

Raising the Bar Sydney 2018

Chris Fox – For the love of art

Welcome to the podcast series of Raising the Bar: Sydney. Raising the Bar in 2018 saw 20 University of Sydney academics take their research out of the lecture theatre and into bars across Sydney, all on one night. In this podcast, you'll hear Chris Fox's talk "For the Love of Art." Enjoy the talk.

[Applause]

Okay, welcome. I just almost choked on that very cleansing ale. So I hope you've all grabbed your drinks. I'll be talking for no more than a half an hour, maybe a little bit less than that. We'll see how we go.

And tonight I'm going to be talking about Interloop. So I'm going to take you back to 1932. I'm going to take you back to 1932, pretty much where we are now, in fact, which is a pretty unique location. This bar started in 1915, and has been here pretty much ever since. And we're on Sussex Street, Hickson Road, pretty much south of this point. And this used to be known as "The Hungry Mile." A pretty amazing place in the city at this time, 1932, Great Depression, things were pretty dire. A lot of people were tramping up and down here trying to get work. On the walls, the entire walls went all the way down to Darling Harbour. And this was a pretty intense time. There was a lot of difficulty trying to get employment, 32% unemployment.

However, there were some pretty unbelievable infrastructure projects happening. The Harbour Bridge had just been completed. 1932 was the opening of the Harbour Bridge. And John Bradfield designed that. And he designed this pretty amazing structure that we know today that spanned across the harbour, but he also designed the whole infrastructure for this city, a underground railway network, which he's not as well-known for. And this was a very particular network that had a series of underground stations. And these underground stations were the first time in the city that we started to see this subterranean, this other layer to the city.

So this particular station that he opened in 1932 with the team was Wynyard Station and Town Hall Station. And these required a very particular mode of transport to move up from the platform to the street level. And it's part of his scheme, it's part of him pitching this proposal for the city, was to think about it in relation to an escalator, this idea of moving people up from the lower levels to the upper levels. There'd only been a few at that time. There'd been a few in the UK. Escalators were initially like a theme park thing that you would go to and possibly dislocate your hip when you got off the side of it, the way in which you had to dismount it. But at this point, they were just starting to come into service. And he estimated 10,000 people per hour were able to transfer.

So this is a pretty, very different way in which the city was starting to be thought about. So that was approved and is part of the infrastructure for the bridge, the connecting railway across to Milsons Point, the underground network began. And opening in 1932, three tube escalator – wooden tread escalators opened at Wynyard Station, as well as at Town Hall. And these have then been in service since 1932, up until 2017, so over 85 years. A pretty amazing piece of infrastructure, to see that sustained and ongoing for that time. There was a series of replacements and upgrades, but principally, the same mechanisms were in operation for over 85 years. So these escalators have been part of the city for all this time. And so tonight, I'm telling you about this very particular piece of infrastructure because I completed a

recent large-scale public artwork called Interloop at Wynyard Station at the site, at the bottom of the York Street escalators. And these escalators are incredibly long. They travel from York Street down to the platform level. And the artwork that I composed sits directly above that.

The idea was that as you're travelling down the escalators, there's a sense that you're moving while still standing in that same location. This idea of travelling while moving while stationary. There's a quite interesting idea that when you're on an escalator, you have this moment of pause in your busy day-to-day. There's this idea that many people have travelled through this time, through this space, and I was interested in by people just looking up, you had an opportunity to see something that was other-worldly. So the project simply inverts the escalators. It's directly aligned to the four escalators, so when you pass down from York Street, you look up and the escalators are then swirling and swooping around, interlooping back onto themselves. And they are made up of these timber treads, these very particular iconic part of the infrastructure that I've described. And with a series of different technologies and processes and quite difficult different stages of the project, we were able to instal this in December in 2017.

So tonight, I'm going to talk to you about that in relation to infrastructure in the city and the importance of holding on to parts of our heritage, and also the potential for whimsy or the potential for other-worldly artworks in the city that can start to connect to different parts of our history, parts of our heritage, and to have a connexion between past and future journeys. Okay. So understanding now where we are in relation to being on Sussex Street and the new infrastructure that's happened prior to the completion of the new Barangaroo development, which is over to our right. There's been a new link that's connected, which is when you'd walk.

