DO PLANNERS DREAM OF ELECTRIC TREES?

Timmah Ball

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I.

A metal filing cabinet stands at the end of a thin corridor, rarely frequented by other bureaucrats who otherwise fill the sparse office floors in the 37-storey building. Ministerial briefs are stored in manila folders that accumulate like a library of forgotten administrative details, which were important for a moment in time. I file a recent planning approval amongst the hard copies of Acts and other policies, which inform our work. As I turn to leave the 1987 Planning and Environment Act makes eye contact with me. I take it, noticing how small and unimposing it is with its flimsy green cover; the exam anxiety it once elicited now seems trivial. As I flick through its pages, re-digesting the amendments and special provisions, it slowly occurs to me that a Law designed to protect nature is made from trees. If paper still comes from trees. I can't be sure if it still does: most of my professional transactions are electronic, which makes the experience of touching the Act with my fingers transgressive. Am I touching a dead tree, or has technology pacified these aspects of environmental degradation and I've just forgotten, lost ruminating in the cyclical blur of professional development and global environmental debate.

In the new knowledge economy, urban planners must move rapidly through technical and political processes in the development of cities and regions. Trends compete for attention in a frenzied 21st century where basic things, like people, often fade into the background. These tensions were exasperated at a conference where design professionals clamoured for front row seats in

the atrium at Fed Square, anticipating the US strategist, the keynote speaker, fresh from Brooklyn's industrial revitalization. She explained to the audience that the future of cities is: *{wearable technology which moderates climate change hot spots, robotic, 5G, driverless, blockchain, focused on air space (because there's no land space left), skies thick with drones and data driven because the internet is everything.}*

In this tech revolution, I assume that eco-conscious entrepreneurs have developed treeless paper. And if they haven't, then the solution to the killing of trees must be hidden within the 1987 Planning and Environment Act, which states that:

THE PURPOSE OF THIS ACT IS TO ESTABLISH A FRAMEWORK FOR THE PROTECTION OF LAND IN VICTORIA IN THE PRESENT AND LONG-TERM INTERESTS OF ALL VICTORIANS.

Trees are of interest and underpin our long-term livelihood but, as I skim through the pages, no clause or section directly references the protection of trees. Do they deserve their own Act? Or is their preservation coded in legislative language, buried amongst the references to the metropolitan green wedge and the declaration of distinctive areas and landscapes? The Act is lengthy and just as I grasp one section there is always another clause to the paragraph, which is disorienting. And there are no images of trees or other remnants of the natural environment, which is strange. Does the Act assume trees will always be here, growing along train lines, on the edge of freeways or on high-rise roof tops?

*

A landscape architect invites me to speak to his students in a class—the Politics of Public Space. The idea of landscape architecture sounds like a peculiar contradiction, not dissimilar to the concept of legislating nature, something that should live above the law—but still, I agree to participate. We meet in a new building and don't talk about trees. His students are eager to discuss ideas of gender and race in the built environment as we critique a new building on Swanston Street. Cities are large and unruly, and we struggle to retrofit them into the latest thematic buzzwords, but the students move eagerly through the building trying to assess its impact on our humanity. It meets most of our criteria appallingly, despite its architectural form and porousness, distinctive of inner-city Melbourne. From some angles you can almost see the trees that grow along Swanston, the city's spine. But their presence is like wallpaper, decorative but not cultural or nourishing.

The landscape architect moves us into a small tutorial room for the second half of class. I'm asked to lead a discussion on the ARM Portrait building of William Barak and I begin by reading an essay referencing Linda Kennedy. Kennedy conveyed the irony of a Blak figure in the built form with menacing honesty. Her words cut into my own internal flux: that it is bewildering to be an urban planner of Ballardong Noongar descent living on Bunurong, Boon Wurrung and Wurundjeri Woi Wurrung country. But a spark or gut feeling tells me to keep pushing within these professional borderlines even as they oppress. And, if I don't suffocate in the process, then dismantling the borders which both restrict and determine livelihood will seem worth it. I'm aware that this is difficult terrain as the landscape architect catches me on the intersection, questioning why I work in land use policy and not art or academia. Part of the answer is that I see different

struggles in these industries that are equally damaging. And I am more interested in border crossing, spilling into these disciplines at night, leaving an imprint then returning to my desk in the 37-storey building in the morning. Moving across borders is dangerous but claiming one spot has never felt comfortable, either.

