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# civic PRIDE

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Curated by **Milly Mitchell-Anyon**,  
Dunedin Public Art Gallery 2019  
Creative New Zealand Toi Aotearoa  
Curatorial Intern of Contemporary Art.



ARTS COUNCIL OF NEW ZEALAND TOI AOTEAROA

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**P**+64 3 474 3240. **E** dpagmail@dcc.govt.nz  
30 The Octagon Dunedin 9016  
PO BOX 566 Dunedin 9054  
www.dunedin.art.museum  
A department of the Dunedin City Council

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# LAYERED HISTORIES: CIVIC PRIDE

How we inhabit a place can be the most telling expression of how we sense its worth, our intention for it and our connection with it.<sup>1</sup>

— Geoff Park

*Civic Pride* is about place and how we inhabit it. At the core of this story is the Octagon, which is a public plaza in the centre of Ōtepoti Dunedin, and the London Plane trees that occupy its interior. Central to this narrative is the 1889-1890 *New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition* (NZSSE) which marks a pivotal moment in the history of the city, of the Octagon, and ultimately the history of the Plane trees in this community. Drawing together archives, historic artworks, photography and contemporary art and craft practices, *Civic Pride* considers the legacy and currency of these living remnants from the NZSSE.

The NZSSE opened to the public on the 26th November 1889 and ran until the 19th April 1890. It marked New Zealand's golden jubilee – 50 years from the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi in 1840. The NZSSE 'provided the vehicle by which the colony might "recount the progress she has made during her short semi-centenary."' <sup>2</sup> The measure of progress was documented in the form of the universal exhibition similar to London's *The Great Exhibition of the Works of Industry of All Nations* which was held in 1851 in the purpose built Crystal Palace building in Hyde Park. With over six million visitors to *The Great Exhibition* in 1851, Britain's appetite for the universalising exhibition was clearly insatiable. Following this, all-encompassing exhibitions began to pop up globally. The first of these universal exhibitions encompassing art, industry and sciences held in Aotearoa was the 1865 *New Zealand Exhibition* in Dunedin. It was 25 years after this exhibition that the *New Zealand and South Seas Exhibition* (NZSSE) opened.

In the years leading up to the NZSSE, the civic amenities in Dunedin were being readied for the expected influx of visitors to the exhibition. The 'uninhabited open wasteland' of the Octagon was slowly being landscaped into the Octagon we have come to recognise today.<sup>3</sup> In 1888 the Dunedin and Suburban Reserves Conservation Society (now known as the Dunedin Amenities Society) was established. Their first aim was to 'ameliorate the state of the Octagon and the Triangle'<sup>4</sup> so they could be 'made respectable for the visitors to the [New Zealand and

South Seas] Exhibition.<sup>5</sup> The Dunedin Amenities Society was also heavily invested in conserving the town belt, an area teeming with native trees that were repeatedly being ‘vandalised’ by its nearby inhabitants.<sup>6</sup> With funding provided by the Council and membership fees, The Dunedin Amenities Society played an important role in the imagining of new public spaces around Dunedin, as well as the formation of the Octagon.

Prior to the NZSSE, when surveyor Charles Kettle was planning the town layout for ‘New Edinburgh’ [as it was known by, before it was ‘Dunedin’] he was applying the same structure to the town as Edinburgh’s Moray Place:

At a very early stage in the survey, Kettle seems to have decided to establish a central focus to his plan and to include at least one recognisable feature of Edinburgh. That was to be a large central ‘place’ similar to the circular Moray Place, near the heart of the city.<sup>7</sup>

Rather than the circular layout of Moray Place seen in Scotland, Kettle replaced it with an angular octagon. For Kettle, this octagonal structure may have been easier in terms of planning ‘than curved boundaries when it came to preparing survey and allotment plans.’<sup>8</sup> The Octagon, alongside the designation of the same street names, were references to the ‘Old Edinburgh.’<sup>9</sup> The nomenclature of Dunedin itself derives from the Gaelic name [Dùn Èideann] for Edinburgh, referencing ‘the face of the hill’ or ‘a knoll on the hillside.’<sup>10</sup> The Octagon was, then, the product of the grid that reshaped the landscape, and is recognised today as one of the faces of the city.

