

Locating Suburbia
Memory, Place, Creativity

Edited by

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton



UTSePress

© Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton 2013
All remaining chapters © their respective authors 2013

First published by UTSePress 2013

PO Box 123

Broadway NSW 2007

<http://www.lib.uts.edu.au/utsepress-publications>

All rights reserved

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry

Title: Locating Suburbia: memory, place, creativity/ edited by
Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton.

ISBN: 9781863654326 (ebook)

Subjects: Suburbs—New South Wales—Sydney.
Suburban life—New South Wales—Sydney.

Other Authors/Contributors:

Hamilton, Paula, editor.

Ashton, Paul, 1959- editor.

Dewey Number: 307.74099441

Design and typesetting by Two Tone
Eli Hochberg, Caroline Hunter, Cameron Jones,
Minhky Le and Jumana Shakeer

Acknowledgements

We would like to thank Julie-Anne Marshall, manager of the UTS Library's eResearch unit, for supporting this project, and Margaret Malone for her marvellous contributions to bringing this collection to fruition. Thanks, too, to UTS Shopfront and its Program Manager Pauline O'Loughlin who facilitated the production of this ebook as a Shopfront project. We would also like to acknowledge the great assistance provided in various ways—including internal grants and seed funding—to the contributors in this collection by the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences' Faculty Research Office.

Finally, thanks to Professor Ross Gibson and Professor Peter Read who refereed the manuscript.

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton
Editors and Co-Directors
Centre for Creative Practice and Cultural Economy

This eBook was designed by
Eli Hochberg, Caroline Hunter, Cameron Jones,
Minhky Le and Jumana Shakeer

CONTENTS

Introduction	<i>1</i>
Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton	

MEMORY

1 The Perfect Garden	<i>7</i>
Kay Donovan	

2 Remembering the Suburban Sensory Landscape in Balmain	<i>18</i>
Paula Hamilton	

3 The First House and the Hop Farm	<i>31</i>
Margot Nash	

4 The Smell of Glass Bead Screens	<i>51</i>
Andrew Taylor	

5 Connecting to the Past	<i>75</i>
Anna Clark	

PLACE

6 A Place for Everyone	<i>88</i>
Paul Ashton	

7 Home	<i>103</i>
Sue Joseph	

8 'It Used to be a Dingy Kind of Joint'	<i>124</i>
Robert Crawford	

9 Liquid Desire	<i>140</i>
David Aylward	
10 ‘What Happened to the Locals?’	<i>154</i>
Penny Stannard	
11 Reinventing Manly	<i>170</i>
Theresa Anderson	

CREATIVITY

12 The Concrete Remains	<i>187</i>
Sarah Barns	
13 Camperdown Park	<i>204</i>
John Dale	
14 Blood, Belly, Bile	<i>213</i>
Debra Adelaide Imagery by Greg Ferris	
15 Watery Ghosts	<i>226</i>
Megan Heyward	
16 The Artist as Trickster	<i>243</i>
Elaine Lally	
17 Road, River and Rail	<i>259</i>
Chris Caines	
Author Biographies	<i>268</i>
References	<i>272</i>

INTRODUCTION

THE POLITICS AND PASSIONS OF THE SUBURBAN OASIS

Paula Hamilton and Paul Ashton

Murder in the suburbs isn't murder technically at all really is it? It's a justifiable reaction to aesthetic deprivation and golf.¹

Suburbia has been satirised and mocked by the best of them from George Orwell's 1939 caricature in *Coming up for Air* to Dame Edna Everidge from the 1960s and TV's Kath and Kim in twentieth-first century Australia. For many of the generation growing up in the twentieth century, suburbia is, on the one hand, the remembered nightmare from which the human chrysalis escaped to experience adulthood and its pleasures *elsewhere* – the stifling, conformist sameness which nonetheless hid evil deeds like murder. Others hold dear the wistful nostalgic memories about growing up in a domesticated cosy world of backyard games so effectively mobilised by conservative Prime Minister John Howard during the 1990s in relation to Earlwood, a suburb of Sydney.²

It is certainly the case that for the older generation who lived through depression and war in the twentieth century, the suburbs represented safety and peace – 'a roof over our heads'; 'a place to call our own'. Like the soldier who came back from Changi POW camp, kissed the ground at Narrabeen, a suburb in Sydney, and said: 'this'll do me'!, the expanding suburbs after the 1950s were the retreat for many men after

time abroad in global conflict; a place to replenish the spirit and build again – individual lives, families, homes, garages, sheds, gardens, lawns. Suburbs have also been long hated,³ and more recently loved,⁴ by writers and intellectuals. They have also been perceived with an uneasy ambiguity, as ‘being neither town nor country, but an unwilling combination of both, and either neat and shining, or cheap and nasty, according to the incomes of its inhabitants’.⁵ This was the ‘half world between city and country in which most Australians lived’ that architect Robin Boyd decried in his elitist work on Australia domestic architecture.⁶ Recently, however, there has been a strong and growing interest in delineating the complexities of the suburban experience rather than simply denouncing or defending it.

Over the last twenty to thirty years, suburbia has had a make-over. How it is remembered and what place it has had in our lives has also been reconfigured. Many now accept that the nostalgia relates only to a childhood dream of the white Anglo-Saxon part of the population that obscured a great deal more than it revealed. Certainly the historian Andrew May argued in 2009 that ‘the reliance of the twin fictions of the novelist’s pen and of baby-boomer nostalgia for our predominant images of post-war suburban history precludes the prospect of developing more sophisticated historical narratives’.⁷ Even before the impact of the massive post-war migration, the suburbs were more culturally and socially diverse than we have previously understood. Class and religious divisions, if not always race and ethnicity, have a long history within suburban communities.⁸ Nowadays, the articulation of that nostalgic memory in public forums is strongly contested, as suburban places are made and remade over time.

