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Engaging with People and Place through Painting in an
Australian Public Housing Precinct Undergoing Renewal

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Abstract

This article presents an example of how convergent art–anthropology methodologies provided insights into the concepts of house and home in a large public housing precinct scheduled for demolition. Drawing is discussed as both a means to experience embodied understandings of place, as well as a method for initial engagement with the residents of the housing precinct. A series of oil paintings are presented, along with an exegetical discussion of how the paintings elicited ongoing conversations and interviews. The research process demonstrates how the artworks produced became a point of discussion, around which entangled emotions of anxiety could be expressed, as people were relocated to replacement housing. The final paintings aim to offer the residents and broader community an alternative representation of the houses, as a platform to consider the issues of housing affordability, gentrification and homelessness in our cities.

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Your Dream Home Awaits You: Engaging with People and Place through Painting in an Australian Public Housing Precinct Undergoing Renewal

Katie Hayne

Introduction

For over a decade, I travelled down Canberra's Northbourne Avenue each day on my way to work.¹ The fleeting glimpses of the iconic modernist architecture of the public housing between the towering gums created the character of the Avenue. The curious signs of life gave some clues to the community that lived there: an old couch on the footpath, a broken-down car, a political sign in a window. In 2015, the Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government announced the Northbourne Avenue inner-city public housing precincts were to be demolished between 2016 and 2019 as part of an 'urban renewal project'. The land would be sold to fund a light-rail program. The Government claimed the housing was ageing, expensive to maintain and had created large concentrations of disadvantage (see Canberra Times 2015 and 2017, ABC News 2015). It is a story of gentrification that is being told in many cities across the world.

In a final attempt to save some of the architecturally significant buildings, the ACT Heritage Council was successful in a compromise deal with the Government, who agreed to retain a representative sample of the key building styles (McIlroy 2015). The political tussles that played out in the media about the value of the housing clearly had an impact on the community that lived there. Resident Phil Brown wrote an article in the Canberra Times stating:

Since the Northbourne redevelopments were announced, our homes have been called eyesores, ghettos and drug-infested crime dens that should have been knocked down years ago; the people within called scumbags, drug addicts, dole bludgers, criminals and paedophiles among the many insults. Now we're told we're not wanted anywhere simply because of where we come from and based on the above assumptions. (Brown 2017)

Mr Brown's comments indicate the extent to which the public housing had become stigmatised in Canberra, as well as the stereotyping of the people who lived there. In my project, I hoped to engage with the residents through

1 I rented an ex-government house, known as an 'ex-guvvie', in the inner-north area for this period. Due to the increasing house prices and high rents in the area, I have since moved to a suburb further from the inner-city.

creative practice to gain a deeper insight into their opinions of the public housing precincts and their pending demolition.

This article provides a brief background to art–anthropology convergences and presents an introduction to the Northbourne Avenue public housing site. This is followed by an exegetical account of the fieldwork research and the studio-based creative research I conducted between 2016 and 2018. The research set out to gain an insight into the residents’ lived experience of the Northbourne Avenue public housing. Taking the broad definition of lived experience as ‘personal knowledge about the world gained through direct, first-hand involvement in everyday events’ (Chandler and Munday 2011: para. 1), I discuss the methodologies of practice-led research in painting, augmented by photography and video, as complementary to anthropological methods for engaging with people and place. I present a series of oil paintings that I produced as part of the research process and trace how an ongoing creative practice was a point of connection with the public housing residents. Whilst acknowledging the limitations of traditional studio- and exhibition-based art models in enabling community participation (Kester 2013: 124–126), my intention here is to demonstrate how creative practice-led research in drawing and painting can enable engagement with residents of a large housing estate, and contribute to understandings of home and house at a time of increasing global housing uncertainty.

Art–anthropology convergences

Over the past two decades, there has been a growing body of literature in anthropology arguing for further explorations into interdisciplinary art–anthropology approaches (see Grimshaw and Ravetz 2004, 2015; Schneider and Wright 2006, 2010 and 2013; Ingold 2013; Sansi 2015; Pröpper 2015, Rutten 2016 and Haviland 2017). Arnd Schneider proposes:

[...] there is now a current climate of ‘convergence’, with on the one hand, the so-called ‘ethnographic turn’ of the arts, and on the other hand, the (post) writing culture critique of fieldwork practices in anthropology, coupled with a renewed emphasis on practice (in addition to, and beyond text). (2015: 24)

Tim Ingold, in his book *Making* (2013), argues for an anthropology *with* art rather than anthropology *of* art, noting that we are used to the idea of anthropological research including photographs and films: ‘But could they also include drawings, paintings, or sculpture? Or works of craft? Or musical compositions? Or even buildings?’ (ibid.: 8). In art, this focus on making and practice as knowledge has been explored in depth in discussions around the model of creative practice-led research (Smith and Dean 2009, Barrett and Bolt 2010, Gibson 2010). This art-based model outlines an iterative research

process that emphasises creative studio-based work as part of new knowledge creation, although less consideration is given to field research and social interaction.