In 1891, an invitation to the public was issued by the Dunedin Amenities Society that, for ‘those who take reasonable pride in this Edinburgh of the Southern Hemisphere should not be backward in coming forward’ to help beautify the city.<sup>11</sup> The London Metropolitan Public Garden Association, in conjunction with the Dunedin Amenities Society, offered the funds for the ‘planting of plane trees in suitable public thoroughfares ... on condition that the local authorities agree to maintain the trees when planted, replanting such as they may die.’<sup>12</sup> It was this burgeoning enthusiasm for nature, conservation and public spaces that willed the newly formed Dunedin Amenities Society and the community into action – to plant sixteen London Plane trees along the central thoroughfare of the Octagon. By 1892, the Octagon’s transformation had already begun:

It would almost seem, indeed, as if a magician’s wand had been waved over these reserves—for so many years eyesores to the citizens and visitors—the stunted trees and mangy grass of the former and the arid waste of the latter being now converted into ornamental gardens, “things of beauty,” which properly looked after, will be “joys for ever.”<sup>13</sup>

By 1940, an article reporting on a Dunedin Amenities Society meeting noted that the Plane trees in the Octagon, planted 50 years prior, were looking healthy.<sup>14</sup> They were, according to the Dunedin Amenities Society:

... hybrid planes, which had been specially obtained from one single tree in Kew Gardens [London]. This particular tree was the parent of most of the plane trees in London reserves, and was known as the *London plane*. He [Mr. Tannock] regretted that the young plane trees obtainable in New Zealand were not of the same healthy type, and were therefore unsuitable for street planting. [He] said he would see what could be done by way of propagating shoots from the existing trees.<sup>15</sup>

In *Civic Pride*, the walls are lined with photographs that document the life of the Octagon and that of the trees growing in and with the community. These photographs are placed against a backdrop of the paint colour 'Kew Gardens,' binding them together like a photo album. Just like an album, the chronology they offer creates a timeline of social and community memories. The photographs are copy prints from the Hocken Collections Uare Taoka o Hākena's public research collection; drawn from envelopes titled: *Octagon I* and *Octagon II*. Their edges are worn with use, frequently touched and called upon for reference. These photographs show the Octagon during its early foundations, during public celebration, the gardens and trees growing and changing over time, monuments being erected and then removed, as a site for activism and protest, and so on. They demonstrate the social function of public spaces to unify people within them.

The artist group Wilde Projects, spearheaded by Auckland-based artist Richard Orjis, responds to the history of the Plane trees in the Octagon with the installation *bttm methodology for the hybrid plane* (2019). Wilde Projects explores town planning, ecology, art making, queer histories and public spaces in their practice. *Walking in Trees* (2019) was staged by Wilde Projects in Auckland which consisted of a large scaffolding structure that allowed the public to walk into the canopy of a Himalayan cedar tree in Albert Park. The work was flanked by sandwich boards that illuminated the histories of the public space using 'bttm methodology' – which is a methodology developed by val smith and Orjis, that operates as an ongoing open-source project.<sup>16</sup> *bttm methodology for the hybrid plane* explores the history the Octagon and facilitates a meditative exchange with the trees that sit just outside the doors of the Dunedin Public Art Gallery.

Orjis notes that 'bttm methodology' explores power dynamics, kinship, relationality and passivity as an active resistance to capitalist, colonial and hetero-patriarchal

reproductive impulses.<sup>17</sup> The London Plane trees (*Platanus x acerifolia*) that line the Octagon are a hybrid tree 'created by crossing the Oriental plane, *Platanus orientalis* with the Western plane, *Platanus occidentalis*. The hybrid was most likely a natural result of the two parent trees being planted close to each other.'<sup>18</sup> As a tree, it is the offspring of cross-cultural encounters as well as inter-special experimentation that can be read through a queer lens. In *bttm methodology for the hybrid plane*, Wilde Projects offers a set of instructions for viewers to create new arboreal intimacies with the trees, to relate to them as living/breathing organisms.