And as part of that, there was a whole upgrade that had to happen for Wynyard Station. So as part of that upgrade, there was an understanding about these amazing escalators. I mean, I think for a lot of people, and even myself, I'm quite captivated by this idea of an escalator, but I hadn't fully understood this amazing length that it had been in service. So there was a huge heritage team that were really very passionate about that and understanding how important it was to hold onto that in some way. So they have been lobbying for about two or three years prior to when I started on the project at the end of 2016. And they were determined to create some heritage interpretation. They wanted to think about it in relation to maybe using parts of the escalator. How can we think about some imagery about it? It wasn't very specific, but there was an idea that that had to happen. So on 24th of December, just before Christmas, I got a call. And it was an art consultant who was calling me up. He said, "Oh, Chris, look. We've got this project. Have you got anything on at the moment? Are you busy?" I said, "Well, no. I just had a baby three weeks ago. Haven't slept. [laughter] It's Christmas Eve. It's pretty bad timing. But what's the project? Can you tell me about it?" And he's like, "Well, it's this project at Wynyard Station that you can use the old heritage escalators and make an artwork out of it." And I was like, "Oh, no! I'm totally fine. There's no issue. I've got heaps of sleep! [laughter] I can totally manage that."

And then proceeded over that Christmas break a very short turnaround. By the 10th of January I had to get a series of sketches out. But strangely enough, from that first call on the 24th of December, I remember seeing something in my head in relation to this artwork. I didn't see it in its final state, but I did remember some sort of evoking imagery of a twisting stair or some sort of flying stair in the ceiling above people's heads. That's all I can recall, but it was something quite specific. And from that moment through the proposal stage, which went on for a couple of months, my sketches were really quite simple. I just really just sketched an idea of this sort of looping stair following the geometry of the existing alignment of the old heritage escalators and now the new heritage – the new installed escalators that were going in. And it was just the simple looping of those treads. So that went on for quite a while, back and forth

in relation to the competition stage. Then awarded that, it become a quite lengthy process then for the team who were involved in the upgrade, to remove all these treads. Now, these escalators, as I've said, have been at Wynyard Station for a long time, so you could imagine the amount of grease and the grime and the way in which these had to be removed was massively extensive. It all had to be done mainly at night. They had to build a whole structure that had to remove each of the elements. They had to pull apart all of the different tread elements and all of the metal elements underneath it. Because strangely enough, with these old escalators, all of the mechanisms and drive components are external for the escalators. Now all of that is internal, inside the escalator. So there was a whole room underneath the escalators themselves that had to be disembowelled and pulled apart and then lifted up. So this become quite extensive.

So at this point, being engaged with the project, I had to look at different parts of using parts of the escalators. They initially actually wanted just some 2D representations on the wall. And at that point, I came back with a proposal which was quite extensive, this big sculptural work. They said, can't possibly build that. It's right above the escalators. And they said, can you do something else, but a bit smaller on the walls? So I came back and just made it bigger. [laughter] And for some reason, that worked. So they were quite excited by the proposal, which is really real credit to transport from New South Wales to be able to actually go with a big sculptural ambitious project like this. So once I worked out that I was going to work with the timber treads, that become the focus. So I work often in computational design or parametric modelling, which principally just means I'm working with the computer where it becomes a tool to make the way in which you design pretty fluid. So that we ended up being able to make a 3D model of the timber tread, which is pretty simple, duplicate it one on any other, and then we were able to connect them all together that they were able to be moved around and constantly updated. And what that meant is we were able to try and squeeze this sculpture into a really tight space.

We only had a couple of metres between the ceiling and what they accepted as not being too low for the station area. So that became a pretty extensive process. We went through a whole lot of different ideas about how that could twist over itself in a double stitch. Then we went to a single stitch. Then we went back to another way of interconnecting them. We thought about different modes of connexion. All this become quite completed because the building itself is from 1932. So we didn't really have an opportunity to connect in contemporary ways of connecting structure. We couldn't drill into the steel. We couldn't weld the steal. All the concrete wasn't rated. It became a quite complicated project to work with this urban infrastructure that was a heritage listed building and a heritage listed set of items. So we worked through that. We understood ways of thinking about how we can support this. So we came up with a system of a steel pipe. Pretty simple system. This idea of a steel tube that passed through the sculpture, and then on top of that, we connected the timber treads. They would have a series of brackets and the tube would pass through the space. There would be two tubes that twisted over each other, and they would break and become the four connexions, which related to the escalators. So that seemed to work quite well.