We keep talking about the space between buildings and the ones contained in textbooks, like there's a real difference. Another guest speaker asks if I'm frustrated by the industry's obsession with preserving "heritage" buildings in spaces like Fed Square while birthing trees are at risk of vanishing. The answer is horrifyingly visible in the Australian landscape where terra nullius quietly persists, where western architecture is revered and western trees—those clean British Oakes and Elm trees which line St Kilda Rd Boulevard—are not threatened by tunnels. Cultural ignorance trickles through the industry. But while it is easy to critique, I occasionally imagine change at the juncture of art, activism, architecture, academia and policy, even if the concept of meaningful co-existence seems distant and challenging.

Working in the mechanics of a foreign operating system and trying to manipulate the law from within is overwhelming. But I see trees growing in urban areas and understand that they were here before the western law that attempts to protect them. Trees are visible through the windows of packed trains crammed with office workers. And in the language, memories and Sovereignty of the traditional custodians of this Country and interconnected Blak communities who have found home in Narrm/ Birrarung-Ga. As Lisa Bellear writes in *Beautiful Yuroke Red River Gum*:

> There are maybe two red river gums
> a scarred tree which overlooks the
> Melbourne Cricket Ground the

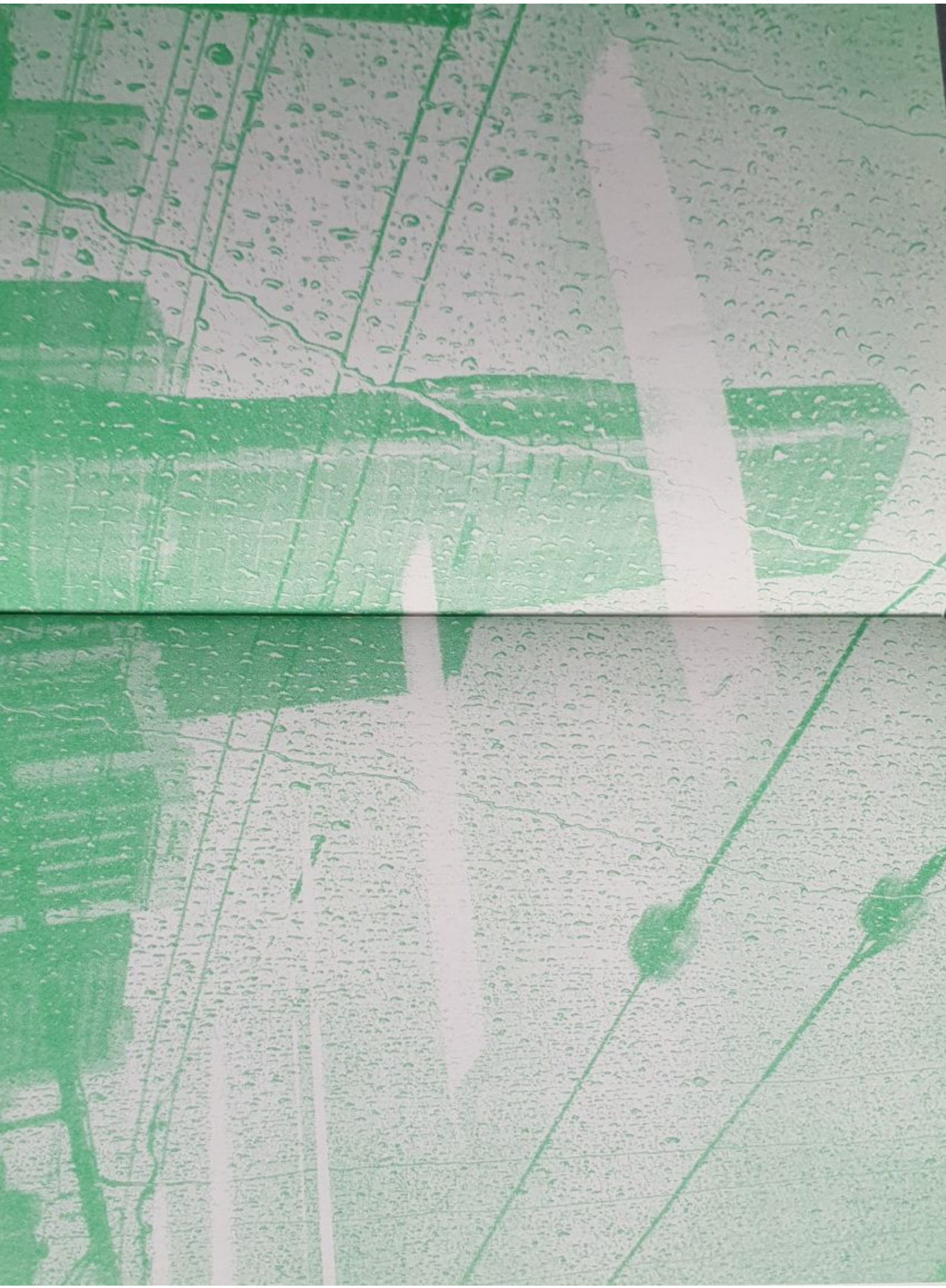
survivors of genocide watch
and camp out, live, breathe in various
parks 'round Fitzroy and down
town
cosmopolitan
St Kilda

