

## Cultural Identities in Post Suburbia

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The production of cultural identity in western Sydney during the 1980s and 1990s is the subject of this paper - a time when the region began to generate cultural products that corresponded to critical periods of suburban development. Such cultural production contested the relationship of the outer suburbs to the city centre. In doing so western Sydney began a process of redefinition, from the ubiquitous 'other', a place not considered *cultural* by inner Sydney, to a region with new and distinctive cultural possibilities.

The first part of the paper looks at emerging processes of cultural description in particular the various ways suburbia was re-enacted in the eighties and nineties. The description of public and private territories and landscapes of aspiration and insurgency are considered. The development and expression of new civic identities are discussed in the second part of the paper, in particular the rise of commercial cultural identities, new patterns of diversity, and the newly configured spatial arrangement of insurgency. The paper concludes with a questioning of the notion of place-based identity, looking at the landscapes beyond suburban narratives and contemporary cultural production in western Sydney.

### **Processes of cultural description - identifying, mapping and renaming**

During the 1980s the new suburbs of outer Western Sydney began a highly place-specific process of cultural production. Pre-dating the contemporary practice of 'branding' new residential areas, this occurred in an environment where a commercially assisted production of cultural identity was largely absent. Two historical factors contextualised this new cultural output: the growth of new suburban areas in the preceding decade and the development of cultural policy designed specifically to enable cultural production in new, low income suburbs.

In 1963 the County of Cumberland Planning Scheme with its generous green belt and limits to urban growth was re-evaluated. The subsequent Sydney Region Outline Plan released in 1968 was structured to accommodate significant population increases in western and southwestern Sydney. The State Planning Authority purchased large tracts of land during this time. A structure plan for Campbelltown and plans for new suburbs including Mt Druitt and Macquarie Fields were developed in the early 1970s. The NSW Housing Commission responded to the potential for significant residential development by consolidating the largest investment in public housing in the social history of NSW in these areas (Toon & Falk, 2003).

The synergy between these urban planning outcomes and the policies and products of the Australia Council's Community Arts Board, also a product of the 1970s' policy

environment, is critical. The development of funded programs enabling artists to work ‘in community’ with new residential populations ensured a focus both on the nature of settlement and its cultural outputs (Hawkins, 1993).

It is important to understand the obvious, but often overlooked, reality that in the 1970s and 1980s new residents in Western Sydney came from *elsewhere* in the metro area. This was a time of transition from inner Sydney to western Sydney, a migration that is now largely replaced by population movement *within the region*. In the 1970s residents in Sydney’s Waterloo spoke bitterly of the possibility of a move to Mt Druitt and for many low-income families the movement from traditional inner city suburbs was a reality. People who had known intimately the urban landscapes of Redfern, Waterloo and Leichhardt found themselves in the new suburban landscapes of Tregear, Cartwright and Macquarie Fields. The move and the process of settlement represented a process of dispossession and acclimatisation to an unrecognisable cultural landscape.

The perception that new release areas lacked a sense of distinctiveness, a sense of cultural identity, was pervasive – by 1980 many areas of Mt Druitt were well established and the links between a sense of place and a positive cultural identity were played out as a suburban dissonance that intensified as housing areas failed to achieve the transition to neighbourhood. While much has been made of the lack of social infrastructure the reality of public housing allocations allowed many points of entry to such a dissonance: this was a time of intense suburbanisation for the Aboriginal community, a time when cultural difference began to be articulated as part of outer rather than inner suburban experience, and of course it was a time when the spatial organisation of poverty was reconfigured.

During this time increasing criticism of areas such as Mt Druitt and Green Valley in Sydney, Logan and Inala in Brisbane, Elizabeth in Adelaide and Broadmeadows in Melbourne resulted in a number of cultural projects aimed at providing residents with the opportunity to recontextualise or re-enact the suburban landscape. Garage Graphix, a community arts workshop in Emerton, Mt Druitt, was set up in the late seventies with Australia Council and state arts funding. An initiative of Blacktown Council (who had one of Australia’s first community arts officer positions) and locally based community artists, it was located in the garage of opera singer Peter Dawson’s family’s farmhouse, Rutherglen, now deep in suburbia.

