

## The Urban Aboriginal Landscape

**Larissa Behrendt**

*Professor of Law and Director of Research at the Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning  
University of Technology, Sydney*

In her novel, *The Secret River*, (2005), Kate Grenville tells the story of a family who move from England to the new penal colony in New South Wales when the husband is convicted of stealing. At the end of the book, when the family has staked its piece of land and made a small fortune from trade, they build a colonial mansion as a testament to their wealth. Grenville, unlike her fictional family, understands that this land that brought riches to her fictitious family, did it with stolen land and resources. To capture this, the stone foundation upon which the house is built covers a large fish carved into the stone during ceremonies performed by the Aboriginal clans who lived in the area for the previous thousands of years but have been pushed away, massacred or have died of illness.

Grenville's metaphor is a striking one for Indigenous people. The large house, splendid in its opulence, built on the resources taken from the Aboriginal people. And it is a vision that is a striking reminder of the history that lies beneath our modern Australian state. And just as importantly, it is a metaphor for ways in which that history has sometimes be deliberately written out some of the darker deeds to give the impression of more noble beginnings.

### **“Not real ones” and No Community**

Since the decade of reconciliation, the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody (1991) and the Bringing them Home report (1997), it is harder to argue that Aboriginal people no longer form part of the Australian consciousness. And the predominant telling of history now acknowledges Aboriginal presence – even if we still see struggles between academics and other commentators about how many people were killed on the frontier and even whether there were massacres at all. But how to navigate that relationship has continued to be the question that has been most difficult to answer.

And this is further complicated in the urban areas of Australia where Indigenous presence seems more challenging. There are some tenacious stereotypes about Aboriginal people in urban areas like Sydney. I often get asked, “How often do you visit Aboriginal communities?” And I reply, “Everyday, when I go home.” The question reveals the popular misconceptions that “real” Aboriginal communities only exist in rural and remote areas. And it is a reminder of how invisible our communities are to the people who live and work side-by-side with us. I suspect there is an element to this view that sees Aboriginal people as only having cohesive communities outside of our cities that finds its genesis in the once orthodox view of that Australia was peacefully settled, with Aboriginal people simply giving way naturally to a far superior (as the story would be told) technology of British civilisation.

We see a further glimpse of this trend to ignore and silence in the current political climate in Mark Latham's diaries (2005). Speaking of his electorate of Werriwa, Latham notes his observations about the changes in the mood of his electorate towards social issues, including reconciliation and it was telling that his response was to move away from pushing them as part of the Labor platform. They weren't, to use his term, vote winners.

This is perhaps compounded by the view that those Aboriginal people who do live within a metropolis like Sydney are displaced, not from here, and therefore do not have special ties here. This view can remain even if the Aboriginal family has been living here longer than the observer's family. While it is true that an Aboriginal person's traditional land has fundamental importance, it is also true that post-invasion history and experience has created an additional layer of memory and significance for other parts of the country.

If I think of my traditional land, the land of the Kamillaroi, the areas of Lightening Ridge, Brewarrina and Coonamble, I think of the part of Redbank Mission where my grandmother was born or Dunglear station, on the road between Walgett and the Ridge, where the Aborigines Protection Board removed her from her family. I remember our elder, Granny Green (and my own grandmother's cousin), taking me and my father across the paddocks and she could remember where the spiritual places but also point out the newer history on the landscape – where children were stolen from and, she would tell us in whispers, where the massacres had taken place. The “traditional” and the colonial and the present are all a fluid history connected to place and kin in our culture.

And so too, wherever we have lived there is a newer imprint and history, one that is meaningful and creates a sense of belonging within Aboriginal communities that have formed in urban areas. This is a cultural and political history that is littered across the area where we now live. I live right next door to what was once Australia Hall, the place where the Aborigines Progressive Association organised the “Day of Mourning and Protest” in 1938, one of our key points of political activism and that day marked the beginning of our civil rights movement. I also think of places like the Redfern Medical Centre that has been the place where community meetings and political movements have taken place. I think of places like South Sydney Leagues Club, who attracted young Aboriginal men from across the state, including my uncle, to come to the city and play football. I think of Redfern Park where I heard the Prime Minister of Australia (Keating not Howard) acknowledge that this was an invaded country.