And some of us mob have graduated
from Koori Kollij, Preston TAFE,
the Melbin Yewni

Red river gums are replaced
by plane trees from England
and still
the survivors
watch.[1]

And trees continue growing in unlikely places beyond planning strategies, urban design theory, legislation, tech trends, environmental activism, and art. They speak to each other through complex root structures beneath the city's streets and highways that couldn't settle them.

1. Lisa Bellear, *Beautiful Yuroke red river gum in Landbridge:* Contemporary Australian Poetry, John Kinsella (ed.) Publisher: FACP, 1999



II.

There's a ghost in the hallway. He lingers quietly in the long corridor, melting into the dark burgundy wall with federation wallpaper trim. In the foyer at the bottom of an opulent staircase an array of artists, performers, musicians and audiences gather radiantly, rarely noticing his presence as the collective anticipation before an event obscures the past. In a building that moves contemporaneously the ghost is well hidden within the architectural edifice of his own making. We don't remember his name but his impact lingers forcefully, although it is easy to forget or look away. In the beginning the building's grandeur was intentional, a statement of control and occupation. And while the interior re-emerged as a space of cultural production a peculiar uneasiness remained within its walls. Even as the building's original intentions slipped from view.

We seep into the authoritative architecture, enlivening it with community and culture but its structures have remained untouchable even as bodies transform the space. Does it matter? It's difficult to tell, maybe it's enough that a building that started as a town hall, (the iconic symbol of government, law and bureaucracy) was reimagined as a community hub for cultural activation. Or maybe we should do more to erase its legacy, to rid of its ghosts. Built in 1876 it was designed by the British architect George Johnson in the Italianate style. A popular 19th-century design movement influenced by the architectural vocabulary of 16th-century Renaissance Italy. A laneway between the building and North Melbourne library was named after him like many other streets, roads and highways that mark this city with ghosts. In an anonymous poem that was published in the Port Phillip Gazette, a newspaper that circulated

in the 19th century, the material goals of these buildings were laid out like the planning maps that spread themselves across the landscape with the confidence of someone who had been invited. The poem stated:

> A site thus fixed, a town is plan'd; the streets
> At angles right and then divided off,
> And anglicised.[2]

These sites were never something that could be 'fixed' or controlled. But the buildings that were laid over them became permanent and given a status that elevated them from the ground they stood on. They became impossible to mould or adapt within the legal mechanisms and heritage acts that preserved architectures of Renaissance Italy. And misinterpreted the layers of culture beneath. This building and others gained prestige, establishing exclusionary socio-spatial practices where 'public' space was divided unequally because it was never intended to be 'public.' And when the doors finally opened, it was never enough to let those who belonged, their true custodianship.

