

[Home](#) / [Archives](#) / [Vol. 25 No. 3 \(2022\): cities](#) / [Articles](#)

## Whose Heritage

### Renovating Munro Martin Park in the Arts and Cultural Capital of the North

**Anthony Castles**

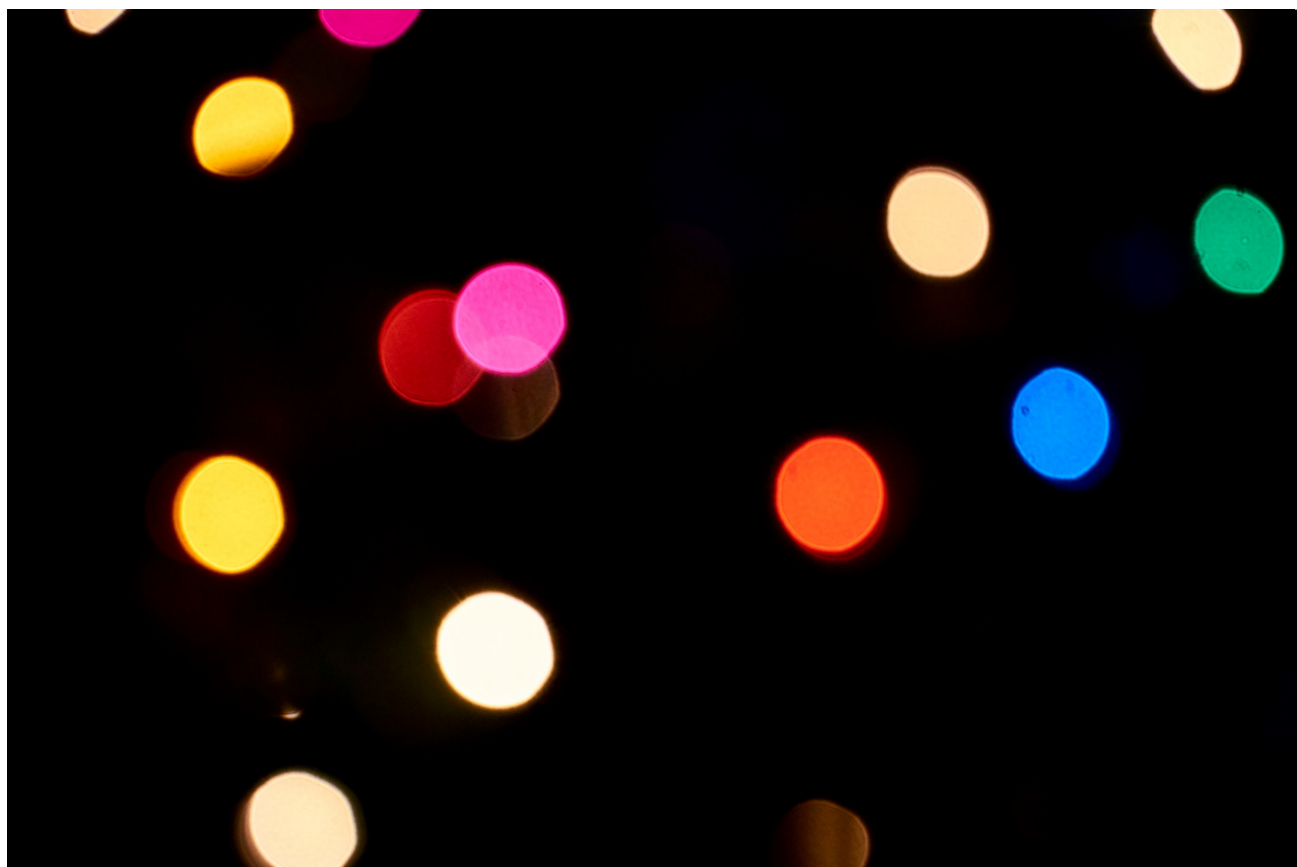
James Cook University

**Lisa Law**

James Cook University

**DOI:**

<https://doi.org/10.5204/mcj.2893>



[Vol. 25 No. 3 \(2022\): cities](#)