In March 2013, for example, Peter Roberts wrote a column for the *Sydney Morning Herald* which had the heading: ‘What happened to the suburb I used to know? His particular suburb was Greenacre near Lakemba in Sydney and his article juxtaposed a suburban past and present. He remembers a suburb where he grew up during the late 1950s and early 1960s as a place of peace, sparsely populated, filled with boys sports and games:

Lakemba? Sure that’s where we went to the Sunday matinee at the Odeon every week and watched such pearls as the Three Stooges, Jerry Lewis and Ben-Hur.

Roberts does not mention that Lakemba is now the site of a mosque and one of the biggest Muslim communities in Australia. But most of the *Herald* readers will have this in mind. In his (Anglo-Saxon) memory, there was no violence as there is now, which he blames on the ‘enclave of Little Lebanon’. Greenacre and Lakemba now, he says, have been ‘turned into a minefield, or a battlefield, or a refuge

of drug dealers, criminals, drive-by shooters and terror'. His elegaic tone is one of sadness and loss:

That was my home – the place where I once simply couldn't imagine living anywhere else – transformed to the place where I could never imagine living again.

There were several responses to this letter which seemed to strike a Sydney nerve and gave readers a sense of how the media mediates our collective memories. At least two letters accused Roberts of cloaking racism in nostalgia. Omar Sakr replied in the same edition of the *Herald* with an awareness about the public prominence of such views and how they need to be interrogated. Sakr is particularly critical of the assumption that all of the problems are the result of another ethnic group, as though murder and rape were not part of any other suburban culture. This view, he says, absolves one group for taking responsibility for the problems of the community as a whole. For him, growing up in this area probably twenty or thirty years later, the most important element was the camaraderie of his diverse delinquent friends.

One letter, though, was from someone who had lived for eighteen months in Lakemba until recently and also spent time there on a regular basis now. Con Vaitsas, now of Ashbury, claimed that Roberts' vision was 'way out of whack with reality' and very outdated. He argued that Greenacre and Lakemba were no longer predominantly the home of the Lebanese but a mixture of very different nationalities living peacefully side by side: 'my neighbours were Filipinos and Colombians on either side and Africans opposite us', he wrote. So his perception was one of a successful multicultural community.

Such an exchange does little to recognise the complexity of current suburban life but it does juxtapose the memories from different generations and cultures against one another as alternative experiences of belonging to particular suburban localities.

What is Suburbia?

Suburbs are geographically defined areas on a map, spatially located in our memories and also an idea: they colonise our imaginations as both inside and outside the pale. But beyond the government defined boundaries, how are they delineated? Are they anything beyond the city central? Inner city areas such as Surry Hills or Balmain are certainly not brought to mind by this term. Spatially the suburbs are seen as 'out there' away from the inner city which somehow don't meet the criteria for single story occupation on a block of land which we think of as characteristically suburban. But where does the inner city begin and end now? Redfern, Waterloo, Alexandria, Drummoyne,

St Leonard's? 'As a state of mind and a way of living', Humphrey McQueen has observed,

Suburbia is not confined to certain geographic areas but can thrive where there are no suburbs... It is pointless to lay down a criterion for suburbia that includes duplexes, but excludes a row of terraces. Where it survives outside its natural habitat, suburbia still aspires to the ways of living that are most completely realised by nuclear families on garden blocks with detached houses.⁹

The identity of suburbia, so far as it can be ascribed one, is shifting and insecure; a borderline and liminal space.¹⁰ Dominant stereotypes have listed it as 'on the margins' beyond edges of cultural sophistication and tradition' and the areas that make up 'sprawl'.¹¹ But in the twenty-first century this static view has to be modified somewhat. And it is evident from this collection that suburban dwellers themselves have redefined being cosmopolitan as house prices in the inner suburbs skyrocket and push people further afield.¹²

The study of suburbs is often viewed as separate from the city or the urban as a whole. But in fact not only are suburbs obviously integral; they are now part of the networked city, reinforcing much older electricity grids, transport and water services with contemporary communications networks, especially the internet and mobile telephony which has facilitated greater interaction between suburbs and across the urban generally. Suburbs are always relational in this sense and though we tend to throw a light on the local or the small concerns within the suburb as case studies, this collection does not argue for their isolation from the wider urban landscape, for we know that local knowledge too, has the power to change lives.

This collection was set up as a collaborative project by members of the Research Strength in Creative Practices and Cultural Economy at the University of Technology, Sydney, is in the first instance a testament to that range and complexity of twenty-first century responses to city suburbs, predominantly in Sydney, though with a nod to other suburban contexts on the most-populated eastern seaboard of Australia, such as Melbourne and Brisbane. Secondly, the collection showcases the lively engagement and interdisciplinary nature of the intellectual culture in the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Technology, Sydney, from the more traditional scholarly approaches of Humanities scholars to the range of cultural forms which make up Creative Practice in the academy, especially in this

case, Creative Writing and Media Arts.¹³ We had many seminars and discussions which took place in 2011 and 2012 about the ideas for the collection. We began by viewing it from the perspective of lived experience, always believing it possible that new technologies can create different spaces for collaborative scholarship within the traditional frame of a book.

And so it proved. We found that the tension between representing how a world was experienced while keeping that detached critical eye on its form and nature could work very well through a range of artistic and scholarly practice that spoke to each other. Karen Till, writing about her own engagement with memory studies as an artist, argues that more traditional scholars have a lot to gain by heeding the work of artists 'who also acknowledge the ways that people experience memory as multi-sensual, spatial ways of understanding their worlds'.¹⁴

Three distinct themes emerged in relation to the central concept of re-imagining the suburban which people researched and made for this publication. As our title indicates these became remembered suburbs anchored either by our own personal past or those of others, suburbs as places that were made and remade across time and suburbs not only as the subject for various creative representations but also increasingly where creativity as an identified practice or industry takes place.¹⁵

Some of our essays take as their subject particular suburbs such as Bondi, Manly and Campbelltown. Others range across time and the space of the urban and suburban. Others focus on those inner city in-betweens, subject of urban renewal and consolidation, such as Marrickville, Pyrmont and Balmain. Some utilise the concept of the even more local through a focus on the park, shops, the backyard or the suburban house. And still others explore what took place in the homes of these areas there that came to be identified with suburban life.

