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Complexity, aesthetics and gentrification: Redfern/WaterlooTour of Beauty

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Redfern/Waterloo
Tour of Beauty

SQUATSPACE ·

BOTTOM LEFT PHOTO: ALI BLOGG

Complexity, Aesthetics and Gentrification: *Redfern/Waterloo Tour of Beauty.*

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It's now nearly 4 years since SquatSpace began running its *Tour of Beauty* through Redfern/Waterloo. Being involved with this project as one of the *Tour*'s organisers has been a formative and grounding first-hand experience in spatial politics, gentrification, urban planning and design. I want to take this opportunity to briefly reflect on the neighbourhood complexity which the *Tour* makes visible (if not entirely comprehensible) as it relates to two key issues in the ecology of neighbourhoods: gentrification and aesthetics.

The *Tour of Beauty* began as a strategy for coming to grips with the complexity of Redfern. In Sydney, the word "Redfern" comes packaged with all sorts of (often unspoken) associations: *pride*: for the Aboriginal folks from near and far, for whom Redfern is a physical and spiritual foothold in an increasingly hostile urban environment; *fear*: for a huge slab of the non-Indigenous population who steer clear of the place as a general rule; *hope*: for the property developers whose watchful eye is cast on Redfern's precarious social and architectural structures; and *endless frustration*: for politicians of all persuasions, who have continually failed, in their own terms, to "solve the Redfern Problem" - which presents an entanglement of racial politics, welfare policy, and land value. It is precisely Redfern's resistance to problem definition which makes it so complex.

A problem? For whom? A solution? On whose terms? Redfern is not a chess game. Chess, though offering an enormous array of potential moves and counter-moves, always moves forward towards a known and desired goal. Thus the term "wicked problem", coined in 1973 by design theorists Horst Rittel and Melvin Webber, seems appropriate for Redfern. A wicked problem has no clear definition. It has no clear "rules" of engagement. There is no way of knowing when a wicked problem has been solved, or when one should stop trying to solve it. It is impossible to simply impose a solution which functions well in analogous situations, and any attempt at a solution tends to generate a proliferating cascade of further problems, each of which may be equally difficult to define and solve.[1]

In mid 2005, when SquatSpace naively stepped into the Redfern fray, we were presented with a problem of our own. As artists, we are used to making Art. Art tends to select, define, frame, solidify and simplify elements from the world, and transplant them into another context. It is a process of representation in

Tony Mundine's Gym on The Block, April 2009.
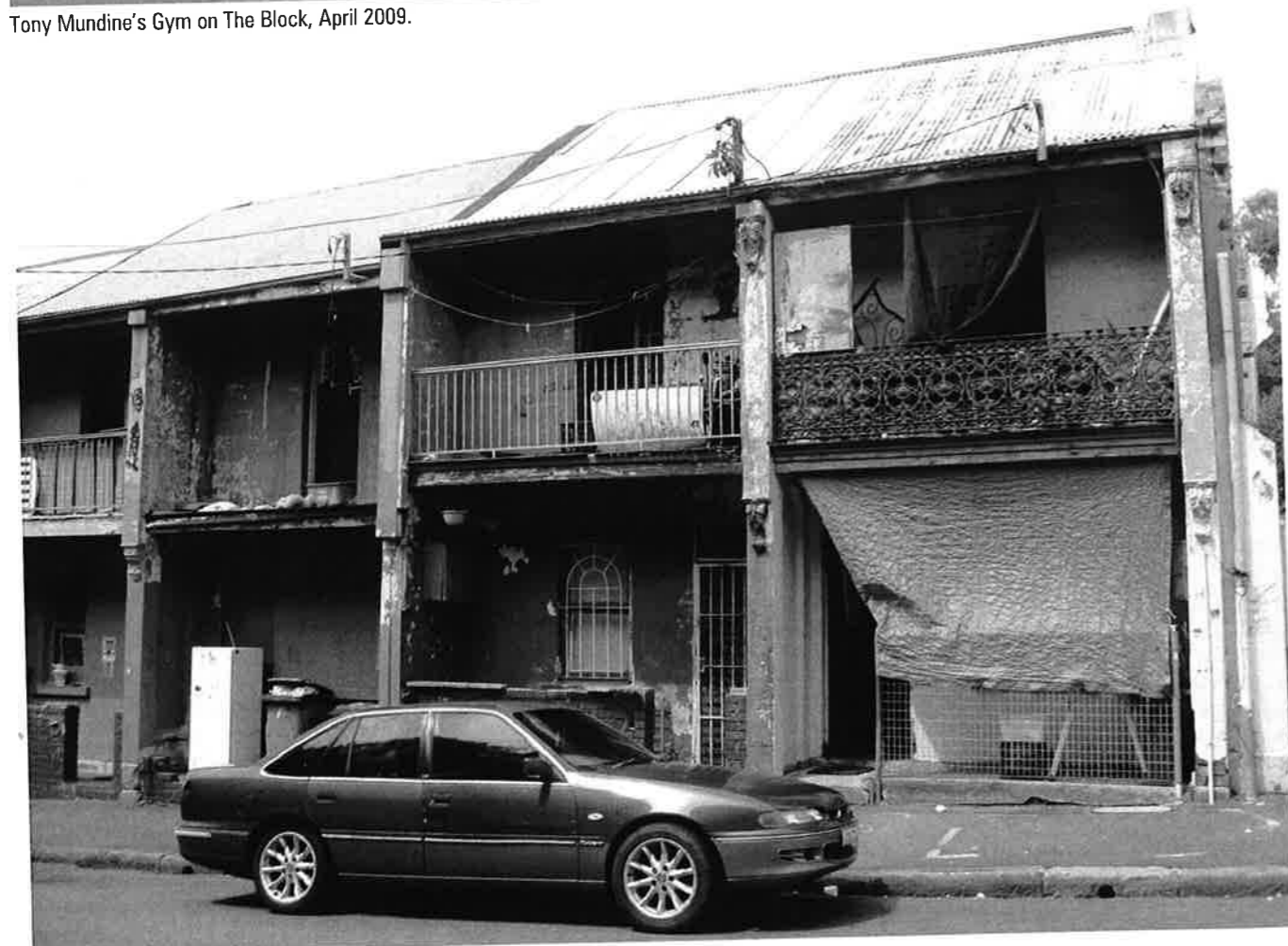
Terraces on The Block, April 2009.

