'Projecting lushness: Doing the tropical urban through waterfront redevelopment'

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Introduction

The Townsville Strand was a $30m redevelopment of the waterfront, which has stood the test of time. Despite some modest opposition at the time, the City Council, transformed the Strand into a manicured public parklands which continues to enjoy wide public acclaim 15 years on. Qualitative and quantitative research was undertaken by one of the authors in 2004-6 into community usage and attitudes toward the Strand (Transpac Consulting, 2005; 2006). In this paper, the frame shifts from the original one concerned with measures of social capital development to one that is grounded in a phenomenology of place and a socio-aesthetics of immersion in landscape. Our aim is to analyze how, through its design and landscape 'affordances', this waterfront space has successfully engaged a variety of users and managed to have a measurable impact on an entire city's atmospherics.

Key concepts and hypotheses

The notion of an affordance was coined by the ecological psychologist, James J. Gisbon (1979: 127), to capture what a landscape or environment '*offers* the animal, what it *provides* or *furnishes*, either for good or ill'. Affordances include such things as 'terrain, shelters, water, fire, objects, tools, other animals, and human displays' (Gibson, 1979: 127). They point to the fact that landscape is 'the world in which we stand' (Ingold, 2000: 207); and which we see, hear, smell and experience kinaesthetically. Furthermore, landscape consists of 'contoured and textured surfaces', which are 'replete with diverse objects – living and nonliving, natural and artificial' (Ingold, 1993: 154). Important to our discussion will be the notion that artifice, design, and cultivation, are also aspects of landscape affordance.

Our own observations regarding the Strand's place-defining qualities are the following. In terms of visual affordances, the Strand could be said to be a cross between: a classic tourist postcard image of a tropical beach (see Figure 1); a scene from Seurat's *A Sunday Afternoon on the Island of La Grande Jatte* (see Figure 2); and a distant Charles Sheeler-style image of an industrial landscape (see Figure 3). Each of these views is simultaneously mundane and grand (see Hiss, 1995, on 'simultaneous perception').

Figure 1: View of Magnetic Island

Figure 2: 'Sunday Afternoon on the Strand'

Figure 3: Townsville port

Figure 4: Canopy of fig trees

The phenomenological frame, anchored by notions of focal moments and focal experiences (Borgmann, 1982), provides further insights. The thing about focal moments and experiences is that they are shared; those involved in them know that they have shared in their creation (the experience couldn't be created by one person acting alone), and that a certain collective mood is invoked and shared. As Heidegger (1995: 67) suggests: 'Attunements … in advance determine our being with another'. This is what can be experienced when friends and family come together on the Strand, to share in the rituals of casual dining, of preparing a BBQ or laying out a picnic. Conviviality is not only an affordance, but an insistence.

With feet firmly planted on the lush lawns of the Strand, the everydayness of life in the tropics penetrates deeply into our lived bodies. We feel it, literally, from the very tips of our toes. Brownsville – the derogatory nickname for the city - fades into the memories of the distant past, as the immediacy of a *lush* Townsville is sensed. The experience of the Strand draws a line between the imagery of days past, without jettisoning the reality of the city's industrial port history. The port was founded a year before the city itself was formally declared; it could be said that without the port, there would be no city. And so, framed by the rich canopy of century-old fig trees above (see Figure 4), the vista pays respect to the perennial mark of the port on the city's identity and foundational raison d'être alongside the more touristic vistas towards

Magnetic Island. The Strand brings past and present together, harmoniously, and affords its visitors an opportunity to feel at ease in a world.

We have already used a key concept that requires elaboration. We argue that what the Strand does is project a sense of tropical lushness that is otherwise felt to be missing in the city. The *Concise Macquarie Dictionary* (Macquarie University NSW, 1982: 743) tells us that lush is an adjective denoting qualities such as 'tender and juicy… succulent… characterized by luxury and comfort… [and] sexually attractive'. The dictionary adds that when lush becomes a noun it refers to someone 'who takes alcoholic drinks, esp. regularly' (Macquarie University NSW, 1982: 743). Given its rich phenomenological-um-aesthetic connotations, we feel that lush has received insufficient attention from scholars in the humanities and social sciences. References are scarce. Interestingly, it is Nietzsche (1989) in *Beyond Good and Evil*, who deploys the term in philosophical lexicon, referring to conceptions of the Soul approaching a state of 'tropical lushness':

> While the *new* psychologist is preparing an end to superstition, which so far has flourished with an almost tropical lushness in the way the soul has been imagined, at the same time he has naturally pushed himself, as it were, into a new desert and a new mistrust - it may be the case that the older psychologists had a more comfortable and happier time -; finally, however, he knows that in that very process he himself is condemned also to *invent*, and - who knows? - perhaps to *discover.* (Nietzsche, 1989: 20)

Even for Nietzsche then the qualities of *tropicality* and *lushness* are contiguous. Furthermore, the opposite state is one of metaphysical and experiential 'desert-ness'. However, Nietzsche also cautions those supposedly luxuriating in lushness (after all, he is a cynic) that they will one day be 'condemned' to invent and 'perhaps' to discover.