Referring to the suburbs of England, Roger Silverstone previously commented in his 1997 book *Visions of Suburbia* that 'An understanding of how suburbia was produced and continues to be both produced and reproduced is an essential precondition for an understanding of the twentieth century, an understanding above all of our emerging character and contradictions of our everyday lives'.¹⁶ Whether his argument for the centrality of suburbia to historical understanding still holds for the twenty-first century remains to be seen given the many different shapes it now takes in our imaginations.

MEMORY



16

THE ARTIST AS TRICKSTER

Elaine Lally

CONTENTS

REFERENCES

THE ARTIST AS TRICKSTER

PERTINENT-IMPERTINENT THINKING IN WESTERN SYDNEY

Elaine Lally

What interested me in the C3West project with Panthers is how to find a translation... so when we have meetings, I can feel the moment where, perhaps, we are too abstract, or we have gone too far, and then – this is a very unbelievable moment – when we have to find new words, new ways to have some communication with the other one.¹

We have to stop and dream. It can be very hard to dream, you know, in the world economy or in the contexts of today's life... What we have commissioned Sylvie and François to do is to present a safe place to dream, because a safe place to dream is in a fiction, in a story.²

Pablo Picasso famously said that 'art is a lie that tells the truth'. Lewis Hyde, writing in *Trickster makes this world: How disruptive imagination creates culture*, quotes this aphorism in support of his contention that some artists are able to embody the spirit of the trickster myth that exists in many of the world's cultures: the Monkey King who travelled from China to India with the good pilgrim Tripitaka; the North American Indian myths of Coyote; Hermes; Mercury; Prometheus; Krishna; African myths of Eshu and Anansi, the Ashanti spider trickster. Paradoxically, these myths assert 'that the origins, liveliness, and durability of cultures require that there be space for figures whose function is to uncover and disrupt the very things that cultures are based on'.³ Indeed, for Hyde, artists have a touch of the prophet about them, with the power to help others see into the hidden heart of things, to collaborate in imagining possible futures that have the potential to become collective aspirations.⁴

This chapter explores the trickster capacities of artists in relation to the suburban context of western Sydney. It focuses in particular on the 'imagineering' work of one of the individuals quoted above: the French contemporary visual artist Sylvie Blocher, as a participant in C3West, an arts, business and community collaboration driven by a coalition of contemporary arts institutions. Blocher, and her artistic cooperative Campement Urbain, has created an art-driven intervention that attempts to address the challenges of suburban development for communities and organisations in Sydney's Penrith region. Located 50km west of the iconic landmarks of the Sydney CBD – the Harbour Bridge, Sydney Opera House, Darling Harbour and the foreshore – Penrith, although a significant regional commercial and administrative hub serving over 500 000 people, has long been thought of as a 'poor cousin' to the more affluent areas of Sydney's 'global arc'.

At the core of this collaborative venture is the Penrith Panthers, a major sporting, entertainment and leisure organisation that has been a cultural focus for the area for more than 75 years. Panthers

marketing manager Max Cowan describes, in the quote above, how the pressures and challenges of contemporary life can leave little space for imaginative exploration of possible futures. By creating an imaginative fiction, which has its roots in the histories, memories and geographies of the local community and of Panthers itself, Blocher and Campement Urbain achieved an opening out of the possibilities for addressing those challenges. The resulting ‘space for dreaming’, in Cowan’s phrase, has become a place for making connections between the past and the future through the lens of the present. However, in order for these dreams to become reality, they must be able to connect with the pragmatic constraints of practical expression and implementation. They must be capable of providing a concrete link, rather than an abstract conceptualisation, between memory, imagination and aspiration, and for the work of the artist to enlist the resources of established bureaucratic, political and organisational frameworks for urban development.

This chapter provides an empirically based illustration of the dynamic collaborative processes of Blocher and Campement Urbain’s intervention in Penrith, drawing on material gathered through a five-year ethnographic research project tracking the development of the C3West partnership.⁵ I want to argue that this kind of imaginative intervention is exactly what Hyde is referring to when he juxtaposes the creative sensibility of the artist with examples of trickster myths and stories that exist throughout the world.

Blocher describes the challenges her intervention aims to address: The problems facing Penrith – social disconnection, low-density sprawl, minimal public transport, monocultural spaces that are dead at night – are the same as [those facing] communities on urban fringes everywhere, including Paris.⁶

Suburban development in Australia and internationally has drawn from a limited repertoire of models and trends that have changed little over time. Suburban landscapes all over Australia seem to have more in common based on the period in which they were built, the style of housing and the layout of the street grid, than they are differentiated by geographic location. The non-arts stakeholders in the C3West process shared an aspiration to rethink the potential of suburbia in a way that would resist homogenisation and the creation of an ‘anywhere’ place. Blocher’s role in C3West’s developing partnership with Penrith Panthers has exploded the boundaries of the initial brief articulated in 2005, to become, in 2012, a set of radical proposals for the urban redevelopment of the whole of the Penrith region.