There is, of course, another dimension to the cohesiveness of Aboriginal communities in the Sydney area and that is the tightly knitted kinship and family networks that exist here. They are just as strong here as they are in more discrete rural and remote areas. And it is an aspect of contemporary Indigenous culture that kinship and family ties bind our communities in a way that reinforces our more traditional obligations but interweave more widely than they once did. Once a network of clans within the Eora nation, Sydney now has a large Aboriginal population (second to the Northern Territory) and has clusters of Aboriginal communities in La Perouse, Redfern, Marrickville, Mt Druitt, Penrith and Cabramatta. Across these enclaves are family and kinship networks that tie them together.

One of the real consequences of overlooking Indigenous presence and experience is to exclude us from participating in civic life in a meaningful way. This is true in relation to nation-building activities such as drafting the Constitution, voting (participating in

democratic processes), working for real wages (participation in the work force), and participation in policy making (whether that be about Aboriginal people themselves or broader collective decision making like town planning and urban development).

### **There are some troublemakers...**

This is not to argue that Sydney's population thinks that there are no Aboriginal people here but the media attention becomes intense when there are socio-economic problems or racial tensions. Through these images of youths committing violence, engaging in criminal activity and anti-social, self-destructive behaviour, Indigenous presence often breaks-in to the consciousness of Sydney residents through media stories such as the so-called "Redfern Riots".

However, little attention is paid to the vibrant and functional Aboriginal communities throughout the metropolitan area. There is no media coverage of the successful – and rather uneventful – day-to-day lives of Aboriginal people that see participation in a broad range of community activities. We do not see stories about the success of Aboriginal women's legal services, our Indigenous radio service, Gadigal, our child care service, Murawina, and homework centres for our kids after school.

These community-building activities and organisations are hidden by images of out-of-control and violent Aboriginal people who are seen as lawless, without a sense of community responsibility, as dangerous. And through these images, Aboriginal people are seen as a threat to peaceful and cohesive community life within the city. People become fearful of Aboriginal people and see them as a danger to the social fabric rather than as making a contribution to it. These images also reinforce the impression that no cohesive Aboriginal community exists in urban areas and we once again become invisible.

There does seem to be a greater interest in including Aboriginal people in broader community building activities in relation to green spaces within metropolitan or urban centres. For example, in the national parks that surround our city, there are more active initiatives to engage Indigenous people in co-management arrangements, eco-tourism, educational programs about bush tucker and resource management. While not diminishing the importance of this collaboration, it is noticeable that there is a greater willingness to include Aboriginal people in to the "nature" and "environment" aspects of planning and land management than there is in the planning of urban spaces and communities. It is hard to ignore the "noble savage" romanticism in this preference for Indigenous involvement with plants, trees and animals over involvement with town planning, infrastructure and housing.

### **The Challenges of Recognising Aboriginal Urban Communities...**

The challenges of recognising "traditional" Aboriginal communities over the newer, more fluid contemporary cultures is not just a tension for non-Aboriginal people to navigate in relation to how they integrate this presence into their own sense of

community; it also has more practical challenges for accommodating Aboriginal people into urban areas.

The focus on – and romanticism about – the “cultural”, especially in the stagnant “traditional” stereotypes of Aboriginal people in urban areas often occurs at the expense of the “social” and the “economic” needs of those communities. The focus on “traditional” cultural aspects is one that ignores the presence of the contemporary interweaving of other nations into the community in the area. While it remains an important and strictly observed cultural protocol that these newer nations, not descended from the “traditional owners” have no right to speak for (and are required to acknowledge country), they do, as Aboriginal people with distinct post-invasion experiences, have a particular socio-economic profile that often requires special services and targeted policies to adequately addressed.

Poorer levels of health and distinct health issues, lower life expectancy and higher mortality rates, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and large and increasing levels of over-representation of Aboriginal people in the criminal justice system are all dimensions of the unique needs and circumstances of Aboriginal people in the Sydney area. (Australian Productivity Commission, 2006) And it is not surprising that specific services, such as the Aboriginal Medical Service and the Aboriginal Legal Service, were first formed in the Redfern area to address the unique needs of Aboriginal people living in the area and as a response to the racism that many felt they were experiencing when they did try and access mainstream services.

Under the current national arrangements for Indigenous funding, there is an increasing focus on Aboriginal communities in rural and remote areas. This has already meant a redirection of funds away from urban centres like Sydney to those places that are now seen as the government priority. This focus on remote communities has been driven by the findings of the Commonwealth Grants Commission’s 2001 *Report on Indigenous Funding*. The report identified areas of relative need and found that those areas were predominantly in remote areas. No-one would quibble about the need of remote communities, especially those who have seen the disadvantage and social problems up close but there is just as much need in other Aboriginal communities – and the statistics back this up – that it seems an abandonment of government responsibility to not provide adequate resources to address the needs in one type of community because the government has a preference for another.

