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## Reflexive modernity and the art of public communication

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*In 2000, Victoria's largest regional council, the City of Greater Geelong, allocated \$200,000 to fund a community art and place-making project in inner Geelong West. The Walk West project was conceptualised and lobbied by a community group for six years. The project addressed the impact of a large section of freeway installed in the seventies and its consequences for quality of life in the locality.*



**Tania Virgona's six curved pillars, 3-5 meters in height. The Melbourne overpass and footbridge can be seen in the background.**

*This article reports on an example of highly developed community relations. It examines public art and placemaking as public communication tools and their relationship to political and social activity in post-amalgamation Victoria. In particular it applies the theories of Ulrich Beck and the notion of reflexive modernity in risk society where citizens' initiative groups will play an increasingly important role in reclaiming the biological and cultural heritage lost as a result of 'progress'.*

Public art in Geelong is the expression of a vision. It is an emerging sign of a new identity, forged from the city's manufacturing past and propelled by certainty toward its future. Now former industrialised city precincts are transformed by 'urban revitalisation' art and landscaping projects. These ventures seek to open up new commercial opportunities for the city and are massively funded by council, state government, and the private sector. An example is the \$150 million Waterfront project. Local activist public art is also emerging in Geelong. But grassroots communities seek to address complex negative psychological impacts, and planning and infrastructure deficits created by the modernisation process. These subtle 'quality of life' issues have been so far overlooked by government authorities in their bid to capitalise on city central commercial and tourist boosters.

This article uses Ulrich Beck's theories to examine the community-driven Geelong art and placemaking project, Walk West, within the wider context of Geelong. The project focuses on urban psychological and infrastructure linkages damaged when transport developments in the seventies effectively dissected the inner city urban area of Geelong West from its traditional recreational ground, Western Beach. This study explores how local communities have responded to the changing nature of their space, examining Walk West as an example of high functioning community relations. It studies the management of relationships, the communication process, and project promotion. It speculates on the extent to which communities feel empowered to participate to effect change in post-amalgamation regional Victoria and the role of public art as political and social activity.

The case study demonstrates that community groups in non-traditional areas will mount decentralised, long term, novel, and articulate sub-political campaigns to promote social and environmental issues often overlooked by state authorities. The article suggests that a new era in modernity and citizenship is apparent, with attendant ramifications for professional communicators, and state and corporate decision makers.

### **Reflexive modernity in risk society**

This paper engages in a critical and theoretical discussion to apply and test out the theories of sociologist Ulrich Beck. Beck's influential critique of industrial society (1992), has redefined 'risk', a term once associated with bravery and adventure. 'Risk' is now described as something hidden, deadly and unseen; perhaps long concealed in incubation. Beck also characterises risk as implicit, and linked to products and practices considered safe, for example exposure to asbestos fibres used in fire retardants and now linked to the deadly disease mesothelioma (Kazan, McClain, Edises, Abrams, Fernandez, Lyons, & Farris, 2003). According to Beck, reflexive modernisation is spawned from early modernity and its naïve belief in advancement through 'progress', but in a dynamic inversion, reflexive modernity interrogates modernity, the very source of its power. By 'disembedding' the socially accepted patterns and 'reembedding' a new order (Beck & Giddens, 1994), New Social Movements (NSM) emerge that are challenging, cynical, and articulate (Anderson, 2000). For Beck, a distinguishing factor in this era is that this activity will take place outside traditional decision making institutions like governments and parliaments. The central reason for this is citizens' lack of confidence in these institutions.

In the past industrial society was compelled by what Beck terms the "dictatorship of scarcity" (Beck, 1992, p. 20); that is our need to achieve emancipation from poverty. Within this framework, society generally accepts that the

production of wealth and the production of risk go hand in hand and are an acceptable trade-off for the benefits of modernisation. But it is Beck's concept of post-industrial society that is particularly interesting to this case study. Beck describes a new period of modernity, one where human aspirations beyond our physical survival gain relevance and momentum. Tied to this is Beck's view that the problems post-industrial society now faces are not with the under-supply of goods that characterised scarcity society, but over-supply. Indeed Beck maintains that the unwanted side effects and unintentional by products of the techno economic development process, borne out of notions of progress and 'making nature useful', are more likely to be the source of our danger.

According to Beck, citizens' initiative groups or grassroots activists will play an increasingly important role in risk society. In particular they will have a strong influence on the definition of what is 'safe'. People like activists will provide this critique.

