

Nov 17th, 12:00 AM

## **Hermeneutics and Cross-Cultural Design: Reflections on Community Consultation and Collaboration by Designers in Fairfield, Sydney.**

Susan Stewart  
*University of Technology Sydney*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers>

---

### **Citation**

Stewart, S. (2004) Hermeneutics and Cross-Cultural Design: Reflections on Community Consultation and Collaboration by Designers in Fairfield, Sydney., in Redmond, J., Durling, D. and de Bono, A (eds.), *Futureground - DRS International Conference 2004*, 17-21 November, Melbourne, Australia.  
<https://dl.designresearchsociety.org/drs-conference-papers/drs2004/researchpapers/189>

This Research Paper is brought to you for free and open access by the Conference Proceedings at DRS Digital Library. It has been accepted for inclusion in DRS Biennial Conference Series by an authorized administrator of DRS Digital Library. For more information, please contact [DL@designresearchsociety.org](mailto:DL@designresearchsociety.org).

# Hermeneutics and Cross-Cultural Design: Reflections on Community Consultation and Collaboration by Designers in Fairfield, Sydney.

**Susan Stewart**

---

*University of Technology*

---

*Sydney*

---

This paper looks at design as cultural activity and cultural production. Specifically, it looks at design of the built-environment within the context of culturally diverse communities, especially those communities within which both recent migrants and more established residents are in the process of negotiating new, cross-cultural, local identities. What is the role of the designer within such contexts? As bearer of an authoritative western professional tradition, the designer is a powerful figure within any cross-cultural negotiation. Where do the responsibilities of such professionals lie?

Traditionally the answers to such questions have been guided by conceptions of the designer as either a facilitator (of the expressed desires of others; i.e. realisation of a brief) or as an inspired creator (whose inspiration fulfils desires that the users could not have anticipated or formulated for themselves). Many designers would designate themselves as combining these two characters in proportionate measure. This characterisation, however, is contested by design researchers who advocate an hermeneutical approach to design within cross-cultural contexts, and it is this latter approach which is argued for within this paper.

The hermeneutic approach understands cross-cultural design as ideally arising out of an interpretive-dialogical engagement between parties who recognise each other's inalienable otherness and yet, at the same time, genuinely care for the other in their difference. The process of design should be one in which the parties concerned are opened to a mutual learning process, which in no way subverts the distinctiveness of each. Again ideally, the design produced by such a process might provide a context for the furthering of ongoing dialogue.

But how would one set in train such a process? What would such a design look like? This paper presents a case study of cross-cultural design, Bareena Park in Canley Vale, and examines its potential as an exemplar of the hermeneutic approach.

Canley Vale lies within the Fairfield Local Government Area (LGA), the most ethnically diverse local government precinct in Australia. Less than half those living in the LGA are Australian-born. More than 70 languages are spoken, and only a third of Fairfield's residents speak English at home. Many arrived in Australia as refugees, or were admitted as migrants under the family reunion program. Fairfield City Council strives to foster a sense of community among this diverse and sometimes struggling population, however many residents experience themselves as divided not only from each other, but from the government and its institutions. Public open space, provided and maintained by the Council and shared by the diverse members of the community, is thus seen as potentially playing a crucial role in fostering a culture of engagement.

At Bareena Park, landscape architects, cultural planners and community artists (working collaboratively under the umbrella of Fairfield City Council) employed an innovative approach to community consultation and design development. This approach was developed in practice, rather than conceived in theoretical terms. This paper retrospectively interrogates both process and design outcome in the light of hermeneutical theory, allowing practice and theory to illuminate each other.

# **Hermeneutics and cross-cultural design: reflections on community consultation and collaboration by designers in Fairfield, Sydney.**

**Susan Stewart**

Lecturer in Design

University of Technology Sydney.