As an undergraduate student, I studied visual arts and anthropology and, for over a decade, I worked alongside anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers in a research centre for visual anthropology and digital humanities.² When I decided to do a postgraduate degree in painting, it seemed natural to me to explore the relationship between practice-based research in painting and anthropology. I was wary, from the outset, of being criticised for being a ‘quasi-anthropologist’ (Foster 1996: 302). This was despite my experience of anthropology where the realities of fieldwork and participant observation had become much more fluid than alluded to by Foster. Hal Foster’s questioning of art’s ability to challenge, rather than reiterate inequitable power relations, continues to be discussed in depth today (see Rutten et al. 2013, Hjorth and Sharp 2014, Grimshaw and Ravetz 2015). A relevant example here is the implication of art in aiding the gentrification of our cities. The term ‘art-washing’ has been used to describe this process of government and businesses moving galleries and artists into run-down areas to revitalise them. In some cases, negative criticism has even been directed at the community-based and creative place-making projects of the individual artists themselves (Prichard 2018). Lucy Lippard has argued that, as artists and anthropologists, we must always firstly ask: ‘are we wanted here?’ (2010: 32). This is not always an easy question to answer and it has remained at the forefront of my mind throughout this project.

As I continue to explore how to position myself as a researcher, whose primary practice is oil painting and who engages with a community, I have looked to other art-anthropology projects. The projects most often cited as examples of art-anthropology collaborations are socially engaged (Sansi 2015: 17), typically incorporating photography, video and installation. Nevertheless, there are painters who identify as artist-ethnographers (for example, Zoe Bray and Lydia Nakashima Degarrod), as well as anthropologists who draw and/or paint (Manuel João Ramos, Amanda Ravetz, Susan Ossman and Michael Taussig). I do not consider this project’s approach to be a socially engaged or participatory one, in the sense that I have not invited residents of the public housing precinct to create art or interact with the creation of the art directly. Nor have I held community art workshops. I do propose, how-

2 I was influenced by visual anthropologists and ethnographic filmmakers Philippa Deveson, Kim McKenzie, David and Judith MacDougall and Howard Morphy at the Centre for Cross-Cultural Research, The Australian National University. I collaborated on numerous Indigenous media projects, which provided in-depth experience in the use of the visual methods of photography, video and digital media in cross-cultural contexts, producing several short ethnographic films and digital media publications (e.g. Morphy et al. 2005).

ever, that my drawings and paintings have been a catalyst for social engagement through urban field research. From an anthropological perspective, I seek to take a reflexive approach (MacDougall 1998: 89), acknowledging my role and agency as an artist, one benefiting from the development of their own art practice. Through the furthering of relationships with the research participants, spending time in place and conducting interviews, I hope to develop a painting practice that is ethical and such that it can contribute deeper understanding of the residents' lived experience of the public housing precincts. This research thus offers an alternative, and a more nuanced image of public housing than the one presented in the public media.

Public housing in Canberra

Public housing has played an important role in the development of Canberra as Australia's national capital. When the capital was founded in 1911, it was only a small country town and it soon became clear to the government that providing adequate housing was key to the city's success (Wright 2000: 6).



Fig. 1. Northbourne Flats.
Courtesy of the National Archives of Australia. NAA: A7973, INT973/8.

This led to a public housing development program designed to accommodate all classes of society, not only low-income earners.³ Accommodation was provided in the form of free-standing housing, which came to be known as 'ex-guvvies', as well as camps, hotels and hostels (Hutchison 2006, Graham Brooks and Associates 2014: 55). Despite this provision, there remained a

3 A comprehensive history of the development of public housing in Canberra can be read in Bruce Wright's (2000) *Cornerstone of the Capital: History of Public Housing in Canberra*.

significant housing shortage throughout the period between the 1930s and the 1950s. A piecemeal approach to planning, the 1930s depression, as well as the shortage of materials and labour due to World War II, all exacerbated the problem. Further pressure was placed on the housing supply in 1948, when the ACT Government decided to transfer the remaining public service departments from Melbourne to Canberra (Graham Brookes and Associates 2014: 55). Blocks of flats, previously considered undesirable, suddenly found favour (Wright 2000: 29) and there was a shift towards faster and cheaper modern design and construction techniques (ACT Heritage Council 2015: 3).

