Collapsing City Narratives: Artistic Activism and Urban Ecologies in Strife

Dr Louise Rollman

Independent Researcher
Brisbane, Australia
Contact Email l.rollman@connect.qut.edu.au

Abstract

InterFace: City as a Work of Art, or City Under Redevelopment (1988), was a pioneering interdisciplinary project that leveraged art and digital technologies to critique urban change in *Meanjin* (Brisbane). Emerging as an early experiment predating conventional public art policies and unencumbered by economic or city marketing pressures, the project, with artist Jeanelle Hurst as interlocutor, represents a distinctive approach to *imagining* the city. Moreover, predating the digital realm as we know it, the project merits renewed critical attention, celebrating Hurst's obscured influence in shaping early concepts of electronic telecommunications within visual art and culture. Utilizing a multifaceted approach, the study employs critical review analysis, enriched by semi-structured interviews with key participants and observers, historical memory and contextualization. By examining the project's engagement with urban spaces and its conflicted reception in the socio-cultural context of the late 1980s, this research contributes to a deep understanding of place. As a compelling and productive counterpoint to urban renewal strategies, this study positions *InterFace* as an exemplar that continues to hold significance, especially in fostering innovative, collaborative and socially relevant art within the broader context of urban ecologies and change.

Keywords

Cultural memory, Experimental Art, Site-specific art, Transdisciplinary, Collective Action, Resilience.

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Obscured by its interdisciplinary character, its coordinator's gender and location, *InterFace: City as a Work of Art, or City Under Redevelopment* (1988) envisioned the internet and our hybrid realities across physical and virtual spaces. Coordinated by artist Jeanelle Hurst, the ambitiously scaled project involved twenty-one artists and programmers occupying both physical and electronic spaces across *Meanjin* (the CBD of Brisbane, settler capital of Queensland). Its most innovative components involved the creation of an early digital map of the city and the digital presentation of the locally produced art magazine *eyeline*, which were accessible through centrally located terminals connected to an early internet network. Although not initially well understood locally, the magnitude of Hurst's thinking, especially her conceptualization of space and technology, set her apart. In a global forum, *InterFace* would be well-received at the First International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA) (1988), where Hurst's innovative concepts for electronic telecommunications — especially the incorporation and exchange of imagery, and their networking possibilities — ignited broader imagination at a time when the internet was still in its nascent stages and forms.

This empirically-led study is informed by semi-structured interviews with key participants and close observers. Interviewees such as Jay Younger and John Stafford were involved in the professionalization of the sector through the formation of Queensland Artworkers' Alliance (QAA), as well as policy development with Arts Queensland, including the watershed policy, *Queensland: A State of the Arts* (1991), and they continue to sustain public profiles. Guided by a larger study examining relationships between artistic practices and urban renewal strategies, this paper offers a nuanced understanding of *InterFace*. While emphasizing its historical significance, this research underscores the enduring relevance of *InterFace* within a broader discourse regarding the intersection of art, technology, and urban change.

Following a contextual review that takes into account the economic, political and cultural circumstances impacting upon the conditions of art-making that precipitated *InterFace,* this analysis revisits the project and its reception to underscore its enduring relevance for ongoing discussions regarding urban change and innovative, collaborative, contemporary art with social impact. While it makes little sense to give the Bjelke-Petersen Government (1968-87) too much credit for motivating cultural change — after all, the city's cultural sector was equally influenced by local and international politics, state economics and governance — Andrew Stafford observes that coming of age in a hostile climate certainly distorted the prism through which Brisbane-based artists interpreted local and international influences. [1] It is an era that politicized a generation, and artists, amidst a changing city, demonstrated an alternative vision for the city.