which one thing comes to stand for another, resulting in a (provisionally) satisfying coherence and sense of unity. Choosing to "make art about Redfern" is thus a tricky proposition. How could we reconcile the tension between the complexity of our subject-territory, with art's requirement of coherence? Our tentative experiment at moderating this tension was the *Tour of Beauty*, which provides an experiential framework for dialogue and dissent without requiring closure and consensus.

The *Tour* works well at providing "a foot in the door" to Redfern's local politics. Our role as tour-guides steers clear of party lines. We are not beholden to the correctness of council or state government policy, nor are we hamstrung by the orthodoxy of hard-core oppositional local action groups. We run the tours as "fellow citizens", although by now, most of the members of SquatSpace have been forced out of the neighbourhood by rising property prices. Speakers on the tour represent themselves: they are free to be as inflammatory, seductive or rhetorical as they like. Our intention, with this way of making art, was to liberate ourselves from the onerous role of having to represent the opinions and arguments of others, which, we believed, would always be diluted and misconstrued when filtered through our secondary voices.

Thus, the *Tour* offers a series of sharp, angry, sweet or sad speeches. Ray Jackson walks us through the final path taken by TJ Hickey before he died after pursuit by the police. Ray's passionate plea to re-open the inquest is delivered in front of the very fence upon which the young man was impaled, forcing us into the uneasy role of impromptu mourners and amateur crime-scene investigators. Lyn Turnbull welcomes us into The Settlement, a dishevelled neighbourhood community centre. She recounts the tale of a hostile takeover bid by certain local residents, keen to rid the street of the Aboriginal kids whose exuberant and mischievous presence was bringing down property prices. And Ross Smith gently shows us the public housing which defines a large proportion of the area, whose population, he says, "are one of the most studied" in Australia. "Poked and prodded by experts who come and go and never come back", Ross says the public housing tenants carry on bemused, determined not to be intimidated by the academic glare of anthropological and architectural research.

These are just a few of the regular speakers on the *Tour*. Experientially, the *Tour* is a strange day out. It is exhausting, both emotionally and physically - it runs for over 4 hours. And we who come along – how should we define ourselves? *Tourists?* - if so, what kind of tourists are we? We take a risk, leaving our homes and traipsing *en masse* around a contested suburb like Redfern (even if many of us already live here). It is unsettling: a group in a bus, or on bikes, moving through public space becomes spectacle as much as spectator. Inevitably, something unplanned will happen on the *Tour*. Recently, an inebriated inhabitant of Redfern Park saw our gathering as a readymade audience - an opportunity to hold forth on some incomprehensible subject of his own. How do tourists respond to such a situation? This encounter foregrounds the paradox inherent in the *Tour* itself. "If you came out today to experience the real Redfern, well, here it is

folks!" Unlike our pre-booked speakers, who while provocative and passionate, are for the most part encouraging of polite dialogical exchange, these random incursions have no predictable behavioural script. Which brave soul will intervene to expel or include this homeless man, so we might continue with our discussion about Redfern?

Such situations bring to the surface the ethics of everyday action – the complexity inherent in the seemingly innocent question of "what to do about Redfern"? There is never any end to this complexity: and precious little in the way of a vocabulary to even speak of it. Yet speak we must, and the *Tour's* dialogical structure provides a small framework in which difficult questions can be raised and discussed.

Artists are thus the avant-garde of gentrification

The final stop on the *Tour of Beauty* is a place at the eastern edge of Redfern, called Crystal Waters. It is a modern high-rise apartment development on the site of a former glass-works factory. After a day of visiting Aboriginal housing sites, community centres, abandoned government buildings and housing tower-blocks, Crystal Waters is a jarring vision. Our visit is like a trip into the future – or at least, one possible future – in which Redfern's complex spatial and social tensions have, perhaps, been erased, replaced with a lego-land environment complete with foaming fountains and private security patrols. At this place, unlike all the former sites, we offer no guest speaker. As tourists, we now *confront ourselves*: the group organically reforms into a circle, and begins to sift through some of the overwhelming complexity of urban design and planning which we have confronted.