Background to case study: The city pre- and post-the Strand
Townsville is a medium-sized or third-tier city on the Far North Queensland coast, which at the 2011 Census, had a population of 174,462 (http://www.censusdata.abs.gov.au). Townsville's economy is based on retail trade, health and education services, government administration and defence, construction, mining, manufacturing, and property and business services, and its port facilities (the third largest in Queensland) mean that it is an important transport hub for the agricultural and mineral extractive industries (http://www.townsville.qld.gov.au/townsville/cityprofile). It is regarded by some as the unofficial capital of North Queensland and it houses a significant number of health, research and military functions and personnel, as well as acting – with its airport facilities - as something of a tourist gateway for the nearby Great Barrier Reef and, to the north, the Wet Tropics World Heritage Area. The latter function is something of a double-edged sword. Townsville itself is located within what is called the North Queensland dry tropics (http://www.nqdrytropics.com.au/) and is intensely competitive with the city of

Cairns, which is more squarely located in the wet tropics and far more reliant on tourism as a key economic driver.

Local media reporting is constantly featuring articles and special features with titles like 'On the Move' or 'Making Townsville Great' (see Galloway, 2015). The 1990s are seen as something of a threshold moment in city life due to a confluence of factors including: the establishment of an organization named Townsville Enterprise, several important cultural heritage celebrations, the election of a Mayor committed to fostering prosperity and the 'greening' of Townsville, the entry of a local rugby league club into the national competition; and the Strand redevelopment.

Interestingly, the Strand project was as much a coastal management as landscaping and urban renewal strategy. For a variety of reasons, the beach at the Strand was continuously losing its sand. The initial coastal management solution was to construct a rock wall that concealed the view of what little beach was left. So, in 1993, the Townsville City Council conducted a design competition that was won by the architectural firm of Gillespie Peddle Thorp (now Peddle Thorp) whose architectural and planning projects have also included the recent Cairns Esplanade Lagoon.

The project entailed the landscaping of 2.2 kilometres of foreshore, was deemed by the council to be primarily for 'recreational and leisure' purposes and included a range of amenities such as stinger enclosures; a rock pool; a basketball court; an enclosed children's play area; a small water park; barbecues, and extensive open space and amenities for picnics and various other types of sociability. The Strand hosts regular cultural, artistic and community events, and is an area of intense activity– although, these are spatially and temporally concentrated (see Transpac, 2006, for estimates of hourly pedestrian movement). The landscape design required the use of 250,000 ton of rock, 400,000 ton of sand (which is regularly replenished), 70,000m2 of turf, 16,000 trees and shrubs, 900 palms and 22,500 native groundcover plants. The urban type produced could be described as 'tropical urban'. As *Architecture Australia* magazine wrote of the Cairns Esplanade project: 'People-made beachfronts and esplanades of the north contain large introduced shade trees, such as figs and Indian almonds, surrounded by green lawn, dotted with the occasional barbecue and picnic table' (Fantin, 2005).

The Strand's success was quite immediate. As the Transpac Consulting report of 2006 concluded: the Strand attracted 1.5 million visitors annually; Townsville residents make up 45.8% and 52.5% of weekday and weekend visitors; and statements such as 'The Strand has improved the general quality of life in Townsville' and 'The Strand has had a positive effect on the Townsville economy' rated between 81.2-88.4%. This generally positive mood towards the Strand was backed up by figures related to actual usage. By far the largest category of frequency of visitation was 2-3 times a week (35.7%) and by far the lowest were frequencies of visitation of once a year or every six

months. While the Strand only rated fourth on the list of reasons given for visiting Townsville by non-residents (Transpac, 2006: 40), the original report concluded that non-regional visitors (i.e., intrastate, interstate and international visitors) considered the Strand 'a high quality destination that enhances the visitor experience' (Transpac, 2005: 71).

Projective cities and their waterfront desires
The concept of projective cities seems to be predicated on a series of interesting tensions between city as practical project and city as projected image; and between city as unique artefact and city as manifestation of 'type'. With respect to the latter, Lee and Jacoby (2011: 17) argue that type 'should not be confused with "typology"' and – following the lead set by early 19th century French architectural theorist Quatremère de Quincy – they suggest that an architectural or urban type does not refer to a copy or imitation but rather to 'an element, an object, a thing that embodies the idea'. They also make the very sensible point that 'exotic formal experiments' are not the same thing as 'invention'. However, despite their 'meta-critical' intentions, Lee and Jacoby are stuck in a post-industrial understanding of types. They write: 'A warehouse can be turned into apartments, and a Georgian terrace into a school… a formal reduction prevents other knowledge that can be obtained from type' (Lee and Jacoby, 2011: 16). This mode of reflecting tends to ignore what Czarniawska (2002: 8) labels the '*powerful sense-making'* capacities of '*functionality'* [emphasis in the original]. She adds: 'Functionality as sense-making device has a strong aesthetic value, and not only for engineers. There is beauty in smoothly working machines and in smoothly run meetings' (Czarniawska, 2002: 8).

