

Prospecting the city

Margaret Woodward

Hobart is a relatively small place both physically and socially. With a population of 195,000 it's a compact city, whose limits are visible. Its suburbs border bush, land edges harbour and the dramatic natural skyline rises to meet an often imposing sky. It is possible to traverse Hobart on foot, walking from its flat harbour-side floor up to the folding foothills of Mount Wellington, an edge of the city is always visible, giving the impression that it is possible to encircle this city in your arms. Hobart is an exceptionally beautiful city, one that landscape architects describe as having extensive 'prospect', commanding high views over large expanses of land and water. On a sunny day it is sparkling and inviting, offering vantage points and sight lines which link water to mountain and city with nature. On a grey day, climb any of Hobart's many hills and, buffeted by a cold wind from the south-west, it can feel lonely and desolate. The physical landscape can at times seem overwhelming.

In Hobart the social landscape is far less visible. One is not confronted by crowds of people as in larger European and Asian cities, where life unfolds on the streets. Victorian and stern Georgian architecture closet people away from view, suburbs draped over the city's hills seem sometimes to be quietly watching. Walking down a quiet city street you can be struck with the topographical prospect of this place and also feel the strong sense of yourself being observed. Having lived in Melbourne, a bigger, flatter, hotter city, where, instead of a view across a drowned glacial valley, my 'prospect' amounted to a view across the road to a neighbour's house, I realise how strongly the visibility of the landscape and being visible in the landscape shapes our experience of living here. While this landscape is visible and at times confronting, it tends to overwhelm the social through its grandeur and scale. The climate, the geography and, I will argue here, the representations of place conspire to render less visible the social landscape of our city.

In Tasmania the physical landscape dominates many of its colonial cultural artefacts. A strong tradition of landscape art and literature has developed in response to Tasmania's natural environment, well surveyed by Roslynn Haynes in her recent book *Tasmanian Visions*.¹ Images of landscape have also been central to advertising Tasmania and its commercial products to the rest of the world. This is not a recent phenomenon. Since the early 1900s, Tasmania has had its identity as a holiday destination and place to live shaped by waves of marketing and advertising campaigns – the emphasis of these 'constructions' shifting over time. During the early 1900s Tasmania was promoted on the strength of its picturesque qualities, with tourist advertising from that era describing it as having 'Grand mountain and river scenery', or 'Replete with natural wonders' and 'A scenic paradise'. In order to encourage both tourists and immigrants, comparisons with elsewhere were common in the 1930s and 40s. Familiar reassurances such as 'The Switzerland of the South', 'This Other England' and 'A little bit of England' appeared frequently in tourist publications. The contemporary construction of Tasmania as a 'wilderness' destination with a pristine natural environment is relatively new. Starting in the mid-1980s with the declaration of the Tasmanian Wilderness World Heritage Area, this version of Tasmania is now used to market an array of products including beer, tourism, real estate, forestry, food and wine. Appeals to escape from bigger cities underlie advertising slogans such as 'Uncomplicated lifestyle', 'Discover your natural state', 'Idyllic offshore retreat', and 'Ulcer free zone', all found in current promotional material.

By analysing these campaigns recognisable ‘myths of place’ are revealed, some peculiarly Tasmanian; myths of wilderness, myths of elsewhere and myths of escape. These myths operate to allow people to recover some lost sense of wholeness. The ‘myth’ of wilderness has evolved from origins in religious, colonial and conservationist ideas. The popular notion of wilderness as untouched, empty land ignores the presence of Indigenous people on this land for thousands of years, or as artist and University of Tasmania lecturer, Martin Walch points out that these areas are now fully mapped by satellites.² Myths of wilderness are promoted in contemporary eco-tourism and tap into a desire to return to nature. Myths of elsewhere and myths of escape are the currency of advertising worldwide. Growing up in Tasmania with the idea that everything happens elsewhere, either in ‘mainland’ Australia or Europe, was part of the state’s cultural cringe. Roslynn Haynes notes that changed after the 1970s once Tasmania was put on the map for its wilderness value.³ Myths of escape are equally common, whether it’s an escape from everyday life by going on holiday or by creating a new life here, shifting house or changing lifestyle.