Citizens' initiative groups will operate outside the corporate and state institutions that have accepted 'legitimacy' and are in fact 'lay people', once a dismissive term. The irony is that the lack of self-interest that characterised the marginality of these groups in the past is precisely the reason they now have legitimacy. These people and groups will be articulate and able to communicate at sophisticated levels. They will take on issues that require them to become experts in diverse and complex fields, like disposing of toxic waste or predicting wind patterns in the dispersal of smoke emissions. They will challenge the rights and arguments of traditional institutions and construct alternative knowledge. Citizen initiative groups will critique society and its relationship to science in an act of dynamic reflexivity. For Beck, simple modernisation meant a massive transformation of traditional agrarian society. Modernisation's mechanical processes restamped the 'new improved' industrial social forms over the deconstructed social landscapes of the past. But reflexive modernisation is quite different. Beck describes an era where the industrial social forms

of today are now replaced by the inherently dynamic reflexive modernity, not in an act of revolution but of evolution. Within this new modernity Beck predicts many changes. One such change is in the structural boundaries of relationships, social contours, and roles that classify society. Groups traditionally engaged in adversarial relationships, for example unions and corporations, will cultivate unusual alliances blurring these conventional alignments.

For Beck, acid rain, deforestation, and rising global temperatures will cross traditional boundaries and cannot be quarantined from the producers of risk. As these 'boundaries' change, notions of exploitation and its relationship to self-interest are redefined. While the global threats Beck describes would appear to be isolated from the local concerns of small community groups, Giddens (1991) discusses relationships between local and global issues and the notion of 'lifestyle' in late modernity as something more significant than in previous eras rendered by the multiplicity of choices available for the individual agent (Giddens, 1991, p. 81). He argues that:

In modern social life, the notion of lifestyle takes on a particular significance. The more tradition loses its hold, and the more daily life is reconstituted in terms of the dialectical interplay of the local and the global, the more individuals are forced to negotiate lifestyle choices among a diversity of options...Reflexively organised life planning, which normally presumes consideration of risks as filtered through contact with expert knowledge, becomes a central feature of the structuring of self identity (Giddens, 1991, p. 5).

The role of public art in addressing political and social issues is discussed by Lacy (1995). She describes how it is the relationship itself, between artist and audience, that becomes the artwork (p. 20). Lacy's ideas about public art connect to Beck's core theory by alluding to the

reflexivity of the artist's role, mediated through the relationship with the community in response to inherently social and political issues that impact on lifestyle, as described by Giddens (1992). This suggests that active citizens will evolve to contest unusual issues broadly embedded in the fabric of risk society.

### **Walk West and citizens' initiative groups in Geelong**

Greening Geelong West (GGW) is the citizen initiative group that developed the concept and successfully promoted the urban link project, Walk West. In 1989, the small municipal City of Geelong West established the committee in response to residents' initiatives to 'green' the suburb. The council made its facilities freely available to GGW and other community groups including Urban Forum, a contemporary urban planning and environmental issues group, and community watchdog groups Geelong West Action Group (GWAG), and Geelong West Community Resources and Action Centre (GWCRC). The City of Geelong West also sponsored the production of a council/community newsletter *West News*.

Consequences for Geelong's municipal council structures followed the Victorian state coalition victory in 1992. Premier Jeff Kennett had a powerful electoral mandate to instigate change based on the coalition's strong economic rationalist policies. The commencement of Victoria's 'reform' program was swift, and had dramatic social ramifications. In the local government sector an audit review of municipal structure in the Geelong region was commissioned. Following the passing of legislation, six municipalities: Bellarine Rural City Council, City of Geelong, City of Geelong West, City of Newtown, City of South Barwon, and Shire of Barwon ceased to exist and their councillors to hold office. Minister for Local Government Roger Hallam advised City of Geelong Mayor Cr Frank de Stefano that the decision marked the end of 'what I appreciate has

been a very traumatic period for you and your Council' (Hallam, 1993, n.p.). The amalgamated City of Greater Geelong was born.

With the City of Geelong West now disbanded, Greening Geelong West operated as a residential lobby group with no formal relationship with the new council. Other local groups such as GWAG, GWCRCAC and Urban Forum that had helped shape GGW's ideas and provide valuable networking, found they could not operate in the new structure. The groups' inability to access community spaces like the town hall without incurring a fee, plus a sense of disempowerment within the new council structure, saw them defeated and disbanded. Greening Geelong West was the beneficiary of surplus funding from disbanded groups GWAG and GWCRCAC.