Articles

## Introduction

Over the past two decades the Cairns landscape has transformed from a remote tourist town beside the Great Barrier Reef to an international, tropical city with a new focus on culture and

the arts. A number of important urban design projects have enabled this transformation, including key waterfront redevelopments, the addition of a large shopping mall and convention centre, a renovated museum, and now a new performing arts precinct and proposed 'gallery precinct' for the people of Cairns to access new art forms and events. Anderson and Law (556) depict recent developments as a kind of "mayor's trophy collection" or set of "must have" attractions Cairns needs to stay 'competitive'. More generally they might be interpreted as 'entrepreneurial urbanism' (Harvey) and the attractors for Richard Florida's creative class, although there is now more scepticism about how these projects fuel property speculation and benefit the middle classes rather than the 'bohemians' Florida saw as key to urban growth and transformation (Wainwright). The renovation of Munro Martin Park discussed here is a culture infrastructure project helping transform Cairns into the 'arts and culture capital of the north'. Here we interrogate the winners and losers of the renovation, with a specific focus on how its heritage values are preserved.

The identity of Cairns as an arts and culture hub is not new or unfounded, but the debate changed in emphasis with a proposed Cairns Entertainment Precinct (CEP) in 2011/2012. The then Mayor Val Schier had secured federal and state funding for the development of a \$155 million arts precinct on the waterfront near the Cairns Port, as the city had outgrown its existing facilities at the nearby Cairns Civic Theatre and the venue was unable to host large performances. The CEP was to be a key cultural infrastructure project marking a new era of arts and culture activities in Cairns. The subsequent election became a referendum on the precinct, with its location and need being questioned. Bob Manning became the new Mayor with a mandate to scrap the CEP and instead renovate the existing Civic Theatre as part of a scaled-down vision.

In 2016, the Cairns Civic Theatre was demolished to make way for a new Cairns Performing Arts Centre. The original Civic Theatre was constructed in the 1970s and was one of a small handful of buildings in Cairns designed in late Brutalist architectural style: its exterior walls were made of fluted grey concrete blocks. Popular from the 1950s to the 1970s, brutalist architecture celebrated Modernism translated into raw, exposed concrete. Despite a renewed popular interest in Brutalist buildings in many western cities, many "are being demolished and new, ... homogenous (often glass and composite-clad) towers [are being] erected in their place" (Mould 701). The Cairns Civic Theatre was no exception. Munro Martin Park, directly across from the Cairns Civic Theatre, was folded into the plans for the area and the two were imagined together to form a new Cairns Performing Arts Precinct (CPAC).

## Munro Martin Park History

Munro Martin Park (originally Norman Park) was gazetted as a recreational reserve for Cairns in 1882. The park was set aside soon after European settlement and became a space for outdoor recreation. Community attachment to the park grew over time as the park became known as a meeting place for sporting events, community celebrations, parades, and political rallies. Circuses began annual visits to the park from 1891 as it was the closest large area of open ground to the inner city. These physical features also facilitated other community events, such as public holiday celebrations including May Day and ANZAC Day. Attempts to beautify the park and

create shade were made in the early 1880s and again in 1892. Trees were planted with the aim of establishing a botanical reserve, although many did not survive. Those that did – mangoes, figs, and other tropical species – created shade, provided fruit for eating fresh or making chutneys and sauces, and became roosts for local flying foxes and bats.

A major change of use occurred when the park was taken over by the military during WWII, and it became a space for accommodation huts and military training. An Air Raids Precautions control centre was erected (today one of the few remaining examples, and heritage listed), and a radio tower. After the war the local authority had no control over the park until it was returned from the military. The park's war infrastructure was mostly removed, and after the war the parkland was in decline and underutilised (Grimwade 21). Most sporting clubs had moved to new grounds and community gatherings were no longer associated with sporting events (Cairns Regional Council 804).

In 1954 the Cairns community saw substantial redevelopment of the park with a bequest from well-regarded local philanthropists: the Munro Martin sisters. The Cairns City Council redeveloped and beautified the park and on completion it was renamed Munro Martin Park in recognition of the sisters. It quickly renewed its status as a place for community gatherings and organised events, and as a rallying point for parades and political protests. Although the park continued to be used, it was no longer the focus of sports, with the development of purpose-built sporting fields on the southside of town. Much of the passive activity in the park began moving to the Cairns Esplanade in the early 1960s, with multi-purpose recreation areas and a large open saltwater swimming baths. This trend continued as the land along the Esplanade was reclaimed from mudflats and turned into areas for recreation and swimming (McKenzie et al. 113).

By 2014 no major work had been undertaken in the park for some time, and it again became underutilised. A report by Grimwade evaluating the park's condition found much of the infrastructure in disrepair. While it was still used by circuses, festivals, May Day celebrations and political rallies, the group most often found there were homeless Indigenous people. Plans to redevelop the park once again occurred in 2015, and these were folded into the CPAC vision.



