2016: archive project

Posted By zanny begg on 23 Feb 2008 @ 2:53 pm in 2-Race/Matter [Feb 08], Issues | No Comments

Social space is not a thing among other things, nor a product among other products: rather, it subsumes things produced and encompasses their interrelationships... - Henri Lefebvre

2016: Archive Project is an artistic investigation into the inner city Sydney suburb of Redfern - the title representing both the postcode for Redfern and the expected completion date of this ten year project. This archive does not intend to be an objective study of the suburb - but a subjective exploration of the changes taking place within the area through the lens of the artists' mutual interests in community and Post-situationist urban life. Each time the archive is exhibited it is re-invented but the emphasis on the local area of Redfern continues.

Redfern has an important place within the history of Sydney. It has traditionally been a poor area, home to migrant; Aboriginal; and low income communities. The opening of the Eveleigh Rail-yard bought many working class people into the area before it was closed down in the late 80s. Today over 40% of Redfern residents still live in public housing.

The Block forms the heart of Redfern and was one of the first urban areas bought back by the Aboriginal community for Aboriginal housing. It has existed as a quasi-autonomous Indigenous zone within the centre of Sydney and has been the focal point for important moments of anti-racist resistance such as the Redfern “riots” and the Aboriginal Tent Embassy.

With the rapid rate of real estate development throughout Sydney and the high costs of property, Redfern has become a prime target for “gentrification.” Redfern is situated between Sydney central and the airport, and is part of the land known as the city-airport corridor - its proximity to the city and (so far) lack of intensive development making it a key site for real estate speculation. A special government agency has been created, the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (RWA), to force through the rapid pace of urban change, making Redfern the only suburb in Australia with a designated minister of parliament.

We have chosen nine physical sites for exploration in this archive - the same sites identified by the RWA for urban renewal. The Archive will not only document the physical changes in the suburb, however, but also the voices of the Redfern community who are affected by these changes.

What is an ideology without a space to which it refers, a space which it describes, whose vocabulary and kinks it makes use of, and whose code it embodies - Henri Lefebvre

The 2016: Archive Project has had two installments: an exhibition at Mori Gallery in February 2007 and an exhibition at Artspace in August 2007. In mid 2008 the Archive will participate in a month long residency organised by Performance Space but situated offsite in The Redfern Community Centre (RCC). The RCC is in the heart of the block and is a key organizing place for the local community. It provides after school care for local kids, computer access for the community, a meeting place and a cultural centre. The 2016: Archive Project has been given complete access to the RCC during this month to share this space with the community and develop a new installment of the archive.

The Archive seeks to not only chronicle the changes taking place within the urban environment of Redfern but also participate in moments of resistance to these changes. Both artists have been long term residents of Redfern and supporters of community campaigns against forced gentrification and urban “renewal”.

Keg de Souza and Zanny Begg
Lily Shearer, interviewed The Block, November 25th 2006:

Zanny: How long have you lived in Redfern?

I lived in Redfern from 1981 to 1984, and I now work here at the Performance Space. I like that I know lots of people here, that you can walk through the block and talk to people and there are Black fellas from all over Australia - it's like an extended family. I have my great niece here with me today and she is playing in the park and now she has wandered across the road and I don't have to worry because she is talking to an uncle and aunty. I couldn't do that is I was in the city, it would be too dangerous.

After the disbandment of the missions and reserves a lot of people were coming to Sydney for work, it was after the depression too, and everyone seemed to congregate here in the block. They were squatting in the old houses, it's a meeting place, a gathering ground.

Zanny: What will be the impact of the changes proposed by the government?

The changes that they want to bring in… they may as well round us back up and put us on the missions, if its going to go ahead like that. They may as well relocate people again, 'cause that is what is happening, people are being relocated to other areas, like when they relocated people to Mount Druitt where I have been working for the last 15 years, they relocated everyone here straight to Bidwell in Mount Druitt. There are 11 suburbs that constitute Mount Druitt and Bidwell has to be the worst and lots of Aboriginal and Islander peoples end up there. It fragments the community, you break down family relationships, some have been on a hard journey to find their families and then they break apart again. And that's grief, and we are already born with 218 years of inherited grief, and they are just adding to it. This will affect not just Aboriginal people on the block, but Aboriginal Australia. This place is the Black heart of Australia.

Zanny: How would you like to see the community change?

…I like the Pemmuway project, I think you have to tap into tourism, it's a gold mine for our community. I know my kids are talented, I know they have all these deadly skills and they understand politics from a really young age and I just want to support them and give them a voice. Our kids were not raised with the racism that we were raised with, they are on the ball and able to act. I think we have some deadly leaders coming through. We need a tourist centre here, some shops, artworks, it could resource the community.

Ray Jackson, interviewed Redfern Department f Housing, November 25th, 2006:

Zanny: How long have you lived in Redfern?

I have lived in Redfern for 15 years when I was first moved into this Department of Housing apartment in James Cook Building (of all places). When I first saw the name I thought, well I am going to change that, but I found out that all these building here are heritage and because they originally started out with the navy they all have naval names of some sort.

…I don't mix much, I just tend to be here working or I am out of the place, but its reasonably quiet, the sirens go every now and then and we call that the Redfern lullaby… but it doesn't bother me, it's a neighbourhood that's vibrant, we have our crime but then so do other places, we have an over zealous police force but then so do other places, I love living here, thirteen flights up, I only wish I was higher...

Zanny: What will be the impact of the changes proposed by the government?
The changes will destroy us, they are not only out to remove the black face out of Redfern/Waterloo they want to move the department of housing out too, they want to move the poor out, for such an area as this to be on such valuable land and its been subsidized so the poor can live here goes against any patterns of what the government understand’s as the bottom-line. This place is valuable, very, very, valuable and they want to make money out of it. Their first push, of course, is to get the block, but that is going to be a fight and a half, and I don’t they are going to win on that, I think it will be a compromise, but it will be loss for us nonetheless. The block remaining in Aboriginal hands is the only way we is the only way we will see it. What Mickie Mundine wants to do there with the housing company, personally I don’t fully agree with, but its much preferable to what the government wants to do with it. 

Now when it comes to removing the Department of Housing, which covers a huge area, again they are going to have a very large scale fight on their hands. One of the humorous stories, if there is humour in these situations, is that we have a large contingent of Russians here - what is termed the white Russians - and they have been here since the Department of Housing took the units over in the late 70s and they have told Frank Sartor and the respective ministers “you leave us alone, we must die here and then you can do what you want with the buildings”. Now that is solidarity for you! They are all ancient mate, they are bloody ancient, and they are not going to last long. So we are here by the grace of their ghosts! But there is a grit and a determination - bugger it we will not be moved. We will stay here, they can blow the place up around us.

Zanny: How would you like to see the community change?

…I would like to put more resources into the neighborhood. They start good they put in a tennis court but when the nets start to rot that’s it, they never maintain it. They say that the community should maintain it - but this is Department of Housing, its poor, the community can’t maintain it. Welfare these days is really a welfare, welfare, its people with mental health issues, addictions, all that sort of stuff. There needs to be a lot more done. I would also like to change how cliquey this place can be - these days there is more emphasis on privacy than community. We had one person in the unit opposite there who was dead for five weeks and nobody found him! Later when people were talking about they said they hadn’t seen him for a while…

Zanny: Keg and I are making this archive over ten years, how do you see this suburb in ten years time?

I like to think we will still be here in ten years, better managed and better self managed. I certainly hope that we have a better class of copper, ‘cause the police are brutal here.

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