C3West, Penrith, Panthers and Campement Urbain

C3West was initially conceived through discussions between Brisbane-based art consultant Jock McQueenie and the Director of the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, Elizabeth Ann Macgregor. These discussions led to a partnership between the MCA and two galleries in Sydney's west, Penrith Regional Gallery & The Lewers Bequest and Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre, to apply McQueenie's '3Cs' model to businesses in western Sydney. While working as Arts Officer for the Tasmanian Trades and Labor Council (TTLC) in the 1990s, McQueenie had developed a professional consultancy practice custom-designing arts projects that sought to connect communities with artists and industries in new ways. The name '3Cs' was coined by McQueenie to indicate the coming together of community, culture and commerce within these projects. The approach proved to be a distinctive Australian model that resonated with broader international trends within contemporary art, including an increasing emphasis on engagement⁷ and an interest in the commercial potential and importance of creativity (artistic and non-artistic) and the creative industries.⁸

The initial discussions between Macgregor and McQueenie identified the western suburban region of Sydney as a potentially fruitful site for the application of new ways of seeing, revealing and making manifest an alternative vision. Western Sydney has often been characterised as a 'cultural wasteland', and negative stereotypes about the inhabitants, the urban environment itself and the collective lifestyle circulate frequently.⁹ Over the last three decades there have been concerted policy efforts by all levels of government, as well as calls by many organisations and communities from within the region for a shift in the collective imaginary. The region tends to be seen in terms of what it lacks – culturally, economically, socially – rather than as a place with distinctive assets and potential. McQueenie and Macgregor approached two local galleries, the Casula Powerhouse Arts Centre and the Penrith Regional Gallery and Lewers Bequest, to establish C3West as a mechanism for exploring how this region could reap the benefits of the capacity of the trickster-artist to catalyse innovative synthesis.

C3West aims to promote a new kind of interactive partnership between cultural institutions and corporate partners, with the objective of an improved connection by both with the community. Each of the cultural institutions involved in C3West has a history of active involvement in community-related projects and also in engagement with corporate organisations. However, the C3West initiative is distinctive in that it moves beyond conventional forms of corporate engagement, such as sponsorship or the commissioning of a public artwork, to instead

develop innovative synergies between community engagement and commercial perspectives. As artist Craig Walsh, who has developed projects for C3West and has also had extensive experience working with commercial partners in a conventional public art commissioning relationship, puts it:

It's not about an organisation suggesting or supplying artists to satisfy the need for a piece of public art in their foyer or their football ground... with the Panthers specifically, the conversation, the dialogue, was always about, 'Well, what are we trying to achieve here?'¹⁰

For the arts institutions involved, according to MCA Director Macgregor, 'it's about ideas. It's about looking for artists that have something interesting to communicate and an ability to communicate'. Macgregor insists that the best contemporary visual artists have a heightened capacity to see the world differently, which recalls Hyde's assertion that artists are able to see into the 'hidden heart' of things. For Macgregor, therefore, the artists commissioned by C3West are expected to take their distinctive vision and use it to create new realities.

Blocher and Campement Urbain, applying the artist's capacity for productive disruption, achieved a fragmentation of those negative perceptions and stereotypes, through asking – as Blocher puts it – questions that are at the same time both pertinent and impertinent. Their intervention therefore becomes both practical and potentially implementable, because it preserves continuity with those aspects of local heritage and culture that are sources of pride.

Exploring potential business partners for C3West, McQueenie made connections with the Penrith Panthers Entertainment Group, through Penrith Regional Gallery's chairman. Panthers made an ideal partner because it is much more than a rugby league club or entertainment precinct. The Panthers Group has expanded from its origins as a single sports club and rugby league team to become the operator of 14 registered clubs located throughout NSW, Australia. Panthers' headquarters is in Penrith, on an 82-hectare riverfront site at the foot of the Blue Mountains. The club provides a key social focus for the Penrith area, both in terms of local identity and social infrastructure.

As the second largest employer in Penrith, with significant investments and strong community links, the club has a fascinating history but was increasingly facing a number of challenges. Panthers already engages extensively with diverse sectors of its community, from the people who use its hospitality and leisure facilities, to fans and the players

and families of its rugby league club, as well as the local community through outreach programs such as Panthers on the Prowl.

The first artist introduced to Panthers by C3West was Craig Walsh, in July 2005. Panthers asked Walsh to find a way to express the importance of rugby league as experienced by the club's community. Walsh's project, *Heads up*, a series of large-scale (200 x 150 cm) colour images of players and fans, was completed in September 2008. These images, taken immediately after a game, attempted to capture the real-time experience of rugby league games and the strong emotions they engender. For Walsh, *Heads up* aimed to position the fans and the players as having an equally important role in the club's community and culture. *Heads up* was first exhibited at the MCA from September 2008, and in July 2010 a selection of the images, including both player and fan portraits, was installed in the redeveloped foyer of Panthers' Penrith club.

The enthusiastic reception of Walsh's work by the Panthers organisation – the exhibition launch at the MCA featured the attendance of the whole rugby league team, all wearing matching dark tailored suits, as well as many of the fans depicted in the images – demonstrates that Panthers had been actively thinking about its place within its community, as well as its future, for some time before Blocher's arrival. It also illustrates the strength of Panthers' commitment to exploring innovative ways of engaging with its community, and reinforced the importance of its sporting activities.

Building on this early collaboration, C3West brought French artist Sylvie Blocher to Australia in September 2006 to meet with Panthers. Blocher was particularly impressed by Max Cowan's account of Panthers as an organisation striving to establish and maintain a strong sense of community under challenging conditions. She detected a utopian element underpinning the club's ethos, but was disturbed by what she described as the alienating and demoralising atmosphere of the club's gaming rooms. Initially thinking that, like Walsh, she might develop a project around the club's sporting dimension – she had worked in the past on the topic of sporting figures and had exhibited work at the MCA during the Sydney Olympics – Blocher became increasingly intrigued by what seemed like a paradoxical tension between the club's community-based origins and commitment, and its commercial focus and urban development ambitions.