In the context of our own argument, we might say that urban types and their functionality are expressive of technical, sensorial and ideational 'affordances'. Needless to say such affordances are mediated by the experience of place. Qualities of place are conspicuously missing from many academic and policy discourses regarding waterfronts. From Capetown to Baltimore, London to Sydney, the rhetoric of post-industrial urbanism was centred on the magical transformative powers of the regenerated waterfront (Breen and Rigby, 1996; Marshall, 2001). As working ports ceased to be central to cities, it was thought the waterfront could be re-aestheticized and become the centrepiece of what Dovey (2005) termed the 'fluid city': a place of capital flows and encounters based on consumption, leisure, and aspects of the information economy. The same author notes that waterfront regeneration tended to incorporate the following kinds of 'project types': 'markets, maritime heritage districts, shopping malls, theme parks, housing, commerce, hotels, convention and exhibition centres, sports stadia and museums' (Dovey, 2005: 10). The model was imitated with very little tweaking across the globe. Despite assuming a well-worn formula, each new project would be trumpeted as *the* project that would reinvigorate this or that city. As Boltanski and Chiappelo (2005: 110) state in *The New Spirit of Capitalism*, in the world of projective city-management, 'What matters is to develop activity – that is to say, never be short of a project, bereft of an idea, always to have

something in mind, in the pipeline'. Any idea, even a bad or expensive one, is better than no idea at all.

Quentin Stevens (2007; 2009: 4), who has advanced the notion of *Ludic City*, has been critical of seeing post-industrial waterfronts as 'place marketing to attract both tourists and inner-city residents'. He proposes that meaningful discussions of waterfronts need to move 'beyond the popular "specularization" thesis' and to be able to account for the 'diversity of user behaviour, and how well these are shaped by material changes in the environment' (Stevens, 2009: 4). We couldn't agree more. Some of the discussions of the waterfront as urban type are so lacking in qualitative, phenomenological and aesthetic accounts of place that they neglect to take into account such basic features as the relative 'artificiality and superficiality of the waterfront geography'; not to mention the kind of 'physical and perceptual encounters' with water, climate, vegetation, infrastructure, and so on, waterfront locations entail (Stevens, 2009: 3).

The built or landscaped waterfront is therefore a 'spatial manipulation of the water's edge' that provides for 'safe, predictable and often a distant encounter with the water's edge' (Stevens, 2009: 4). Why might such a spatial and aesthetic manipulation of, and distancing from, water be deemed desirable? As Gaston Bachelard (1983: 12) has said of water: 'to disappear into deep water or to disappear toward a far horizon, [is] to become part of the depth of infinity'. While contemplating water can induce a sense of calm, overwhelming beauty, or timelessness, water also does its work through waves, tides, cyclonic storms, the corrosion of hard substances, not to mention the possibility of drowning or being killed by a menacing sea creature.

Doing tropical *lushness*: The Strand as landscaped oasis
Such considerations are important to our case study. Saltwater crocodiles, sharks and poisonous jellyfish, occupy the immediate aquatic zones of the North Queensland coast. And, cyclones are an important part of the popular imaginary (see Figures 5). Furthermore, while the Coral Sea, which the Strand faces, can appear beautiful and capable of providing psychic and physical renewal, it can also disappoint. The water close in, and which pours into the rock pool and stinger enclosures at the Strand, is often has a brown tinge to it (see Figure 6). It seems like a cruel joke – a Brownsville joke at that – that on some days the ocean only turns turquois blue well out to sea, halfway towards Magnetic Island. The perverse joke is aggravated by the fact that, due to the dredging of the shipping channel, the water surrounding the industrial port sometimes looks more 'classically' tropical (and therefore more inviting) than the shallower water close to the Strand.

Figure 5: Townsville merchandise   **Figure 6:** The Strand beach on a brown-water day

The presence of what appears to be discoloured water – a regular occurrence at the Strand – means that the landscaping of the parklands had to do much of the heavy lifting, aesthetically speaking. What the landscaping achieves is a series of *tropical affordances* that are both reassuring and which make up for perceived lacks in the local geography, climate and landscape.