Haunting our discussions around the fountain at Crystal Waters is *aesthetics*. The very *look* of the place raises the question of taste. Clean and new, in contrast to the layered accretions of grime and history which characterise most of the other sites on the *Tour*, Crystal Waters is generally held by the group to be a sanitised and "artificial" (and therefore failed) attempt at neighbourhood creation. In this, aesthetics and politics are inextricably interwoven. "I wouldn't want to live here", one of our tourists mutters. But for others on the *Tour*, Crystal Waters points a possible way forward: centrally designed apartment complexes are an opportunity to share amenities, services, water and power. They might even allow for community gardens and large-scale solar power generation. The "characterful" but ecologically wasteful terrace houses of Redfern struggle to achieve such design intelligence, embedded as they are in nineteenth century British architectural principles. Another tourist counters that it is unlikely that Crystal Waters has

utilised anything but the cheapest and meanest of technologies and materials - it is space parcelled, commodified and alienated at its worst. He casts aspersions on the kind of non-community that such a place is likely to engender: *yuppies*, driving their cars directly into the underground car-park, taking the lift to their apartments, walking their fluffy dogs in the manicured private park, and never otherwise interacting with the rest of Redfern. He means, without interacting with the *real* Redfern.

"If you came out today to experience the real Redfern, well, here it is folks!"

The fact that the discussion reaches this point - that we allow ourselves to make sweeping generalisations about the aesthetics and lifestyle habits of a large segment of the population - is disquieting. After a day of opening our ears to a broad range of voices – believing, that is, in our own open-mindedness - here were are again, struggling to come to terms with difference. While no doubt an understandable response to our sense of helplessness in halting the march of "progress", the ease with which we can engage in yuppie-bashing reveals a blind spot in our thinking. That blind spot is *our own role in the process of gentrification.*

When we artists and creative types move into a neighbourhood, it is nearly always because of its affordability. Run-down spaces offer an opportunity to artists not visible to other sectors of the property market. We are able to invest energy into architectural waste structures, creating a connection between beauty and utility where there previously seemed to be none. In fact, it is this "authentic" utilitarian beauty of artists' warehouses, lofts and squats (and which we find lacking in faked-up developments like Crystal Waters) which allows the broader property market to wake up to their potential for intensified commodification.

Artists are thus the avant-garde of gentrification – a fact we never acknowledge when we moan about the "yuppies moving in and changing the face of our suburb". We loudly declare our abhorrence for gentrification, yet we ourselves are a key step in its onward march. As David Ley has so incisively pointed out, this is how aesthetics is embedded in the property market. Artists (somewhat like real-estate agents) engage in a quasi-magical process of value-creation. We devote attention to worthless

and invisible phenomena. Like renovators and do-er-uppers, the attention of artists makes junk special and *valuable*. It is therefore no surprise that the same occurs to the very neighbourhoods which we inhabit. As Ley writes, gentrification instigated by artists involves the exact same trajectory as the classic Duchampian transformation of garbage into found objects: 'the movement of [...] a place, from junk to art and then on to commodity.'[2] The final step, then, in the gentrification process is the pushing of those same artists out of their homes, which are now too expensive, and onto the next low-rent neighbourhood. And so the cycle continues.

The *Tour of Beauty* is no doubt playing its own small part in this process. However, it could do more. It could, precisely, begin to cast the spotlight right back onto artists' spatial transformations of Redfern. In this way, we might begin to see ourselves as intrinsically involved in, rather than victims of, the gentrifying forces of change. In addition, perhaps we could begin to invite those very yuppies we seem to abhor as guest speakers on the *Tour*. The danger, of course, is that we may be criticised for giving airtime to those who certainly don't need it, whose "money talks" much more loudly than the clamoring voices of Redfern's battlers. What's more, by listening to them, we might dull our oppositional edge, the sharp clear moral high-ground that a partial understanding of any situation enables. But apart from our egotistical (and wrongheaded) attachment to being the noble underdogs of gentrification, there is not much more to lose. To gain? Plenty. A chance to understand yet another aspect of the ever-evolving multifaceted social and spatial equilibrium which is a neighbourhood. The possibility, that is, of moving forward into an ever more complex ecology, which, this time, might be conceived in a more holistic manner.

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ENDNOTES
[1]The term "wicked problem" was introduced to us by Redfern resident Jack Barton, an architect and urban researcher. According to Barton, his PhD thesis - centred on spatial decision support systems for suburb planning - would never have been completed if he had continued to use Redfern as his case study: the area was too complex and its problem-set too vast to be tamed by the requirements of the academic system.
[2]Ley, D., 2003, "Artists, Aestheticisation and the Field of Gentrification", *Urban Studies,* Vol. 40, No. 12, p. 2528.