*Fig. 1: Aerial image of Munro Martin Park, 1970. (Source: Cairns Historical Society image P291110.)*





*Fig. 2: Aerial image of Munro Martin Park, 2018. (Source: Creative Life – Cairns Regional Council.)*

## Winners and Losers

After its renovation and re-opening in 2016, Munro Martin Park became a new public space with an art focus for the Cairns community. It is beautifully landscaped and entices new audiences to enjoy the arts, including families who find it a safe and secure environment for leisure. The barriers often associated with entering arts and culture venues are displaced by egalitarian outdoor seating on blankets, and programming and casting are demographically inclusive, which in turn entices a diverse audience. In this way the park is important to community life, offers health benefits and social interactions, and is a place that welcomes regardless of social standing (Slater and Koo 99). At the same time, the new space reflects neoliberal sensibilities in regard to safety and anti-social behaviour, as the park reflects a wider city branding exercise for Cairns (Mercer and Mayfield 508). The need for controlled ticketing, for example, means the park is now fenced with restricted access. Prior to its renovation the park was a safe haven and meeting and waiting place for those travelling from Indigenous communities in Cape York and the Torres Strait Islands to Cairns. It was frequented by Rosie's, a local charity providing meals for the homeless, and many used it as a place to sleep (Dalton, [Cairns Post](#)). These communities are now locked out during performances and every night at sunset (CCTV ensures they do not remain). This is unfortunate as the park is underutilised on a day-to-day basis as performances are sporadic; this is partly because it is costly to rent and access for community events. In this way the public



space of the park has become commodified as part of a new political economy of the city and displaced its use as a refuge for the alienated or excluded. In other words, the park's renovation raises familiar questions about the 'right to the city' (Marcuse). The park had been a place where people could just 'be' or dwell, but this was inevitably associated with homelessness (Mitchell 123). It is not uncommon for different groups of people to claim the same site at different times of the day. The important thing is that the users feel a strong enough connection and that it reflects their cultural or social needs so that they are likely to use the place (Barnes et al.).

In addition to the displacement of a homeless community, the park also lost significant heritage trees that had survived from the late 1800s. Local environmental activists protested by sitting in – and refusing to come down from – some of the trees as the renovation commenced (Power, [Cairns Post](#)). The trees expressed heritage value but were also home to endangered bat colonies (Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management). Although Munro Martin Park trees are not the only flying fox habitats, their loss has contributed to their demise. On the other hand, and through the park's addition of new trees, tropical plants and elaborate vined arbours, the park is an award-winning showcase of tropical urban greenery evoking civic pride. This revitalisation and beautification creates opportunities for new community attachments to place through new sensory perceptions (Hashemnezhad et al. 7).

Community attachment to Munro Martin Park and its related social value has thus changed over time. The park's social value, as understood by the Burra Charter, is the social quality which makes it a focus for spiritual, political, national, or other cultural sentiment. Jones (21) defines social value as encompassing "the significance of the historic environment to contemporary communities, including people's sense of identity, belonging and place, as well as forms of memory and spiritual association" (see also Johnston, 1). Fond memories of sporting days, school excursions, and the circus are held by the older community, but after 1970 these positive associations diminish as the park became known for anti-social behaviour and was avoided. The heritage value and community associations are now remembered with interpretive panels that recall political rallies, circuses and celebrations, and the military takeover – making this history more accessible to younger audiences. While the park is no longer a rally point for the start of the annual May Day march, and the circus has shifted outside the city centre, portrait panels remember the stories of people who had a connection with the park. An obelisk created in the memory of the Munro and Martin sisters has been restored, which is also a reminder of Eddie Oribin's and Sid Barnes's joint work as influential Cairns-based architects (who built the former neighbouring brutalist Cairns Civic Theatre). The World War Two Air Raids Precautions control room, which coordinated all the air raid wardens in the city, remains and is listed on the Queensland Heritage Register. It was reused as a Scouts shop and has a large fibreglass scout hat put on top. The redevelopment thereby acknowledges the past and makes it more accessible than it was from the 1970s to the 2000s. Old places need new uses and new uses need old places, as urban activist Jane Jacobs famously said (Chang 524). These new uses become a part of a new city narrative and imaginary, creating new community attachments as a part of an evolving story. As it the case with other parts of the city's history, however, some histories of Cairns are silenced in urban renewal (Law), reflecting the multiple and sometimes conflicting social values at play.