It is this later phase of Canberra's public housing program that has been the target of urban renewal/redevelopment, and the one I focus on here. In particular, I consider the Northbourne Flats and the Northbourne Housing Precinct, both situated along Northbourne Avenue, the main northern entry leading into Canberra. The Northbourne Flats (see Figure 1), completed in 1958, consist of 248 flats of one, two, and three bedrooms. They are arranged in a repetitive configuration of three-storey blocks on either side of Northbourne Avenue. The Northbourne Housing Precinct (Figure 2) was built between 1959 and 1962, and is considered to be a more confident adoption of the postwar International Style and of greater architectural significance (Graham Brooks and Associates 2014: 57). The architectural firm Ancher, Mortlock and Murray was selected to design the precinct, with Sydney Ancher as Director in Charge. Ancher is known to have been inspired by European modernism, particularly the work of Le Corbusier and Mies van de Rohe, during his travels throughout Europe. He visited the, then controversial, Wiessenhoffsiedlung exhibition in Stuttgart and the Berlin Building exhibition in 1931 (ACT Land Development Authority 2014).



Fig. 2. The De Burgh street pair houses in the Northbourne Housing Precinct soon after completion. Northbourne Avenue flats, Canberra, Australian News and Information Bureau, 1965. Courtesy of the National Library of Australia, <https://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/3643918>.

The modernist ideal of a more egalitarian housing, with an emphasis on rational and functional design, can be identified in the designs of the Northbourne Housing Precinct. The brief was to provide a range of prefabricated concrete and brick housing flats and attached houses with an emphasis on a strong landscaping program. The final precinct consisted of four housing groups: the two-storey De Burgh Street pair houses, the four-storey Dickson and Lyneham bachelor flats, and the three-storey Karuah maisonettes and Dickson garden flats. According to the ACT Heritage Council, the precinct was ‘designed and constructed to present a “gateway” to Canberra which required a high degree of civic design’ (2015: 5). A small sample of each housing type in the Northbourne Housing Precinct will be saved due to the successful heritage listing, but the demolition of the precinct as public housing questions whether the ideals of modernist housing estates were ever realised. It presents an example where, despite the variety in design of the housing, none of the housing types have been deemed suitable as public housing. Did the Northbourne Flats and Housing Precinct fail its intended purpose? Or is the failure simply a part of broader attitudes towards public housing?

There has certainly been a reduction in public housing across Australia since the 1960s, and in 2018, 7.1 per cent of housing stock remained public housing (Burgess, 2018). Public housing, originally available to the fully employed, is today means-tested and predominantly occupied by welfare recipients (Wright 2000: 71). In a critical literature review on the meaning of home, Shelley Mallett notes that

[the] governments of advanced capitalist countries such as Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand have actively promoted the conflation of house, home and family as part of a broader ideological agenda aimed at increasing economic efficiency and growth. These governments have attempted to shift the burden of responsibility for citizens’ welfare away from the state and its institutions on to the home and nuclear family. (2004: 66)

Furthermore, the public housing on Northbourne Avenue had gained a very poor reputation, predominantly through media reporting and the visual appearance of the buildings.

The study of home and domestic spaces has long been of central importance to anthropology (Miller 2001: 2) and, likewise, explorations of dwellings and the domestic sphere have been an important subject in the visual arts (see Perry 2014, Racz 2015, Lauzon 2017). However, researchers have increasingly recognised home as a complex, multilayered concept that requires a multidisciplinary approach (Mallett 2004: 64, Cox and Buchli 2017: xii). Researchers have also outlined a conflation between the materiality of ‘house’ with the more nebulous concept of ‘home’, particularly with regards to how the ‘ideal’ and ‘real’ can be seen to coexist in a tension (Mallett

2004: 70, Blunt and Sheringham 2018: 6–8). This is especially relevant to the stigmatisation of large social housing estates, which has been recognised in many developed cities across the world (see Arthurson 2004; Wassenberg 2004, 2013; Hastings 2004; Atkinson et al. 2008; Jacobs and Flanagan 2013). Blunt and Sheringham suggesting ‘wider perceptions and media representations of certain residential buildings as unhomely and alienating run counter to the lived realities of such spaces’, citing projects that have sought to challenge the assumption that declining buildings must contain declining communities (2018: 7). Indeed, due to the poor reputation of Canberra’s inner-city public housing, there was a backlash from communities living in the outer suburbs against the building of new public housing in their areas (Lawson 2015 and Brown 2017).

It was in this sensitive social and political context that I sought to engage with housing residents: a social system that favours private ownership; a time of increasingly unaffordable house and rental prices; a society that conflates public housing with crime and dysfunction; and a time when many long-term residents were facing forced relocation.

Observation and engagement through drawing

As noted, my research methods included a combination of participant observation, drawing, painting, photography, video and interviews. I began by videoing the Dickson Bachelor Flats – the first public housing buildings to be demolished (Figure 3).



Fig. 3. The Dickson Bachelor Flats – the first building in the Northbourne Housing Precinct to be demolished. Photo: Katie Hayne, 2016.