The spectre of demolition

The Bjelke-Petersen Government (1968-87) has had a lasting effect on both the settler city's physical landscape and its psyche. It is well established, and confirmed by the Fitzgerald Inquiry (1987-1989), that this government was institutionally corrupt. It was marred by electoral malpractice, crony capitalism and systemic police corruption — so extensive that the police were "acting as entrepreneurs of crime" and "franchising organized crime" — in this way, the police were crime bosses responsible for running a criminal enterprise. [2] This government was also strongly associated with an extensive pro-development demolition program that largely erased, and thus transformed, Brisbane. Amongst Bjelke-Petersen's lasting legacies was the demolition of some sixty buildings, the majority of which had historic significance. [3] The controversial midnight demolition of the Bellevue Hotel in 1979, and the violent protest that ensued, would become a potent symbol for the extensive anti-cultural, pro-demolition program of the Bjelke-Petersen era and its impertinent callousness, particularly toward heritage. The jarring effect of demolition during this era contributed to the city's tensions and anxieties, and would ultimately have unexpected political ramifications, resulting in a decline in the city's support for the government.

During the Bjelke-Petersen era, Australia underwent an economic downturn, largely prompted by the 1973 OPEC oil crisis. The post-World War II boom ended with stagflation — a high inflation rate accompanied by a high unemployment rate — which was further exacerbated by the 1982-83 recession.[1] This period led to record inflation — a staggering 20% (in 1986) — as well as record unemployment and industrial disputation. From 1975 to 1983, the unemployment rate in Queensland rose from 15.6% to 23%. [5] The increase in unemployment, especially youth unemployment, in Queensland was greater than the national average, and in 1984 it peaked at 31%. By 1986, Queensland accounted for 18% of Australia's unemployed. [6] Despite their economic circumstances, Bjelke-Petersen brushed young people as "ratbags" or *different* — and at a time when being *different*, of colour or queer, could be "outright dangerous". [7] This, coupled with an intense police presence produced a culture of paranoia and anxiety. Lindy Morrison, drummer from the Go-Betweens has said that although the federal Whitlam Government (1972-75)… "allowed us to breathe, we were justifiably

paranoid" of the Bjelke-Petersen Government and the Queensland police. [8] Moreover, many of the demolitions seemed to target the buildings utilized by young people as meeting places, concert halls and venues for dance parties. For many young artists, the Bjelke-Petersen Government was influential in that they "obliterated everything" — and it was an era when "everything" from the Great Barrier Reef to the built environment was under threat. [9]

Also coinciding with the Bjelke-Petersen era was the ongoing post-war residential and retail drift to the suburbs, precipitated by the broader shift to car use in Australia. Like other capital cities, Brisbane's central business district was being decentralized. The closure of the Roma Street Markets and the opening of Chermside Shopping Centre (heralded as the largest in the southern hemisphere), followed by a succession of other suburban shopping centres, drew the populace away from the city centre. Retail would not begin to return to the city centre until the Queen Street Mall opened in advance of the Commonwealth Games in 1982. Consequently, the experience of the city was becoming fragmentary and the changing economy in the CBD led to a plethora of vacant spaces. Artists, mindful of being part of a changing city, became aware of opportunities to utilize disused buildings in the city centre.

As young artists of the time recall, the city was being cleaned up and transformed into a "schmick" and newly recreated city; "the climate was basically, knock it all down".[2] [10] Amidst this climate of oppression and demolitions, and despite the city's changing nature, by occupying the city centre artists, and particularly those associated with artist-run activities, demonstrated an alternative vision for the city. Hurst and her contemporaries assert, "we wanted to be in the CBD". [11] For them, there was a real sense of everything being knocked down and that things weren't going to last for very long. And these demolitions, which had been happening since the mid-1970s, escalated in the lead-up to Expo 88.[3] Accordingly, young artists at the time very much focused their attention on short-term possibilities and being able to occupy spaces temporarily.

Hurst was principally involved with One Flat, an artist-run-initiative (ARI) not linked by a single name or physical space.[4] Additionally, the influence of postmodernism sparked broader shifts within the field of contemporary visual art, ultimately redefining the role of ARIs in policy and practice. Such transformation was a feature of *Open Sandwich* (1983), the first national conference of Aus-

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[1] Verrender (2014) describes stagflation as a rare economic phenomenon and a "nightmare" for policymakers: "raise rates to dampen inflation and you exacerbate unemployment. Try to fix the jobs crisis and you fuel inflation". [4]

[2] A colloquial Australian phrase meaning new and smart or stylish.

[3] World Expo 88 is broadly considered a transformative moment in the history of Brisbane. The largest event of the 1988 Bicentennial celebrations, attracting more than 18 million visitors, it was the world's first 'free enterprise' World Exposition and spurred a major redevelopment at the South Brisbane site and nearby areas.