*Fig. 3: Munro Martin Park as a WWII Command Centre, n.d. (Source: Cairns Historical Society, image P08730.)*





*Fig. 4: WWII Command Centre as Scout Hut with hat, 2016. (Source: Cairns Historical Society, image P20692.)*

## Conclusion

The revitalisation of places through arts-led gentrification is well documented and understood. This article builds on critiques of gentrification, asking slightly different questions about memory, history, and the contested meanings of heritage in urban renewal. The social value of Munro Martin Park is situated in time and space and by different users, and community attachment has evolved over time. For older generations the park evokes memories of sports, circuses, political rallies, and the closeness of the war. These histories have been remembered and curated through new park signage reflecting a conservative middle-class past: No Sports on Sundays; Circuses and Celebrations; Rallying at the Park; Military Takeover. For younger generations, for whom the park was a place to be avoided – a dangerous place on the edge of the city centre inhabited by the homeless – the park is now a new cultural space promoting accessibility to the arts. The mangoes that were once shelter for the flying fox population have given way to a new venue, tropical vines and foliage, and new signage and programming will produce new social value over time. Whether its redevelopment will “herald a renaissance in Cairns cultural life” by delivering “fresh performing arts and botanic experiences” (Cultural Services 8) remains to be seen in the shadow of COVID-19. What we do know is that the history and social significance of the park as a space for the homeless or a stopover and waiting place for Indigenous people from the Cape and the Torres Strait Islands has been erased, and that the now dispersed homeless population is difficult to reach except for food trucks and shelters. Their use of the park, whether as shelter or meeting place, is now highly constrained to a small, unfenced corner of the park at the corner of

Sheridan and Minnie Street (which is rarely used).

Although the redevelopment of Munro Martin Park is part of a vision for Cairns as a hub for arts and culture activities, it is important to ask at what cost. The controlled and surveilled nature of the park no longer permits the use of the space for rough sleeping or informal community events, although its redevelopment has increased visitation and created a safe and inclusive public space for middle class residents to enjoy the arts and contemplate the city's history. With Marcuse and Mitchell we think it is important to ask larger questions about whose right to the city, and to see the remaking of urban sites as ongoing struggles over public space. In a city with one of the highest rates of homelessness per capita in Queensland, the renovation of this site of refuge reflects neoliberal tendencies in the creative economy to remake the city without due attention to the exclusion of undesirables and growing spatial inequality.

## References

Anderson, Allison, and Lisa Law. "Putting Carmona's Place-Shaping Continuum to Use in Research Practice." *Journal of Urban Design* 20.5 (2015): 545-562. DOI: 10.1080/13574809.2015.1071656.

Barnes, Leanne, et al. *Places Not Spaces: Placemaking in Australia*. Envirobook, 1995.

Cairns Regional Council. "Planning Scheme Policy – Places of Significance." Cairns Regional Council, 2016. 801-805.

Chang, T.C. "'New Uses Need Old Buildings': Gentrification Aesthetics and the Arts in Singapore." *Urban Studies* 53.3 (2016): 524-539. DOI: 10.1177/0042098014527482.

Cultural Services. "Cairns Regional Council Strategy for Culture and the Arts 2022." Cairns Regional Council, 2018.

Dalton, Nick. "Call to Shift Cairns' Charity Food Van Because of Appalling Drunks." *Cairns Post*, 2016. <<https://www.cairnspost.com.au/news/cairns/cairns-food-van-offers-to-move-after-tempers-flare-over-itinerants/news-story/0a112da6109a9a5b4dcb1fd82b1d2013>>.

Florida, Richard L. *The Rise of the Creative Class : And How It's Transforming Work, Leisure, Community and Everyday Life*. Basic Books, 2004.

Grimwade, Gordon. "Heritage Plan Munro Martin Park." Cairns Regional Council, 2013. 68.

Harvey, David. "From Managerialism to Entrepreneurialism: The Transformation in Urban Governance in Late Capitalism." *Geografiska Annaler. Series B, Human Geography* 71.1 (1989): 3. DOI: 10.2307/490503.

Hashemnezhad, Hashem, et al. "'Sense of Place' and 'Place Attachment'." *International Journal of Architecture and Urban Development* 3.1 (2013): 5-12. <<http://ijaud.srbiau.ac.ir>



[/article\\_581\\_a90b5ac919ddc57e6743d8ce32d19741.pdf](#)>.