This paper retrospectively examines an approach to consultative and culturally inclusive design developed in practice by a team of landscape architects, engineers and cultural planners, in association with community artists in Fairfield, Sydney.<sup>1</sup> The paper discusses, as a case study, the rehabilitation of Bareena Park in Canley Vale, one of the projects undertaken by this team. The approach that these built environment professionals collaboratively developed, and subsequently employed at Bareena Park, seeks to attend to the voices and views of culturally diverse stakeholders in a design, by creating non-threatening forums within which they can speak, and within which they can directly impact upon design decisions. The paper asks: "Is this an exemplar of a hermeneutic approach to design?"

Certainly it was not consciously developed as such. Rather, the approach was arrived at incrementally through experiment and reflection, and through serendipity, over a series of projects spanning a decade. This paper is not, then, the documentation of a deliberate exercise in applied theory. Rather, my purpose in asking the question "Is this approach hermeneutical?" of the Fairfield case study is to clarify and extend existing discussion on the relevance of hermeneutics to design practice.

This paper begins by outlining the approach to cross-cultural community consultation developed by the Fairfield Council design team, and then reflects upon the relevance of hermeneutic theory to this approach. The design of Bareena Park in Canley Vale provides a specific reference point for this discussion.

## **Community consultation and design in Fairfield**

---

<sup>1</sup> The research on community consultation and design in Fairfield represents a part of the findings of a research project titled "Innovative cross-cultural professional practices in the Australian built environment: an evaluation of everyday practice and educational responsiveness," conducted by an interdisciplinary and cross-institutional team of investigators including Dr Susan Thompson (UNSW), Dr Maryam Gusheh (UNSW), Dr Helen Armstrong (QUT), Dr Bronwyn Hanna, Dr Deborah van der Plaat and Dr Susan Stewart (UTS). The research was funded by a small grant from faculty of the Built Environment, UNSW, in 2001-2. See Stewart et al, 2003, for an earlier presentation of the findings of this research.

Fairfield City is the most ethnically diverse local government area (LGA) in Australia. Situated 32 kilometres south-west of the Sydney central business district, its population of nearly 200,000 residents is drawn from more than 130 different countries. More than 70 different languages are spoken, and only a third of Fairfield's residents speak English at home (Berryman and Finch, 2000:14). Many who have settled in the Fairfield LGA arrived in Australia as refugees or through the family reunion migration program. Consequently, many come from difficult or traumatic backgrounds, have had only fragmentary or disrupted education, and are possessed of skills largely unmarketable in their new country. Many with such backgrounds find it difficult to become competent in English without adequate training and support, consequently suffering high levels of unemployment and the resultant isolation from mainstream Australian life (Berryman and Finch, 2000:76-7).

Fairfield Council strives to foster a sense of community, and of belonging, within this "sea of diversity" (Focus group, 2002: McKenzie). The role of public open space as an informal meeting ground, open to all, has been recognised as being of vital importance to such a fragmented and needy population. Over the past decade the Council has assembled a loosely defined team of built environment professionals, including landscape architects and planners, engineers, a cultural planner and social planner, who together are seeking to address the need for appropriate, community-oriented, public open space in the Fairfield LGA.

Prior to this initiative, public parks in the Fairfield area had become run-down and were little used. The aggressive car culture pursued by some Fairfield youths, targeted these abandoned spaces as sites for the dumping and torching of stolen vehicles. The general public avoided the parks, believing them to be unsafe; frequented by drug addicts and others of anti-social intent. The design team employed by Fairfield Council, therefore, needed not only to renovate the park facilities, but also to disperse the aura of fear and ill repute that haunted these neglected public spaces. Only by bringing the people into the parks, by giving them a sense of ownership of, and belonging within, these public spaces, could the desired rehabilitation be achieved. It was thus of vital importance that the design team effectively included the public in the design process.

Traditionally the preferred method of community consultation employed by local government in Australia has been the holding of a 'public meeting' in the formal setting of the Council Chambers. Within the Fairfield LGA such meetings were not well attended. Geoff King, the 'Public Open Space Manager' for Fairfield Council and a member of the design team, wryly remarks that they were lucky to attract "two elderly Anglo-Saxons and a dog. . . and that's just not very efficient." (Focus group, 2002) Drawing on the previous experience of team members who had worked on earlier projects for Fairfield Council (Stewart et al, 2003), the design team evolved a more effective approach to community consultation.