Under the former council structure GGW had begun a revegetation project at Western Beach. The site contained one of the few examples of indigenous landscape in the suburb. The group applied to the new council to continue financial support of this project, but all other projects ceased to function. But by 1994 a new and different community project began to emerge. The group saw a critical need to link the alienated urban beach area of Western Beach by a defined pathway to the retail and community heart of Geelong West, Pakington Street. In 1995 the concept was developed into a proposal and presented to CoGG.

### Walk West

Geelong West is adjacent to the main city centre of Geelong. Historically it provided cheap, predominantly timber housing at close walking proximity to local industry and Geelong city. Western Beach, the suburb's coastal address, offered rich social networking and recreational opportunities like boating, swimming, fishing as well as pedestrian access to the city commercial centre.

But by the mid seventies Geelong's modernisation process had transformed Geelong

West. A massive section of the Princes Highway now arced across the skyline, damaging the infrastructure linkages between inner urban Geelong West and Western Beach. A modern footbridge replaced former 'human scale' pedestrian access points and led pedestrians into fast moving car traffic. The unintended and unplanned psychological effects of the new highway superstructure including traffic noise and a hostile built environment compounded the isolation of Western Beach. Subsequent pollution of Corio Bay meant this community recreation ground and access point to the city of Geelong became neglected.

The Walk West concept aimed to achieve a safer environment for pedestrians to arrive at Western Beach. Greening and public art would create a pathway for walkers and a sense of place. GGW considered the creation of public art and greening to be a statement about the suburb's identity and creativity that would foster community ownership. GGW's vision was that through Walk West, two areas of the suburb that had become physically isolated would be reunited.



**Artwork within living communities; Mark Trinham's metal and wood pods.**

### Communication of Walk West concept

Greening Geelong West's first step was to articulate the project into a proposal and present it to CoGG. They developed an action plan with

several objectives to convince council to adopt and fund the project. The group developed the name 'Walk West' to promote the message and, with community watch group West Forum, sought funding to extend the concept. A community festival called 'Walk West' was conducted between 1998 and 2000. Original artwork was designed for posters and flyers. Press releases targeted selected media and provided publicity. Advertising was used to promote the festival.

Other communication tactics of the Walk West concept included representations and presentations to senior council officers and councillors. An independent resident conducted a petition to address traffic management issues. Other community groups also supported the proposal. In 2000 Walk West was included in 2000/2001 CoGG budget. \$165,000 was allocated to develop greening, public art, and landscaping as well as safer pedestrian links. (A central goal in the original concept plan to improve water quality at Western Beach is not yet addressed.)

Following this, the council presented the Walk West concept to a state government funding body as a local exemplar of an urban design solution, and was allocated \$100,000. A community consultation process formed two steering committees to oversee the appointment of artists and tree selection. CoGG conducted a series of community proposal presentations to present artist and landscaping plans.

In 2002, Walk West's iconic sculptures feature heavily in Council information and promotional material. The art, lighting, greening, pedestrian crossings, and landscaping works are in place and have raised community awareness of the relationship of the bay to Geelong West. The sculptures, designed with extensive community consultation, symbolise natural and manufactured forms that attempt to express and mediate modern and ecological environments. In one key sculptural group, six arced 'blades' stand together in a natural cluster but also allude to the march of industrialisation through mass production, rusted metal, and the stainless steel of the materials.



**Tania Virgona's metal blades at Western Beach allude to the march of industrialisation but also resemble stalks of grass. Corio Bay can be seen in the background.**

In other works, large pod-like organic structures of metal and wood resemble seeds in stages of growth. The sculptures nestle in obscure places; in lanes, behind bridges, down suburban streets. Unlike the corporate public art at Geelong's Waterfront these pieces are located within living communities. They must be sought.

The project has attracted professional interest from urban planners as a good urban design outcome, and from those interested in citizenship issues because it represents a community-driven solution to a complex and challenging psychological and infrastructure issue. This urban design project has demonstrated that communities can create and communicate a vision.



**Mark Trinham's wood and metal pods at the Geelong West approach to the footbridge.**

### **'Risk', lifestyle, and legitimacy**

Walk West is an example of risk society and reflexive modernity, a stage beyond both basic modernist and post modernist perspectives. Beck (1992 & 1994), Giddens (1991), and Anderson (2000) describe and define the changed social and political environments that characterise this new era in modernity. In this example, the unintended and unplanned by-products of the modernisation process are precisely the roots of the project. Poorly functioning pedestrian access points, risk from high traffic volumes, noise, and visual pollution caused the Geelong West community's psychological and physical disenfranchisement from Western Beach. A citizen initiative group perceived this as an unacceptable risk and advanced it as a rationale for the council to commit funds to address the situation.