[4] For example, One Flat Exhibit (1981-84), initially located at Red Comb House, 190 Roma Street, then O'Flat, 19 Edmondstone Street, and then One Flat Exhibit George Street Branch, 355 George Street (1982-85). [12]

tralian alternative art spaces, organized by the Experimental Art Foundation (EAF), Adelaide. From Brisbane, Hurst was invited to represent One Flat Exhibit, alongside the Institute of Modern Art (IMA), Artspace (Sydney), and other artists such as Bonita Ely. The conference set out to improve communication between alternative art spaces and increase awareness of issues relating to administration, policy and funding. Its primary purpose was to review the needs and conditions that prompted the emergence of alternative spaces and examine the role of these initiatives in cultural production. As the first formal meeting between alternative spaces, its purposes were considered timely, even overdue, with lasting ramifications for the alternative space field and ARIs in particular. In addition to the economic and political conditions of the city and era, Hurst, in association with iterations of One Flat, thought of the city as a spatial extension of these artist-run spaces and activities. Consequently, *InterFace* was very much a product of these artist-run activities.

InterFace: A Catalyst for Reimagining Urbanity through Art and Technology

Staged in late February and March 1988 in the lead-up to Expo 88, *InterFace: City as a Work of Art or City Under Redevelopment* (1988), was an ambitiously scaled artist-run project. Involving twenty-one artists and programmers including Peter Callas, Diena Georgetti and Jay Younger, the project's intervention in the public realm encompassed physical and virtual spaces: electronic displays in the Queen Street Mall, shop window displays, billboards, projections, lighting displays, and live events. The project's works included "nerve-ending music" played by Eugene Carchesio and Pat Ridgewell from the top of the Prudential Building, which was reportedly audible across the city in the Queen Street Mall and across the river at the Queensland Art Gallery.[5] Central to the project were terminals located in the Queen Street Mall where viewers, using an early internet system, could access information, including *eyeline*. Another city-based public work was Hurst's *Highrise Wallpaper* (1988), which modified the cityscape by night with graphic images and/or text simply produced by using newspaper to block the windows of multiple office towers from emitting light.

Imagining the city was a unifying subject of the *InterFace* project, as indicated by its subtitle: "City as a Work of Art, or City Under Redevelopment". As an early and experimental foray into art in public space, the project was unencumbered by formal public art policies or by a cloaked demand to aid economic growth and city marketing. Indeed, a review of the project at the time by Michelle

Helmrich noted that *InterFace's* "sites were not sites for containment or legitimization, but rather... sites for transaction, forcing works to enter the cut and thrust of city data and commercial signing". [13] However, suggesting "that certain strategies of delivery are more suited to an effective public art statement", Helmrich questioned whether, the works of American-based artists like Barbara Kruger, Jenny Holzer and Krzystof Wodiczko might be deemed more "responsible and appropriate" with their "fast, memorable delivery, and 'political' content?".[14]

In addition to underrating the project's politics, Helmich's reviews are indicative of the unfair critical attention *InterFace* received at the time. As Helmrich suggested, its photo-documentation perhaps offers the somewhat false impression that it was a memorable event. Indeed, as Helmrich further pointed out: "the cropped, still, well-vantaged, and selected image" conveys a compact energy that "will outshine the event". [15] However, as Helmrich and others make clear, the project "could scarcely have competed with the assault of Expo". [16] *InterFace* suffered from a low media profile, and it "lacked the monetary, administrative, technical and even the appropriate artistic resources" to successfully stage "with maximum visibility such an expansively scaled project". [17] According to Helmrich, the project did not prioritize site-specificity or deliver a dynamic interface between its virtual space, commercial sites and the public. Helmrich concluded, "perhaps the most important aspect of *InterFace* lies in the fact that such a project, on such a scale, was attempted at all". [18] Indeed, the idea that one individual, like Hurst, could develop and guide such a project across multiple commercial, public and virtual sites would be just as audacious today.