In 2019 I met Uncle Dave Wardin in the strange, anachronistic building now known as Arts House. He spoke as part of Refuge, a First Nations focused and community led program that confronted climate-related disasters. Throughout the program the heavy colonial architecture was re-positioned, faded out as the traditional owners reaffirmed their place. At the top of the imposing staircase, whose ornate wood finishing symbolised early settler wealth, Yorta Yorta musician Allara Briggs Pattison reassessed how we live. With an

2. Bill Hannan, *Pride of Hotham: A Tale of North Melbourne and a Red-Headed Architect*, Hotham History Project North Melbourne, 2006, p.45

incisively cheeky tone, she told us that she's 'gonna start a Murnong farm in her rental in Preston', reminding me of my own disconnectedness to Country, where Uber Eats replace fresh food when time moves too quickly.

We should all grow Murnong in our backyards. Murnong are Wurundjeri potatoes with far more nutritional value than the introduced foods we've acclimatised to on apps. But as Uncle Dave explained, a mesh of bureaucracies prohibits these changes however obvious and urgent they seem. As we discussed his work he questioned whether people would prefer to see us stuck on the margins making boomerangs for tourists rather than systematically changing mainstream law and policy.

I noticed well-meaning participants move through Refuge momentarily engaged by Uncle Dave's discussions that incited a desire to change. But the absence of policymakers and strategic planners was palpable. On the City of Melbourne Planning scheme, the building is zoned public use and commercial. Heritage overlays protect the colonial architecture but there is nothing to recognise or nourish the culture beneath. Do people who work within the colonial planning system ever imagine something else? Or do we continue circling each other, breaking the rules at art festivals while other departments within the same council implement them.

Most of us don't remember who George Johnson was, but his design is meticulously protected in the layers of legislation that honour his and other buildings. And the possibility to move the space with the artistic impulse that reshaped its internal use escapes us. The taught planning scheme leaves no room for interpretation, petrified of changing the burgundy walls that blemish the Country that the building was built on. In 2010 the building entered the Victorian heritage

Register further strengthening the mechanisms that safeguard its status. It states that:

> The former North Melbourne Town Hall is architecturally significant as one of the earliest of the grand municipal buildings that characterised Victoria in the post-gold era. It is an outstanding and intact example of the grand town halls, which were built in the inner suburbs of Melbourne in the 1870s and 1880s, and demonstrates the prosperity of these municipalities at the time. Both buildings are architecturally significant for their association with George Johnson, one of Victoria's most important architects during this period, and the pre-eminent architect of town halls.[3]

And the 'significant' architectures of Europe are secured in the register that prohibits us from repainting its interiors. The walls remain coated in deep burgundy, which hide George Johnson's ghost who occasionally appears at openings then disappears down the dark hall.

3. Victorian Heritage Database, Former North Melbourne Town Hall and Municipal buildings, https://vhd.heritagecouncil.vic.gov.au/places/3016#timeline-title

III.

I wrote a poem I wasn't sure I should write. It was called:

THE ARCHIVES OF ARCHITECTURE ARE FORMED IN THE BUREAUCRACY TO HIDE WHAT THEY DID

I was paid $200. It evolved from a lecture I gave for a subject in the Faculty of Design and Architecture that I delivered online. On zoom small faces flickered in and out of focus and started to leave. Their names flashed across the screen as they exited, which felt different to seeing them leave if I had been lecturing irl. In this context I might have imagined that they were rushing to something important and disappointed that they had to leave. Zoom magnified their apathy and I questioned why the sector rushed to include Indigenous perspectives. Reminding future practitioners of First Nations Sovereignty felt hopeless if this Sovereignty was never embedded in the material structures that students designed. It would always remain abstract and distant in the logics of their careers. If I was an affordable housing developer or placemaking consultant they might have stayed? But I was equally conscious that my resentment might have been misdirected. It was arguable that the students were just fatigued from managing multiple responsibilities — (casual work, unpaid internships, assessments, mental health and some sort of personal life.) Whatever their reasons, it hurt.

