

# PNYX

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In the first of a 2-part series on Sydney architecture, PNYX caught up with Jennifer Turpin of Turpin+Crawford Studio to discuss the studio's involvement in two of the city's most recent, large-scale public projects; Barangaroo, a 22-hectare former docklands development in the west of Sydney's centre, and Central Park, the redevelopment of the old Carlton United Brewery on Sydney's Broadway. (Eds.)

**PNYX:** Barangaroo has been one of the more politically fraught architectural developments in Sydney this century, being a large tract of public land the development of which was strongly influenced by private interests. How were you involved in this process as public art strategists?

**JENNIFER TURPIN:** I've worked on Barangaroo over a number of years at different stages of the project. My colleague and I work as both artists and strategists/curators - our core work is producing site-specific environmentally responsive public art works - but we also write public art strategies and run public art projects for clients, whether they be developers, or councils or state government agencies.

About 10 years ago I was on the winning team for the masterplan for Barangaroo (then called East Darling Harbour). The team was a local urban design group, with the architects and urban designers Hill Thalys & Paul Berkemeier, and Jane Irwin Landscape Architecture. We developed a scheme responding to the brief which divided the site into 50% open space and 50% a mixture of residential and commercial buildings, and relied on the government building the infrastructure and multiple developers taking on smaller projects. But very soon after that competition was won by our group, the government elected not to go ahead with the plan. Another major competition was held, this time between two developers, Brookfield Multiplex and Lend Lease. Again, we were on one of the teams,



*HALO in front of the old brewery building*  
the Brookfield Multiplex team, the runner-up.

We were, however, later engaged by the Barangaroo Development Authority as part of a team led by SOM. Together with landscape architect Andersen Hunter Horne (AHH) and SOM we won the design of the masterplan for *Barangaroo Central*, the central third of the site. Later we were invited to be on the curatorial side for the whole site, but we declined, preferring to be in the running for a commission as artists rather than as curators.

As it's turned out, we're no longer involved, there are other curators on the project and there are pretty major public art competitions being run. They have good budgets, which is great, because so often in Sydney and in Australia, the budgets for public art works are not very high, making it very difficult to deliver something of suitable scale or ambition to match that of the architecture of a development or project.

**P:** How did Central Park differ?

**JT:** We wrote the public art strategy for Central Park about 4 or 5 years ago. And we

were then involved in implementing that strategy, the first part of which was the developers asking us to produce the first artwork, which became known as *HALO*. We also co-curated a temporary art project on the exterior walls of the old Brewery Power House building called *Artists in Residence*. It was a series of temporary site-specific interventions about 'inhabitation'.

Central Park was developer-run and paid for. But the City of Sydney (the municipality responsible for central Sydney) had involvement in the public park design controls. It will now be handed over to the city for running. The City has a very clever setup: for projects over a certain budget value, developers are required to contribute a public artwork to their precinct, of a certain standard.

**P:** And who is determining that standard?

**JT:** The City has a panel of experts to whom the developer has to present their public art proposal. That panel decides whether the standard is good or not, and if it's not they make suggestions to the developer. So even though they don't specify a percentage of development budget to be spent on art, they do control it to some degree by the fact that it has to go through this panel. With Central Park, the developers really respected that process, and they brought Michaelie and I onboard because they knew we could work with the City. We spent 5 or 6 months developing the strategy, doing in-depth research to really understand the site. The scheme was already well-advanced by the time we began work, so the only problem was that we were starting probably 2 years late. It's often a problem for public art - being brought in too late in the process. At Central Park there was not a great opportunity to integrate into landscape or architectural planning. Rather we had to figure where public artwork should be located and how it could best respond to the site's current design, its history and its future.

The sculpture *HALO* was the first such

artwork, designed by Michaelie and I as artists. In some ways, it's a traditional approach to siting a work - a single piece of sculpture in the middle of a park. Normally we generate ideas for an artwork simultaneously with the landscape or architectural design schedule, but in this case the landscape design was a given. We wanted to create an energetic heart to the public domain, and create a dynamic work that gestured out to all the buildings that surround it, and that didn't really impinge on the ground plane, because that was designed already. So we decided to occupy that 'mid-air zone' with a kinetic artwork that would move in response to the winds of the site in an eccentric, 'drunken' kind of way. After all, the place used to be a brewery!