Behind the camera was *my* comfort zone, due to having had more experience in photo-based media than drawing or painting. After several days of returning to watch the peeling back of the building exteriors (revealing previously hidden interiors), I finally met one of the ex-tenants who was watching his home being demolished. ‘That was my bathroom’, he said, as the metal claw nibbled away at the brick walls. He told me that there ‘used to be a community garden’ and that ‘the man downstairs caused some problems, but things were good’. He said he’d be happy to be interviewed but, before it could be arranged, he walked off. He was clearly very emotional, and I tried to imagine how watching your house be demolished would feel. It became evident how difficult it was going to be to meet and talk to the residents and I wondered if the large camera was a deterrent. The issues were sensitive and it became clear that waiting to talk to people after their homes were demolished was too late.

After several weeks of filming and photographing in and around the remaining housing precincts, with little progress in meeting any more residents, I eventually forced myself to leave the camera behind and try drawing. Drawing in the street was generally slower than photography; it required somewhere to sit and, at first, I felt more exposed. Despite this, after some initial hesitation, I began to experience a greater sense of engagement with place, simply due to being *in situ* for a longer period of time. Drawing required more effort than taking a ‘snapshot’ and was more personally revealing – a passer-by could potentially come and have a look at my drawing. Michael Taussig (2011: 21) describes drawing as a process of ‘giving’ and photography as a ‘taking’. This is an overly simplistic analogy, as Taussig himself acknowledges, yet, at a basic level, it describes how I experienced sketching versus photographing at this time.

To further experiment with sketching in the street, I selected the De Burgh Street housing in the Northbourne Housing Precinct, as well as the Northbourne Flats, the housing that was still occupied by residents. Drawing sharpened my attention to architecture and enabled me to observe in detail the individual character of the houses and gardens. I noticed such features as the variety in the window coverings, the plantings, the hanging windchimes, the washing-drying, the subtle variation in paint colours, the mailbox styles and the front-gate signage. I also became aware of the comings, goings and the sounds of people, cars, cats, dogs and birds. These were not necessarily represented in my drawings, but the process of drawings forced me to experience them with greater attention.

When drawing, there is an activation between the hand and the eye that creates a physical–mental connection with what one is representing. John Berger (1953) wrote eloquently about the drawer becoming one with their subject:

Each confirmation or denial brings you closer to the object, until finally you are, as it were, inside it: the contours you have drawn no longer marking the edge of what you have seen but the edge of what you have become.

Amanda Ravetz (2011: 158) similarly discussed a ‘heightened awareness’ when drawing and how, for her, this sensation was comparable to the expanded sensorial perception induced while conducting observational filmmaking. Ravetz’s description of a heightened awareness resonates with me, although I did not feel such a strong similarity between drawing and observational filmmaking (ibid: 169). The sketch book and pencil do not carry the same technological burden as the video recording, which entails a constant need to monitor image and audio quality, as well as the battery levels and storage memory. And, secondly, returning to Taussig’s (2011) description of drawing as a process of giving, my experience of drawing felt closer to an exchange. The act of drawing, due to its immediate visibility, required me to give more of myself than notetaking, photography or video would.

My drawings, albeit realistic in style, do not set out to be a highly accurate documentation, nor do they contain invented things of what I did not actually see. In this way, my sketches became the beginnings of narrative compositions, as I selected and framed, chose to focus on certain features and not others. I was aware of the same responsibilities of representation that apply when photographing or videoing (or the more conventional ethnographic writing for that matter). For example, I did not intentionally emphasise aspects that might be seen as negative – the signs of deterioration and rubbish – nor did I completely leave them out. In my street drawings, I tried to experience the ‘essence of place’ through my observations.



Fig. 4. The author drawing in De Burgh Street. Photo: Ursula Frederick, 2017.

Beyond experiencing place, what I did not expect was that drawing in the street would become one of the most significant ways for me to meet and engage with the residents (Figure 4). In the De Burgh Street housing precinct, the high fences seemed an impassable barrier. However, within a 20-minute time frame of doing a quick sketch, someone would almost always come past or out of their home. I would show my sketches and explain that I was drawing the houses as a part of my artistic and anthropological study into the housing precinct. Through this exchange on the street, I got the immediate sense that my drawings were valued. The conversation would almost immediately lead to the narration of stories about the housing, as well as the showcasing of the objects that they valued.



Fig. 5. Drawing of a De Burgh Street pair (semi-attached) house, pencil on paper.
By Katie Hayne, 2017.

After seeing my drawings, Hughie, one of the project participants, went inside his home and brought out a prized possession – a team football photo with both him and his brother when they lived in Ireland. At another time, a woman brought out a landscape painting she had done to see what I thought of it. One resident, Michael, who saw me drawing, told me that he used to be a professional artist. He shared his knowledge about painting and recommended several artists I should look at. Michael told me that the best time to see the houses is in the afternoon – ‘you get those long shadows and the railings and pergolas make interesting patterns’. He also talked about the bird life and how John, his neighbour, fills the water pots for the birds every day. When I showed Michael one of my drawings, he said ‘you know the roofs are

flat' (Figure 5). He was alluding to their architectural significance and diplomatically questioned how I had missed this important aspect of their design. 'It's not a very good design for the Australian climate because there are no eaves', he added. These conversations usually took place around a cluster of the ubiquitous 'wheelie' (rubbish) bins. Sometimes, another neighbour would come out of their house and join in. From these meetings, I started to gain small insights into the community, stories from their time living there, and how they felt about the housing.



