

THE WELLINGTON GATEWAY PROJECT

A brief history

(By Project Artist, Fran Ferguson and Regional Cultural Development Officer, Bruce Dickson)



The Project's beginnings: In 1993, Wellington Shire Council received a Federal grant to install a Visitors Information Bay on the corner of the Mitchell Highway and the Wellington Caves Road. Then in response to research undertaken by Council staff, and a proposal of Arts Out West (the Central West's Cultural Development Association), it was decided that the public appeal and impact of the project would be greatly enhanced, if the concept of the bay was broadened to include an imaginative public sculpture.

The Sculpture: The sculpture became known as the 'Wellington Gateway' – was scheduled for completion in late 1994. The complete project was to be nominated for a national art and environment design award.

The vision: The aim was to have this contemporary sculpture reflect the unique spirit and identity of

Wellington and its people. Its final design was also intended to be in sympathy with the chosen site, and its surrounding environment.

When approached for support, the NSW Ministry for the Arts were enthusiastic about the concept and provided extra funds to help appoint a professional artist and landscape architect from within the region. In essence, the design team's task was to develop and creatively co-ordinate the project.

And in this regard, one of the artist's most important objectives when creating the sculpture was to encourage the direct participation of the local community in its design, construction and installation.

Collaborative Development Approach: It was always understood that each stage of the Gateway's development would be undertaken through such a collaborative planning and production process. This would ultimately see the project artist working in close collaboration with the landscape architect, the Shire Council's engineering and planning staff, interested local artists, the Orana Aboriginal Corporation, local school students, the region's cultural development officer, and the community at large.

Important supporters of the project were a group of Koori people from the Orana Aboriginal Corporation who worked regularly with the artist and Council staff on site and played a significant role in the construction of the Gateway.

Students from all the local Wellington High Schools were also very actively involved, along with smaller community groups – through their work on the design making, and installation of the mosaic panels, located within each of the sculpture's seven rock totems.

The Project's Philosophy: The operating philosophy was that such direct community involvement in the image making and construction process, fosters local identity and pride, and more accurately reflects the character of the community itself in the end result.

Innovations

Wellington Gateway and landmark Project – 1994

A commentary on its significance by Bruce Dickson Regional Cultural Development Officer, Central West NSW.

A Great Tradition: Gateway are currently attracting widespread interest in towns and communities around Australia, largely because of their importance in promoting a strong sense of local identity. The concept is not really new, as a powerful tradition already exists in this country of erecting 'Gateways' and 'Landmarks' to achieve such importance as commemorating the centenary of a town, a significant historical event, or those who died in war. Other examples include the planting of avenues of trees along town approach roads and along farm driveways, and the erection of monumental entrances at airports, harbours, or even the street boundaries of 'Chinatown' or a new suburb or precinct.

A Local 'Icon' with Originality and Impact: If undertaken in imaginative style through the use of an outstanding artist (preferably working in association with the community), they in effect become exciting public attractions in their own right. Those with the greatest impact are those which do not copy other place's ideas, but instead set out to create an absolutely original design – in effect a public 'work of art' which ultimately comes to be regarded as a local or regional 'Icon'.

The Wellington Gateway – Leading Example: Because of the excellent level innovation and vision applied to it, the Wellington Gateway and Landmark project is destined to be seen as a leading project not only in the context of rural Australia, but nationally and internationally as well.

Sydney has its Bridge, Paris has its Eiffel Tower, and now Wellington has its 'Gateway' – this comparison is not made lightly because all three are important cultural symbols (or icons) for their own communities.

The parallels between them are very real. At their time of construction, each of them was seen as innovative and daring, and were surrounded by controversy. Each of them involved significant use of design and engineering skills, so in essence the only real difference between them boils down to one of appropriate scale, and the extent of available funding and resources.

Spirit of Gaudi: The use of the welded rail anchors and other decorative features in the Gateway, and the way in which they grow out of its body, create a feeling reminiscent of the somewhat bizarre decorative elements found in the architectural design of Antoni Gaudi in Barcelona. Similarly, the stonework, bring to mind something of the environmental sculptures of U.K. artist Andy Goldsworthy (an example of which can be found in the Adelaide Botanical Gardens). Nonetheless, project artist Fran Ferguson's design is uniquely her own. She is a highly versatile artist, and besides regular exhibitions of paintings, her career to date has encompassed designs for theatre, stage sets, costumes, craftworks, jewellery, wearable art, furniture decorations, festival effigies and articulated puppets.