The key event in this innovative consultation strategy is the holding of a festive Open Day on the site of the proposed 'new' park. A great banner is erected on site in the weeks before the event, announcing the forthcoming festivities and promising free food and entertainment. Flyers are distributed through mailbox drops, and children and their parents are encouraged to attend by announcements at the local public schools. A short survey, asking residents what they want from the park and what memories or stories they associate with the existing space, is also distributed; with the promise of entry in a prize-draw for all surveys completed and returned on the Open Day. The design team have found such recollections to be a valuable resource in manifesting the public value that might once have been accorded to the site, and in retrieving these human associations, so that they can be bound into the ongoing identity of the park.

The Open Day itself is an event charged with energy and vitality. Colourful tents are erected, flags fly, community artists engage the children in painting and craft activities; music and dancing drive out the ghosts, restoring life to the once-abandoned place.

While the children are entertained by clowns and face-painters, taught how to make kites and paper hats, and encouraged to do drawings of 'the most marvellous park', their parents are shown preliminary sketches of the council team's proposals for the park. Council workers fluent in the major community languages, are on hand to discuss the plans and listen to community hopes and concerns. All are invited to comment or make suggestions.

The use of formal, computer-generated plans at these Open Days was early abandoned, as it was found that such drawings discouraged local residents from contributing their views; they looked too complete, too untouchable. Instead, McKenzie says: "we do sketches on butter paper on the boots of cars, and I'm literally out there with a spray can; and that's how it happens, on site." King agrees: "[It's] amazing how much easier it is to sort problems out on the ground!" Being there, with the community, allows the design team to respond directly to the people's perceptions of the place. They can ask: "the corner of this place, what don't you like about it?" and sort it out there, on the spot. (Focus group, 2002)

At a reasonable cost of around \$AUD 3,000, and generally drawing 300 or more locals, these events have proven significantly more successful in engaging the community than the traditional formal meeting.

But is this approach to community consultation and inclusion in the design process, exemplary of a hermeneutic approach?

### **Hermeneutics and the operation of the 'hermeneutic circle'.**

The term 'hermeneutics' names the field of philosophical inquiry concerned with interpretation. Within this paper the term more particularly refers to the

hermeneutic philosophy developed by Hans Georg Gadamer, and articulated in his *Truth and Method* (1960) and subsequent writings. In Gadamer's work 'hermeneutics' becomes a philosophy of all human understanding. Understanding, he argues, always involves interpretation. Interpretation takes place through the action of the hermeneutic circle, and the action of the hermeneutic circle is fundamental to understanding (Gadamer, 1960:293).

If all understanding is hermeneutical, then the kind of understanding that is embodied in design must also be hermeneutical. This point has been clearly articulated by Adrian Snodgrass and Richard Coyne in their ground-breaking paper "Is Designing Hermeneutical?" (1997).

However not all design embodies 'good', or 'the best' understanding. A hermeneutic approach to design would be one that allowed genuine understanding to blossom within the design situation, and to emerge as embodied in the design.

In order to judge whether the approach to design developed by the Fairfield design team is 'exemplary of a hermeneutic approach,' it must be examined in the light of the workings of the hermeneutic circle.

The term 'hermeneutic circle' arose out of a nineteenth-century recognition of the circular structure of understanding. Nineteenth century thinkers discussed the hermeneutic circle in terms of a to-and-fro movement of the understanding between part and whole. Martin Heidegger, writing in the first half of the twentieth century, advanced the (then) radical proposition that the action of the hermeneutic circle is "permanently determined by the anticipatory movement of fore-understanding." (Gadamer, 1960:293). It is this insight of Heidegger's that forms the basis of Gadamer's account of the hermeneutic circle.