Fig. 6. Drawing of the trees at the Northbourne Flats, pencil on paper. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

I believe that the very act of drawing, including its reception, was important in being accepted by the residents. As Manuel João Ramos (2004: 149) suggests, for the anthropologist, 'drawing is not merely a documenting activity but also an important and creative tool for interacting with and relating to human beings, of different cultures and languages'. Furthermore, for Ramos, drawing 'helps humanise me in other people's eyes, it becomes part of the anthropological process of tentatively bringing together observer and observed' (2004: 149). When one of the residents, Jim, saw me drawing, he said I had a 'gift from god' and that it was my responsibility to document the buildings and the trees before they go. Jim gave me a tour of his favourite trees in the Northbourne Flats precinct, commenting on the species, the tree canopy and the bird life (Figure 6). He said I must draw the Golden Ash. In comparison to ethnographic writing, filmmaking or photography, drawing starts with sharing something of yourself and may have the potential to elicit a greater sense of exchange. In this way, the residents demonstrated that they valued my

artworks and, as they started to play a role in directing the focus of my drawings and subsequent paintings, they often also opened up to the possibility of recorded interviews.

Interviews with residents

I formally interviewed six residents in the De Burgh Street houses and four residents (or people associated with) the Northbourne Flats. I had many conversations with other residents that also informed my perception of place and community. This was predominantly through a period of participant observation, whilst visiting the Northbourne Community Centre over six months. Of the ten people I interviewed, eight were current residents, one had been a resident as a child, and one was the Anglican Deacon who ran the Northbourne Community Centre. Of the eight current residents, all, except Kolka, presented themselves as 'single' and living alone. Kolka lived with her nine-year-old son and was in a long-term relationship. Hughie moved in with a partner who had since passed away. Five interviewees were male and five were female, ageing from approximately 42 to 82 years old. Six people mentioned having children, two had grandchildren or step-grandchildren. One interviewee arrived in Australia as a refugee, Hughie as an Irish migrant and Paul was a descendent of one of the first European families to settle in Canberra. Five mentioned having pets living with them at some stage. There was a surprising diversity in such a small sample. It revealed that it was likely that people living in public housing in Canberra had extremely varied backgrounds and lives.

When I interviewed Peta, I discovered she had studied architecture and that she was passionate about the design of urban spaces in Canberra. Peta worked for many years in the Australian Public Service and raised her daughter as a single mother. She had lived in De Burgh Street for 42 years. Her granddaughter now comes to stay regularly, and she told me they are big fans of the comedy sketch *Portlandia*. She was thrilled that I was documenting the houses and she lent me a book about the architect Sydney Ancher, as well as her book on the Bauhaus. She corrected me every time when I referred to the De Burgh houses as 'flats' and explained how technically they are 'pair houses' and how her place is, in fact, one of the few standalone houses. She pointed out how the pergolas connect the houses through horizontal lines (and that I had captured that in my drawing) and that I must paint the Le Corbusier-inspired curved wall. Peta did not want me to take a photograph of her, because, as she explained, of the way that people in public housing are often represented. Instead, she gave me some of her photos, including one of her garden ('looking better in spring', she said) and one of her up at Mt Ainslie, where she described herself as being in alignment with the symmetry of Canberra's layout (Figure 7a). Before I left, Peta said: 'You can draw my front

garden if you like, but as long as I can have the drawing' (Figure 7b). 'It's a deal', I said.

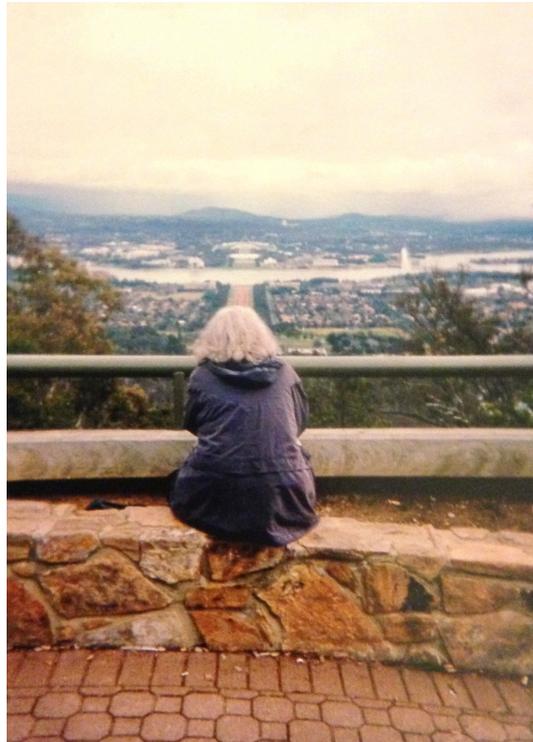


Fig. 7. (a) Photo of Peta up at Mt Ainslie, date and photographer unknown. Courtesy of Peta Dawson; (b) Drawing of Peta's front garden, pencil on paper, by Katie Hayne, 2017.