Looking to the Future not just the Past: Communities often take for granted the contributions made to their quality of life literally hundreds of years ago by their forebears. For example, we can thank these people for the beautiful parks we enjoy, and all the special attractions these contain – band stands, fountains, ponds, glasshouses, kiosks, drinking fountains, seats, sculptures and statues.

It is important that we also look to the future and how we can contribute now to the needs, pleasures and interests of future generations. It is not always necessary to refer to the past in

doing so. Exciting new projects involving a contemporary sense of vision can be developed. The Wellington Gateway is such a project and is all the more exciting because of this.

Controversy a Strength: During its planning stages, the project understandably 'got people talking' and as indicated earlier, created enormous local controversy with media stories running inches deep. Such controversy is both healthy and predictable, because of the high levels of interest artworks of any kind create in people and the absolute subjectivity of everyone's opinions.

A work which did not stir feelings and emotions would most likely be very bland or predictable and would stand little chance of creating lasting public interest.

This is not to say that community feelings do not matter – the great strength to the development process undertaken for the Wellington Gateway was the fact that the community were actively consulted and directly helped to create the images found throughout the sculpture.

Front Door Impressions: Commercial signage from fast food chains, petrol stations and the like often, by default, define the first impressions of a town or place and usually they do so right at its front door. By contrast, the Wellington Gateway has provided the community itself with the opportunity to make a statement about themselves, whilst also announcing to a traveller their arrival at Wellington Township and the Wellington Caves. One of the most subtle of its design elements, is the way it has been positioned so that the changing patterns of light and shade help the rock walls, totems and glass implant assume totally different moods at different times of the day.

The Personal Experience: Possibly the most beautiful way to experience the Gateway is to sit at the site around sunset or sunrise (or during a full moon) and observe the peacefulness, tranquillity and magic of the resultant mood changes. It can be one of the most contemplative, if not meditational, of experiences – akin in some way to that strange spiritual power which attracts thousands of people to Britain's famous 'Stonehenge'.

'Wellington Gateway' Sculpture – Its Images and Symbols: Concepts of 'Wellington Gateway'

Located on a picturesque setting five kilometres south of Wellington, this distinctive 'Environmental artwork' has already become a significant local and regional landmark. It not only identifies the turnoff to the adjacent Wellington Caves but signifies travellers' arrival at the entrance to Wellington – hence its description as 'The Gateway to Wellington'.

The sculpture contains impressions of Wellington derived from research undertaken by the project's artist, and extensive consultations with the project committee and wider community. Virtually all of the elements making up the sculpture have been inspired by the fundamental imagery of a fossil (or skeleton) – large numbers of which can be found in the surrounding area. Ancient fossils have always been capable of providing an insight into a 'corner of time' itself, consequently extensive use of weathered and recycled materials has been made in the sculpture to convey a parallel sense of age and time – with this in turn reflecting something of the ancient geological and natural history of the area.

The work also plays with light and shadow and takes on totally different moods at different times of the day.

1. The Main Sculpture – Tripod and Wind chime:

The form of a tripod, the main structure (height 9 metres) is made from the girders of the old Wellington Bridge which fell down on 6th January 1989. Its shape curves out and

around back to a point at the top, reflecting the image of a cave from which hangs within a large wind chime (made from aluminium), giving the appearance of metallic stalactites. The shape also echoes the form of a seed pod, representing the fertility evident in the landscape of the valley.

2. **Glass Dome and Pool:**

Sitting at the top of the tripod is a glass dome with its red colouring suggesting one of the area's magnificent sunsets. Below this, a slow stream of water drips back along the stalactites to the pool underneath. The shape of the pool reflects the junction of the two local rivers – the Bell and the Macquarie.

3. **Steel Leaves, Flowers and Mosaic Buds:**

Growing up the legs of the large sculpture are large thistle like flowers and leaves – the flower itself is a loose representation of a rare flower 'Halganina Preissiana' which grows locally and can only be found in Wellington and a few isolated areas of New South Wales and Western Australia.

