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Utopia or Dystopia: A Contested Space on Sydney's Urban Frontier

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Utopia or Dystopia: A Contested Space on Sydney's Urban Frontier

Abstract

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Keywords

sydney's, urban, utopia, frontier, space, contested, dystopia:

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Utopia or dystopia, a contested space on Sydney's urban frontier

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Author/s biography

Dr Ian Willis is an honorary fellow at the University of Wollongong, New South Wales, a member of the the Australian Historical Association, Professional Historians Association (NSW & ACT), and the Independent Scholars Association of Australia. He has a special interest in local studies, place and Sydney's rural-urban fringe.

Utopia or dystopia, a contested space on Sydney's urban frontier

Abstract

Australia is a settler society where the rural-urban fringe of the major cities and regional centres is a contestable stage. There are a range of actors who compete in place making processes re-shaping the cultural landscape when there is collision over the ownership of space and the dominant narrative. This paper examines the proposition that Sydney's urban growth has created a zone of conflict on the city's metropolitan frontier between cultural heritage and the interests of development. In recent years Sydney's rural-urban fringe has encroached on the village boundaries of Menangle where there has been a collision between the expectation and aspirations of villagers and a local land developer. Village activism has sought to defend a landscape aesthetic created by settler colonialism in the face of neo-liberal capitalist forces intent on re-shaping place. The former enclosed estate village of Menangle, once the province of the Macarthur family on their colonial estate of Camden Park, is being engulfed by the octopus that is Sydney's urban sprawl. State sponsored urban planning processes have threatened the villagers' community identity and a sense of place in the name of progress and development. Local government has limited capacity to negotiate in a landscape where a battle over cultural values has produced winners and losers as the colonial frontier did over 200 years ago.

Key words: place making; citizen participation; neo-liberal capitalism; landscape aesthetic;

Introduction

Urban growth has caused Sydney's rural-urban fringe to be pushed into the former Cowpastures district of the southern sections of the Cumberland Plain, where the forces of settler colonialism had created an English-style landscape aesthetic that included the village of Menangle. Once a part of the Macarthur family's Camden Park Estate, Menangle village has become a contested site over concerns of cultural heritage and rural lifestyles. A range of actors have participated in the place making processes and attempted to create a new narrative around the forces of neo-liberalism and development.

In the 19th century the Macarthur family attempted to re-create an English-style estate park and pleasure ground on their colonial holdings in the Cowpastures. The landscape aesthetic

was copied by other colonial gentry across the Cowpastures and readily identifiable to newly arrived Englishman John Hawdon in 1828. (Willis, 2016) Over the next century Camden Park retained its position as the high water mark of this landscape aesthetic including its closed estate village of Menangle. The Englishness of the village was confirmed with the presence of a village railway station (1863), the church on the hill (St James, 1876), the grand family mansion (Gilbulla, 1899), the creameries (1890s) and workers' cottages.

Writers, artists and poets waxed lyrically about the area's Englishness and in 1927 the Duchess of York stated: 'It's Little England, a model of an old English village...[just] like home'. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1927.) The Duchess and the Duke were the guests of Brigadier-General JW Macarthur Onslow, and his wife Mrs Enid Macarthur Onslow, while in Australia for the opening of the provisional Parliament House in Canberra. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1927) The Duchess's comments were widely reported across Australia. (*Argus*, Monday 4 April 1927. *Examiner* (Launceston, Tas.), 4 April 1927. *Warwick Daily News*, 4 April 1927. *Morning Bulletin* (Rockhampton, Qld) 4 April 1927. *Mercury* (Hobart), 4 April 1927. *West Australian*, 4 April 1927) By the 1940s Camden Park was considered to be 'an English rose-garden blooming in a wattle grove – a rose-garden more English than if it had been in Kent'. (*The Sydney Morning Herald*, 24 July 1943) Most recently former Englishwoman Lesley Traverso evoked visions of Somerset, (*The Menangle News*, Vol 27 No 2, February 2017.) with her views echoed by architectural historian Hans-Lothar Huhn. (*Macarthur Chronicle*, 13 June, 2017)

The aim of this paper is to illustrate how the village of Menangle, with a population of 1150, has become a stage for a range of actors who have attempted to claim ownership of the place

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making processes. The village is located 64 kilometres south-west of Sydney on the fringe of the Sydney Metropolitan Area adjacent to the Hume Highway and the southern railway to Melbourne. Village residents have sought to use participatory democracy to defend the area's cultural heritage that has been fundamental to their community identity. State sponsored planning processes have pushed Sydney's metropolitan frontier into the countryside to the edge of the village, raised citizen's anxieties and are intent on re-shaping place. Local government has largely been powerless to act in the face of centralised planning controls which have sought to over-ride local sensibilities.