In relation to the Commonwealth Grants Commission report, the following points need to be made:

- Some of the Commissioners themselves were unhappy with this as a measure of “need” and thought that it would have been better to analyse disadvantage in terms of absolute need rather than relative need. That is, while the report focused on where the greatest need was so that limited resources could be shifted there, it was believed that the correct process should have been to assess the needs of everyone; and,
- That there was need identified in rural and urban communities across Australia as well.

It is estimated that about 120 000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people (or about 24 per cent of the Indigenous population) live in remote communities (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2004). Current estimates of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander community would mean that remote communities would make up about one-quarter of the Indigenous population. This leaves out communities in Walgett, Redfern, Framlingham, Brisbane, Melbourne and Sydney. When looking at the poverty in areas like Mount Druitt and the Redfern Block and in looking at the range of socio-economic issues that face those communities, a policy that states that these are issues just as easily tackled by mainstreaming – as opposed to targeted – policy and program delivery is not convincing.

While it is perhaps easier politically to gather support from the broader Australian community for dealing with problems in Aboriginal communities where the population looks more like “real” Aborigines – the ones who look and live the way that many Australians think “authentic” Aboriginal people should look and live –, it is irresponsible – and in the end, bad policy – to ignore the other 76% of the Aboriginal community.

The policy of diverting resources from urban/rural to rural/remote communities is also underpinned by the ideology of mainstreaming and the belief that communities in urban areas in particular, should be serviced by mainstream organisations. The danger with the move is that policies of “mainstreaming” has failed in the past to shift the poorer health, lower levels of education, higher levels of unemployment and poorer standard of housing that Aboriginal communities have experienced and has not offered ways to protect Aboriginal cultural heritage, interest in land, language. To date, they have not offered a way in which Aboriginal people can play the central role in making decisions that will impact on their families and communities.

In the past, the failure of mainstreaming has stemmed from its inability to target specific issues that arise in Aboriginal communities in relation to health, education, housing and employment. This is because mainstream services need to develop specific mechanisms and strategies for Aboriginal clients and they have to do this with stretched resources. In addition to these challenges, Aboriginal people claim that they are often subjected to racism within those mainstream services. Those claims of racism, particularly in relation to the delivery of health services, were well documented in the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody and in particular the case of Arthur Moffitt who was found on a train and taken to the police lock-up because he was assumed to be drunk; he was actually suffering from a hyperglycaemic episode and he died in custody.

The reversion back to mainstreaming is occurring without any changes to the following limitations to visionary policy-making:

- The focus on projects rather than programs means that policy makers are primarily engaged with the delivery of project funding rather than developmental programs that invest in people, that is, they focus on the short term, not the long term.
- The project mantra is premised on the belief that a desired outcome can be engineered by the implementation of a series of projects focussed on addressing the symptoms not the causes,

- The focus on projects fits easily within budget cycles whereas longer term structural programs require funding commitments into future funding cycles. The focus on project funding means that organisations are unsure as to their future viability,
- Policy focuses on achievements within the political cycle that will create good news stories and do not look beyond the current political term, and
- It equates accounting with accountability and progress with funds disbursement, a focus on money without a complimentary focus on outcomes.

This policy environment generates anxiety within community organisations who are focussed on ensuring the continuity or continuance of funding (reporting, accounting and submission at hand) at the expense of a focus on their core business. Funding of organisations frequently occurs at the level deemed to be required and while this is understandable when the reality is that resources are limited and demand is exponential, but this minimal funding means that, at the coal face, organisations are expected to deliver champagne on a lemonade budget.

Despite the way that parts of the electorate have been seduced by the notion of “shared responsibility” and “mutual obligation” in relation to welfare recipients generally and Aboriginal people in particular, I would maintain that there are certain responsibilities that government are solely responsible for and cannot abrogate. One of those is the area of basic health services. In a report commissioned by the Australian Medical Association, Access Economics estimated that basic Indigenous health care was under-funded by \$450 million, despite budget surpluses that have run to the billions (Australian Medical Association Discussion Paper, 2004). With such fundamental levels of under-funding, it is not surprising that socio-economic problems fail to be alleviated and cycles of poverty fail to be broken.

Under the current federal arrangements and policy directions, urban Aboriginal communities can anticipate decreases in funding and a push towards the use of mainstream services.