I was asked to speak about government buildings. I wanted to reflect on the architecture of Parliament House, council offices, town halls, hospitals, schools and other state infrastructure, which represented

authority through uniform western design (grey concrete slabs, cold colour pallets and decadent federation architectures which fortified the construction of a nation). Overtime many of these buildings were abandoned. Old schools and hospitals became surplus to governments needs but remained vacant rather than sold, land banked under the policy of value capture and creation. Public servants waited for the right re-development to emerge, which generated government income and aligned with strategic policy outcomes connected to the latest urban trend. But the deteriorating structures, which waited for decades as empty ruins, began to symbolise westernisation's failure. And this was more attractive than the posturing of re-development and innovative urban strategies.

The subject required students to design a new piece of public infrastructure: a waste management facility, a transport depot, a data centre, a water treatment plant, a power station, an art storage facility, a greenhouse for industrialised agriculture, a distribution warehouse or a hangar. It asked that students:

> "attempt to organize the outer context's overabundance of information in a crystalized architectural form. As a consequence, it is not always about beauty. Yet, at the same time, it is only about beauty—and sometimes even about the possibility of a contemporary monumentality."

These goals may have explained why some students exited my lecture swiftly; I was interested in decay, collapsing bureaucratic buildings that exposed the Sovereignty beneath. I couldn't provide practical prompts to stimulate design processes. Constructing another government building did not espouse beauty or monumentality in the creation of civic futures. My mind

moved towards the possibility where abandonment and vacancy was the desired outcome. It is reasonable that they probably didn't understand what I was doing or why I was there. They had assessments to complete and my perspective asked for intangibility.

A month later I was invited to write a creative response for a small publication addressing the subject's theme. The coordinator suggested I write a short story about a government building and provided hundreds of images of police stations, TAFE's, storage facilities and other infrastructures in Sydney. I agreed believing it would be interesting searching for stories in the concrete malaise. In the string of emails filled with attachments, links to drop boxes and other archives I didn't notice an explicit direction:

> "We were hoping you would be interested in writing a short story about Wee Waa Police Station. It is quite loaded."

It was difficult to know how to respond as I looked over the images that were shared with me scrutinizing the Wee Waa police station, an irregularly shaped triangular building. The tone of the request made it cruelly obvious what had happened in the confines of the bureaucratic form. Newspaper articles, which were provided to me, reported on the buildings unusual design, which many believed, mimicked the Sydney Opera House. They criticized the underutilization, which failed to maximize the large plot it was built on and observed the way that its angular shape made it possible for people to walk up to the roof's peak. But there were no newspaper articles describing the incident that had occurred in a cell in 1981, just a pdf copy of a Wikipedia entry clinically detailing the horrific event. One of the articles from 2005 described how the local Kamillaroi community

had worked with police to develop a mural on the building's exterior like a form of reconciliation. But there was nothing about 1981 and maybe this was what the community wanted. As I thought about the building I wondered whether it was my role to report on the incident while others could only focus on the architecture. And was it even possible to do so without sensationalism or worse still conflating activism with art or academia?

Initially I had worried that the request was exploiting me, reflective of many other demands, which mined First Nations people's trauma. But within this cynicism I could also imagine that they had genuinely wanted to say something about the evil that hid within the bureaucracy and urgently needed uncovering. Although I understood their intention, to report the incident felt like voyeuristically trespassing on another family's grief. Any possibility of justice required robust knowledge of the law and an ability to undermine the carceral systems, which perpetuated these horrors. Fiction felt self-gratifying, the ethics unclear. So I tried poetry as if it's abstraction might illuminate something important. I started writing about the process of not wanting to write a poem about state violence. This felt more respectable than reportage. But the words looked peculiar on the page, unsure if they were necessary. I read it over and over, rearranging the order of each verse hoping to capture something that was useful but unsure if this was ever possible.