Hughie has lived in his De Burgh house for 34 years. He tells a story of finding a man asleep in his lounge room one day, and how it took nine years for him to finally get 'Housing' to fix the security screen door. Despite this, he says: 'I love this place, this is my home'. He showed me where his two dogs are buried in the back garden and I asked if I could take some photos of his lounge room. The interviews revealed stories about place and individual biographies that increasingly connected me with the residents. They usually took place inside people's homes, which added another layer to my understanding their lives.

My initial research plan proposed that interviews would take place outside of peoples' homes, on the front verandah for example. This was not simply because the research participants were initial strangers, but also due to the wide-spread perception that the people in public housing might be 'dangerous'. My plan was partly based on the University ethics and risk assessment processes, in which a researcher is encouraged to adopt a cautious position. In retrospect, this process also encouraged me to focus upon negative stereotypes. This is not to say that I did not need be cautious, as one might be when venturing into any unknown place. When Peta saw me sitting outside, drawing in the street, she sternly warned me that I should not sit there because the man that lived in that house was an 'ice-addict' and could be unpredictable. I took her advice, but the notion that the residents I had come to know quite well posed any danger became ridiculous, and on being invited 'inside', I found myself accepting.

In fact, almost every resident who agreed to be interviewed invited me inside their home, insisting on showing me around the entire house, including the bedrooms and bathrooms. Even Peta, who said that her house was too messy, invited me in to see her art collection. Indeed, upon entering the houses, I gained further insight into the lived experience of the housing. Daniel Miller, in his introduction to *Home Possessions* (2001: 15), notes: 'The life of anthropology comes from its insistence in seeing the world through perspectives we would never have even imagined if we had not forced ourselves into the site from which other people view their worlds'. I did not do any drawings inside people's homes, but I did ask if it was okay if I took a photo of them in the room, or of other items. I also used my mobile phone to take 360-degree panoramas of the lounge rooms in some instances. Doing this, I occasionally felt like the insistent anthropologist described by Miller, but, in retrospect, I wonder what would have happened if I had been more insistent and asked to draw the house interiors as well. These photos came to be a form of notetaking and, along with the drawings, became a part of the dataset from which I could develop creative responses in the studio.

Ongoing engagement through paintings in progress

Concomitant with the street drawings and the interviews was my solitary process of work in the studio. I was relatively new to painting and had never had a dedicated studio before. I wondered how my style of realist painting could possibly communicate my engagement with the housing residents. My studio space, although only a five-minute drive away, felt completely removed from my field location. I tried not to worry about this, but I regularly took visits back to the housing precinct to try and stay connected with the site. I began grappling with materials: the various painting grounds, the different shades of viridian green to capture the vegetation and styles of brush strokes to deal with the flat areas of the building walls. As a primarily representational painter, I am inspired by artists such as the Italian still life painter Giorgio Morandi, the American social realist Edward Hopper and Eleanor Ray, a contemporary, New York-based, painter of architectural space. I also looked at artists who have engaged with housing estates or public housing as a subject matter. Catherine O'Donnell's large-scale drawing installations such as 'Inhabited Space' are a key example.⁴ Others include George Shaw's painting of housing estates in the UK, Rachael Whitehead's installation 'House' (Perry 2014) and Tom Hunter and James MacKinnon's model 'London Fields East – The Ghetto' (1994), which I saw on display at the Museum of London in 2018.

I painted what had inspired me from the outset: the exterior views of the houses and the subtle individual features that distinguished them from each other. I have come to see these paintings not as the final communication of my research, nor as a substitute to the ethnographic text, but rather as an active part of the research process. These works do not depict specific people. I have instead sought to explore how the subjectivity embedded in the paintings, and the houses themselves, suggest an imagined person. To communicate this studio work back to the residents, I started showing them photographs of my paintings in progress (on my mobile phone). This elicited further conversations which provided new insights and was one of the ways the recursive nature of the creative process enabled opportunities for exchange and dialogue.

Below are some of my paintings presented as a short 'photo-essay' followed by brief responses from the residents, or my observations about the paintings.

When Hughie saw the painting of his house (Figure 8), he said 'I should have brought the bins in'. His comment became the title of the painting.

4 See Catherine O'Donnell's 2015/2016 work 'Inhabited Space at Art Gallery of NSW' on her personal website (O'Donnell 2018).



Fig. 8. (a) *I should have brought the bins in*, 2017, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm;
(b) Hughie outside his house. Photo: Katie Hayne, 2017.