While there is no doubt that the processes of cultural description that are part of the production of cultural identity would have taken place anyway, the development of groups such as Garage Graphix allocated both a mandate for residents to describe the area and an accompanying imagery. By the end of 1986 ‘the Garage’ had been operating for over seven years and was an established part of the community infrastructure of Mt Druitt. The community arts project *Mt Druitt: 365 Days – A Community Calendar Project*, produced at the end of that year gives an insight into the issues and imagery that formed part of a process of self-definition. A series of 12 calendar pages depict images and values produced by community groups and local residents with assistance from community artists.

The notion that Mt Druitt offered lifestyle opportunities that might actually be attractive to residents is proposed in the January page, *Mt Druitt - a bit of the country and a bit of the city*, designed by a resident of Habersham. The expression of positive values in itself contested the very negative perceptions of the area in the period that followed the so-

called Bidwill 'riots'. As Powell (1993) points out in her book, *Out West – Perceptions of Sydney's Western Suburbs*, it was not until the early 90s that research indicating levels of satisfaction with western Sydney found their way into metropolitan media. In its absence the positive imagery produced by community arts projects had a particular status.

Local commentaries extended to relationships with the then Housing Commission and increasingly, criticism of planning itself emerged as a subject. The December page, *Mt Druitt wasn't planned for people but people are changing that!*, expresses a common theme. In the absence of sustainable social infrastructure, youth centres, community centres, parks, the act of identifying and articulating that absence became a subject of much cultural work. So too was the articulated belief that social change would only be effected by community action.



Joanna and Janine Lord, Garage Graphix, *Mt Druitt; 365 Days*, December page detail, 1986  
Collection: Marla Guppy

Community action to remedy planning deficits was a central theme of early poster work

As the new demographics of western Sydney took form, particular discourses began to emerge. In the cover image of *Mt Druitt 365 Days*, the reality of women's lives in an area that had one of the largest groupings of single mothers in Australia's social history found purchase in an image of women in the suburban landscape pushing a stroller through the essentially masculine territories of the sports fields. In the background boys group as if for a team photo, relinquishing their position as the subject. Here, the notion of suburbia as the terrain of the nuclear family began to fray as new household structures gained critical mass.



Garage Graphix, *Mt Druitt; 365 Days*, Cover page detail, 1986  
Collection: Marla Guppy

Young women pushing strollers while boys play sport -gender divides in the new suburbia where women increasingly raised families on their own

The belief that creative projects could enhance local identity had spread beyond arts funding bodies by the late '80s. In 1988 the NSW Department of Housing under Housing Minister Frank Walker working in collaboration with the NSW Community Arts Association funded a series of community arts programs through public tenants groups. Parramatta Regional Public Tenants Council, based in Mt Druitt and representing 27,000 households, ran a four-year program with Department of Housing and later with Australia Council funding. The program was seen as a way to involve public housing tenants in improving the image of their communities.

In localities without definition acts of naming were immensely satisfying. Projects such as the Whalan Banner produced by public housing residents made much of hand-knitted street names. The power of naming in areas that were perceived to be 'in the middle of nowhere' cannot be underestimated. The re-working of a sense of place in suburbs that were the recipients of consistent bad publicity formed a large part of this work. Resident generated banners, logos, posters, videos and t-shirt designs sought to connect suburb names with desirable attributes of suburban experience. It is a form of cultural production that ten years later was being used by housing developers to embed a positive identity in new release areas with many millions of dollars now put into this process.



Susie Crooks and Tania Ellis with Whalan residents, *Whalan Community Banner* (detail), Parramatta Public Tenants Community Art Program 1988  
Photo: Marla Guppy

Cultural works that ‘named’ and contextualised new suburbs formed a significant body of work in the eighties

The suburbanisation of Aboriginal communities also gathered momentum during this time with suburbs such as Bidwill and Bonnyrigg having at times larger Aboriginal populations than rural areas. This became a time when Aboriginal people began to make sense of both the notion of a suburban identity but also of spatial relationships to other Aboriginal groups that were themselves being reorganised by the development of the system of lands councils. The development of a visual language relevant to the suburban context, referring less to western desert imagery is evident during this time in the work of artists such as Alice Hinton Bateup and Garry Jones. It was this new language that began to describe the subjects of significance; deaths in custody, the stolen generation but also the displacement evident in the journey from the bush or the inner city to the suburbs.