As artists, we were interested not only in the site's colonial history but also its fluvial, geomorphological history. When it was a brewery, a massive amount of fluids were constantly being pumped around the site - carbonated water, beer - through a complex network of pipes both overhead and underground. In the early 1800s, there was a lake and a fresh water creek that ran down to Black Wattle Bay, the reason the brewery was first located there. Today, the creek still runs in a convict-built ovoid drain only 2 metres below the surface, and as heritage artefact, its presence has influenced the planning of the current development, preventing anything being built over it other than a park. So Jeppe Andersen's water feature and *HALO* are both responses to this natural history of the place.

**P:** So Central Park is a privately run project that has produced space that will be administered by the City of Sydney, a public body, as well as public artworks and programs. Barangaroo on the other hand, while publicly-owned land, seems to have been co-opted by private interests, such as Crown Casino, who are looking to build a casino and hotel beside the park.

**JT:** The unfortunate thing about Barangaroo, from my point of view, is that the City was pushed aside in the process, whereas at Central Park, during the design stage, they had more control and involvement regarding public domain urban design decisions. The City put forward many good suggestions and control plans for Barangaroo, but little by little they were pushed aside and some of the sensitive approaches to urban design were ignored. For example, they suggested the built form in the commercial

southern end of the site step back up from the water, rather than form a massive wall at the edge of the harbour. Their suggestions were very good from an urban design perspective, but ignored to a large extent.

I feel disappointed with aspects of Barangaroo. It's a lost opportunity in many ways. It is really the last great site of harbourside Sydney, and the way its design process has been run has not been conducive to a democratic use of space, particularly with the latest insertion of a huge new casino! As if Sydney needs another! There are of course good aspects to its final design, but for those of us involved in the conceptual phases over the years, we've seen a lot of good ideas get lost in the process.

In many ways the naming of the site Barangaroo has a hollow ring now because strong connections to Sydney's indigenous past, in my view, have not yet been made. Barangaroo was the wife of Australian aboriginal Bennelong, who befriended Governor Phillip in the early days of the colony, and after whom Bennelong Point, where the Sydney Opera House is located, was named. Given these two headlands bookend the city, our team developed ways of making strong connections between the two, either through walkways or artworks that thematically connected the water to the stars, thereby acknowledging the nearby Sydney Observatory and knowledge of the land's original inhabitants. Maybe some of these ideas could be developed in the future.

A strong and simple way to embed such connections at Barangaroo in my view is to plant native species throughout. But already this opportunity has been lost with the planting of exotic deciduous species all along the water's edge, trees that can be found in cities all around the world. The Headland Park (to the site's north) has largely indigenous plants, but to characterise the whole site with indigenous planting seems to me the best way to honour its name. It also would've given the precinct a strong identity within Sydney Harbour, many of whose parks and headlands have indigenous flora.

It's almost as if through not planting native trees we are harking back to the old colonial attitude, where Europeans tried imposing their order on a landscape they didn't understand. This most disappoints me at a time of global urban development when there is a much greater awareness of the importance of the 'local' in relation to urbanisation. Why are we still fearful or ignorant of indigenous landscape, of indigenous culture? Hopefully this changes over

time. But what won't change in the immediate future is the erection of Sydney's tallest new building, a homage to that worst aspect of humanity - gambling! - a building that will tower over the public domain reminding us daily of the power of the dollar.

At Central Park things feel more responsive to the needs of the public. The developers are sensitive to the local needs, and keep trying out new ideas, testing what will work to activate the public domain: initiating street markets on weekends, opening an Asian food alley in the heritage precinct, providing space for sports and other games in the shopping precinct, and sponsoring art events in the public park and a significant public art program. I feel that its design allows for flexibility over time. The public art strategy for both permanent and temporary art certainly has that built into it, with a number of high quality permanent works already installed. The landscape and the architecture, both new and old, provides a good canvas for future cultural initiatives.

*Below: Barangaroo masterplan proposed by the group including Hill Thalis and Turpin+Crawford, showing the site split in two halves.*