Blocher is best known as an artist for her *Living pictures* series of video works, but she has also worked extensively with Campement Urbain, a collaborative art and social action group founded by Blocher and her partner François Daune. The group has a flexible

membership, which includes architects, urban planners, sociologists and philosophers, and they have worked with groups of people in many parts of the world, particularly in relation to urban problems. Blocher's attention became focussed on not just proposing a solo artistic project, but on involving Campement Urbain to intervene in Panthers' Riverlink Precinct Plan, a planned development for mixed commercial and residential use of its 82 hectares of land, strategically situated between the Nepean River and Penrith's city centre. Blocher presented a proposal entitled *The Panthers of the future/The future of the Panthers*, which critiqued Panthers' suburban environment, while supporting the possibilities of its 'utopian project'. She proposed two elements: an analysis of the 'urban territory' of Penrith, to be conducted by Campement Urbain; and a video work for the *Living pictures* series built around the question 'What do you miss?' (or 'What do you lack?').

In her proposal *The Panthers of the future/The future of the Panthers*, Blocher describes her initial impressions of the Panthers club and how she conceived of intervening at a much more strategic and ambitious level than C3West had originally envisaged:

The very first night of my stay in Penrith, [I was taken] to one of the Panthers' playrooms. I stayed there for some time to watch people play the slot machines. I was intrigued by the obvious sadness that reigned in this vast playroom. Some people had come in groups, but the other gamblers were on their own, restlessly performing the same movement, to push the button of the slot machine. Most of them looked rather lost... Here, in the Panthers' playroom, I experienced something close to absolute solitude. Afterwards I kept asking myself, why do those who construct these playrooms don't think of ways to make people dream?¹¹

Both aspects of the proposal were accepted by the club and, in July 2008, at an event held at the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre in Penrith, the results of the first aspect of the proposal, Campement Urbain's analysis of Penrith's 'urban territory', were formally presented to the project partners: Panthers, their financial partners ING, and Penrith City Council.

Campement Urbain's approach brought into play the artists' prerogative to use fiction or artificial myth to articulate difficult truths. The event focussed around a video composed of three parts, accompanied by a verbal presentation by Blocher and Daune. The first component of the video, *Tale for adults*, takes the form of a fantasy story told through a dialogue between a woman and a child. While the

location 'at the foot of the Pink Mountains' is not named, the allusion to Penrith and its geographical, social and political contexts was clear to all present. The second component, *Urban scenario*, analysed and critiqued the 'real' urban space of Penrith and put forward a proposal to rethink the Riverlink development. Finally, *Architectural examples from around the world: A think-tank of possibilities*, provided a visual montage of utopian architectural images, a catalogue of imaginative planning possibilities.

The event fell somewhere between cinema, performance art and lecture. It critiqued the planning process to date while still seeking to inspire hope in the possibilities at hand and to recruit Panthers and its partners, including Penrith City Council, to establish a collaborative planning alliance that would enhance their existing planning and development processes. As Schrage points out, 'creativity often builds on the shards and fragments of different understandings'.¹² The performative intervention blurred the boundaries between bureaucratic or discipline-based ways of thinking – visual art, architecture, planning – and suggested a new way of collaborating through the simultaneous translation of different approaches.

When Panthers decided to proceed with the Campement Urbain vision after the July 2008 presentation, Penrith City Council's Director of Planning, Craig Butler, could see the potential of this approach to encourage new ways of thinking, not just to inform the Riverlink development, but also the planning processes of other areas of Penrith. Butler pinpointed the attraction of the artistic capacity to see differently: 'François and Sylvie come around the side of issues and they paint a different picture'. He became a champion of the project within council and successfully lobbied to establish a consortium that included Panthers, the council, Landcom and C3West, and which commissioned Campement Urbain to extend its inquiry.

The second component of the *The Panthers of the future/The future of the Panthers* proposal, a video artwork for the *Living Pictures* series entitled *What is missing?*, was produced out of work done on a return visit by Blocher to Penrith in April 2009. Blocher's *Living pictures* process involves video-recording people over a period of two hours or more during which she prompts them to speak directly to camera (Blocher herself is out-of-shot behind the camera), using questions that are:

wide-ranging, politicized, deeply personal, idiosyncratic, sometimes perplexing or even invasive. [T]hey aim to draw the

speaker out from themselves, to shed their carefully constructed sociality and reveal a more intimate version of themselves.¹³

The *Living pictures* works are presented as wall-sized video projections, which typically take the form of an address or monologue by the participants. The viewer, as listener, is invited to experience the work as a kind of ‘witnessing’ of an intimate portrait: ‘freed from the bounds of social convention, the participants offer responses that are in turns confronting and revelatory’.¹⁴

In *What is missing?*, Blocher portrays each of her Penrith participants as a pair of identical twins, as if they are in dialogue with themselves. A diverse array of residents took part in the work, including a former mayor, Max Cowan himself, young people and elderly, migrants and indigenous people, all representing the cultural diversity of Penrith itself. Their stories are personal, intimate, and at times confronting. An Aboriginal man describes his brother’s involuntary institutionalisation from the age of four to 57. A Mexican woman speaks of how an experience of a violent abduction brought about her migration to Australia, but that the move had not brought her happiness and she had a deep sense of separation from her culture. An angry young skinhead advocates racial violence in his address. Providing a ‘warts and all’ portrait of the residents of the Penrith area, *What is missing?* forces the viewer – including those stakeholders involved in the planning and development of the region itself – to face the reality of everyday life in the suburbs, the dreams and hopes of the residents, as well as their fears and occasions of despair. *What is missing?* was exhibited at Penrith Regional Gallery (alongside the video presented in July 2008) and as part of a major retrospective of Blocher’s work at the MCA in Sydney, between February and April 2010.

Ironically, the Riverlink development itself was put on the backburner after the global financial crisis. But the incorporation of Penrith City Council into the C3West project network meant that other opportunities opened up. The council commissioned Campement Urbain to undertake a similar process of ‘imagineering’ by exploring the aspirations and concerns of local residents and using the resulting insights to re-imagine Penrith. Blocher returned to Penrith to conduct video interviews with more than 40 local residents, asking them three questions: If you were Mayor of Penrith, what would you change? What is your suggestion for an annual event for the community of Penrith? What is your relationship to beauty?

