Art, Community, Place
Bulleen Art & Garden
Sanctum Studio
Presented by Lachlan Plain

**Slide 1: Title**
In this presentation, *Art, Community, Place*, I will outline how public art on the North East Link can help enhance local communities and create a dynamic experience for commuters without significant project cost.

**Slide 2 – 6: Presented by Bulleen Art & Garden and Sanctum Studio**
I prepared this presentation in partnership with Bulleen Art & Garden because we both believe public art is one way in which a road project can be about more than asphalt and concrete.

Over the past twenty years I have witnessed the transformative and community-building capacity of art in public spaces in various contexts around the world: I have painted large-scale murals and created sculptural installations; I have worked for Snuff Puppets and Sanctum Theatre, creating giant puppets with community groups and taking them to the streets; and recently I have established Sanctum Studio in Banyule.

In many ways this continues the work my parents, Bruce and Meredith, have done through Bulleen Art & Garden, championing the work of local artists for the past 35 years, both in the garden centre and local parkland; and, in the process, created a significant, colourful and exuberant art and sustainability destination in Manningham.

In preparing this presentation we consulted with local artists, councils, Heide Museum of Modern Art, Sculptors Association of Victoria and Eastern Studio Potters and Artists.
We prepared this presentation because we believe that an evolving public art program will reflect local heritage and community concerns, using local artists where possible. As well as large scale sculptures visible from the road, smaller scale sculpture, community and environmental art could be enjoyed in communal areas associated with the NE Link works, such as walkways and parkland. Murals and projection art would add another dimension to the area in a cost-effective way.

We believe that public art can be about more than just way-finding - it can contribute to place-making.

**Slide 7 & 8: Introduction**

Freeways and tollways are liminal spaces, a means for getting from A to B. Traditionally they have been visually bland expanses of bitumen hemmed in by the grey of concrete. When driving on roads like these you could be anywhere in the world. The only indication of your location is the words on the signs above your head.

In recent decades governments and developers across the world have recognised the need to beautify such spaces, creating points of interest along the journey. This has led to more colour along the embankments, and elegance being engineered into structures like bridges and tunnels. There has also been more focus on large-scale works of public art visible to the road.

But, whilst this large-scale public art – or ‘plonk’ art - can be beautiful, amusing and thought provoking, it rarely appears to ‘belong’ to the landscape...even the heavily modified landscape of the modern freeway.

Our vision is for a roadway that is fully integrated in the landscape and community that surround it, with constant visual reminders of where you are in the world.

We propose that, when planning new freeways and tollways, governments and developers should implement dynamic, ongoing public art programs that:

- Evolve across the lifespan of the road;
• Are fully integrated with the structural and natural formations of their environment;
• And are reflective of local communities, histories and ecosystems.

NELP’s urban design expert outlined, while giving evidence, that the Urban Design strategy is deliberately broad so as to not be prescriptive, allowing contractors to come up with their own initiatives.

Expert witness for Banyule, Boroondara, Manningham and Whitehorse, Craig Czarny, raised concerns with this process. He said that the EES and proposed reference design have ‘serious shortfalls with respect to their integration within its physical and policy context.’

• He said that, ‘the UDS is particularly generic and has not informed (but rather is derived from) the Project’s design.’
• And that, ‘the EPRs relating to urban design are loose fitting and limit capacity for a fulsome Project appraisal.

We are concerned that, due to the unspecific nature of these elements of the process, urban design, including any form of public art, will be a secondary consideration during contractor selection.

In Kevin Begg’s witness statement for NELP, he responded to our paper by saying:

“The development of any public art initiative would be undertaken by contractors. The Urban Design Strategy does not provide direction on possible approaches such as a public art program, committee of stakeholders or curator”. 
Slide 9 – 16: Public Art

Whilst we agree that the Urban Design Strategy should be non-prescriptive – that individual contractors, communities and artists should be free to create something that truly reflects their place in the world - we believe the UDS should incorporate some guidelines for an evolving public art program that emphasises:

- Emerging and established local artists;
- Community cultural development projects that engage local community groups;
- Small-scale sculptural works on overpasses, walkways and neighbouring bushland;
- Artforms that are immediate, impactful and cost-effective – such as projection art and street art;
- Ephemeral or evolving environmental artworks that respond to the landscape.

How or where these things are realised should not be prescribed by the UDS, but they should be outlined as guiding principles. Public art may be one out of a number of design solutions, but we believe that it plays an essential role in mitigating against the huge loss of visual amenity and vegetation which will occur as a result of the project.

In our original paper we also strongly recommended that, in order to realise the above points, NELP establishes the following

- An ongoing curatorial position;
- A dedicated peer review committee to oversee the implementation of this public art program, representing artists, curators, arts administrators and local government;
- And a vision statement committing North East Link to the implementation of this public art program.
This program will help integrate North East Link into the consciousness of the communities through which it passes; as well as drawing broader attention to North East Link as being on the cutting edge of creative and socially aware infrastructure development.

We believe that this program reflects the objectives of the EES Urban Design Strategy, encapsulated in the following passage:

“Urban design is...a process that...shapes amenity, the quality of user experience and the wellbeing of people and communities. Urban design also supports natural systems and cultural and heritage values.”

We envisage that this program would span two or more decades and be built into a normal freeway artwork budget. This would mean that North East Link celebrates local artists and surrounding communities on an ongoing basis, as well as creating a dynamic and evolving experience for motorists.

We still believe that the UDS should contain some statement of intent in regards to such a program, even if the particulars are left up to the contractors to iron out.
Slide 17 - 19: Local Heritage/Barak

‘The Birrarung is a river of mist and shadows – the river and its environs are a living, breathing entity that follows Wurundjeri songlines and forms a central part of the Dreaming of the Wurundjeri.’ Yarra Strategic Plan.