Who are the writers?
Looking for reasons
To document architecture
That hides the evidence

Who are the architects?
That create surveillance

To makes us feel safe
From irregular behaviours

Who are the criminals?
In governed interiors
Barbed wire justice
Or bureaucratic discipline

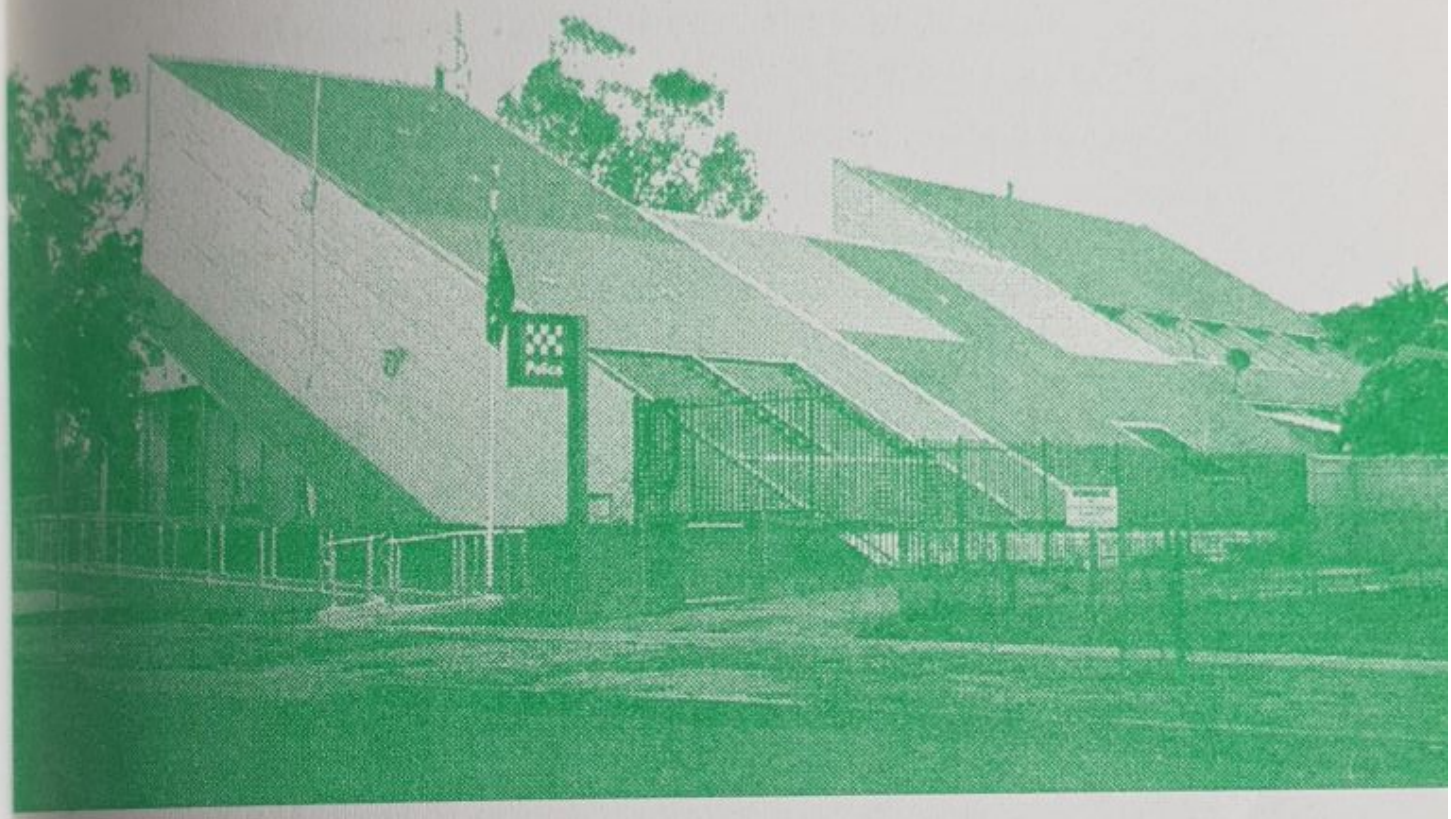
Who hears their shouts?
In solitary cells
On the inside out
That conceals our doubts

Where is design?
That Used to matter
When we read Foucault
In university libraries

Who still haunts?
The triangular exterior
Where community murals
Construct different histories

Where did they go?
To hide what they did
And who disappeared
In a government facility

And how do we imagine?
Administrative equity
Design as disobedience
That acts as abolition



IV.