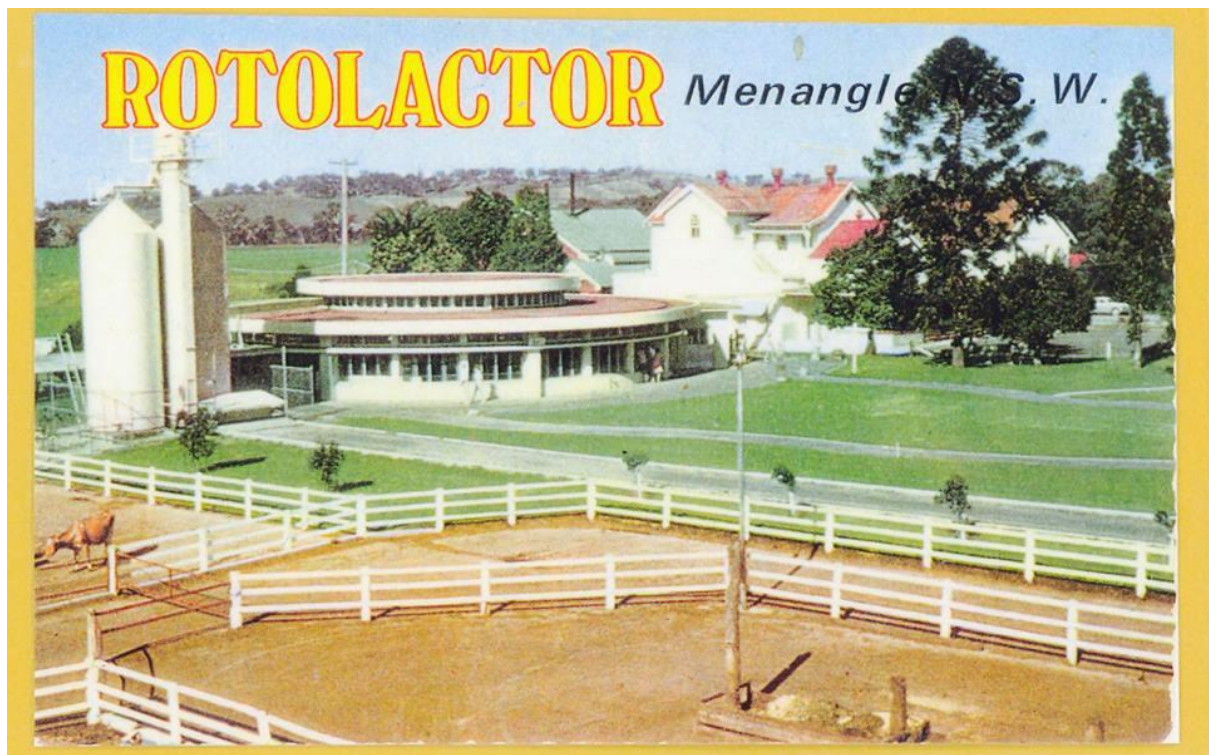


Figure 1 The Menangle Rotolactor was built by Camden Park Estate and started production in 1952. The dairy was copied from a 1920s American design and introduced to Australia by the manager of CPE Edward Macarthur Onslow. (Camden Images, Postcard, 1950s)

Methodology and Research Literature

This case study is a qualitative study using an empirical methodology based on the personal observations as a public historian of the processes around civic activism, neo-liberal capitalism and state sponsored planning processes. The analysis builds on my earlier work of Sydney's rural-urban fringe where former rural communities have been assaulted by the forces of urban growth. This case study is drawn from a variety of local primary and secondary sources including local newspapers, emails, posters, banners, flyers, social media and other ephemera as well as informal interviews with stakeholders. While being an observer to these processes and not taking any direct part in community activism I have acted as a change agent by facilitating storytelling by local citizens in a number of publications.