Gary Jones, *Urban Koori Views*, Fabric yardage (detail), Garage Graphix Aboriginal Art Program 1990. Collection: Marla Guppy

As suburbanisation of Aboriginal populations gathered momentum new expressions of urban Aboriginal identity were explored

Although the visual arts are foregrounded here similar foci were evident in community theatre where groups like Death Defying Theatre produced performance pieces with residents on housing estates, in essence re-enacting the dramas of everyday suburban life, an engaging process as performer or spectator.



Death Defying Theatre performing at the now demolished Villawood housing estate in the late 1980s.

Photo: Marla Guppy



Billboard for the 'Bidwill riots'.

Collection: Marla Guppy

Insurgent civic events set strong agendas for Mt Druitt and defined local identity in a way that many residents saw as highly problematic

### **The production of cultural identity – patterns of aspiration and insurgency**

The so-called Bidwill riots in 1981, while an overblown event, had important implications for the area. The influx of public money and an emerging realisation that planning could be better are the most widely understood. But for us to understand the emerging cultural identities of western Sydney it is important also to understand that in the time after the riots patterns of both insurgency and aspiration became much more defined in the outer suburbs. Places of insurgency where dissident urban agendas were forming and where 'new identities and practices that disturb established histories' Holston (1988) were becoming recognisable.

By contrast in other localities, in suburbs that by the end of the millennium were described as ‘aspirational’, the pleasures of suburban life were articulated with a new confidence. The *House and Garden* Project, developed in 1990, used cultural mapping techniques to explore the new suburb of Minchinbury, as well as older neighbourhoods in Rooty Hill, St Mary’s and Mt Druitt, documenting gardens, homemade garden ornaments, pets, houses and families enjoying domestic environments as elements in a fabric design.

The notion that suburbia might be culturally dense, socially satisfying and even amusing emerged. The belief that social relationships could drive cultural identity even in the absence of appropriate planning and infrastructure was expressed. As areas like Mt Druitt began to shift and sort, spatial as well as social expressions of aspiration began to gain definition. Smaller land releases like Hebersham with its first homebuyers began to define their aspirations within the contextualising of western Sydney.



Jan Mackay, *House and Garden* Fabric Design (detail), Garage Graphix & PRPTC 1989  
Collection: Marla Guppy

As suburbs matured the pleasures of suburban life and its (low income) domestic creativity were celebrated

This new texturing within the outer suburbs is critical to any understanding of the cultural identity of the area. The population moves across western Sydney rather than from the inner city out to the west indicate a new and deeper commitment to the region by residents. In particular the movement into home ownership by young people who had grown up in areas like Mt Druitt is critical for here is the beginning of the aspirational suburb with its new forms of cultural production and participation.

In the early nineties suburbs such as Glenmore Park came on line. Here the agenda was to avoid the planning crises that scarred Mt Druitt. Community facilities were in place, a school and town centre were allocated allocated sites and a cultural plan was part of the initial planning processes.

Parallel to this, the spatial mapping of insurgent communities became more precise. While western Sydney as a whole might have been seen from outside as a *region* that challenged notions of effective suburban life, from within the suburbs, streets and localities were disaggregated. And within this disaggregation the business of producing solutions, itself an important output of cultural production, gathered momentum.



Marla Guppy and Toongabbie residents, *We Won in Toongabbie!* Garage Graphix 1986  
Collection: Marla Guppy

As better-resourced communities became increasingly articulate new and politically significant understandings of the failures of consolidated public housing began to emerge

### **Civic identity in Western Sydney - new commercial identities**

As the region expressed itself as a commercial entity so too the patterns of commercial cultural consumption began to take shape. New commercial cultural institutions, in particular sports clubs, gained ascendancy. During the eighties Rooty Hill RSL and Panthers Leagues Club redeveloped their premises to accommodate a broad range of cultural activities. The physical presence of these clubs in the new urban landscape was impressive with large facades, gateway treatments and lighting supporting their role as drivers of an emerging cultural identity. Unlike ‘high art’ they had an easy acceptance – Mount Pritchard Sports Club uses the colloquial ‘Mounties’ as part of an immense gateway. It was already a well-known destination. Certainly other forms of commercial cultural space developed during this time; shopping malls, cinemas, fun parks but clubs have commanded a powerful position in the creation of a civic identity in Western Sydney.