The action of the hermeneutic circle is initiated whenever we encounter something that calls for understanding. Such encounters can be as straightforward as responding to a traffic signal. For most members of contemporary society, understanding that a red light calls for us to stop is instantaneous; the appropriate response to traffic signals has been taught from an early age, so that even quite young children within contemporary urban settings have fore-understandings already in place that allow them to interpret the signal intuitively and appropriately. In such a case the hermeneutic circle is very simple: an encounter calling for understanding (i.e. a red light) is followed by an interpretive response (stopping).

Even within such straightforward encounters, however, different fore-understandings can be invoked within members of different cultures. In the case of the traffic light, for example, certain teenage cultures of rebellion may pre-dispose their members to interpret the 'red' signal as a challenge rather than a command. The action they take in response to the red light may be quite unlike

that of their more compliant fellow citizens. The interpretive response in each case depends upon the particular pre-understandings activated within the person concerned, and these will vary according to their life-experience, cultural pre-dispositions and the context within which the encounter takes place.

Within more complex encounters, the to-and-fro action of the hermeneutic circle is extended. If the thing that needs to be understood is an unfamiliar material – a new weave of metallic mesh, for example – then the fore-understandings of the person seeking to understand the mesh will initially be shaped by that person's previous experiences and prejudices concerning such material. These fore-understandings may lead the person to handle the mesh in a certain way, to experiment with its flexibility, its penetrability, its workability. Such experiments will deliver new information about the mesh, either confirming or throwing into question the presuppositions that had directed them, and amending or refining the experimenter's ongoing projections concerning possible further engagement with the mesh.

The fore-understandings at work within such an encounter, and the final understanding arrived at, will vary according to the culture within which the inquirer is operating at the time; whether she acts as a scientist, a manufacturer, a designer, an artist or in some other role. Just as in the previous example of responses to a red traffic light, the understanding arrived at, and the action taken, belongs within a particular context and tradition of interpretation and practice. Gadamer emphasises this; that it is the inquirer's locatedness within a particular tradition that allows her to make sense of the thing or situation into which she inquires (Gadamer, 1960: 267).

Gadamer is concerned with the cultivation of self-knowledge within a tradition; that is, the cultivation of a critical understanding of the pre-conceptions at work within each particular tradition. Such critical understanding depends upon recognition of the difference between those fore-understandings that are appropriate to the furthering of understanding within the tradition, and those that are inappropriate (Gadamer, 1960: 267). Appropriate fore-understandings lead to a deepening and enrichment of understanding within the tradition, while inappropriate fore-understandings can narrow a tradition, making those who belong to it less open to the potential that lies within it.

Gadamer sees the to-and-fro movement of the hermeneutic circle as providing an opportunity for recognition of the appropriateness of the fore-understandings at work within each particular event of understanding.

“The prejudices and fore-meanings that occupy the interpreter's consciousness are not at his free disposal. He cannot separate in advance the productive prejudices that enable understanding from the prejudices that hinder it and lead to misunderstandings. Rather, this

separation must take place in the process of understanding itself . . .”  
(Gadamer, 1960: 295-6)

It is within the back-and-forth movement of the hermeneutic conversation that fore-understandings reveal themselves as enabling or disabling, for it is within this movement that prejudices are “provoked” into showing themselves, and so make themselves available to critical consciousness. When that consciousness is alert to the operation of such pre-understandings, and ready to reflect upon the appropriateness of their operation, the opportunity for genuine understanding can be realised (Gadamer, 1960: 298-9).

### **Hermeneutics and cross-cultural dialogue.**

Gadamer is primarily concerned with the cultivation of self-knowledge *within* a tradition. *Truth and Method*, published in 1960, presents the goal of interpretation as a ‘fusion of horizons’ between interpreter and interpreted (Gadamer, 1960:306-7). Such a ‘fusion of horizons’ seems relatively unproblematic when discussing moments within a single tradition, but becomes questionable when considered as a goal of cross-cultural discourse. Gadamer does not engage with the complexity of contemporary cultural experience, or with the hybrid nature of contemporary practices and self-understanding. Is his hermeneutics, then, adequate to the task of facilitating cross-cultural understanding?

