

Tropical Imaginaries of Abundance

We acknowledge that we are walking on Aboriginal land — the Cadigal Wangal people of the Eora are the traditional custodians of Marrickville. We pay our respects to elders past, present and future.

This series of walks present an opportunity to think about how plants shape the ways we look at, feel about, and imagine a place. In the contained booklets, we invite you to imagine a tropical Marrickville, and we suggest you follow the trajectories and assemblages generated by three plants: banana trees, papaya trees and dragon fruit.

We started walking in Marrickville while we were in residence at 'Frontyard', a local, 'Not-Only-Artist Run Initiative' where people can imagine, and take steps to create, possible futures.

Frontyard crosses the bureaucratic edges of the suburb, city and state, serving as a much needed social space for people from all over Sydney who want to think differently about possible futures and what we can do to shape them. Frontyard is a great place to start walking experiments.

In our work we use ethnographic and design research methods, such as repeated walks to map neighbourhoods. Walking generates particular questions by engaging our bodies and senses, as well as our minds. These walks help us identify issues and characteristics, such as how the edges of streets can be cultivated with edible plants, tree-lined according to masterplans, or how plants develop small, spontaneous ecosystems. We are mindful that these landscapes are created together by people, plants, animals and objects. We usually think of this process as 'walking with plants'.

For this booklet, we were led by tropical plants. While we were walking and mapping Marrickville—a hybrid suburb, where the industrial present meets the gentrified future—we noticed



the recurring presence of bananas, papayas and dragon fruits. These plants led us to develop a specific focus on the tropics.

The plants we mapped, rather than being technically 'tropical' species, are those we associate with the tropics. We define this state of things as the 'not yet tropical' of the city to indicate how the urban landscape of Marrickville is adapting to rising temperatures and climate change, and how this acclimatization is made visible by the growth of tropical species.

As part of our mapping practice we follow up these repeated walks with 'over the fence' conversations, private gardens tours, and then short interviews. In doing so we produce an audit of a place through the lens of plants. Another element in our methodology is to use everyday technology like our phones and apps: Instagram as a note-taking tool and visual diary in real time, and Map my Walk as a way to record and map our routes. In this way anyone can reproduce our methodology to map their own neighbourhoods, just using #mappingedges.

Our research reveals that plants encourage specific practices and behaviours in the gardens of Marrickville. For example, gardeners build certain structures in response to how a plant grows, or neighbours develop social relations through the exchange of produce and seeds over the fence. Plants feed, delight, frustrate, and challenge gardeners and gardens.

In Marrickville, as elsewhere, plants escape from gardens and are also found in industrial areas. Their seeds are carried by birds or bats or rats, or on the soles of our shoes and the seams of our clothes. Plants grow between buildings, around canals, and along train lines. Or they push through fences and across human-made borders, escaping and creating new edges and landscapes. **We invite you to follow them.**



Mapping Edges
Marrickville Maps:
Tropical Imaginaries
of Abundance



Mapping Edges is a transdisciplinary research studio at The University of Technology Sydney. Dr Ilaria Vanni is in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences and Dr Alexandra Crosby is in the Faculty of Design Architecture and Building. More information at www.mappingedges.org

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'Homegrown
bananas are lovely.
They're so lovely.'



Walk 1—
Mapping Edges:
Marrickville



‘My garden is a
mess, but there are
always bananas’

Banana trees form
canopies in the back
streets of Marrickville.

Walk 1: Bananas

Bananas look so tropical that in many visual systems they symbolize the tropics. Many parts of the plant are used: the leaves to package and serve food, the flowers, the fruit as a super food with its own waste-free packaging and as offerings. These practices travel with people as they settle and create the city, as we found out in our wanderings through Marrickville, where bananas are abundant. They are found in many cuisines and are central to cultural and religious rituals, but they also do their own thing, taking over abandoned landscapes and forming very lush thickets.





Spilling out over
fences bananas
cross over and
redefine the
boundaries of
gardens.

As we followed bananas, we began learning more about them. Bananas are not true trees. The stems are made from layers of tightly packed leaf bases, and each new leaf comes up through the centre of the stem. They send out suckers that then escape gardens. They escape from cultivation in the backyards to occupy a wild grove along the train line

from Sydenham to Marrickville stations, where they reclaim an already disturbed landscape. Once there, they protect taro, papaya, fennel and other species that dwell closer to the ground. For as long as they are left alone, they keep spreading, untended. Humans are also part of the banana network, and some insert themselves in this plant's migration, collecting particular species of bananas from the internet, or swapping with neighbours, or sharing suckers and hands of bananas after their harvest. Many of the gardeners we interviewed grow bananas. They have a lot to say about them:

**Banana leaves?
Yeah, I chop and
drop. So nothing
in the bin'**




In Sydney's climate,
bananas grow
wild without much
attention from
humans.