Gateway to Mount Pritchard Sports Club  
Photo: Marla Guppy

During the eighties and nineties new commercial cultural industries gained ascendancy



Another important part of the civic identity of western Sydney was the consolidation of new 'diversities'. Here the arbitrary spatial arrangement of 'ethnicity' had by the late nineties resulted in distinctive local environments. Of these Cabramatta is best known, with its main street based retail and commercial activity constituting one of Australia's most successful suburban town centres.

While the proximity to Villawood Migrant Hostel had a clear relationship on the movement of newly arrived Vietnamese refugees in the seventies to suburban hubs like Cabramatta, the dispersal of land packages owned by Landcom shaped the cultural industries hub of Bonnyrigg. Here diverse religious organisations obtained land packages in the eighties and built an impressive range of temples, wats, churches and mosques, a number of which are clustered along Bonnyrigg Park. While the intention here has been to service religious diversity within the suburban environment of Fairfield, the impact of the buildings on the urban landscape, the calendar of festivals and events, and the sense of inclusiveness that organisations such as the Lao Wat, promote have resulted in an increasingly well-visited cultural destination.

Interestingly, comparisons are possible between the architectural style of clubs such as Mounties and new suburban religious edifices such as the Lao Wat. The use of a suburban vernacular style, the unashamedly decorative edifice, the visual prominence in the suburban landscape collectively contribute to a diverse and distinctive civic identity. Here the domestic creativity of the post-war migrant front yard has evolved into a civic statement. Face brick, decorative ironwork and hand painted motifs on black plastic planter pots are part of the landscape of the Wat while off Bonnyrigg Avenue the Turkish Mosque uses the light-coloured bricks, arches and style of new housing in Talington Avenue just around the corner. While there is certainly a level of economic pragmatism in such choices it can also be argued that these decisions of architectural form and design detail are resulting in a distinctive landscape, one that is set apart from both the public housing identities and the style of new private residential areas.



The Lao Wat at Bonnyrigg, 2003

Photo: Marla Guppy

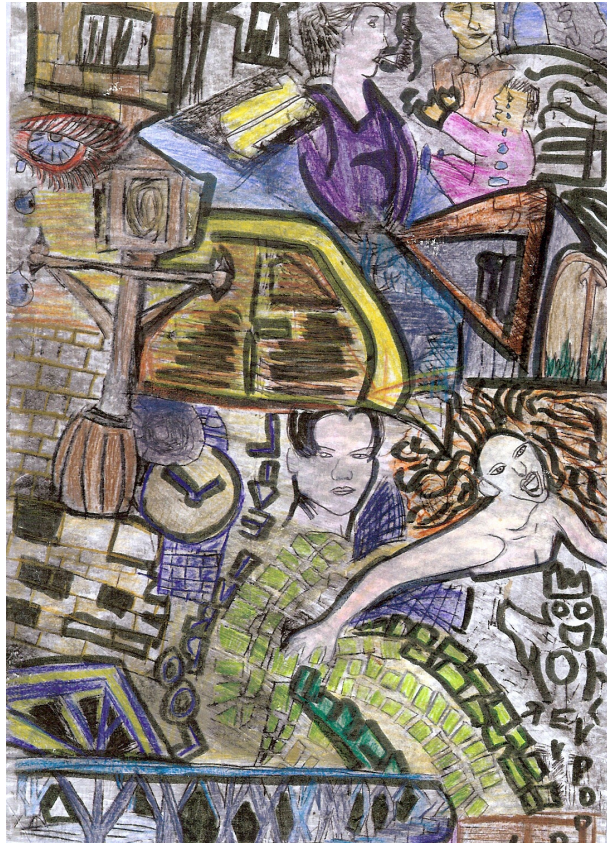
The creative use of a suburban vernacular architectural style allows integration into a suburban landscape where edifice and embellishment are already valued

## **New insurgent identities**

Just as commercial and civic identity has been framed by opportunities for self-definition, so too have newly configured spaces of insurgency. As the population centres in the suburbs became disaggregated the dichotomies between public and private housing were replaced by more subtle distinctions; public housing areas 'settled down' (or not), distinctions began to be made between different areas of private housing, private rental gained a critical mass in some localities lending new identities to these areas, new cultural groups achieved place-based ascendancies.