We developed it up. We had a structural engineering team working with men and a whole lot of other specialists that were working through that detail. We worked out it was going to take about 2 to 3 weeks to instal, and that all seemed fine. We were about to go to fabrication, everything was approved. And then they came back and said, "You've got 48 hours to instal it." [laughter] So that changed the project entirely. At that point, we had to rethink exactly how we're going to build this. The project couldn't possibly be built in that particular way. There's no way we could have a steel tube and then connect each bracket on the side and then put a fascia panel on the side. All that would take, minimum, a week and a half, even if we were doing night shifts. So we had to really rethink the whole approach. So that meant starting again, in terms of a structural project. Very complicated, we're already pinched on

time. This is now August. I already had a completion date that was meant to be November. So we were very crunched at that point. We had to rethink then how we were going to have a structural project that could span that big geometry from the start of the escalators, where they arrive out of the ceiling, back to where they're supported off one of the main beams of the building.

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We came up with this aluminium accordion structure, almost like a sort of concertina form, and we worked out that with another whole team of engineers that joined the project, that we could have that as an actual structural member. That the aluminium accordion form was the beam. Most of the other structural team that was working previously, there's no way we could ever do that. We've got this other time that was like, oh, no, I think we can do that! That's fine. [laughter]

And we also worked with this really amazing set of fabricators up in Brisbane who are boat builders, and they're very specialist boat builders. And I've worked with them on a few other large scale public works, but these guys really came into their own and provided a very steady engagement in relation to how to build this project. Everyone else that we spoke to said, it's possible to build, but the way in which that we can apply the aluminium on the side is never – you can never twist the material. You can't have a double curvature, which means you can't twist material in a certain way. And the boat fabricator's like, no, you just push it! [laughter] And then weld it. It'll be fine. So their attitude was quite fluid. And I think because they build boats all the time, the way in which they're working with material, and they often refer to aluminium to be worked like it is timber. So interesting way of thinking about material. They worked with us. We thought about the structure, how we're going to build it. And then we went into a quite complicated set of documentation that was, I think, about 80 pages long, in terms of the documentation. And we ended up having this quite extensive output from the 3D modelling that then they could fabricate. So we laser cut all the components, then we created jigs, and then they started fabricating all those components. This went on for about three months. It was about a kilometre of welding. And the whole project weighed about five tonne in the end, in terms of aluminium. So it was a huge amount of material. And aluminium is generally quite light, but you can imagine how much material is in that to get up to that weight. So these guys were working with us. We ended up doing a full pre-build. So that three-month period ended with a full pre-build in the workshop, which was really exciting. So we were able to make sure that the whole thing fit, all our connexion points to the building. And then we started to test the treads, checking that everything was going to fit. Had to shape some of the treads to fit. And we ended up prepping all of that before we sent it to Sydney.

We pre-painted everything, and then came the D-day of arriving at Sydney to do the instal for that 48-hour period. So we arrive at George Street, and the only access at that point was down the ramps from George Street, which is a very pinched moment. It's only just over two metres by two metres. And that was what we had to design all the components to fit. So on dollies especially, we had to try and slide them all through, 16 pieces in total. We would put them into different points in the station, attach all the treads that had been delivered separately, and then proceeded from 11:00pm on Friday night, after the escalators closed, everyone went home from work. Closed off the area, and then proceeded to do the instal. And this was, again, because of all that planning, was also possible with the lifting, because of extensive planning and thinking about how we were going to do that, we pre-attached lifting lugs into the ceiling underneath all the existing perforated panels, and they're still there today. And that was how we could align to exactly where they needed to lift. And we knew exactly how big each of the sections would be to lift in. So we had that pretty organised.

Lifted the first section in, no drama. Next piece in was 150 mil out, which is approximately that much, 15 centimetres. Which in construction terms, that's diabolical. There's no way we could possibly have that. So everyone was sort of saying, this is never going to happen! We're not going to do it! It's only got one day left! [laughter] I don't think that they were saying it exactly like that, but – [laughter] inside, they were feeling that. So at that point, I think the only thing we could think of was that we just had to push the material down, because we'd lifted it in a particular way that it had reshaped it, because material, even aluminium, is really quite flexible. And there's a really interesting thing about even that vast amount of five tonne material, it does move quite a lot, depending on how you manoeuvre it and lift it.