Fig. 9. *My little urban forest, planted 40 years ago, woodchips soon, sad*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

This painting is a view of Peta's house from Northbourne Ave (Figure 9). She titled the painting: *My little urban forest, planted 40 years ago, woodchips soon, sad*. Peta, one of the longest residents in the De Burgh precinct – who knows everyone in the street – introduced me to Carolyn.



Fig. 10. *Window Twitcher*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

Carolyn has a perfect view of the street from her upstairs window (Figure 10). She told me that she cannot wait to move to a new house: ‘they don’t fix anything here and it’s freezing in winter’.



Fig. 11. *Golden Ash*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2018.

This painting (Figure 11) was inspired by Jim. He is concerned with what is going to happen to the trees and he took me on a tour of all the species of trees he knew. He said: 'You must paint the Golden Ash'. When I showed him my painting, he was very pleased and asked if I had also done one of the Amber Ash. He was disappointed to learn that I had not.



Fig. 12. *Kolka and Darcy's Home*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

I first met Kolka after completing the painting of her house. Kolka is a single mother and lives here with her son. Kolka told me how the place smelt like cats when she moved in, but that she had put new lino in the kitchen and painted the walls. She was thrilled that the green wall colour perfectly matches the colour of their pet budgie Danny's feathers. Kolka described the view from upstairs of the bike path as akin to living in little Amsterdam but said that she never tells anyone she lives there due to the stigma of living in public housing. She named this painting *Kolka and Darcy's Home* (Figure 12).



Fig. 13. *No Parking*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm each. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

In the case of some of the houses, I never met the residents. I experimented by leaving areas unpainted (see Figures 13, 14 and 15), which accentuated both the limits of my knowledge about these homes and the uncertainty of what the future holds.



Fig. 14. *Bike on a roof*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm each. By Katie Hayne, 2018.



Fig. 15. *Two Bins*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm each. By Katie Hayne, 2017.



Fig. 16. *Crossing Northbourne*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

Similarly, in these paintings (Figures 16 and 17), I simply tried to evoke the mood I had experienced due the time of the year and the day.

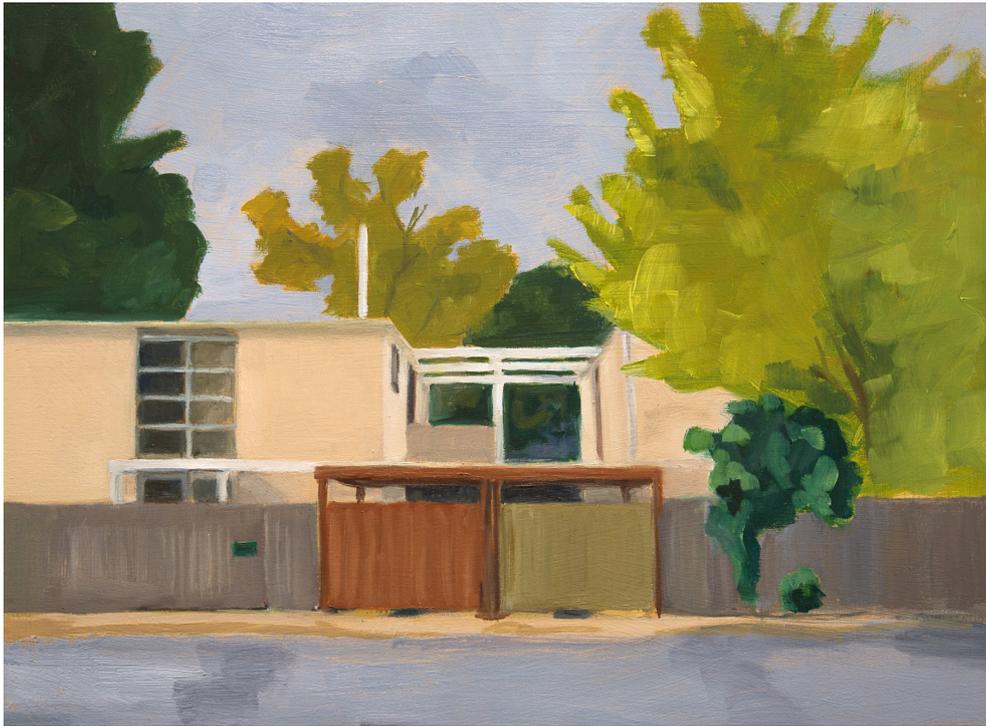


Fig. 17. *Pair houses*, oil on board, 28 (h) x 35 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2017.

In January of 2018, I exhibited these works for the first time. Planning the exhibition involved finalising a series of seventeen paintings, including the titles that communicated a story about the Housing Precinct. The titles became a key way of incorporating the perspectives of the residents into the works. I invited the residents I had met to the exhibition, and I was pleased that a few came along. However, the reality was that even a local artist-run space was inaccessible to many of the residents and, in retrospect, it would have been more appropriate to explore other exhibition spaces – even in the street. The gallery space did enable connections with other audiences and several people shared their experiences of public housing.