The land through which North East Link will pass is rich in cultural significance both to the Kulin Nation and to the modern nation of Australia. But I want to give a potted overview of it here, to highlight the importance of culture to the local area.

Prior to European settlement the Bolin Bolin billabongs, located on the Yarra between present-day Heidelberg and Bulleen, provided the Wurundjeri with an abundance of eels and were one of their most significant meeting sites, where marriages and trade alliances were forged.

The Wurundjeri - or ‘witchetty grub people’ – have inhabited the Yarra Valley for twenty to forty thousand years. They have lived on the banks of the Birrurung (or Yarra River) since it flowed across the land-bridge with Tasmania, joining the Tamar and spilling into the Southern Ocean.

Slide 20: Streeton

Then, in the nineteenth century, post European invasion, the Heidelberg School was one of the most significant movements in Australian art history. It included painters such as Arthur Streeton, Walter Withers, Tom Roberts, Charles Conder and Frederick McCubbin. They worked in ‘artist camps’, painting plein air landscapes and outdoor scenes of daily life. They pioneered an impressionistic style that, for the first time in the short history of European Australian art, captured the colours of the bush and the quality of the antipodean sunlight.
Slide 21: Nolan
Then, in the first half of the Twentieth Century, the Yarra Valley was home to The Angry Penguins – a loose grouping of Australian artists who lived and worked at ‘Heide’, a former dairy farm on the Yarra River floodplain at Bulleen. Heide was purchased in 1934 by John and Sunday Reed, passionate supporters and collectors of Australian art and culture. A number of renowned modernist artists came to Heide to live and work at various times through the ’30s, ’40s and ’50s. These artists included Albert Tucker, Sidney Nolan and Joy Hester.

Slide 22 – 26: Bolin Bolin Cultural Landscape Precinct
The Bolin Bolin Precinct is a significant visitor precinct focussed on the natural environment, contemporary arts and the existing cultural heritage of the area. The Bolin Cultural Landscape Trail weaves its way through the bushland beside a series of Billabongs along the Yarra River. It connects Heide, BAAG, the Veneto Club and the Heidelberg School Artists Trail.

Banyule and Manningham are home to many thriving arts organisations and individual artists. Some have decades long practice histories and strong reputations, others are newly emerging. They include every visual and performing arts discipline and range in size and focus from national organisations through local community arts cooperatives to independent artists. Some examples include:

- Council run galleries such as Hatch Contemporary Art Space in Heidelberg and Manningham Art Gallery in Doncaster;
- Banyule’s bi-annual program of ephemeral artworks in public spaces;
- Local community events such as the Banyule Kids Arty Farty Fest and parade;
- Public art sculptures in the Bolin Bolin Precinct and throughout Manningham, such as
- Ivanhoe and Heide Makers Markets,
- Stonehouse Gallery in Warrandyte.
Slides 27 – 30: Local Artists...

We believe that in selecting tenders for public art work, NE Link should give precedence to a certain proportion of local artists. This would help embed the roadway into the consciousness of the local community.

The NE Link journey should tell the story of the land through which it passes. To these ends we propose that NE Link also commission artists and community development workers to engage community groups and schools to generate ideas and designs for artworks along the freeway. Community engagement might include working with:

- Local residents
- Recent migrants and ethnic groups,
- Indigenous groups,
- Schools and universities,
- Early learning facilities,
- Aged care facilities,
- Groups for people with physical and intellectual disabilities,
- Groups for people suffering issues of mental illness and social isolation.

Artists and community development workers will work with these communities to help tell their stories, and the stories of their suburbs, in an unexpected and memorable way.

Slides 31 – 33: Street Art

Melbourne has gained international acclaim for its diverse range of street art and associated subcultures. There is no reason that this cacophony of colour could not spill out from the inner city, down the city's North Eastern artery.

Murals are a cheap and impactful way to transform the visual experience of driving on a freeway. They introduce colour and wonder to the journey, opening windows onto illusory worlds beyond the day-to-day commute. We propose that
the embankments and sound barriers along the NE Link become an evolving gallery reflecting Melbourne’s rich street art culture.

A street art program along the NE Link would help draw Melbourne’s cultural tourists from the city centre to experience the unique artistic heritage of the North Eastern suburbs – including attractions such as Heide, Montsalvat and TarraWarra.

**Slides 34 – 37: Projection Art**

Events like White Night and Gertrude Street Projection Festival have introduced a mainstream Melbourne audience to the potential of projection art. Projection art, like street art, can transform large tracts of vertical space into something magical. But, unlike street art, projection art is in a constant state of flux – the mages are moving, morphing, becoming something else. And with the precision of modern mapping applications, projection art can be truly responsive to the contours of the site.

**Slides 38 – 42: Environmental Art**

The modern motorway is rolled out over complex living ecosystems. An environmental or land art program would draw attention to the organisms remaining on the verge of the road, as well as in the parklands and backyards surrounding the motorway. It would also emphasise the affect of elements such as wind and rain.

Artists responding to this brief would be asked to collaborate with NE Link’s landscape architects to embed their work into the design of the vegetation on verges of the motorway. These works would potentially incorporate the vegetation itself into the artwork. They would be designed to be time-based, evolving through the seasons and over the years, as trees or shrubs matured or sculptural surfaces weathered.
Slide 43 – 45: Quotes
I am going to leave you with some slides including quotes from some of the groups Bulleen Art & Garden and I consulted in preparing this presentation.