There are, however, two mechanisms that could be usefully employed to redress this socio-economic disparity:

- Home ownership schemes: these have been mooted for communal land but there are questions about their viability and effectiveness in places where there is no competitive housing market. The Sydney property market does not have these same limitations and could be used as a mechanism to create inter-generational wealth.
- Claims under the *Aboriginal Land Rights Act (NSW)*. This legislation provides for claims over certain Crown Land and successful claims can generate wealth for Aboriginal communities.

### **An Imagined Future...**

How would things be different if Aboriginal people were included in the planning process in a more meaningful way?

There is an implication for “cultural” recognition that is about acknowledging co-existence. This recognition manifests itself in acknowledgement of country, respecting the knowledge of elders, using Aboriginal place names and erecting monuments that acknowledge the post-invasion history of Aboriginal people. Meaningful progress on reconciliation has taken place most actively at the local level and many local governments have been exploring these kinds of initiatives as part of an attempt to rethink sharing the country. The flying of Aboriginal flags on municipal buildings is another attempt to acknowledge this presence and history. Public spaces and art also seeks to recognise shared history and co-existence.

In addition to this, the inclusion of Aboriginal cultural values, values that still permeate our contemporary communities, would be important to include into urban planning processes. Plans tend to focus on infrastructure, particularly roads and transport. There are references to public spaces and the environment, the importance of accessing employment opportunities and the recognition of the importance of diverse modes of housing. But this focus tends to bend too much towards the bureaucratic rhetoric of economic rationalism rather than the focus on the importance of strengthening community ties and facilitating community obligations, especially to children and to elders.

This community focus that extends to facilitate the obligations would refocus community and urban planning. And these values are not unique to Aboriginal culture. There are many other cultures within Sydney who would say that at the heart of their cultural practices are the importance of family and community. This emphasis on community relationships and responsibility requires consideration of space and infrastructure that will nurture those relationships and assist in meeting those responsibilities. This necessarily focuses on the development of communal space and I would note that this is contrary to the concept of large, internal space in the McMansion design.<sup>1</sup> By contrast, they remind me of something that Lord Byron wrote:

The premises are so delightfully extensive, that two people might live together without ever seeing, hearing, or meeting (1811).

Because these values of community, kinship, social responsibility (reciprocity), social interaction and the importance of place are inherent in Aboriginal culture but not unique to them, they echo sentiments of others who feel that these sorts of ideals should have more influence in alternative directions for urban planning. What Aboriginal participation and community values can offer is a way of underlining the importance of those principles playing a guiding role in thinking about how we build for future generations, a way that recognises the glory of the enterprise that built mansion, but recognises the significance and value of the foundation upon which it stands.

## References

---

<sup>1</sup> The following observation by Osbert Lancaster comes to mind:

Although very few people are actually called upon to live in palaces a very large number are unwilling to admit the fact.

In Osbert Lancaster. *Homes Sweet Homes*. London: Murray, 1939

Australian Bureau of Statistics. *National Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Survey, 2002*. Released on 23 June 2004. See [www.abs.gov.au](http://www.abs.gov.au)

Australian Medical Association. *AMA Discussion Paper 2004 – Healing Hands – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Workforce Requirements.*; Access Economics. *Indigenous Health Workforce Needs*. July, 2004. See: [www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-63Q9J7](http://www.ama.com.au/web.nsf/doc/WEEN-63Q9J7)

Australian Productivity Commission, *Overcoming Indigenous Disadvantage: Key Indicators 2005*. Canberra, 2006. Downloaded from: [www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous/keyindicators2005/index.html](http://www.pc.gov.au/gsp/reports/indigenous/keyindicators2005/index.html).

Commonwealth Grants Commission. (2001) *Report on Indigenous Funding*. Canberra. Downloaded from: [www.cgc.gov.au](http://www.cgc.gov.au)

Grenville, K. (2005) *The Secret River*. Melbourne: Text Publishing.

Lancaster, O. (1939) *Homes Sweet Homes*. London: Murray.

Latham. M. (2005) *The Latham Diaries*. Carlton, Vic: Melbourne University Press.

Lord Byron, (1811) *Newstead Abbey* in *Lord Byron: The Major Works (Oxford World's Classics)* (1986) Oxford: Oxford University Press.

National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. *Bringing Them Home: A Guide to the Findings and Recommendations of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. Sydney: Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission, 1997. See: [www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/](http://www.austlii.edu.au/au/special/rsjproject/rsjlibrary/hreoc/)

Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody. *National Report*. Canberra: Australian Government Printers, 1991. See: [www.austlii.edu.au/car/carrdeaths.html](http://www.austlii.edu.au/car/carrdeaths.html)