The resulting work, *The future of Penrith/Penrith of the future*, was presented at a symposium held at the iconic Sydney Opera House on 22 October 2011, and at Penrith Regional Gallery a few days

before that. NSW Premier Barry O'Farrell, speaking at the launch, described Blocher's work as having 'liberated candid insights from local people about their unspoken dreams and desires'. The presentation consisted of a video documentary of local residents talking about Penrith and its future, a critical analysis of the geography and urban design of Penrith and a set of proposals for the urban recalibration and reconstruction of the city centre, in the form of a 3D visualization of a future Penrith. These materials were subsequently made available on the council website and also displayed in the foyer of the Council offices.¹⁵ Unveiling the results of Campement Urbain's planning process, Penrith City Mayor Greg Davies invoked language similar to that used by Max Cowan in the quotation that opened this chapter:

Penrith can dare to be different and stand out as a creative regional city... This vision is just the start. We want it to get people thinking about what can happen, what is possible if we dare to dream.¹⁶

Campement Urbain's proposals for Penrith form the basis for ongoing engagement between the council, its local community and other stakeholders such as state government transport and planning agencies. They have gone on to national recognition as an inspirational vision: *The future of Penrith/Penrith of the future* won the 2012 Australia Award for Urban Design, awarded by the Planning Institute of Australia, in the Policies, Programs and Concepts – Large Scale category. The awards jury praised the concept as 'an inspirational vision, utopian in its idealistic imagery setting out to meet every challenge with fresh imagination'.¹⁷

In practical terms, Campement Urbain proposes the development of a new ground plane and landscape configuration from which 'one can appreciate the totality of the city and understand its landscape context which integrates large-scale elements in order to celebrate the topography of the Blue Mountains'.¹⁸ As is typical in Australian urbanised areas, there is a heavy reliance in Penrith on mechanized transport. Connectivity between zones is fragmented, with isolated and poorly connected areas, and it is necessary to circumnavigate large areas to go from one place to another. Campement Urbain's analysis of the land-use from the perspective of the main transport and connectivity links (the river, major roads, rail and bus connections), identifies 'archipelagos of opportunity' – spaces that are available for development or redevelopment in the city centre area – and how these connect to the 'residential ocean'. The objectives of their series of detailed proposals are to connect and provide crossing and meeting places, as well as to stimulate, absorb and develop. Their proposals

make detailed recommendations for that part of the Penrith city centre which stretches along the railway line and on either side of the river, and which incorporates the major Westfield shopping centre, the City Council Chambers with its associated cultural centre (the Joan Sutherland Performing Arts Centre) and, indeed, the area of the Panthers Riverlink development that was originally under discussion with Campement Urbain.

The Productivity and Process of Disruptive Imagination

C3West's approach avoids a conventional commissioning framework in favour of a mutual deliberative process as the means to define and develop the work. Bartelme proposes that business leaders can learn to think differently through exploring the tensions between the divergent perspectives of art and business, such as 'the need for creativity and the need for structure, the will to take risks and the desire for control, and the will to lead with the requirement for participative followers'.¹⁹ While the world of the arts is comfortable working within these tensions, in the business world these tensions can be difficult to negotiate.

It may be that Panthers is unusual, as a commercial organisation that was already highly engaged with its communities, and whose business is, at its core, about risk-taking, both in the sporting arena and in the gaming aspects of its entertainment and leisure facilities, and that these distinctive characteristics were what made it receptive to the C3West approach. Cowan, indeed, was able to perceive how innovative thinking in the present could be framed as an imagined future, one which could be made real via the practicalities of the present. Cultural broker McQueenie noted that 'conceptually, Max pulled it out of the future'. This ability to 'pull it out of the future' recalls Hyde's characterisation of the trickster:

Trickster is the great shape-shifter, which I take to mean not so much that he shifts the shape of his own body but that, given the materials of this world, he demonstrates the degree to which the way we have shaped them may be altered. He makes this world and then he plays with its materials.²⁰

Picasso's contention that 'art is a lie that tells the truth' resonates with both Cowan and Blocher's injunction that creating a future that is more than simply a continuation of business as usual requires us to dream. Where their aspirations for the partnership came together was in a shared perception that it was critically important to retain the sense of utopian aspiration which had characterised the Panthers right from its origins. The project, in a sense, needed to take Panthers back to its roots in the community.

Looking back on the experience of working with Campement Urbain, Max Cowan wrote that:

Campement Urbain presented a bold and ambitious vision... It establishes new ways of thinking about the suburban city [and] offers a new standard, a new self-belief... I knew then, back in 2005 – and it remains true – that Panthers had to seek out new paradigms, new ways of operating, new images and perspectives of itself, it needed to get a grip on a future that was shutting down its relevance.²¹

Indeed, Max Cowan's capacity to see what might not be obvious to others, to recognise the productive value of such disruptive interventions, may be a kind of trickster quality within his own personality, which made it possible for him to use his marketing role at Panthers as a platform for transformation. While a marketing manager is generally constrained by the need to reflect contemporary realities and plausible future projections, Campement Urbain accessed more freedom by strategically locating their work within an artistic framework, rather than that of an urban planning consultancy:

The position of the artist allows people to discover what they wouldn't normally admit. The artistic process with local people unties tongues and represses taboos.²²

The device of creating a 'fiction' or 'fairytale' creates both distance and intimacy, enabling the speaking of what Blocher describes as 'difficult truths':

You say what you want but you give other names, so everybody knows what you are talking about, but everybody's protected.²³

This, however, is not purely a speculative process. Blocher explains how this method of working cannot be rushed, and that it requires patience and a long-term investment of interaction: Campement Urbain uses a special process that we call in French the *dispositif*. It could be translated in English by the word 'device'. So, the 'device' is how to construct the fiction, an urban fiction. In the beginning, the things that people say are always very, very conventional because they are under social control. It takes a very, very long time before their words begin to be singular, more active. It takes a very long time for them to recover their proudness. It takes a very, very long time for them to construct themselves like a subject and not like objects.