So what we had to do was just push it down, take all half the loadings off the lifting block and tackle, and were able to force it down and then connect it up. So once we understood that, we were able to connect it, and then we've got the other three arms connecting back up to where they needed to without much of a drama. So that pretty much got us to Sunday morning. We ended up getting engineering sign off that afternoon. But you can imagine the tolerances we had in terms of timing was pretty stressful. So I wasn't sleeping a lot. I think I was sent off site on Sunday afternoon because of the WHS guys. Have you slept at all? You've got to get out of here. Because everyone else was working on particular shifts, and so I had a little bit of sleep I think on the Sunday night. And then I was back at 4:30 in the morning because we had to be there for the opening of the escalators.

And that was a pretty exciting moment, because I was there with a small press team, and we were just doing documentation. And so we were there when they switched the escalators on, and it was – I never forget. The first people who were coming through as commuters, they'd left there on Friday afternoon, so they'd never thought of anything that was happening. And they were walking back through the turnstiles and then tracking up. And I think probably the first 15, 20 people didn't even clock it. Because they just like – bleary-eyed, all those people on their phones. [laughter] And it was this idea that they were just walking to work and there was a few of them who just looked up. 5:00 in the morning and went, I swear that wasn't there on Friday. [laughter] But then they were like, nah, anyway, got to tell you about my weekend. [laughter]

And so from there, it became this really interesting thing for the next hour or so. By 6:00pm – 6:00am, sorry. I remember we were there starting to do photographs and the initial video and so on for the documentation of the project. And I remember a few of the commuters who were then coming back down, doing loops, and recording on the way down. I was like, I swear I've seen that guy! And the guy did about four loops. [laughter]

So I think from there, it sort of generated its own momentum. And there was something quite wonderful about that. There started to be a sort of embracing around the project, which I've never really had in a project before. I've been making artworks for about 20 years or so. And for me, it was such an honour to have that sort of response. Much more in relation to the way in which it's sited in the city and the fact that this sort of infrastructure is really a part of Sydney. And I think people have a real affinity to the material, they have a real connexion to that tread, to that timber escalator infrastructure. And I think people have really taken ownership of it. And when it was removed at the start of 2017, I think people were just so disheartened, but accepting of it. And I think there was an interesting slippage where there was never an announcement that this was coming. And the city actually was really completely unaware. And when it arrived as this other reconfigured form, this twisting, quite evocative sculptural element, but still made out of that same material, people were just overwhelmed by it.

And I think that's – it was just something I could have never anticipated because I was just driving the project as best I can to make it work and make it fit and 48 hours and oh, my

God, never going to do it! [laughter] And I think when it actually opened, there was something around these important parts of infrastructure, this connexion back to our past, and connexion back to our history, are really important to nurture. And I think the city is often transforming so quickly. And I think – I started the talk tonight in relation to where we're sited here, in relation to The Hungry Mile heritage and the new development over here in Barangaroo, which is continuing. And we see this constant transformation. And I think it's a difficult navigation in trying to understand how we can connect to our history, connect to our heritage, and thinking about ways of working with that. And I think visual arts and these sort of big-scale projects can really offer another way of approaching that. And I think it was a really lovely synchronicity to work with this particular material and this location.

But it's also something in relation to how we understand our city and what makes our city so special. And these escalators, which I think most people in their everyday wouldn't really think escalators are that important. I mean, I think prior to working on this project, I was like, you know, escalators, yeah. They're sort of fun. I mean, I think I generally am just getting up to the next level of – and I supposed there is that moment of pause. But I think when there's such a legacy with an object or an infrastructure, 85 years or more, that's a huge amount of time that spans. And for something that is seemingly part of our everyday, it becomes a very potent reminder and connexion.

And I think for me, the connection to past and future journeys is really what the whole project's about, is that so many people have moved in that space throughout these 85 years, and to have some reference to that and to honour that is really what this project's been about. And hopefully you got an opportunity to enjoy it and it's now, I think, part of this city, and I'm really honoured to have been able to do that for this city. Thank you.

[Applause]

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