

'Art and the Sea'

A Talk for the Benevolent Society at its gala dinner, Art Gallery of NSW

I thought I would play with the topic 'Art and the Sea' to extend it to become the 'Art of Living by the Sea', or if you will the 'Art of Living in Sydney and Australia'. For this is where my thinking started, many moons ago in my early 20s, that eventually led to the creation of Sculpture by the Sea.

I love Sculpture by the Sea and I love how artists transform the Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk and how the public have responded to the exhibition, especially the children.

Today, 10 years after it began, Sculpture by the Sea might seem an obvious and natural event to be staged in Sydney but it took a long time for my mind to conjure it up. The thought process began when I was trying to grapple with the question of "What it was to live in Australia?" and from that question to ask, "How did I want to live my life?".

A key starting point is that I considered the Arts one of the main areas in the modern world where people dream and where those dreams, if they become reality, will often add something significant to the world.

So the idea began to grow that one day I might produce a major cultural event based on the core aims of:

- *being free to the public;*
- *engaging the public en masse; thereby*
- *contributing to the life of Sydney and our sense of community; while*
- *facilitating the dreams of artists.*

Inherent in my aims was the desire to create something that would showcase Australia as a sophisticated and evolving culture to the world.

Translating all of that into a project which could realise those aims was another thing altogether and far from easy. Along the way I rejected many ideas simply because they would not sufficiently capture the imagination of Sydney or have the potential to attract international interest.

A key step in the process was my first visit to 'Symphony under the Stars' and how wonderful those evenings are sharing the experience side by side with friends and total strangers - who come in very handy when you realise you have left the cork screw at home.

The sense of community at Symphony under the Stars is palpable, even if it is a little strange that nearly two hundred years later we still cheer the defeat of Napoleon in the snows of Russia with booming canons. That said it would be nice to live at a time when nationalistic feats were celebrated with the composition of a symphony and not a jingle.

So I wanted to create an event that captured the essence of modern Australia. Still the concept eluded me, probably not helped by the fact I was working as a lawyer.

So running away from the commercial world I moved to Prague in my late 20s and it was there that I first encountered the power and majesty of sculpture set amongst among 13th century ruins attached to a chateau where I was staying with some Czech art student friends. Late at night we played among the ruins in some sort of a theatre sports meets hide and seek game where everyone did something to surprise and delight the others.

At one point I looked around and one girl had stood up on a crumbling wall to be silhouetted against the moon. She looked magnificent! Half art, half human, I could not tell if she was a sculpture or one of us. It was at that moment I first truly understood sculpture, its sense of theatre and its ability to transform space. I also realised that sculpture could be the art form around which I would base the event that I might one day produce. I reasoned, what does everyone love about Europe? It's the history and the architecture. And what does everyone love about Sydney and Australia? It's the sea, our coast and our beaches. So why not introduce sculpture next to the sea.

Returning to Sydney in the late 1990s I walked the Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk for the first time and knew this was the location for the event. Everywhere I looked there was natural plinth after natural plinth on which to site sculptures.

I like to joke that it was as if God and the Mayor of Waverley had got together to create the perfect site for a sculpture park. Over 2km there are a variety of environments in which the artists can play. We can truck in huge sculptures and crane them into position on the headland overlooking Bondi Beach or the Tasman Sea, while just 50m away small works can be nestled among the nooks and crannies of the rocks. Add to the mix the cafes, restaurants and sex appeal of Bondi and Tamarama and it works. So much so that on a \$400 marketing budget in year one 25,000 people turned up for our one day show. I often get asked why it was just one day and the simple answer is that I had no money at the time. Which is another story altogether.

Above and beyond everything it's the majesty and theatre of sculpture set against the back drop of the sea that creates such a potent mix. One day the sea is raging, the next it's lake Bondi.

A few years ago a leading Japanese art critic visited Sculpture by the Sea. Bowled over by the crowds he raved about how extraordinarily popular sculpture was in Australia and what a sophisticated society we were. While not wanting to calm him down too much I pointed out that it is Australian's love of the sea and the beach that added to the exhibition's appeal. That we regard the beach as our own, so anything that is free and at the beach is off to a good start in the popularity stakes. I know he did not grasp the subtlety of what I was saying, it was simply too overwhelming for him to see tens of thousands of people at a sculpture exhibition with the children running excitedly from sculpture to sculpture.

The sea is also a tonic, it calms and it invigorates us. I do not know about you but I develop sensory over load in less than 30 minutes in an art gallery. This does not happen when the sea is the back drop.