Fred Dallmayr argues strongly in the affirmative, pointing out that the idealised notion of a “fusion of horizons” outlined in *Truth and Method* “was only presented as a regulative idea, as the distant goal of a protracted hermeneutical engagement . . .” Moreover, Dallmayr adds, “in Gadamer’s later writings there is a steady distancing from fusion-ism in favour of a stronger recognition of otherness in the context of reciprocal encounter” (Dallmayr, 1996: 32).

Dallmayr is a strong advocate of hermeneutics as a model for cross-cultural encounter. He sees the dialogical engagement of hermeneutics as fostering “mutual recognition” between cultures. Dallmayr articulates this ideal of ‘mutual recognition’ in Heideggerian language, calling for an attitude of ‘emancipatory care’ in each culture’s dealings with the other, and “a policy of ‘letting be’ that allows the other to gain freedom and identity while making room for cultural difference and diversity” (Dallmayr, 1996: 3).

Since the mid-1990s, the appropriateness of hermeneutics to discussion of cross-cultural encounter has been increasingly argued in philosophical circles. One distinguished voice amid this discussion is that of Ken Kochler. Kochler, who is President of the International Progress Organisation (I.P.O.) and active on behalf of the United Nations, plays an important role in contemporary international debates on political philosophy. His conception of cultural dynamism draws explicitly upon Gadamer. Koch writes:



“According to Gadamer, the universal horizon of my understanding of the world . . . is constantly being modified by my encounter with other human realities in my own individual ‘history’, which is part of a larger history of interacting civilizations. My understanding of reality and of myself is not something static, it is a dynamic process shaped by those cultural perceptions which enter my individual horizon and the collective horizon of the cultural community (civilization) I belong to. The cultural ‘ego’ is not a static entity that exists in a world defined by one tradition only . . .” (Koch, 1997:6)

Gadamer’s conception of self-understanding as an ongoing, shifting, negotiated production that works itself out within a tradition, has been broadened by Koch into a more contemporary conception of self-understanding as negotiated within the context of an animate culture, and a history of cross-cultural engagements (Koch, 1997:7).

The vitality of contemporary cultures, and their ongoing self-transformation through engagement with others, is highlighted in the writing of Dallmayr and Koch. However the picture drawn above seems to suggest an internal integrity of each culture that is belied by contemporary experience.

Wolfgang Welsch argues that “the old homogenizing and separatist idea of cultures” has been surpassed, not only “through *cultures’ external networking*” (as Dallmayr and Koch have emphasized), but equally through “the *inner differentiation and complexity of modern cultures.*” (Welsch, 1999:197) Increasingly we are bearers of multiple cultural attachments and identities, which variously serve us as we negotiate the diversity of cultural contexts that populate everyday contemporary life (Welsch, 1999:198-9).

The quest for self-knowledge within each particular tradition or culture, may well be facilitated by this complexity of contemporary cultural experience. For Gadamer it was the tension between strangeness and familiarity, experienced in encounters with a traditional text, that provoked pre-understandings into showing themselves; thus making both self-understanding, and genuine understanding of the text, possible (Gadamer, 1960:295). This same tension is surely experienced in contemporary cross-cultural encounters. The experience of cross-cultural encounter is rarely entirely strange to the contemporary individual, given her own internal complexity. Rather, the strangeness of such encounter is experienced alongside a sense of the familiarity of such strangeness.

### **Hermeneutics and cross-cultural design**

How, then, do we understand the role of hermeneutics in cross-cultural design practice?