A product of traditional modernity, the 1970s highway overpass was built to alleviate transportation pressures and facilitate greater production. Beck's notion of risk advances the idea that "the social production of wealth is systematically accompanied by the social production of risks" (1992, p. 19). In a hallmark of risk society this civic infrastructure had, in turn, produced its own social risks. The risks and their consequences for the public were 'unseen'

by the local and state government authorities, or considered an acceptable trade-off for the 'greater' benefits the new road would bring. In this case the host community, through a citizen initiative group (GGW), identified and defined the risk. Further, the members of this group occupied what Beck calls "social risk positions" (1992, p. 23), and were affected by the risk more than others. GGW and its activities are consistent with Beck's prediction that change will take place "bypassing political debates and decision in parliaments and governments" (p. 23). GGW's ideas and the Walk West concept were shaped in an inherently civic, apolitical, and sub-political environment. The identification of a public policy issue, and lobbying and advancement through complex bureaucratic government are beyond the usual scope of a small ecological-issue-based community group.

One area where the example is not accommodated by Beck's theories is that the physical and psychological disenfranchisement caused by the modernization process constituted a risk, but not the global, irreversible, embedded risks such as radiation that Beck describes. The physical 'risk' to the public identified in the Walk West concept was of a low level and able to be moderated by personal choice. Giddens (1991) also discusses the impact of existence in the post traditional order, risk, reflexivity, and self-identity, however his views encompass the significance of 'lifestyle' in high modernity. His interpretation of 'lifestyle' and its relationship to self-identity are more closely allied to the actions of the citizen initiative groups that grew the Walk West concept.

Giddens flags a changed modernity where individuals seek to apply interpretation and definition of risk to their own circumstances. This corresponds with the views of Anderson (2000), who discusses both Beck and Giddens in respect of New Social Movements (NSM) and risk society. She defines NSM as "grassroots activism outside of formal political structures; informal, relatively unstructured, network forms of organisation; and, finally an emphasis upon direct

action and identity and lifestyle politics” (Anderson, 2000, p. 94). GGW and other citizens’ initiative groups that contributed to this project would appear to be typified by both this definition of NSM and Giddens’ views of ‘lifestyle’. Therefore although this case study does not encompass the full extent of risk society, it does link substantially to the theory in terms of reflexive modernity, and is supported by extended theoretical views of risk society and its embedded influence on lifestyle.

Of particular note for the domain of community relations, and central to Beck’s ideas, is the notion of legitimacy. The right to promote and achieve support for new ideas on behalf of the wider community requires a perception the proponent is ‘legitimate’. Traditionally, organisations with legitimacy have been mainstream state, corporate, and civic institutions. In this case, a small, grassroots community group gained legitimacy for an issue that is traditionally a state responsibility. As proponents they developed legitimacy over time by an articulate and persistent long-term campaign using novel and unusual communication means that demonstrated the symbolic power of the community. Castells (1997) discusses the breakdown of ‘legitimizing identity’ in the society caused by globalisation and the demise of the nation state. He argues this has led to new communes of collective responsibility that redefine meanings and challenge notions of legitimacy. “It is possible that from such communes, new subjects - that is collective agents of social transformation – may emerge, thus constructing new meaning around project identity” (Castells, 1997, p. 67). The Walk West case study shows evidence that reflexive modernity is active in Victoria and notions of legitimacy are changing.

Walk West also suggests that Beck’s notion of industrial society in transition (Beck, Giddens, & Lash, 1994, p. 5), now applies in Australia. Industrialisation and the modernisation process that prioritised wealth production over citizens’ life quality have reached a stage where there are

signs that a redefined modernity may be imminent. Walk West is an example of that imminent reflexive modernisation. Walk West directly addressed the complex psychological impacts of poor civic infrastructure. It expressed these impacts in ideas and as public art and landscaping works. On a practical level, the sculptures and placemaking marked the pathway to Western Beach, but they were also symbolic of the mediation between industrialised society and lost biological heritage. The style and subject of these sculptures underscores that this was no ‘one off’ or accident. Reflexive modernity has the potential to offer richer, more democratic, and intelligent uses of human resources. Reflexive modernisation is certain, desirable, and marks the evolution of industrial society to a new level.