This description of their method of working demonstrates that, although there is a utopian flavour to both Blocher and Daune's new mythology

for Penrith, as Hyde points out in relation to the trickster's disruption of the status quo, this can be somewhat deceptive: 'trickster stories are radically anti-idealist; they are made in and for a world of imperfections'.²⁴ There are indeed many artists, Hyde argues, who choose to work in a way that hopes 'to combine disruption with repair'.²⁵ They 'disjoint what they have found themselves born to, but then go on to make new harmony in place of the old'.²⁶

Blocher and Daune explicitly understand the process of creating their art as being part of their research and development for Campement Urbain's urban development proposals. It is also important, however, that, for an artist whose practices stray a long way from the art-world contexts of galleries and exhibitions, the work they produce is still capable of being positioned as art. This is because, as Liz Ann Macgregor puts it, C3West is primarily a 'hearts and minds' campaign aimed towards demystifying contemporary art and artists, countering stereotypes that such art is difficult to understand and elitist.

Conclusion: Responding Creatively to the Specificity of Place

From the perspective of art world processes, C3West's aims resonate with a trend in contemporary art that conceives of the work of the artist as 'a process of communicative exchange rather than a physical object'.²⁷ The influential art critic Bourriaud argues that an extended conception of aesthetic form is needed in relation to artworks that are brought into being across social and institutional boundaries. This expansion in how we understand the social role of artworks needs to include 'communicational' elements – whether labelled social, relational, connective, dialogical or collaborative – because aesthetic form exists actively 'in the encounter and in the dynamic relationship enjoyed by an artistic proposition with other formations, artistic or otherwise'.²⁸

The Campement Urbain process, and in particular Blocher's trickster-artist capacity to disrupt expectations through her video works, creates spaces for imaginative invention. Blocher's approach, by responding fearlessly and creatively to the stories and desires of the ordinary people of Penrith, allows for the forging of new links and connections between the past, present and future. It can be thought of as a process of 'future-making' in Suchman, Danyi and Watts' terms, in that it comprises practices orientated to projections of transformative change. It corresponds with their understanding of 'the future not as a temporal period existing somewhere beyond the present, but as an effect of imaginative, rhetorical and material practices – including memorialised pasts'.²⁹ For both Penrith City Council and the Panthers, the commitment of Campement Urbain to honouring the specificities of local communities and sites resonates

with their own commitment to maintain local traditions and culture while attempting to address the challenges of a rapidly changing globalised context for urban development and planning.

Blocher and Daune position *Campement Urbain* as a process of art-making because it gives them a kind of ‘artistic license’ that they wouldn’t have if their intentions were understood in different disciplinary terms. As Blocher explains:

It’s a really very interesting process, and to put us not in the architectural field, or landscaping, or public space, but it puts us directly in the arts process, because when you are an artist they all think you are mad! So, you come, you arrive, it looks not dangerous. We don’t look dangerous. But then we are on the point, very interesting, where we can ask the question that nobody wants to ask, and nobody wants to hear... When you say you are working as an artist, in fact you can open other fields and you can ask questions as you want, where you want.

In Hyde’s analysis of the relationship between trickster myths and the cultural freedom we accord to artists to articulate their distinctive view of the world and to provide us with prophetic visions of possible futures, this freedom comes from a kind of extreme openness. Hyde describes how Allen Ginsberg was once asked by a young man who had heard him lecture on prophecy: ‘Mr Ginsberg, how do you become a prophet?’ Ginsberg replied: ‘Tell your secrets’. Uncovering secrets, Hyde tells us, ‘lifts the shame covers. It allows articulation to enter where silence once ruled. “Tell your secrets” is a practice for loosening the boundaries of the self, for opening up the ego’.³⁰ Blocher’s practice of asking ‘pertinent and impertinent questions’ is explicitly designed to infiltrate and insinuate itself beyond the ‘shame covers’ of those she speaks to.

Cowan is unambiguous about his own recognition that this was a capacity that could be harnessed by Panthers to help them forge links with the council and their development partners around what might be seen as a risky proposition:

I believe that we can actually do something here that attracts worldwide attention and praise... We have to do something that’s completely different, and doing something completely different is quite threatening to most organisations and authorities. It scares them... So what we have to have Sylvie [do is] excite the people who are in a position to make the

decisions. She has to light the flame for them. Because if she can't do that, then we can't do it.

CONTENTS

REFERENCES

Cowan clearly sees that the trickster nature of the artist's social position absorbs some of the risk of making proposals that call for courageous, bold and dangerously uncertain action. Blocher herself describes the overall aim of their Penrith intervention as 'to position Penrith as a place where people can dream, create bonds and build shared histories'.³¹ This unlikely partnership between a football club, a local council and a contemporary visual artist, if successful, may be able to alleviate one of the challenges of Penrith, as identified by one of the Panthers' employees interviewed as part of this research. He lamented that all the school friends he'd grown up with in Penrith had moved away from the area. Rather than being a place that young people can't wait to move away from, Campement Urbain's intervention in the area may provide the conditions under which Penrith can re-invent itself as a fertile breeding-ground for suburban dreaming to become reality.

Elaine Lally is Associate Professor in the Faculty of Arts and Social Sciences at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her scholarship focuses on creative practice and digital culture, and explores material culture, consumption and everyday life, drawing on the sociology and philosophy of technology. With Len Ang and Kay Anderson, she co-edited *The Art of Engagement: Culture, Collaboration, Innovation* (2011). She is currently working on a book about online musical collaboration, 'Music making in the Cloud: creativity, collaboration and social media', to be published by Intellect in 2014. She is the author of *At Home with Computers* (Berg, 2002).