When we look out the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's doors to the Plane trees in the Octagon, the sixteen trees have decreased to fourteen, with the health of the remaining trees becoming increasingly precarious. In January 2010, four trees were suffering from an unknown disease. However the Ministry for Agriculture and Fisheries concluded that there was no fungal infection, but recommended 'physical modifications, changing maintenance practices and therapeutic treatments' to ensure the longevity of the trees.<sup>19</sup> Despite the efforts of the Dunedin City Council, two trees in the Octagon were felled in January 2015 after they had died.<sup>20</sup> In the face of the trees decline, Wilde Projects creates a set of instructions to renew civic love for the trees. Orjis notes that the term 'tree hugger is often used as a derogatory term for environmentalists,' but the terminology itself is relational in its etymology.<sup>21</sup> Maybe we should be hugging the trees as part of their therapeutic treatment?

When the trees in the Octagon were felled, the Council offered the wood to the community. The Otago Woodturners were one of the groups to take the Council up on their offer. The turned bowls in *Civic Pride* were all made by Croydon Paton, a Dunedin-based turner. Using the wood from the Plane trees that once stood in the Octagon extends the life of the trees and the memory of them. The bowls carry a history with them; stretching back to the day they were planted, to improve the civic amenities of the town. At the NZSSE, ceramics were sold as souvenirs for visitors, and to a degree these bowls operate as souvenirs from the exhibition – although slightly delayed in their arrival, nearly 130 years after the closure of the exhibition. Paton's works inhabit place in the very material being used. The variations of woodgrain, exposing different growth patterns and patches within the tree. Since the trees were planted in the Octagon, they have been witness to innumerable public gatherings, celebrations, protests and marches; with millions walking by them and under them. The trees carry with them their own histories that are held in the bowls that, perhaps, eventually will outlast the remaining trees in the Octagon.

At the time of their planting, Dunedin had been rapidly

expanding over the preceding fifty years. The new settlement began to rapidly expand after the gold-rush of the 1860s to accommodate gold prospectors and the large wave of migration that followed. The wealthy province was the first in Aotearoa to establish a Botanic Gardens in 1863, the first university [The University of Otago] in 1869 and the first public art gallery [Dunedin Public Art Gallery] in 1884. The region entered a period of recession in the 1880s after the gold rush had died down and the migration north led to the beginning of the population decline.

Set against the economic climate, the NZSSE in 1889 presented the opportunity for Dunedin to create a profit. The ticket sales for the NZSSE were estimated to be around 618,000 – a huge number compared to the national population of approximately 668,000 and from a city of around 150,000. The high visitation numbers almost matching the population of Aotearoa generated revenue for the region and operated as an advertorial for the colony.

The NZSSE was housed in a purpose-built structure, designed by Dunedin architect James Hislop, constructed out of wood and corrugated iron. The facsimile *Bird's-Eye View Of The Exhibition* on display in *Civic Pride* was produced by Walter Leslie as a supplement for Invercargill's *The Weekly Times*. It demonstrates the aspiration of the NZSSE to be remembered as the cultural event of the century, it was to be Aotearoa's 'red letter day.' At the closing ceremony the Minister of Education, Thomas Williams Hislop, emphasised the economic risk given the declining population that coincided with declining resources:

I think you will agree enterprise of the kind, undertaken at a time when the sun of prosperity is shining, betokens a certain amount of boldness, but when it is entered upon under a black cloud of depression it betokens a faith in the future which is indicative of the building up of a great nation.<sup>22</sup>

In *Civic Pride*, Leslie's rendition of the NZSSE is placed alongside John Gully's *After Rain, Te Anau* (1887). The work was painted by Gully on a sketching trip with J.C. Richmond to Te Anau and Lake Manapouri in 1887. It was displayed in the NZSSE, and is now held in the Dunedin Public Art Gallery's collection. Gully's works were presented at both the NZSSE and the 1865 *New Zealand Exhibition*, and demonstrated a shift in attitudes around nation-building. Gully (1819-1888) emigrated to Aotearoa in 1852, where he became a proficient self-taught watercolourist and was employed as a draughtsman at the Department of Lands and Survey by J.C. Richmond.<sup>23</sup> At the *New Zealand Exhibition* in 1865, Gully exhibited his works 'on behalf of the survey office' and 'gained a silver

medal and sold all the paintings he exhibited ... placing his name at the forefront of New Zealand watercolourists.<sup>24</sup> Gully had died by the time the 1889 NZSSE opened, but a number of his works were hung 'opposite a selection of old master engravings' and 'constituted a kind of retrospective of Gully's work, allowing for comparison between his early and later styles.'<sup>25</sup>