In the first place it must be acknowledged that design is, itself, a globalised cultural practice. The institutionalised context of design education, in universities

throughout the world, is dominated by the design paradigms and values broadly identified with 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism and its stylistic successors. Samer Akkach, an Arab-Australian (or Australian-Arab) architect and academic, who has wide experience of design practice and design education within both the Arab and Western worlds, observes that:

“Increasingly, design appears to be taught and practiced in a complex globalised context dominated by digital technology, sophisticated visual culture, and interdisciplinary values. Cultural differences have remained somewhat marginal to the ‘mechanics’ of designing . . .” (Akkach, 2004: 2)

The fore-understandings that shape the first response of a designer to a design situation, and that drive the design process, are most likely to be shaped by the globalised institution of design culture, regardless of what other cultural traditions the designer also participates in. Such fore-understandings are shared by other designers and widely accepted by members of cultural practices that have had a long history of association with design, such as engineering, marketing and property development, and also the consumer culture at which design products are aimed. Within the contexts provided by such familiar cultural partners, the pre-judgments of the designer are likely to go largely unchallenged (or, at least, any such challenges fall into well worn and familiar patterns of dispute). Within the context of such partnerships the hermeneutic conversation will proceed fairly smoothly, and the resulting design will probably be considered appropriate.

It is only when designers step outside the culturally supportive world of traditional design partners that their pre-judgments may begin to meet resistance.

David Week, a practicing architect whose doctoral thesis and subsequent papers discuss hermeneutics in the context of cross-cultural design, has spent much of his working life engaged in aid projects, working with needy and isolated communities throughout the Pacific and South-East Asian region. Unlike the engineers and project managers that collaborate with architects working in mainstream commercial practice, Week’s partners in the building production process, the craftsmen and elders of the village, typically have little experience of mainstream design culture.

Week has developed an entertaining metaphor for the role that Gadamer’s hermeneutics plays in his approach to design. The experience of working in another culture, he argues, is often the experience of a breakdown in understanding; the operation of the design process is jammed by its encounter with the seemingly incomprehensible actions of those for and with whom one is designing. It is in considering such breakdown that Week develops his metaphor:

“Hermeneutics” he suggests, “is the WD-40 in the architect’s toolbox, there to unfreeze the apparently solid, interact with that which is alien, make fluid what has long been fixed . . . Having access to such fluidity

gives us the ability to productively encounter incommensurable worldviews. As society becomes more complex and fragmented internally, and more in contact with powerful but radically different societies globally, architects need this ability.” (Week, 2001:124)

That which hermeneutics ‘loosens up’ is the designer’s dependence upon the *rightness* of his or her own cultural pre-understandings. Week cites numerous instances, drawn from his own rich experience of practice in foreign cultures, of being made aware of the contingency of his expectations concerning how things should be done (Week, 2000). Such recognition, he emphasises, does not demand a wholesale abandonment of, or loss of faith in, one’s beliefs about what is good and right in design; but it does mean opening oneself to the possibility of a shift or change in both understanding and practice (Week, 2001:122).

When working on aid projects, Week’s isolation from those who share the cultural pre-dispositions of mainstream design culture, and his dependence upon cultural ‘others’ for the realisation of his buildings, makes it difficult for him to ignore any breakdown in cross-cultural understanding. He must address these breakdowns, or fail in his project.

Designers working in mainstream practices, however, are far more easily able to dismiss or overlook such breakdowns when they occur. Even in the globalised context of a modern western city, many users of designed objects and spaces may have cultural pre-dispositions almost as distant from those of mainstream design, as those of the villagers and craftsmen that Week works with. The professional authority that designers carry into a design situation may easily silence the voices of those who find design values alien or meaningless. The challenge to designers working in mainstream practice is, then, greater in some respects than that faced by Week in his aid work. Because cross-cultural questioning is so easy to silence or overlook within mainstream practice, greater vigilance is needed in attending to its promptings.

It is against this measure that the case study of the design of Bareena Park in Canley Vale, Fairfield, might be judged.