But there are many things inherent in Sculpture by the Sea which I cannot claim to have planned in advance. First and foremost is how children respond to the exhibition. For them it is a fantasy land and they run amuck. It's not just the wind and storms that artists need to consider when creating their sculptures but whether their work will pass the five year old boy test of 'Mummy how is this made?'.

Four or five years into Sculpture by the Sea, on a not particularly nice mid week day when there were not many people out and about, I noticed three different school groups on Tamarama Beach. Although our resources were ridiculously thin at the time I realised we needed to respond to this interest by setting up a primary schools education programme. This programme now has thousands of school children participating in artist led work shops and tours. We are also moving into our third year of working with the Australian Business Community Network to bring classes from disadvantaged schools out West to the sea. Extraordinarily many of these children had never been to the beach. With this work we are on the gentle edge of early childhood intervention where the Benevolent Society works on both the gentle edge and the cutting edge. I applaud you for this work and the resilience of your staff. To put this into slightly light hearted relief against one incident we experienced I can only guess at the troubles your organisation and staff face on a day to day basis.

The occasion I am thinking about involved a school from outside of Perth that Alcoa sponsored to participate in our workshops, with the teachers warning us in advance of the devilish 10 year olds from seriously disadvantaged back grounds about to descend upon us. My education staff told me what they were expecting and asked me to attend thinking that an adult male might help with the unruly behaviour they were fearing. When I arrived, late as always, the class was well under way and the children were behaving as angels, engrossed in making their sculptures. In contrast their teachers were in shock. As they wrote to us later, they had never seen the children, 'so on task'.

Art is a wonderful thing.

Ten years ago realising my idealistic aims through the creation of Sculpture by the Sea seemed easily achievable to the young man I was then. Little did I know how hard it would be – and I say that having had a great deal of luck along the way. Yet tonight the goals I set for Sculpture by the Sea seem insignificant compared to the aims and achievements of the Benevolent Society.

For art is something individuals and society can focus on only when there is enough material wealth to allow the time for such pursuits, when the struggle of survival is not a day to day reality. To live in the lucky country we are indeed lucky. Our luck as Australians is no longer simply riding on the sheep's back, as it had begun to when the Benevolent Society was founded in 1813, but it is still our national wealth that allows us to have such an extraordinary lifestyle. There are opportunities and responsibilities that come with this wealth. To me this was the essence of my questioning of what it was to be an Australian at the end of the 20th century.

Back in 1813 when the Benevolent Society was founded Napoleon was still the Emperor of France. As a young man, before he came to power, Napoleon's aim in life was to improve the lot of 40 families. Napoleon's means never did seem to justify the end and things got a little out of hand – he clearly did not have a strong board. Fortunately the Benevolent Society's means are somewhat more peaceful.

Nor did Napoleon master the art of the sea. If he had there would be many more places in Australia with French names such as La Perouse, Freycinet Peninsula or Sans Souci. But even if we cannot work out how to pronounce Sans Souci, we have understood its meaning of 'without worries' and adopted it as our national motto.

The sea is integral to our ability as Australians to live a life without worries, it is our playground. Quite simply we love it! Our society and our culture is evolving around the art

of living by the sea. Restaurants such as Icebergs Dining Room and Bar, sobo and Sean's Panorama literally embrace the sea with its doors wide open to Bondi Beach, while Paspaley Pearls brings us the art of the sea in one of its most beautiful forms.

People want art that is relevant to them. Through these people Australian culture will evolve, shaping our national identity in the 21st century as dramatically as the great impressionist painters Streeton, McCubbin and Roberts did in the late 19th century.

If the figures are to be believed this magnificent lifestyle of living by the sea is out of reach of up to 2 million Australians who live in poverty. Even if you are sceptical and take this figure to be exaggerated we still have too many Australians in desperate need. Something is not right. As a nation we need to accept responsibility for this and do much more.

As I said at the start of this talk, I love transforming the Bondi to Tamarama coastal walk. But the Benevolent Society transforms lives.

I talk of facilitating the dreams of artists and encouraging others to dream, the Benevolent Society helps people live and cope with living.

Life is hard enough for all of us in this room, even if sometimes these hardships might be due to challenges we have voluntarily taken on. I can only imagine how hard it is for people who struggle on all fronts who fall into the care of the Benevolent Society. Congratulations on what you are doing for our society and keep up the good work.

*David Handley
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