The historic nature of this case study needs to be set in the context of research around a landscape aesthetic (Willis, 2016) and the development of community activism, (Howe, Nichols and Davison 2014) its colonial origins, and the planning process. (Williams and Williams 2014) Heritage and place making are complex and contested concepts with their own broad fields of work. One that crosses the disciplines and provides a useful model here is Jones and Shaw survey of heritage in Australia. (eds. Jones and Shaw 2007) There is a rich literature covering participatory planning and a useful model to examine the concept of citizen participation has been provided Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation. (Arnstein 1969) Legacy and others have provided an examination on civic participation in a neo-liberal context. (Legacy 2015; Legacy and van den Nouwelant 2015; Melanie Lombard 2014)

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The state sponsored planning processes that background the development proposals discussed in this paper take place under the administration of a number of state governments. They started with the Askin Coalition state government (1965 to 1975) which developed the Sydney Region Outline Plan. In the early 1970s both the state and federal governments came under community pressure around heritage issues which were subsequently reflected in planning proposals for the Macarthur region, which included Menangle. The paper then moves onto the recent development proposals at Menangle and the planning regimes of the Carr Labor government (1995 to 2005), followed by Labor Premiers Iemma (2005), Rees (2008), and Keneally in 2009. The planning regime was changed by the election of the O'Farrell Liberal-National Party Coalition government (2011 to 2014) and consolidated by later Coalition leaders Mike Baird (2014) and Gladys Berejiklian (2017).



Figure 2 Aerial view of Menangle village showing the Southern Railway in bottom left of image. The rotolactor paddock is bottom right of image (Camden Images, 1996)

State sponsored urban planning processes - the 1968 Sydney Regional Outline Plan

The first state sponsored planning scheme that had a direct effect on the Menangle village was the 1968 Sydney Region Outline Plan, which was prepared by the State Planning Authority of New South Wales under the Askin state government. The government subsequently drew up the 1973 New Cities of Campbelltown, Camden and Appin Structure Plan, which later became the Macarthur Growth Centre in 1975 in an agreement between the state and Whitlam federal government. The structure plan recognised the national significance of the cultural heritage of the Menangle village and the associated Rotolactor. (The State Planning Authority of New South Wales, 1973, p. 84) The Rotolactor was part of the process of industrial modernism that the Macarthur family had implemented to improve their dairying operations in the mid-20th century. It was an automated circular milking machine with a rotating platform introduced into the Camden Park operation in 1952 by Edward Macarthur Onslow from the USA.

The Rotolactor was a huge tourist attraction at Menangle with up to 2000 visitors a week at its peak until the Macarthur family sold out of the Camden Park pastoral interests in 1973, including the village of Menangle itself. The sale struck at the heart of Australia's rural consciousness (Willis 2012) and received extensive press coverage with questions asked in both state and federal parliament. (*Camden News*, 24 January 1973; *The Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 July 1973) The Rotolactor continued operations until 1977 and then remained unused for several years. It was then purchased by Halfpenny dairy interests from Menangle who operated the facility until it finally closed in 1983. (Walsh 2016, pp.91-94)

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The importance of the cultural heritage credentials of the Menangle village were re-stated in the 1984 Working Paper of the Macarthur Planning Committee (Department of Environment and Planning 1986, pp.1-6) and then again in the 1991 heritage report by Joyti Sommerville commissioned by Wollondilly Shire Council. (Betteridge 2012, p. 16) The Menangle Village Conservation Area was gazetted in 1991 and updated in 2000. (Betteridge 2012, p. 16)

First development proposal for the Moreton Park Road Precinct 2004-2006

In 2004 two Menangle businessmen, Ernest Dupere and Russell Halfpenny, were encouraged into action by the policies of the Carr Labor state government which aimed to streamline and fast-track development approvals in New South Wales. Under the influence of neo-liberalism and micro-economic reform the state government maintained that it needed to stimulate economic activity by the removal of red tape in what Gleeson and Low have called ‘corporate liberalism’. (Gleeson and Low 2000) This process was initiated with eight ministerial taskforces in 2003 one of which involved major developments and infrastructure projects of state significance. (Williams and Williams 2014, pp.499-501)

Menangle developers Dupere and Halfpenny had grandiose vision for a freight hub on the eastern side of the village, along the Moreton Park Road precinct, and put their ideas to a public meeting in November 2004. The proposal involved an intermodal freight terminal of 500 hectares consisting of 10,000 m² warehouses, railway and trucking facilities operating 24/7 creating 5000 jobs. (*The District Reporter*, 18 November 2005; *Camden Advertiser*, 1 December 2004) The site was on farmland adjacent to the Southern Railway Line and the South Western Freeway (Hume Highway).