Although the project's association with the Australian Bicentennial Authority facilitated access to the city's personnel, its staging was an administrative burden for the project's coordinator that involved "lengthy negotiations with city authorities", which were further complicated by the restrictive climate of the day. [19] For instance, Gary Warner's sound work, *Boom Box Town and Country* (1988), was intended for the Regent Theatre along the Queen Street Mall, but was reportedly censored by the Mall's management under Brisbane City Council (BCC). Additionally, reflecting pre-Expo anxieties, a letter to the editor in *The Courier Mail* protested that a billboard by Jane Richens, suspended above the exterior watermall at the Queensland Art Gallery, "deface[d] the Gallery".[6] [20] More tellingly, Peter Anderson observes that *InterFace's* "innovativeness was swamped... locally by the... mainstream media obsession with Expo". [21] However, its

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[5] The Prudential Building was formerly located at the corner of Queen Street and North Quay, where Brisbane Square and Reddacliff Place stand today (construction completed late 2006).

[6] The watermall is a key feature of the Robin Gibson-designed Queensland Art Gallery (QAG). Consisting of six internal and external linear pools that span the entire length of the building, the watermall runs parallel to the river and thus mirrors this prominent feature of the Brisbane landscape. QAG regularly presents exhibits at the central watermall, including Yayoi Kusama's *Narcissus garden* (1966/2002).

comparison to Expo is unfair, and as Stafford contends, in retrospect it was "progressive". [22]

Redefining Narratives Amidst Bicentennial Controversies Driven by contemporary art practice as an extension of artist-run activity, *InterFace* stood apart from public art programmes of the time, especially those associated with Expo. Comparatively, Expo 88 displayed "one of the largest and most prestigious sculpture collections assembled in Australia". [23] These large stand-alone sculptures, typically forged using industrial technologies and materials, including bronze, corten and stainless steel, some of them kinetic, were largely conventional and only tentatively engaged with Expo's theme applied to the sculpture program "illustrat[ing] the interdependence of art and technology". [24] This is especially evident when compared to the city-scaled, ephemeral works and new media technologies featured in *InterFace*. Even so, the fact that the project "miraculously" received Bicentennial funding itself prompted opposition. As Jay Younger recalls, artist "Pat Hoffie was trying to gather a group... to protest against" *InterFace* because it was funded by the Bicentennial Authority, which, as reviewer Lynne Seear described, materialized as an "insipid" counter-project called *Two-Faced InterFace*. [25] The 1988 Bicentennial celebration triggered debates and protests regarding national identity, especially the role, place and depiction of Indigenous cultures, and many activist and artist groups were wary of participating in projects organized or funded by the Bicentennial Authority.

While implicitly regarded as an aspect of nation-building, the 1988 Bicentennial was an occasion through which Indigenous people and women "drove a wedge through the image of a 'united' nation". [26] According to the Bicentennial Authority, the "national Bicentennial arts program was the most ambitious, comprehensive and successful... ever organized in [Australia]". [27] With $17 million of federal funding, the program partnered with 6,500 artists to present 120 projects for an estimated audience of 5.3 million. Although Expo 88 was the largest and longest-running Bicentennial event, Australia Day 1988 may have been the most spectacular. The privately sponsored First Fleet re-enactment that sailed into Sydney Harbour was met by more than 40,000 Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal protesters — the largest protest march in Sydney since the early 1970s Vietnam Moratorium demonstrations.[7] While the bicentennial Indigenous protest movement proclaimed, "White Australia has a Black history", women simultaneously adopted the slogan "Australia has a women's history" and thereby also sought to assert their presence to claim equal space in the public sphere. [28] As MacNeill has highlighted, "these oppositional movements [were]... ill-fitting pieces incapable of producing the unified and unifying identity... desired by the... Bicentennial Authority". [29]

While benefiting from Bicentennial funding, Hurst remains adamant that "*InterFace* was politically motivated". [30] She describes a love/hate relationship with Brisbane's CBD and describes her identity and relationship with the city as "schizoid". Although the city was her "stomping ground,… it represented all these things that you wanted, but also all the other oppressive elements". [31] Furthermore, as a female artist, Hurst recounts situations of "extreme misogyny" and notes "if you objected to it, you were the aberration". [32] Consequently, she refers to every facet of her life as "so politicized". As a female artist, Hurst "demand[ed] the right to have a presence". She states, "for me the struggle was claiming space [or] territory [and] holding on to that territory". [33]