### **The design of Bareena Park**

Bareena Park in Canley Vale was one of the first parks to be addressed as part of the ongoing Fairfield park rehabilitation program developed by the Fairfield Council design team. The park’s degraded state and unsavoury reputation within the community, as well as the lack of alternative public open space within that locality, placed it high on the list of parks targeted for urgent upgrading.

Initial sketch plans, discussed with the community on Open Day at Bareena Park, showed a circuit path loosely defining the perimeter of the park, an existing eucalypt grove retained at one end of the space and new planting of eucalypts, casuarinas and other native species in clusters along the path. Play equipment

was proposed to one side of the circuit path, while a sturdy set of timber bollards divided the park from the road, designed to prevent further antics with cars within the space. These proposed elements were all retained in the final, built design, although the location and character of the play equipment was altered, as was the exact line and positioning of the path and planting. However the character of the park, as it emerged from the ongoing design process, was deeply indebted not only to community comment gathered at the Open Day, but equally to an ongoing process of engagement with the local school children, who worked closely with community artists in developing artwork for the park.

Researches into public memory through the surveys and conversations conducted on Open day, had uncovered understandings of the place that were to prove pivotal in the development of the design. Older, Anglo-Saxon residents had recalled the one-time existence of a creek on the site, long-since piped underground. Childhood memories of floods and frogs and dam-building surfaced among these older residents, and struck a chord with members of the design team, who had coincidentally been engaged in projects concerned with the sustainability of Fairfield's remaining natural creek systems (Stewart et al, 2003:243-4). The more recent residents of Canley Vale, chiefly of migrant background, had no such associations with the space, and little feel for the charm of Australian natural creek systems. However a seed had been sown, which was to bear fruit.

The stories of floods and frogs that had been gathered from older residents of the area took on a momentum of their own when carried, by community artists, into the local schools. Migrant children began to study the ecology of Australian creek systems, while many of their parents began to reveal tacit understandings of water management practices from their cultures of origin. The recovery of memories of the now-buried creek thus became a link between the older Anglo residents and the recent migrants; between the water ecology of the Australian landscape and that of other places and cultures; between the semi-rural past of Canley Vale and its suburban present.

The final landscaping of the park etches the memory of the creek onto the now-dry terrain. The fall of a creek-bank, a tumble of rocks and sprouting of reeds delineates a meandering boundary between the play equipment (mounted on its bed of impact absorbing, artificial turf) and the grassy sward beyond. The shadowy illusion of a watercourse is playfully embellished by the work of the community artists: colourful over-sized steel cut-outs of water-creatures dangle from tall posts; brightly painted, arched bridges, reminiscent of those in Chinese gardens, span the imaginary water-course where it is crossed by the path; and a sculptural ensemble of broken pipe (inhabited by delightfully crafted stainless steel amphibians and insects) and long legged water birds, is placed adjacent to a steel stormwater grate that gives access to the piped-creek below, alluding to the ongoing, subterranean presence of the drainage channel.

### **Is the work of the design team at Fairfield exemplary of a hermeneutic approach to design?**

A hermeneutic approach is one that understands the need for openness to all that is projected within an encounter, including that which may be unexpected or challenging. The consultation process developed by the Fairfield Council design team, and their commitment to engagement with the community throughout the design process, signalled their preparedness to encounter the voices of the community. The use of butter paper sketches and other informal devices for presenting their initial ideas to the community, displayed their real desire that those voices should not be silenced by the authority of professional *éclat*.

But were the design team really ready to recognise the cultural contingency of their own beliefs, and to re-examine those beliefs should they be found to be obstructing, rather than enabling, the emergence of understanding?

Perhaps; but, in the event no real challenge to the designer's pre-dispositions arose. The voices of the older members of the community could be readily attended to, as they harmonised with the design team's existing (though not initially expressed) concerns about the fragility of local watercourses. Through the medium of the community artists and school children, migrant members of the community were drawn into this developing design understanding. The designers were at no stage confronted with a need to seriously reconsider their pre-conceptions concerning what is good and right in design. In this project, at least, they were able to remain comfortably within the bounds of their existing cultural pre-dispositions.

