to the human scale. Artifice is also explored in the materiality of the building with an extensive use of steel; a material which arguably but literally Wollongong was built on.

The notion of transformation spoke very loudly in the consideration of the form of the building: ‘these were people who who took part in transforming a nation’s economy and who, in turn, transformed themselves’. We took this idea and considered that the building needed to physically transform and in so doing ‘inflict’ and thereby invigorate the surrounding streets and public space.

The design therefore moves away from the convention of an introverted box in favour of the idea of the amphitheatre with the town as the stage. Bay windows jut into the street and hover over pedestrians below, allowing multiple points of engagement. The facades literally burst open at points and seemingly consume the streets prompting the feeling of sitting on a verandah.

These components allow the facade to take on differing qualities from season to season, as the facade opens and closes, and from day-to-night-time, providing a transformation to the level of activation. These elements reflect current cultural aspects of city living that are relatively new to Wollongong. Cafés spilling out onto trafficked streets, the idea of going out for breakfast, sitting on a verandah under a tree canopy watching the world go by. These are still fledgling experiences in Wollongong, borne out of a town which largely retreated to the beach rather than seeking urbane living for their social experiences.

The Forecourt, a civic-scaled public forecourt, which is formed at the gateway of the town, becomes the grand gesture and invites a dialogue with the surrounding streets establishing a social heart, something which has dwindled in many regions over the years.

Its architectural expression speaks to the landscape (nature) of the Illawarra in the form of stands of tall gums and tallowwoods and takes the form of a series of variegated weathered steel blades as an obvious reference to the local steel industry (artifice). Between these ‘fingers’ of steel sit delicate cascades of landscape, which at ground level will include herbs and produce that speak to the culture of the vegetable garden and food as a social catalyst (culture). The recurrent theme of contradiction and contrast is evident; the delicate with the robust.

The forecourt is conceived as a cut in the building and starts to reveal the interior as a ‘soft inner core’; another metaphor of the Illawarra, a region perceived as a tough working class steel town which surprises the visitor with a soft and evocative natural beauty.

This incision then reveals the notion of the blast furnace – the melting pot – where the elements of the development are collected and brought together and all the elements are forged.

The interior then reveals a warm sculpted form, overaided again with landscape and connected to air and light constantly placing the space with the place of Wollongong.

The interior is revealed at many points and simultaneously connects and permeates the existing streets of the town because place is not only about conceptual connections but as importantly how the physical connections are made on the ground. ‘Ancient corridors – corridors to home’; the interior seeks to forge the city together. We ‘seed’ the potential for new connections to be made, in time ‘invading’ the surrounding streets, every corner, every nook and cranny activated.

At its core, place is about acting as a catalyst to revitalise the city by engaging activity and life in and out of itself, making new connections and strengthening existing ones with a built form which speaks uniquely to the place.

These connections mean whole towns become permeable and a network of streets, lanes, arcades, malls all serve to create a meaningful town experience with the whole being greater than the sum of its parts both physically and economically.

All of this is not just about a single project; it merely helps to illustrate the point. It shows theory can become practice, the intangible can become tangible.

Defining place must always start in its own place and time and it must express its own values. Defining and expressing ‘place’ is in some ways the act of ‘knitting’ together people, place and culture.

Place also seeks to act as a catalyst for other great things to happen, it never isolates or alienates. And when all these elements are present we have truly created place; a place which to be replicated elsewhere would make no sense; a place people defend; a place which reflects its people.