Figure 3 Moreton Park Road precinct located east of the Menangle village and adjacent to South Western Freeway and Southern Railway Line (I Willis, 2017)

The Moreton Park Road proposal generated disquiet amongst Menangle residents. Resident Ray Smith maintained that the proposal would ‘change the character of the town and ruin their reasons for choosing Menangle as their home’. Smith stated that, ‘the rural atmosphere will be turned into an industrial one’. (*Camden Advertiser*, 1 December 2004) Menangle resident Kathryn Terry, who thought that ‘the whole atmosphere of the area would be destroyed’ organised a protest meeting in December 2004 attended by around 70 residents. (*Camden Advertiser*, 12 January 2005) This community activism fostered resistance to the proposal over the next 15 years.

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By the end of 2004 there was a stand-off between the villagers, who wanted the status quo, and the developers, who were intent on moving ahead with the Moreton Park Road proposal. Dupere and Halfpenny continued to maintain that Menangle 'residents did not understand the proposal' and that they had addressed the concerns of residents after the initial public meeting in November 2004. (*Camden Advertiser*, 12 January 2005) Despite these assurances community anxiety continued to grow. Another public meeting was held in March 2005 at the Douglas Park Community Hall where 'angry and confused residents' packed the hall. Wollondilly Shire Council Mayor Banasik stated that the proposed rail, road and warehousing interchange was 'bigger than Ben Hur [and would] change the face of Wollondilly'. The community meeting was attended by four councillors and the council general manager. (*Camden Advertiser*, 30 March 2005) The developers stuck to their original position that they would always 'consult both the council and the community'. (*Camden Advertiser*, 30 March 2005)

In mid-2005 the Carr Government's Minister for Planning Craig Knowles introduced amendments to the Environmental Planning and Assessment Act that aimed to standardise planning requirements across the state and introduce a streamlined assessment regime for major projects of state significance. (Williams & Williams, 2014, pp. 499-501.) These changes were met with the approval of developer interests, while opposed by local government, community and environmental groups. (Espinoza Nino, 2008, pp.10-13)

University of New South Wales planner Wilfred Espinoza Nino has maintained that these amendments gave the Minister for Planning 'totalitarian power' over projects deemed to be of state significance. This process cut the community out of the decision making process on the basis that the state government 'knows best'. (Espinoza Nino, 2008, pp.10-13)

Community cynicism remained high in 2005 despite a finding by the New South Wales Lemma Labor Government's Department of Infrastructure Planning and Natural Resources that the Moreton Park Road site was unsuitable for an intermodal freight terminal. (*The District Reporter*, 18 November 2005) Menangle resident of 46 years Peter Reay felt that if the project went ahead 'you can kiss the rural lifestyle goodbye'. (*The District Reporter*, 18 November 2005.) Developer Ernest Dupere sought to bypass Wollondilly Council in mid-2006 by having the proposal, now rebadged as the Menangle Enterprise Park, declared a project to state significance and place the planning approval in the hands of the New South Wales Planning Minister, Frank Sartor. (*Macarthur Chronicle*, 2 May 2006.)

Community activism intensified and over 150 people turned up at a protest meeting organised by the Menangle Action Group. Meeting organisers, who maintained that it would 'send a message to the government', were supported by Wollondilly Mayor Phil Costa. (*The District Reporter*, 9 June 2006.) Resident Robin Craig spoke for many villagers when he re-stated their position that the development 'would destroy Menangle's village character'. (*Macarthur Chronicle*, 2 May 2006.) On the other hand developer Ernest Dupere re-stated, yet again, his position that he felt he could work out a solution to any opposition from the community. (*Macarthur Chronicle*, 30 May 2006.)

Economic development and the re-zoning of the Moreton Park Road Precinct 2008-2011

Corporate liberalism arrived on the steps of the Wollondilly Shire in 2008 when Wollondilly Shire Council adopted a plan to encourage economy activity in the Local Government Area.

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Menangle Pastoral promptly engaged a joint development partner, Macquarie Bank, and commissioned a report on the Moreton Park Road site. The report acknowledged the problematic nature of the project with respect to: Menangle's historic nature and heritage assets; the relative isolation of the development site; and the lack of infrastructure at the project site. (ERM 2008, pp.54,79) These issues were never really addressed by the developers in any of their plans for the site.