Johnston, Chris. "What Is Social Value? A Discussion Paper." Australian Government Publishing Service, 1992.

Jones, Siân. "Wrestling with the Social Value of Heritage: Problems, Dilemmas and Opportunities." *Journal of Community Archaeology & Heritage* 4.1 (2017): 21-37. DOI: 10.1080/20518196.2016.1193996.

Law, Lisa. "The Ghosts of White Australia: Excavating the Past(s) of Rusty's Market in Tropical Cairns." *Continuum* 25.5 (2011): 669-681. DOI: 10.1080/10304312.2011.605519.

Marcuse, Peter. "From Critical Urban Theory to the Right to the City." *City: Cities for People, Not for Profit* 13.2-3 (2009): 185-197. DOI: 10.1080/13604810902982177.

McKenzie, J., et al. "Cairns Thematic History of the City of Cairns and Its Regional Towns." Cairns Regional Council, 2011. 150. <[https://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0010/40888/CairnsThematic.pdf](https://www.cairns.qld.gov.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0010/40888/CairnsThematic.pdf)>.

Mercer, David, and Prashanti Mayfield. "City of the Spectacle: White Night Melbourne and the Politics of Public Space." *Australian Geographer* 46.4 (2015): 507-534. DOI: 10.1080/00049182.2015.1058796.

Mitchell, Don. *The Right to the City: Social Justice and the Fight for Public Space*. Guilford Press, 2003.

Mould, Oli. "Brutalism Redux: Relational Monumentality and the Urban Politics of Brutalist Architecture." *Antipode* 49.3 (2017): 701-720. DOI: 10.1111/anti.12306.

Power, Shannon. "Locals Angry Cairns Regional Council Has Removed Trees in Munro Martin Park." *The Cairns Post*, 2015. <<https://www.cairnspost.com.au/news/cairns/locals-angry-cairns-regional-council-has-removed-trees-in-munro-martin-park/news-story/837cb6c0769f7651d884481bcf1e25e8>>.

Queensland Department of Environment and Resource Management. "National Recovery Plan for the Spectacled Flying Fox *Pteropus Conspicillatus*." 2010.

Slater, Alix, and Hee Jung Koo. "A New Type of 'Third Place'?" *Journal of Place Management and Development* 3.2 (2010): 99. DOI: 10.1108/17538331011062658.

Wainwright, Oliver. "'Everything Is Gentrification Now': But Richard Florida Isn't Sorry." *The Guardian*, 2017. <<https://www.theguardian.com/cities/2017/oct/26/gentrification-richard-florida-interview-creative-class-new-urban-crisis>>.

## Author Biographies

**Anthony Castles, James Cook University**

Tony is a PhD candidate at James Cook University, Cairns. He has an interest in community arts & culture and abandoned & adapted architecture. Tony's research examines how the adaptive reuse of community spaces for arts and cultural purposes can conserve and build new social and aesthetic values, adding to their significance and helping conserve a region's identity. Through qualitative and quantitative enquiry, the research aims to identify how to inform planners and developers, and develop a novel scale to inform decision making.

### **Lisa Law, James Cook University**

Lisa is a geographer with interests in the politics of urban spaces in the tropical world, from the changing meanings of public spaces to the politics of designing the built environment. Her recent research explores the history of tropical urban design in Cairns, the landscapes of Creative Cities and the role of urban design as a strategy for urban and regional regeneration. She also has an interest in the role of the backyard in creating environmental consciousness.

## **License**

Copyright (c) 2022 Anthony Castles, Associate Professor Lisa Law



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-NoDerivatives 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/).

Authors who publish with this journal agree to the following terms:

1. Authors retain copyright and grant the journal right of first publication with the work simultaneously licenced under a [Creative Commons Attribution - Noncommercial - No Derivatives 4.0 Licence](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/) that allows others to share the work with an acknowledgement of the work's authorship and initial publication in this journal.
2. Authors are able to enter into separate, additional contractual arrangements for the non-exclusive distribution of the journal's published version of the work (e.g., post it to an institutional repository or publish it in a book), with an acknowledgement of its initial publication in this journal.
3. Authors are permitted and encouraged to post their work online (e.g., in institutional repositories or on their website) prior to and during the submission process, as it can lead to productive exchanges, as well as earlier and greater citation of published work (see [The Effect of Open Access](#)).

an  publication

Supported by  **creative industries**

Copyright © M/C, 1998-2022 ISSN 1441-2616

[About M/C](#) | [Contact M/C](#) | [Accessibility](#)