4. **Totem Wall:**

Curled in front of the main structure is a 'wall', comprising of seven totems made from local rock (quartz, slate and basalt) connected by more steel sections from the old Wellington Bridge. The series of rock totems, which get larger as they curve around, are also connected by lengths of cylindrical steel.

The Wall and totems reflect the Catombal Range which lies directly behind the sculpture. This Range forms the tail end of the Blue Mountains 'Where Mountains and Rivers meet'. The wall's shape also conveys the feeling of a prehistoric, decayed backbone of a fossil lying on its side. The layering effect of the stone in the totems reflects the natural process of various sediments building up over time. Although cemented together, it also suggests the intensive efforts in labour and time spent by some settlers in the region in constructing dry stone walls around their farms.

5. **Inset Glass Balls:**

Within the top of each totem will be found clear handblown glass balls looking like large eyes – which have been 'fumed' to create a rainbow effect as the light passes through them. These balls were created by Brian Hurst of Sydney. On their inner side, the totems have been inlayed with further mosaic tile designs.

6. **Inlayed Mosaic panels:**

Each totem reflects different aspects of Wellington's history, culture and life. For example, the images of birds reflect the fact that historically, Wellington was the place at which the Inaugural Australian Branch of the Gould League (an international birdwatching society), was established. The trees and skies in the Wellington Valley are always alive with birds and this certainly made a strong and colourful impression on the artist's mind, when she first explored the site and began work on the sculpture.

7. **Imagery within Mosaic Panels: (and their source of creation).**

• **Hand Prints:**

From young babies and the children of Wellington, in the repeated circular form and pattern of Mandala.

- Aboriginal Community:**
 Illustrations created by local Koori artists of a range of aspects of the Wiradjuri peoples' history, and their relationship to the land.
- Girls from High School:**
 Male and female symbols, as well as images and representations of wisdom, age, fertility and the 'circle of life' – including the elements (earth, air, fire water).
- Local Artist Bill O'Shea:**
 Illustrations of poems of local poet Col Wilson ('Blue the Shearer'), which celebrated Wellington's 175th Anniversary – painted on ceramic tiles with poem overlaid.
- Other panels:**
 Were completed by community members and students from Wellington's various High School and these examine aspects of Wellington's history from the past to the present – including streetscapes, heritage buildings, river, hills. Images include abstract figure with river, farming life, fossils and the culture of the town ringed by local native flowers and birds. There is also a Map of Australia outlined in different animals and human footprints, with Wellington pinpointed inside. The town is framed by radiating cones reflecting other intriguing historic occurrences such as the staging of the last pistol duel in Australia, the founding of the Gould League, the major floods, the gold mining era and the immense scale of the Burrendong Dam.
- Rail Anchors:**
 The welded 'rail anchors' reflect not only the historic importance of the railway to the district's early development, but also images of 'growth' and the 'sprouting' of life. The Wellington Valley is renowned for the natural agricultural abundance of its farming lands and the richness of its volcanic soils and silt, river plains (Besides the history of its productive wheat and canola farmers. The area has also been settled by families of Chinese gardeners, who each year produce a bounty of 'green' and 'root' vegetables.
- Complementary Landscaping Design for the site:**
 The design was undertaken by regional landscape architect Catriona McDonald and amongst other features, it involves the growth over future years of an avenue of native trees beside the highway. These will lead into Wellington township from the site. On the site itself – the landscape design reflects the natural 'chaos' of the native environment and features shrubs and trees local to the area and ideally suited to the prevailing climatic conditions. These plantings also give a hint of what can be found on a vastly greater and more exciting scale at the nearby, internationally renowned, Burrendong Arboretum (the turn off to Lake Burrendong and Arboretum can be found exactly 3 kms towards Wellington from the Gateway Project site).
- Information Bay:**
 The Wellington Gateway Sculpture, also fulfils the function of a visitor information bay. Adjacent to the site, visitors will find maps of Wellington and the Shire, highlighting major attractions, services and amenities. (Don't miss the spectacular 'coral' cave; and the equally intriguing sub-tropical fern tree gully shade area at the Arboretum).