The developer conducted a community engagement strategy about the proposal starting with a public meeting in November 2008. The meeting outlined the planning context for the proposal as part of the New South Wales Rees Labor Government's Draft South West Subregional Strategy for Sydney. Over 60 residents attended and their cynicism and fears about the loss of their lifestyle and rural aesthetic became evident to all to see in the question and answer session. (Tebecis and Greig, 2008) In 2009 the developer posted information on their website, briefed key stakeholders including the Menangle Action Group and conducted a public information session at Menangle House in October. (Wollondilly Shire 2010, p.192) In April 2010 the council invited public submissions for the proposal, while the Menangle Action Group and the newly formed Menangle Community Association (Egan-Burt, 2017a) conducted a community poll and prepared a vision statement for Menangle village. (Wollondilly Shire 2010, pp. 192-193)



Figure 4 Menangle Railway Station on the Southern Railway Line between Sydney and Melbourne with a steam train approaching the station from the south (Campbelltown City Library, 1963)

Wollondilly Shire Council strengthened the historic protection of the village by adding Menangle Railway Station and part of Moreton Park Road to the village conservation area and the local environment plan. (Betteridge, 2012, pp. 19-20) The new association held a historic photographic exhibition and launched a campaign to create a landscape curtilage around the village precinct. (Menangle Action Group & Menangle Community Association, 2010, pp.3-5)

The rural zoning of the Moreton Park precinct continued to be an issue for the developers and in early 2010 Menangle Pastoral lodged a planning proposal with Wollondilly Council to re-zone the precinct to industrial usage. (*The District Reporter*, 26 April 2010.) In July the Menangle Community Association wrote to the council objecting to the re-zoning. (Menangle

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Community Association, 2010a) The association also made representations to the council that insufficient reference was made to the history of Menangle and Camden Park Estate in council planning documents and decisions. (Menangle Community Association 2010b) The council eventually rejected the proposal in August for a gateway determination, a state government mechanism for the preliminary assessment of planning proposals. (Wollondilly Shire 2010, pp.199, 218-219) The developer then went to the state government in order to bypass the council's approval processes. (*The District Reporter*, 7 March 2011.) The Keneally Labor Government's Minister for Planning Tony Kelly gave permission to the developers to have the proposal assessed by the government's Joint Regional Planning Panel. (Betteridge 2012, p. 21)

The following year in March 2011 the O'Farrell Coalition State Government came to power and the developers tried again to have the Moreton Park precinct re-zoned. This time the developer sought an amendment to the Wollondilly Local Environment Plan through the government's Sydney West Joint Regional Planning Panel. (Betteridge 2010, pp.20-21) By 2014 the shortcomings of the site had still not been overcome by the developers and the preliminary gateway assessment was rejected. (SouWest Developments, 2015)

In July 2011 the council lodged a planning proposal with the Department of Planning and Infrastructure which sought to add a landscape conservation area around the village. The proposal sought to recognise the heritage significance of the 'visual catchment and historic landscape' to the village. (Betteridge 2012, p. 26) In November 2011 the department deferred a gateway decision pending the preparation of a detailed heritage study of the Menangle village precinct and surrounding area. (Betteridge 2012, p. 8) In 2011 the Menangle

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Community Association gathered letters of support from politicians, community groups and local identities. (Menangle Community Association 2011; Governor of New South Wales 2011; Russell Matheson MP 2011; Chris Betteridge 2011; Camden Historical Society 2011; The Oaks Historical Society 2011; J & E Macarthur Stanham 2011)

Under pressure from community concerns the Dupere developments interests, trading as Souwest Developments, took a different approach with the Station Street precinct in the Menangle village. In 2012 they lodged re-zoning proposal for 450 houses and a commercial precinct around a restored Rotolactor. (Elton Consulting, 2015, p.10) Developer Ernest Dupere said that the 'proposal had taken a long and tortuous path to get where we are' and that the company 'was committed to preserving the village's heritage'. He maintained that the company would use funds from the sale of houses to restore the creamery and rotolactor buildings so that 'the public can once again enjoy them'. (*Wollondilly Advertiser*, 22 July 2014.) The proposal received an early endorsement by the O'Farrell government's Sydney West Joint Regional Planning Panel in 2013, was put on public exhibition in July 2015 and eventually approved in 2016. (Sydney West Joint Regional Planning Panel 2016,)

The editor of *The District Reporter* best summed up the attitude of many saying that

While the majority of the community know that urban development is inevitable, it doesn't mean they will just sit by and watch the heritage of the area obliterated in the name of progress. (The District Reporter, 4 July 2014.)