The situational factor of the council amalgamation process also offers scholars of community relations an interesting insight into how communities function in the area of capacity building. The 1993 Geelong council amalgamation amounted to a clearfelling logging of small, local community groups in Geelong West. Urban Forum, West Forum, GWAG, GWCRAC, and *West News* all disappeared. The reduction in the number of community groups is linked to the destruction of a range of environmental factors essential to community groups’ survival. The amalgamation process removed nearly all the supporting civic infrastructure, like the use of ‘in kind’ facilities and council staff, proximity, and local communication channels. It left the Geelong West community with no tangible means of conducting business, and a disrupted understanding of the process to effect change. The amalgamation effectively disempowered its citizens.

Under the old council framework, social patterns had been established that were easily accessible and known to the community. These created a social environment that nurtured a sense of place and helped groups to create the networks required for ideas to seed and grow. The amalgamation process disembedded these social patterns and left a vacuum. The reembedding of a

new framework took time. Both council and the community had to relearn processes of interaction and navigation of this new bureaucracy. Inevitably, the disruption caused damage to the social and civic environment. The powerful argument pitched by Council at local groups was ‘why is your voice more important than anyone else’s?’ Logically, it appeared to follow that no one would get anything, because that was more equitable.

Today, the council helps community groups with a small grants system in the areas of environment, arts, and festivals. However, while the funding gives local groups a minor financial boost it does little for community capacity building. In particular it does not address the nurturing of environments that create community groups. Only once established, if these groups are incorporated or auspiced by an incorporated group, if they have an ABN, and if they are able to engage with bureaucracies and prepare and present information in a competitive process, can they obtain a grant and advance their ideas. This process culls out all but the most polished, confident, and established community groups. Significantly, it does not address the social environmental sub-stratum framework damaged by the amalgamation process.

Walk West indicates that changes in relationship management between the community and state institutions are impacting on the Australian social and political landscape. It shows how sophisticated community relations can work for the common good to create stronger, better-functioning communities where participants are able to develop a voice, grow confidence, and work collaboratively to achieve results. Geelong, now balanced between its industrialised past and its future as a tertiary service centre, would appear to be an exemplar of Beck’s ideas.

### **Conclusion**

The Walk West case study demonstrates that local communities will act on long-term, issue-based demands that are usually the province of

state authorities. Such action could flag a changed sub-political environment that has new ramifications for public communication. This article argues that, for the new era of reflexive modernisation to advance, political and cultural environments have to evolve to a new stage.

Without conscious planning, civic environments can be so complex and removed from citizens that they stifle community expression. Our state institutions can facilitate this by re-embedding the patterns of social forms with a structural change that facilitates the growth of reflexive modernisation. This means building a civic sub-stratum that fosters the establishment and maintenance of community groups. High-functioning community relations between individual groups builds community cohesion, facilitates exchanges of ideas, and forms a familiarity with the bureaucratic processes which produces change. This has a consequence on the extent to which community groups feel empowered and can effect change. Loss of local identity through the generic use of construction materials and our ability to alter the landscape to precise homogeneity has led a sense of sameness in communities. The Geelong Council amalgamation demonstrates how local identity loss can occur through structural change. The name ‘Greater Geelong’ implies a generic mass and one voice but is this ‘one voice’ at the expense of the many voices that gave texture and depth to life in the community?

The Walk West project has shown that the strength of a community is not always within the centralised power structures of its institutions. It has shown that ideas and synergy do exist within communities and in some circumstances these can be brought to fruition. But it is unusual for a group to adopt a policy issue and advance the idea with such perseverance over so many years. The history of this project shows it is more likely that community groups do not survive to develop their ideas beyond the ‘they should do this’ stage. This is significant for communicators and those interested in community relations.





**Mark Trinham's metal and wood artwork marks the start or end of Walk West.**

A second, important, lesson from Walk West is that civic environments should be nurtured. The fact that GGW originated within the previous small municipal structure is significant. In its early years the group was exposed to the close workings of the council and its officers' local knowledge. This gave the group valuable insight into government processes. It is precisely because of this that the group believed they had a credible voice and the legitimacy to create and advance their views. This led to an expectation that the group could effect change. That several other groups failed to survive the council amalgamation transition and were subsumed by GGW demonstrates that community confidence to conduct a functional civic role is fragile.

Walk West was a critique of simple modernisation. This, and the impetus to address the problems the project identified, took place

outside traditional institutional domains. This is a clear indicator of the new era in reflexive modernisation. Public art in Walk West expresses a community vision. But it is a vision from the grassroots. Its genesis and history within pre- and post- council amalgamation can teach us important lessons. This case study represents an opportunity to debate concepts of risk society and reflexive modernity. It offers an opportunity to dissect and describe its process and to promote ways the transformation can be facilitated on local, state, and federal levels. This has significant implications for citizenship in the twenty-first century.

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