These new textures in the cultural fabric of western Sydney are by the same process of deepening cultural identity evident in the self-descriptors produced by new insurgent communities. Material developed by young people in the Speed Street neighbourhood of Liverpool, a locality with high crime levels, high unemployment and a staging post for refugees and newly arrived migrants, shows an interesting urbanity, an implicit acknowledgement that the 'urban' can deliver both pleasure as well as disadvantages. Moreover, the normality of such a range of experience is expressed in the way Liverpool is experienced on an everyday basis (Guppy, 2000).

The possibility that 'the good and bad' of urban life might be integral to suburban spaces is arguably a new consideration, one that previously might have been more comfortably expressed in Kings Cross or Darlinghurst. It is important to acknowledge what has been achieved here. The visual material is neither an exclusive expression of disadvantage nor an aspirational hope for a 'better' suburban future but rather an expression of the messy, unstructured reality of urban life with its multiple contexts for interaction, sexual adventure, sadness, pleasure, violence, identity...and in this it is both energetic and honest. Significantly in a locality where the process of becoming a citizen is engaged in, both successfully and unsuccessfully on a daily basis, it also describes the complex realities of civic participation.



*Visions of Liverpool*, Liverpool Girls High School contribution to Living Streets Cultural Map,  
Project Coordinator: Martha Jabour 2000

The multiple realities of suburban life including its complex emotional landscapes are expressed in work by young Speed St residents

### **Beyond suburban narratives**

At the beginning of this paper we looked at the cultural production of ‘first generation’ suburbia in outer western Sydney – the imagery produced by people, especially women, who came to suburbs like Mt Druit and Green Valley from elsewhere. But what of the new generations of suburban residents, the third generation who were born in western Sydney in the nineties to parents who had themselves integrated into the cultures and lifestyles of the residential areas west of Parramatta or south of Liverpool? How might they respond to the task of ‘describing suburbia’, its issues and concerns?

Within this potentially immense topic certain shards of observation are interesting. The first has been the impact that the University of Western Sydney’s various art and design school have had on the capability of young creative residents of suburban Sydney to ‘work their own culture’. The visual imagery of young artists such as Regina Walter, who grew up in Fairfield, and Marian Abboud, whose family live in Holroyd, is worth noting for their easy and knowledgeable capacity to sift through the icons and detritus of suburban identity. Such ease would not have been possible for insiders in the seventies and eighties when the very question of identity was uncomfortable. Here the notion of ‘good or bad’ suburbia is less relevant than the seductive possibilities of working within

its rich landscapes, of exploring its multiple identities. A process that is without the expectation or even desire for an identity ... that is in a continual process of deconstruction.



Regina Walter, Bonnyrigg Destination Marker, Parramatta Liverpool Bus Transit Way 2004  
The diversity of new cultural identities is evident in contemporary place-specific art works  
Photo: Marla Guppy

Such easy working with the new realities of suburban self-image is also evident in even younger creatives. A brief from Camden Council and Guppy & Associates to art students in a Narellan high school to design a glass artwork that represented the 'culture of Narellan' resulted in a number of abstract designs. A Council staff member discussing a design by a Year 12 student remarked; 'But it could be about anywhere!' Well yes...in its maturing outer suburbia no longer appears to need the prescriptive albeit romantic narratives of the seventies and eighties. Ask a sixteen year old to depict suburban culture, a sixteen year old who has only known suburban culture, whose spectrum of urban difference is located within different suburban experiences but who has grown up with the virtual communities of cyber space, and you may well get the post-suburban imagery of 'anywhere'. Beautiful, engaged but essentially 'placeless' by its nature.



Marian Abboud, Project Artist & Laura Crichton, student, Elizabeth McArthur High School,  
Glass art work, façade of the new Narellan Library (detail), Camden Council, 2005

Photo: Marla Guppy

New expressions of cultural identity are abandoning representational, place-specific imagery for  
abstract expressions of contemporary life

Certainly Western Sydney will continue to produce place specific material. And in the newly responsive development industry, an industry that has in fact borrowed and reworked the new 'community' as a valued product, there will be a sustained emphasis on the (positive) identity of the latest residential area. There will also continue to be cultural work that explores place-based identities. But increasingly the Region will produce cultural products that are negligent of the spatial configurations of the city, products that respond to global themes or occupy the placeless landscapes of new technology.

And as the scope and scale of the cultural industry sector in Western Sydney gathers critical mass, the region as an economic environment for sustained production of cultural products may well be more significant than its position as the subject of such outputs.

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