Advertising campaigns about Tasmania’s natural environment sell and tell one kind of story, largely a Romantic one which perpetuates what sociologist, John Urry calls the ‘tourist gaze’,⁴ one of introspection, loneliness, awe and wonder at the land. The history of these campaigns project a view of place that is largely driven by political and economic agendas. Images of natural untouched wilderness prevail, despite the problematic nature of the term wilderness, and that Tasmania’s natural environment has always been and continues to be highly contested. While the government’s tourist agency uses images of wilderness to attract tourists, the same government supports the development of the largest pulp mill in the country and the destruction of ancient forests. And when the campaigns describe living here as ‘uncomplicated’, ‘ulcer free’, and encourage us to ‘explore the possibilities’, life here is further idealised by such facile slogans. The day-to-day social realities of life such as finding work, food and education, dealing with loss, age, addiction and belonging in a community, are glossed over. When representations of place are so dominated by the visual sense, it is not as easy to locate the social in the landscape. The high visibility of the city’s advertising billboards links them directly to our relationship with the prospect and physical environment of the city. Communicating to a wide audience in a public and powerful way, the content of campaign advertising attempts to shape ideas about how we might inhabit this place.

Over a period of two weeks in late March 2007, the mass re-skinning of the billboards with a new visual code interrupted the familiar noise of this advertising. By colonising twenty-seven sites for the Ten Days on the Island festival, *the write/here project* installed an alternative commentary on living here – a narrative which spoke of lived experience, the project speaking both for and to this place.

Through the collaboration of participating communities, *the write/here project* pierced the veneer of the picturesque to make visible the social environment. Challenging our ingrained suspicion of advertising, drably predictable sites were suddenly speaking in a personal voice. The surprise of discovering new narratives in previously unnoticed commercial sites drew people deeper into the project, their unknown source arousing

2
Walch, M. ‘An Analysis of Experiential Space at the Close of the Twentieth Century’, dissertation for the degree of Master of Fine Arts, University of Tasmania, 1998, pp 29-30

3
Haynes, R., op.cit. p 302

4
Urry, J. *The Tourist Gaze*. 2nd edition, Sage Publications, London, 2002

curiosity and questions. *the write/here project* reassures us that something else is going on here, presents another narrative, a heartwarming and at times a heartbreaking one. In a city where half the billboard sites are contracted to breweries, *the write/here project* cleverly located texts that offered an alternative to the ever present giant beer cans. A local pub's massive backlit billboard was replaced with text revealing the tragic loss of one family's teenage son.

The project challenged ingrained myths, reinforced others and, inevitably, offered a platform for new narratives to emerge. Notions of escape were alluded to in many instances. The search for a life elsewhere was expressed in the ironically located billboard, greeting arrivals at Hobart International Airport which read 'Hobart is home but you can't spend your whole life at home'. Similarly, an inner city billboard revealed a desire to escape the claustrophobia of a small community, 'I'm trapped in my job, in my commitment to community, my commitment to my friends. One day I'm just going to pack up and be gone'. The billboards presented many perspectives on 'home'; be that a prison cell or nursing home, through social connectedness or isolation, tradition or sea change. One's own idea of 'home' was undeniably reconsidered.

Living in Hobart with its compact scale allows personal familiarity and visibility. However, Tasmania is still predominantly promoted through representations of place – a physical place that is at times deliberately manipulated and constructed to be devoid of people. What *the write/here project* did was to include people in the picture – people's connection with their places, and with each other. Refreshingly, the project offered more than a catalogue of reflective observations. It held the capacity for a city to envision its place differently, with renewed prospect.