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Not all Menangle residents thought the housing development in the village was a bad thing. In July 2014 Menangle Store owner Brian Redmond wrote a letter to *The District Reporter* stating that residential development was a good thing for the village and would bring a sewerage service to the community. In addition Redmond felt it was positive that Menangle Pastoral Company would restore the creamery and Rotolactor building turning them into conference centre and restaurant. (*The District Reporter*, 11 July 2014.)

By 2017 control of the Moreton Park Road and Station Street precincts had passed to Mirvac Developments. Mirvac lodged a proposal for 5000 housing lots in the Moreton Park Road area with Sydney South West Planning Panel of the Berejiklian state government.

Wollondilly Shire Council opposed these plans and Councillor Lowry complained that the shire should be defended from Sydney's urban sprawl. (*Camden Narellan Advertiser*, 17 May 2017) Wollondilly Council received support in their opposition to the new housing development from Camden and Campbelltown councils. (*Camden Narellan Advertiser*, 17 May 2017.)



Figure 5 The Menangle Community Association held a community festival that attracted thousands of visitors to the village. In the background of this image is the Menangle General Store built in 1904 designed architects by Sulman and Power for Camden Park Estate (MCA, 2017)

Conclusion and Challenges

The village of Menangle on Sydney's urban fringe has been a contested site between development interests and community activism on a stage where there has been a stream of constant changes to the New South Wales state government's planning regime.

At Menangle the community felt that development proposals around the village threatened the community's nationally significant cultural heritage, its colonial landscape aesthetic and the contemporary rural lifestyle. The legacies of settler colonialism had created a site where

nostalgia has been turned into a potent political force, a position best summed up by Menangle resident Laura Egan:

People seem to think preserving Menangle is a bit of a 'not in my backyard' mentality, but it isn't. Menangle is unique in its history and as part of the story of Australia. Why sacrifice it? The local council aren't interested in development, so it really is only developer greed driving the threat. (Egan-Burt, 2017b)

The loss of rural landscapes is not a new theme on Sydney's south-western frontier for decades. Residents have displayed nostalgic yearnings for earlier times and the lost memories of their youth. Local journalist Jeff McGill recently recalled 'when I was a kid' there were 'open spaces – that have long helped define the local landscape' and that are now 'vanishing'. (*Camden Narellan Advertiser*, 3 May 2017.)

On the other hand, a string of state governments and local councils have attempted to encourage economic growth and development on the greenfield sites of Sydney's south-western urban fringe. In this case study the grand dreams of Menangle developers for a freight hub fitted this neo-liberal agenda but has failed to gain official government support due to shortcomings. While the state planning authorities have approved the less problematic proposal for housing on the edge of the village adjacent to the historic Rotolactor.

In recent months community activism at Menangle has taken a new approach. The Menangle Community Association conducted a successful community festival celebrating the history of the Rotolactor and attracted thousands of people to the village. The festival demonstrated to

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local developer interests the commercial potential surrounding the marketisation of nostalgia. Subsequently developer Halfpenny made numerous public statements supporting the restoration of the Rotolactor as a function centre and celebrating its past. (The Sydney Morning Herald, 22 December 2017).

This paper provides a useful case study of civic activism in the planning processes and illustrates how the Arnstein's Ladder of Citizen Participation can be applied in the field. At Menangle the evidence suggests that the community started at level one in the early stages of the planning processes where there was an attempt at manipulation and as community awareness increased the degree of civic participation moved up the ladder. Community activism faded out at level five where the public submissions seemed to have some impact at placating citizen's worries and slowing the development processes sufficiently to air the major issues.

So it is legitimate to ask: is community activism worth the effort? On the evidence provided the Menangle case study certainly supports the notion that without community activism the villagers would certainly be in a worse position than they are currently. While the villagers have not stopped the forces of neo-liberalism their actions have slowed up the planning processes, encouraged public discussion of the major issues and led to the amelioration of some of the worst aspects of the developments.

The contested nature of place making in and around the Menangle village shows no sign of abating anytime soon. There are continuing challenges for development interests and Menangle villagers alike. Civic participation needs to ensure that Menangle citizens are not

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dealt out of the democratic processes, while development interests need to be more sensitive to local sensibilities. Overall there is a need for all actors to acknowledge that there is an ongoing need for the creation of resilient and sustainable communities that meet the needs of all citizens.

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