Margot Nash holds a MFA (by research) from the College of Fine Arts at the University of NSW. She is an award winning filmmaker and a Senior Lecturer in Creative Practices at the University of Technology, Sydney where she coordinates the postgraduate writing program. Her areas of research include the theory and practice of screenwriting, developing subtext, film directing and Australian independent film history. Her film credits include the experimental shorts *We Aim To Please* (1976: co filmmaker) and *Shadow Panic* (1989: prod, writer, director), the documentary feature *For Love Or Money* (1982: co filmmaker, editor) and the feature dramas *Vacant Possession* (1994: writer, director) and *Call Me Mum* (2005: director, co-script editor). In 2012 she was Filmmaker in Residence at Zürich University of the Arts where she developed a feature length personal essay documentary film about memory and history.

Penny Stannard is a PhD candidate at the University of Technology, Sydney. Her research examines the tensions, ambiguities and contradictions that arise when suburban Australia is placed within the cultural policy discussion. Of particular interest are the intersections that occur between the physical and imagined dimensions of suburbia and how these are encapsulated both theoretically and 'on the ground'. Penny has had a twenty-year career producing contemporary cultural programs for organisations across the government, community, education and not for profit sectors. Her work spans disciplines of practice and is informed by methodologies that engage communities, researchers, policy makers, educators and artists in partnerships that result in creating new cultural material and influencing policy directions.

Andrew Taylor is a Senior Lecturer in Media Arts at the University of Technology, Sydney. He is also a filmmaker and photographer and his film work has been awarded and screened at Australian and International festivals. Andrew's recent research has focused on the use of still images in documentary and work that falls between film and photography. He is currently working on 'Love, Death & Photography', a series of film-photo-essays for TV broadcast and online exhibition.

Chapter 15: Watery Ghosts

CONTENTS

RETURN TO
CHAPTER 15

- 1 Michael De Certeau, *The Practice of Everyday Life*, University of California Press, 1984, p108.
- 2 Ross Gibson, *Seven Versions of an Australian Badland*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 2002, p2.
- 3 Gladesville Campus Master Plan, (Online). Available: http://www.health.nsw.gov.au/hospitals/gladesville_mp.asp (Accessed 6 May, 2012).
- 4 Former uranium smelter site, Hunter's Hill (Inquiry), Parliament of NSW Report 2008, (Online). Available: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/parlment/committee.nsf/0/8C6EFA4FA782EDC5CA25744B0007DA3B> (Accessed 12 May, 2012).
- 5 Redevelopment and Remediation of the Rhodes Peninsula, (Online). Available: http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rhodes,_New_South_Wales#cite_note-ParlEnqReport-8 (Accessed 6 May, 2012).
- 6 Final Report, Redevelopment and Remediation of the Rhodes Peninsula, Parliament of NSW Report 2002, (Online). Available: <http://www.parliament.nsw.gov.au/prod/PARLMENT/Committee.nsf/0/E74C6E72C3AFDA00CA256CF4000A804C> (Accessed 10 May, 2012).
- 7 G.M. Mudd, 'The Legacy of Early Uranium Efforts in Australia 1906 to 1945: From Radium Hill to the Atomic Bomb and Today', *Historical Records of Australian Science*, 2005, p 16 <http://www.publish.csiro.au/?paper=HR05013>
- 8 Fishing in Sydney Harbour guidelines, NSW Dept of Primary Industries, (Online). Available: <http://www.dpi.nsw.gov.au/fisheries/recreational/info/sydney-closure> (Accessed 10 May, 2012).
- 9 N. Neumark, *Memory flows: rivers, creeks, and the Great Artesian Basin*, 2009,(Online). Available: <http://www.communication.uts.edu.au/centres/cmair/projects/index.html> (Accessed 15 April, 2012).
- 10 Simon Schama, *Landscape and Memory*, Vintage Books, New York, 1995, p258.
- 11 *ibid*, p265.
- 12 De Certeau, *op cit*, p108.
- 13 T. Edensor, *Walking through Ruins in Ways of Walking*, p137
- 14 Ross Gibson and Kate Richards. *Life After Wartime*, 2003-2007, (Online). Available: <http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/> (Accessed 12 May, 2012).
- 15 Ross Gibson and Kate Richards, *Life After Wartime, a suite of multimedia artworks*, Complete_suite pdf, p1. (Online). Available: <http://www.lifeafterwartime.com/download-pdfs.html> (Accessed 12 May, 2012).
- 16 D. Beattie, *The Wrong Crowd*, (Online), 2001. Available: <http://www.abc.net.au/wrongcrowd/> (Accessed 15 January 2010).
- 17 Debra Beattie, *The Wrong Crowd: An Online Documentary and Analytical Contextualisation*, PhD thesis, 2003, eprint, QUT, p52. (Online). Available: <http://eprints.qut.edu.au/15874/> (Accessed 15 January 2010).
- 18 Megan Heyward, *Of Day, Of Night*, Eastgate Systems, 2005, (Online). ISBN 1-884511-45-7. Available: <http://www.eastgate.com/catalog/OfDayOfNight.html> (Accessed 15 January 2013).

- 19 Hans K. Rustad, 'A Four-Sided Model for Reading Hypertext Fiction', *Hyperrhiz 06: Visionary Landscapes*, 2009, (Online). Available: <http://www.hyperrhiz.net/hyperrhiz06/19-essays/80-a-four-sided-model> (Accessed 18 December, 2012).
- 20 op cit, p108.
- 21 G. Priest, '*The Shapes of Water*', *RealTime 97*, 2010 (Online). Available: <http://www.realtimearts.net/article/97/9919> (Accessed 15 August, 2012).