'Going over to his sheep, Rick bent down, searching in the thick white wool — the fleece at least was genuine — until he found what he has looking for: the concealed control panel of the mechanism.'[4]
— Phillip K Dick

There are sheep in a mural that was installed along the Epsom Road Overpass in 1998 that are also robots. But unlike the electric replicas Rick Deckard keeps on his roof to impress his neighbors in the sci-fi classic *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep?*, there is nothing genuine in the mural and it is impossible to find the concealed control panel in order to make it stop. The sheep in the mural preserve a narrative of progress and prosperity, a history that the built environment aggrandizes in other murals, public art and heritage listed architecture. And as much as I have tried to tamper with the mechanism to reveal the fake, electric sheep the control panel remains concealed. Lost within layers of legislation, planning controls and amendments to the planning scheme, which keeps the simulated city running.

The mural titled '*Riding On The Sheep's Back*' by the artist Libby McKinnon is intended to celebrate the agricultural significance of the area where cattle crossed over Epsom Road on their way to city abattoirs, or for sale at the Newmarket stock yards. In the 20th century, Newmarket was the world's largest livestock auction market where several million braying bulls and bleating sheep, passed through weekly, emitting

4. Philip K Dick, *Do Androids Dream of Electric Sheep*, first published 1968, Doubleday Publishing

a foul smell, which permeated the landscape. The area was described as 'a city within a city where rural folk conducted business, traded and supplied livestock to supply food to people across the nation and overseas.'[5] Established in 1856 the Newmarket Saleyard was located between Racecourse Road and Epsom Road, with abattoirs adjoining the area to the southwest.

Other abattoirs were constructed along the Maribyrnong River for the discharge of liquid waste, where the blood of livestock stained the water for days. The abattoirs operated 24 hours per day Monday to Saturday throughout the year, shutting on Sundays. The only other days of closure were Good Friday and Christmas. Between 1898 and 1908 the abattoir buildings were declared unhygienic and were replaced by modern facilities.[6] However, factories for boiling-down sheepskin and bone manure remained open on the Maribyrnong riverbank. By the 1980's innovations in livestock management decreased sales and usage. In July 1985 the Saleyard was officially closed.

In *Abattoir Blues* Nick Cave writes:

> The sun is high up in the sky and I'm in my car
> Drifting down into the abattoir
> Do you see what I see, dear?
> The air grows heavy. I listen to your breath
> Entwined together in this culture of death
> Do you see what I see, dear?[7]

Most often people don't see or even remember the abattoirs. Instead the culture of death is hidden behind the mosaic sheep that resemble the electric ones that Rick Deckard keeps to convince his neighborhood that he is less affected by apocalyptic wars.

These images exist in order to blur what is real and what is electric/fake. They appear abundantly in cities,

where the façade is so thick that even the trees are difficult to decipher. The electric versions the Elm, Oak and Plane trees are often misinterpreted as real as if they belong here. These trees, mosaic sheep and many other creations were designed to suggest that nothing difficult ever happened; instead we are persuaded to look back on history with nostalgia.

Throughout Museum Victoria's collections it is stated that 'these artworks were recognised as a gift to the people of Melbourne to link the present and future of this site to the past.[8] But 'the past' represented by the mural isn't real. While it is true that drovers moved sheep and cattle through the area, and across the city driving employment and commercial development intrinsic to settler colonialism, other stories are missing. The gentle image of sheep conceals the noxious by-products and waste produced by the abattoirs that alarmed residents.