Nevertheless, the result of the design process was not one that the designers anticipated. It was a genuine outcome of their dialogue with the community. The pleasure that the Fairfield design team takes in the completed park is, in part, the pleasure of having been carried along by the flow of an agreeable hermeneutic conversation.

Of all the parties to the design process, those who *can* be said to have genuinely achieved new understanding through the agency of the hermeneutic conversation were the migrant residents of Canelly Vale. An abandoned and forbidding space within an alien landscape became, for many, the site of a newfound sympathy for the fragility of Australian ecology.

### **Conclusion**

Reading the work of the Fairfield Council design team through the lens provided by Gadamer's hermeneutics, provides theoretical insight into the success of this work. The readiness of the design team to pick up on and poetically develop the theme of a lost watercourse signalled their possession of fore-understandings appropriate to that theme. The capacity of each of the cultural groups that were party to the design at Bareena Park to relate to, and share ownership in, the unfolding design conversation, demonstrates the potential for cross-cultural

dialogue within the design process. For each group the meaning of the poetic references to a lost watercourse mapped onto different fore-understandings, particular to their own histories. The design at Bareena Park embodied the potential for a multiplicity of different histories, of different fore-understandings, to be realised and united within an extended design event. None of the cultural groups involved in this exchange was stifled at the expense of another. Each, I would argue, was enriched by the experience. In this sense the design at Bareena Park can indeed be regarded as an exemplary outcome of a hermeneutic process.

### References:

Akkach, S. (2004) "On the question of Eurocentrism," in *Design Philosophy Papers*.

[http://www.desphilophy.com/dpp/dpp\\_journal/paper2/body.html](http://www.desphilophy.com/dpp/dpp_journal/paper2/body.html)

Berryman, C. & Finch, J., (2000) *Fairfield City Community Profile 2000*, Ettinger House, for Community Life, Fairfield City Council, Sydney.

<http://www.fairfieldcity.nsw.gov.au/default.asp?iSubCatID=149&iNavCatID=130>

Dallmayr, Fred (1996) *Beyond Orientalism: Essays on Cross-Cultural Encounter*, Albany: State University of New York Press.

Focus group interview: "Cross cultural professional practices", Faculty of the Built Environment, University of New South Wales, Australia, 2 September 2002, 4pm-6pm.

Gadamer, Hans-Georg (1960) *Truth and Method*, 2<sup>nd</sup> rev. edition., translated and revised by J. Weinsheimer & D. G. Marshall, London: Sheed & Ward.

Kochler, Hans (1997) "Philosophical Foundations of Civilizational Dialogue: The Hermeneutics of Cultural Self-Comprehension Versus the Paradigm of Civilizational Conflict" in *I.P.O Research Papers from the Third Inter-Civilizational Dialogue, "Civilizational Dialogue: Present realities, Future Possibilities"*, University of Malaya, Kuala Lumpur, 15-17 September, 1997. <http://i-p-o.org/civ-dia.htm>

Snodgrass, A., & Coyne, R., (1997), "Is designing hermeneutical?" in *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol.2, No.1, pp65-97.

Stewart, S., Hanna, B., Thompson, S., Gusheh, M., Armstrong, H., & van der Plaats, D., (2003) "Navigating the Sea of Diversity: Multicultural Place-making in Sydney", in *International Journal of Diversity in Organisations*,

*Communities and Nations*, edited by M. Kalantzis & P. James, Vol.3, Article DC03-0019-2003.

Week, David (2000) "Architecture without foundations: the practice of a profession across cultural boundaries," unpublished PhD thesis, University of Sydney.

Week, David (2001) "Practical hermeneutics: WD40 in the architect's toolkit," in *Architectural Theory Review*, Vol.6, No.2, pp.107-126.

Welsch, Wolfgang (1999) "Transculturality: the puzzling form of cultures today", in *Spaces of Culture*, edited by M. Featherstone & S. Lash, London: Sage Publications, pp.194-213.