Refuge in Innovative Territories *InterFace* gained more favourable recognition when it was presented as part of the *Networking in the Arts* Workshop at the First International Symposium on Electronic Art (ISEA), Utrecht (1988). Here *InterFace* would for the first time receive more engaged and deeper recognition. Her co-panellists — including Fred Truch, Raymond Lauzzana, Roy Ascott, Carl Eugene Loeffler — were particularly interested in Hurst's models for electronic telecommunications and its networking possibilities. Especially the interactive capacity to merge the physical world with electronic, digital, and virtual realms, set her apart. Subsequently, Hurst was invited to present *InterFace* again as part of other conferences including *The Shaping of Tele-Culture* at the National Computer Graphics Association (NCGA) Arts Conference (1989), with the CADRE Institute (Computers in Art, Design, Research, and Education), San José State University (SJSU). In these forums, with well-versed contemporaries capable of comprehending her proposals, Hurst's imaginative conceptions for the digital realm were well-received. While her co-panellists had been excited about the internet as a chat room, she was talking about the exchange of text and images within these networked spaces. The electronic aspects of *InterFace* provided an opportunity to reach beyond the constraints of the city, and contrary to the stifling atmosphere of Brisbane at the time, these forums provided a much-needed refuge for Hurst.

Conclusion

Amidst tumultuous urban renewal, artist-run activities, including *InterFace*, *reimagined* conventional perceptions of artists' roles in urban space. For *InterFace,* not only was Hurst able to negotiate with key stakeholders for the temporary use of major sites in the centre of the city, she was also able to negotiate the politics of inserting experimental contemporary artworks into mainstream spaces, which would disrupt those spaces. As this paper has discussed, by presenting *eyeline* online and producing early digital maps of the city, in many ways, these aspects of the project *imagined* the internet as we are now familiar with it. However, primarily due to its innovations, it was not well un-

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[7] Australia Day January 26, was proclaimed a Day of Mourning by Indigenous Australians in 1938 during the Sesquicentenary celebrations.

derstood or appreciated locally. As Younger states retrospectively, "the scale of Hurst's thinking was very important and her embracing of technology was very different". [34] It was instead better understood by a global community of change agents. Despite its limitations, the project served as a platform for exploring relationships between art, technology and urbanity.

By revisiting the conditions that precipitated *InterFace*, this paper highlights the socio-political impacts of oppressive government policies and a persistent economic growth mindset. Indicative of the city's ongoing rampant economic growth strategies, the research has interrogated how urban change in the city was triggered and driven by the brazen pro-development Bjelke-Petersen Government. Unlike mainstream art programs, *InterFace* was a catalyst for *reimagining* urbanity through art and technology, which invited debate concerning national identity and cultural heritage. With the support of Bicentennial funding, the project contributed to eroding a singular national identity and reinforced a multi-perspective cultural narrative. As a model facilitating interaction between material, virtual and imaginary spaces, *InterFace* remains relevant today. In contrast to political apathy, the DIY punk ethos and activism of artist-run-initiatives of the time, including *InterFace*, enabled artists to match the brazen manoeuvres of a callous government. Simultaneously, their efforts to professionalize the arts sector have risked making it beholden to governments, stifling alternative methods and critiques. Nonetheless, *InterFace* stands as a poignant reminder to pursue ambitious, challenging and visionary ideas.

Acknowledgements

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Author Biography

Dr Louise Rollman is currently a Fryer Library Fellow with the University of Queensland (UQ). Her research primarily focuses on the intersection and impact of political, urban development and management practices on the arts and cultural sector. As a curator specializing in commissioning contemporary art for the public realm, she has facilitated countless exhibition-projects including complex, city-shaping public art commissions involving innovative technologies that project onto bridges, wrap ferries, dive into bodies of water and reshape earth. Past projects include *my own private neon oasis* (2011) (cat.), which in recognition of its innovations, influence and reach, was awarded the 2012 Gallery and Museum Achievement Award (GAMAA), M&G QLD, amongst other awards and best practice acknowledgements.