In the tropical context, lushness is meant to be omnipresent. It is not. What it does connote is a desire for shade (an affordance and a solicitation if there ever was), and a coolness under foot (viz. manicured grass), for instance. Lush is also *soft* or *blurry,* which is a nice contrast to the heavy-handed and totally barren urbanscape that is the Townsville CBD. Confronted with lush, we are drawn into the Strand where we can let out a *whoosh* as we reclaim a sense of grounded homely existence; where our attunement is immediately to adopt a relaxed and carefree mode. To the city's residents, the Strand is a perfectly manicured backyard overlooking a massive swimming pool called the Coral Sea.

So how are the city's residents 'keyed-in' (Goffman, 1974) by this landscape-elicited condition-cum-atmosphere of fecund lushness? We are not sure if the architects and city planners realized this but the city already had a successful proto-type in projected lushness only metres from the Strand (see Figure 7). Predating the Strand redevelopment by decades, the little waterfall is in a slightly concealed position and requires you to turn your back to the ocean to appreciate it. As with an authentic rainforest experience, you often hear the waterfall before you see it; and there is a sense of discovery as your approach it by foot (Hudson, 2000). In addition to producing an immediate sense of joy, and mediating climate, the waterfall also turns every visitor – Townsville resident or otherwise – into an adventurer.
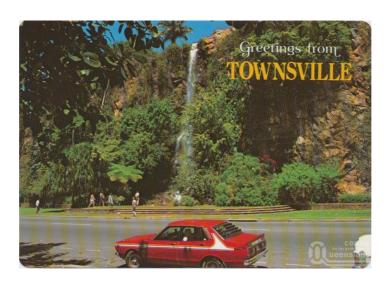
Figure 7: An oasis in a sea of brown: Vintage Townsville postcard from the pre-Strand era

We have asked several people: is the waterfall fake or is it real? Many residents and visitors aren't entirely sure. Perhaps, it doesn't matter because – as Eco (1986) tells us in *Faith in Fakes* – the sign of a good simulation is that we disregard the artifice or forget it is a copy. He adds – which has an unintended poignancy for residents of North Queensland – that, unlike their Mississippi River counterparts, the fake alligators at Disneyland 'don't have to be coaxed' and, in some respects, conform more closely with our 'daydream demands' regarding nature (Eco, 1986: 44).

But, unlike Eco's mechanical alligators, the Strand and the small waterfall, are made up of 'real' stones, real tropical vegetation, real palm trees, real water (including murky brown water) and real sand (even if it is imported). In this respect, gardening and landscaping are not 'fake' activities. Landscaping and gardening are acts of *aesthetic management.* The philosopher Arnold Berleant (2012: 98) writes: 'To impose patterns on a landscape that alter its perceptual identity is an aesthetic act'. He further suggests that what landscape architecture and logging share is that they can be seen as changing (i.e., enhance or detract from) the 'qualities' of place. One may have positive aesthetic connotations; the other negative. But they are both aesthetic acts nonetheless.

In the case of the Strand, rather than deforestation, lots of planting took place. The 'greening' of the city was begun, then, by intensifying the lushness of one selected area, its waterfront. But *lushification* can have impacts well beyond the immediate *lushed-up* zone. As we recounted before, at the time of the 2006 survey, the most frequent rate of Strand visitation, by Townsville residents, was 2-3 times a week. This means the landscaping and aesthetic management at work have touched many locals directly; not to mention become part of the visual iconography of media and publicity regarding the city. This redevelopment has therefore turned out to be good use of both financial and natural resources. Greening one part of the city made the whole city feel more energized. In short, less like Brownsville.

Conclusion

In conclusion, landscapes may not be able to speak but they – even so-called artificial ones - do cue people into the richness and variety of experiences that may be had within their confines. The Strand is a narrow strip of carefully manicured landscape that touches the water for its entire length. The picture postcard views are not obstructed by fancy new museums or dominated by restaurants that charge you to enjoy the view. The Strand also manages to generate, through climatological and landscaping techniques, aspects of synthetic and artificial environments without turning the area into a theme park. In terms of projective macro-urban types, our case study could be said to be simultaneously 'pre', 'past' and 'post-post-industrial'. The Strand doesn't necessarily trade on the image that Townsville has somehow radically re-imagined itself, left behind its role of port city or that Strand-led tourism is going to magically provide boom conditions for the local economy. If anything, the Strand says to its citizens: 'So, what if you live in a city where the port is still crucial to the local economy?'. 'So what if your city is a tourist gateway rather than a tourist endpoint?'. 'I understand your desire to avoid creating a tourist bubble or a precinct that will only appeal to professionals on high incomes'. 'I know you value everyday activities such as exercising, socializing, swimming, commemorating and celebrating and that you desire to undertake them in a special place'. 'But, you know what: it's possible to have these aspirations, modest list of expectations, and have a well-designed waterfront that changes the feel of your city'. If only waterfronts could speak!

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