Gully's *After Rain, Te Anau* moves beyond the purely aesthetic rendition of Te Anau by a surveyor, to an ideological tool used in the NZSSE in 1889. As art historian Rebecca Rice reiterates:

The example of Gully consequently illustrates a key shift that had occurred between 1865 and 1890. In 1865, his work was celebrated as the best work on display, while in 1889–90, its role was markedly different ... Their function was a new one for the colonial context ... They represented the realization that the colonial was on the verge of no longer being contemporary but something of the past...<sup>26</sup>

Where in the 1865 *New Zealand Exhibition*, Gully's works were ostensibly a survey record of the landscape, *After Rain, Te Anau* in the later NZSSE demonstrated 'a new historical consciousness that the 'colonial' moment was past.'<sup>27</sup> As a genre, landscape paintings that Gully produced was in part because 'land surveying went hand in hand with economic as well as political expansion.'<sup>28</sup> While the watercolour *After Rain, Te Anau* was created for the purposes of aesthetic appreciation, it was these sublime wildernesses that provided settlers a view of the 'tameable' landscape.

In the official catalogue for the NZSSE, Aotearoa was described as 'post colonial.'<sup>29</sup> But the term is not as we understand it today, rather in context it reflected a sense that this place was no longer actively being colonised, it was colonised and under the control of British rule. The NZSSE was the celebration of the colony's golden jubilee, a 50 year celebration of colonisation in Aotearoa. As historian Giselle Byrnes highlights that since the Te Tiriti o Waitangi was signed: 'This fifty-year period also witnessed a major transformation of the bush, and a remodelling of the physical landscape.'<sup>30</sup> The Octagon was once described as 'an uninhabited open wasteland.'<sup>31</sup> In the late nineteenth century in Aotearoa, emptiness became the impetus required for mass confiscation of 'waste land' by the Crown. This 'unoccupied' land was carved up, cultivated, allotted and engineered into new settlements by surveyors.

So what do the London Plane trees mean when we take all this into account? Planted over 130 years ago, they tell a story of how we inhabit place. The Dunedin Amenities Society planted the trees to beautify the town, with profits

from a nation-building exercise – both functioning to entrench British sovereignty. Now in 2019, trees play an important role as the ‘green lungs’ of the city; releasing oxygen while simultaneously capturing pollutants on their leaves. The London Plane tree is particularly effective for this purpose, boasting a furry underside to capture the unwanted particles. As a tree, it is ideal for urban planting because of its tolerance of poor soil, human intervention and pollution.<sup>32</sup> While the trees connote a history of colonisation and the processes used to carve up the city through the planting of non-indigenous plants derived from a tree from one of the most iconic parks in London, they also represent the utopian idea of public space as a civic amenity to connect people with one another. Over the years as the trees have grown, they have shifted from the context they were once located within.

The Octagon is a site of connection within the community; where the social function of public spaces is a pertinent reminder of the importance of these places. The trees sit overhead, providing respite from the sun, capturing carbon emissions and beautifying the Octagon. The photographs that line the walls in *Civic Pride* demonstrate the way we have come to inhabit the space as it changes and evolves over time. The turned bowls crafted by Croydon Paton are mementos of these histories that treat the by-product of Plane trees that have died with love, finding another purpose for them to continue living. Wilde Projects seeks to reconsider how we relate to the trees in the Octagon as living beings. By exploring the relationships that the trees have with each other, us and space – we may start to understand that we are intimately connected with one another. Public spaces like the Octagon carry with them a sense of civic pride creating a place that represents the social fabric of the community; carrying memories of the past, operating as a place to experience the present, and to continue nourishing the community well into the future.

— Milly Mitchell-Anyon

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8. Ledgerwood, 7.
9. Ledgerwood, 5.
10. Ledgerwood, 2.
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