When a local artist, who I will call Steve, saw the painting of the Lyneham Flats (Figure 18), he pulled me aside and began telling me about his experience of living there: ‘It looks very calm, it’s not like that, it’s crazy in there’. He noticed the ‘LOVE SUX!’ sign I included in the window. This is an edited version of the story he told me about it:

Yeah that’s Debbie – you know she eventually found love – she’s had a shit time, but she discovered her passion for horses (...) unconditional caring from these two horses that she looks after. So, people come into that place pretty messed up, but they have that stability.

Steve told me stories about each of the residents in his building and how he has coffee with his neighbour every week and helps Debbie bring in her washing, but he said:

I don’t socialise at home. It’s not a good building for socialising. When you bring people here, you don’t talk on the stairway, everyone can hear you. I’ve been trying to get carpeting for years.

Steve told me how Debbie wants to move from the Flats to be closer to the horses now, but that he himself did not want to move. It is his home, and he likes that the buildings are an iconic gateway to Canberra. He said: ‘It’s a really great thing – even with all of its shortcomings – to have a permanent address. It’s so important and transformative’.



Fig. 18. *LOVE SUX!*, oil on board, 61 (h) x 49 (w) cm. By Katie Hayne, 2018.

Conclusion: 'I loved and hated the place'

At the outset, this project did not set out specifically to understand ideas of home or house. Yet, through the consideration of the lived experiences of the residents of Canberra's Northbourne Avenue public housing, at a time of forced relocation, I gained unexpected insights into the complexities of what people hope for in housing. One of the most common observations from the residents was that the public housing is stigmatised. Hughie told me that a taxi driver did not want to drive down his street. Kolka said she never tells anyone where she lives because people think differently of you. Jim said he is looking forward to moving because no one will know his new house is public housing. Wassenberg (2004: 223) writes: 'It is curious that the most frequently reviewed and well thought out large housing estates are now the areas with the worst image'. He further notes that the 'residents are socially stigmatised merely for living in a stigmatised area' (ibid.: 223). It was clear from my discussion with the residents that they felt their identities were closely tied to the public perception of their homes and that they often sought to distance themselves from such associations. At the same time, Kolka was incredibly proud that I had painted their De Burgh Street house and suggested the title of the work to be 'Kolka and Darcy's home'. In an online comment on Google Maps, user Andy M sums up these conflicted emotions well: 'After spending 18.5 years living in Northbourne Flats it's sad be forced out of my home. I loved and hated the place but I will never forget the experience of living there'.⁵

I noticed how the feelings of the residents about moving to a new house changed as other options became available to them. Steve did not want to move, but, when I saw him a few weeks later after he had finally been offered a new place, he said that he was glad to be out of there. Hughie said that the new place they offered him 'you couldn't swing a cat in'. Having lived in a De Burgh pair house for 32 years, he could not stand the thought of moving from his attached house to a flat. He suggested that his neighbour John might like the flat instead; and, John decided to take it. John was pleased with his new place – although small, it has a north-facing window. In the same way that people's views of their existing housing varied, their hopes for a new house did too. Jackson (1995: 122–3) notes that home 'is always lived as a relationship, a tension', that it 'may evoke security in one context and seem confining in another'. Mallett suggests this is a way of understanding home that

[...] holds ideas of the real and the ideal, or the real and the imagined in tension rather than opposition. Accordingly the real and

5 This is a comment left by user Andy M on Google Maps. <https://www.google.com.au/maps/place/Northbourne+flats/@-35.2674429,149.131638,561m/data=!3m1!1e3!4m7!3m6!1sox6b16529e34583b39:oxf8a12724af4dacco!8m2!3d-35.267517!4d149.1301963!9m1!1b1> [accessed 09 April 2019]

the ideal are not pure and distinct concepts or domains. They are mutually defining concepts and experiences. (2004: 70)

These tensions have led me to consider how I might represent the transitional state of the residents in the Northbourne Avenue housing and I have begun experimenting with a new body of work (see Figure 19). The text is painted on a re-claimed cupboard door from one of the first public housing buildings to be demolished. It speaks to the promise and possibility of the future, of both the residents who are forced to leave and of those moving into the new apartments that will take their place. As an opening and closing, an entry and an exit, the door is a symbol of the tensions embedded in the public housing renewal in Canberra.



Fig. 19. *Your dream home awaits you*, oil on reclaimed cupboard door, 63 (h) x 63 (w) cm.
By Katie Hayne, 2018.

Following Lippard (2010:24), I have looked towards anthropology for an ethically responsible approach to social engagement. However, as the artist Susan Hiller recently noted, art has a greater potential than the social sciences to create a space that elicits empathy in the viewer (Chaisson 2018). Painting, in its poetic capabilities, has provided me, the residents and the broader community with an alternative representation of the houses and a platform to consider the issues of housing affordability, gentrification and homelessness in our cities. It is these capabilities of art and anthropology that I seek to explore further in my research and practice.

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