Records show that public meetings were held in Newmarket from 1886 objecting to any extensions or alterations to the saleyards on the grounds that 'the yards and abattoirs were a source of danger to the health of the large population all around them.'[9] In 1887 a newspaper article in *The Argus* reported that 'the Saltwater River was rendered offensive by the blood and

5. Murray Arnel, *Increased numbers attend the annual Newmarket saleyards reunion*, 2019, Stock and Land
6. Newmarket Saleyards Timeline, Museum Victoria, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/4573
7. Nick Cave and The Bad Seeds, *Abattoir Blues*, Abattoir/ The Lyre of Orpheus, 2004, Mute Records
8. Museum Victoria Collections, *Digital Photograph - Mosaic 'Riding On The Sheep's Back', Epsom Road Overpass, Newmarket*, Apr 2010, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/items/1723259
9. Museum Victoria Collection, *History of Closure of the Newmarket Saleyards*, 1887-1987, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/4304

offal thrown into it from the abattoirs, and the ground in which offal was buried was saturated with animal matter."[10]

There were numerous attempts to close the abattoirs including a council plebiscite that resulted in a two to one majority in favour of them being removed. Both the Flemington and Kensington Council persistently advocated for the removal and local council member, Alfred Deakin, unsuccessfully lobbied against further infrastructure. In 1888 a royal commission found that 'every slaughtering establishment should be outside thickly populated localities'[11] and protests continued throughout its operation. But the sheep in the mural do not reflect the blood and anger, which seeped through the inner city streets. Or what the horror that these abattoirs (manufacturing meat that was and continues to be eaten) actually means.

In Anwen Crawford's galvanic book *No Document*, she writes about people in Sydney who also opposed abattoirs. Similarly, the cities legislative council received a petition by 1,000 residents who prayed that the slaughterhouses were demolished. But unlike Museum Victoria's records Anwen treads deeper into the psychology of our disgust that extends beyond the more obvious public health concerns. She writes:

> 'The development of the abattoir as a site beyond the boundaries of the city was motivated by a desire on the part of public health inspectors, among others, to remove unregulated private butcheries and slaughterhouses from heavily populated urban areas. It was believed that the visibility of animal

10. Ibid
11. Newmarket Saleyards Timeline, Museum Victoria, https://collections.museumsvictoria.com.au/articles/4573

slaughter had a morally corrupting effect upon the citizenry, young men in particular.'[12]

Gomeroi writer Alison Whittaker understands this intimately; her family worked in abattoirs but never had the time to wash the moral stain that others were so frightened of. In *begat bedeath* from her poetry collection *Blakwork* she explains:

> My Pop's on the offal floor, sends the lamb up to my father as a gift—dozens a day like so many traditions would do to acknowledge his entry into the family. This family all, wholesome harvesters of flesh crops. From esophagus to anus—the body is scoured of any engine that would suggest a lived life, and passed on.[13]

While the removal of the Newmarket Saleyard and abattoirs was motivated by health impacts, the moral dimension is most likely what aggrieved surrounding residents. Cast off to the urban fringes, the rural and remote signs of slaughter should be invisible; so young men and others are not corrupted nor reminded of darker things. As Whittaker writes:

> It is a long walk. Long enough for only where there is no alternative. Abattoir workers make roughly seven hundred a week. No bus goes out to the abattoir. Its taboo and scale puts it out of reach of any town infrastructure, and out of moral notice. Seven hundred is not enough to make for a car. So she walks, and today she wades.[14]

12. Anwen Crawford, No Document, Giramondo, 2021, p.4
13. Alison Whittaker, begat bedeath in Blakwork, Magabala, 2018
14. Alison Whittaker, outskirts in Blakwork, Magabala, 2018

Whittaker and Anwen unravel the abattoirs ironies. A site of moral panic that occupies mainstream consciousness while people carelessly live on unceded land. Distressed by the killing of sheep they enthusiastically consume, but removed from the other stuff that festers feverishly. And the image of sheep in a mural lets them believe that nothing ever happened here, except an abattoir that vanished like a ghost.

THIS BOOK WAS WRITTEN AND CREATED ON THE LANDS OF THE BUNURONG, BOON WURRUNG AND WURUNDJERI WOI WURRUNG PEOPLES OF THE EASTERN KULIN NATION. SOVEREIGNTY WAS NEVER CEDED.

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