'I had my first banana crops this winter. Yeah. It was like someone had invented banana. It was interesting. So much more bananary than what you get at the shop.'

'All of my bananas are dwarf Cavendishes. Two of them are red Cavendish. The fruit is pink. They don't grow more than two and a half metres, so they are manageable as well.'

Banana plants often become climbing poles for sweet potato vines. In turn the leaves of the sweet potato function as living mulch, keeping the soil around banana plants cool.





‘This is another trick from my mother. You never throw banana skins away. You put them around plants, especially fruit bearing plants and roses.’

'I grow a banana tree in a pot on the roof of my warehouse. It hasn't fruited yet, but it reminds me of the tropics.'



'I have taught people cooking using banana leaf.'

Mapping Edges – Marrickville

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‘Pawpaw, not papaya’



Walk 2—
Mapping Edges:
Marrickville

'I eat a lot of the leaf,
so I grow the papaya
every year.'

The fruits of papaya
are delicious but can
be hard to reach

Walk 2: Papayas

Papayas originated in Mexico and are one of those edible species, like chillis and lemongrass, ubiquitous in suburbs which are, or have been, home to Southeast Asian communities. Sydney is home to Australia's largest Vietnamese community. Arriving as refugees and family reunion migrants in the mid 1970s, many settled in Marrickville and probably began cultivating papayas, or at least eating them and spitting out the seeds at the edges of their properties.







'So my grandmother (in Indonesia) ate this. You never have to buy any vegetables, so they grow their own things. They've got the pond for fish. The only thing she bought I think it was salt.'



There are as many stories as there are now papaya trees.

During one of our interviews, the papaya tree was one of our first talking points' when the gardener we were visiting corrected our identification. 'Pawpaw, not papaya', she said very pleased as, she explained pawpaw and mango do

Papaya trees often
appear in gutters
and cracks in the
pavement

not grow in Pescara, one the east coast of Italy, where she is originally from (whether picked green or ripe, papaya, pawpaw, or papaw are all from the same plant, *Carica papaya*). In Australia the red-fleshed fruit from hermaphrodite trees is labeled as papaya and the larger yellow-fleshed fruit from dioecious trees as pawpaw). The papaya tree came out of her compost, which means that she or one of her children probably made the choice to eat a papaya before she chose to grow it. It's not just humans putting the seeds in their compost heaps: papayas also collaborate with other species. Bats and birds, for instance, help papayas to move across the urban landscape.



Papaya plants like abundant water so often flourish around drains.

‘This papaya came up because I buried the food scraps just in holes in the garden.’

'Oh I grow them from seed but I transferred this one, because this is full sun here.'



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**‘We grow these
wherever we live.’
(dragon fruit)**

**Walk 3—
Mapping Edges:
Marrickville**



**‘My babies!’ (gardener
seeing for the first
time her dragon fruit
flowering)**

Walk 3: Dragon Fruit

In Australia, we tend to think of dragon fruit (Pitaya) as a typically Southeast Asian tropical plant. It is actually a desert cactus that originates from Mexico, from where it was transplanted to other areas of Latin America by Europeans and beyond to South East Asia, USA, Israel, Cyprus, Canary Islands, and of course Australia. Like papaya, dragon fruit grows easily from seed and also from cuttings, and has adapted well both to dry and tropical





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Dragon fruit plants
can be grown in
pots, but still need
structural support

climate. Pitaya needs a support to climb on. It puts out aerial roots, and once it is around 10 kilos, it starts to flower, and relies on moths or bats for fertilisation.

Dragon fruit also relies on humans, who kindly co-design and build inventive supports, using whatever it is at hand. Sometimes a fence will do, but often wood

planks, metal tubes, and other plants are assembled to provide support following the growth path of the plant. Similarly, dragon fruit's limbs break off easily, and are given from gardeners to other gardeners, generating connections and relations through planty gifts.

Dragon fruit, the way it enrolls humans, things, other plants, animals and insects also leads us to some concluding questions: what happens if we are led by plants into reimagining the tropical, as we have done here looking for instance at banana circles along the railway line; papaya popping up with the help of birds and humans along walls, near gutters, on the edge of parks, on compost heaps; dragon fruit—which is not tropical but behaves as if it were—creating sharing circuits and co-designing with their humans' fantastic structures? Can plants help us imagine a different Marrickville, and ways in which it can co-exist with urban renewal projects?



'Even though they haven't flowered yet —they will eventually, but I like the way they're now part of the fence. It's also a possum highway.'

The dragon fruit
flower is striking

'I just put wires and tied it up...then it can move around and grow along there.'



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