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Living Networks: Re-imagining Regional Communities and Their Heritage

Abstract

Working from the periphery of Djaara Country, Castlemaine Regional Victoria, 120km out of Melbourne, our proposal starts from the centre of this old gold mining town and seeks to document and capture our more-than-architectural endeavour. For this narrative, the architect's business is as much about observing and taking note, revealing and paying heed, to the invisible and often intangible systems of just what is there now. Drawing from a Kraussian expanded architectural field, we have evolved a design process of building site knowledge that uncovers the histories, peripheral stories, forgotten memories and patterns of occupation. In seeking solutions to accommodate a growing community, to house those now homeless and to give more agency to our Indigenous people, we reflect on currently accepted design strategies and propose an alternative model that rethinks property boundaries and ownership, occupancy and vacancy regulations. Our work has been resisting the additions of new buildings and instead foregrounds what already exists, to recast the accumulations of built fabric and of its interstitial landscapes as inherently value filled. In doing this we reveal an eclectic town fabric, a mix of industrial, Victorian and 20th century material that hold traces of past occupation but also reflect a kind of vibrant eclecticism that speaks more to a possible future than carbon-hungry developer-led solutions. Our essay will build an alternative spatial narrative that makes visible a process that tracks and traces the voices of those invisible and marginalised protagonists as well as the value of existing built fabric. What we aim to construct is not more built stuff, but a more robust future that accepts what is already there; the ordinary and unremarkable as well as the remarkable. Our conclusions and contributions are as much in spatialising and making active – sensible – those forgotten and intangible voices and peripheral built heritages.

Introduction

Drawing on a deep reading of the historically and socially laden context of the regional township of Castlemaine Victoria, this paper looks behind matter to perhaps what matters most by considering how architectural design methodologies can engage invisible, marginalised systems and histories of site. We seek to reveal and reflect upon what is beyond the material to form a spatialised and active site condition: what we see as the first stage of any architectural work.

As academic partitioners from Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology (RMIT University) School of Architecture and Urban Design, our research across the last two decades has concerned broader questions of site and landscape aiming to reveal the hidden as an expanded context for the architectural project. Our work has been about the evolving and refining of what we call 'predesign' work – the design of the architectural process that works intimately with context. Our research contributes to a reading and translating of site beyond the conventions of traditional architectural site analysis. We rely upon fieldwork, direct on-site experience and collaborations combined with scholarly readings, archives, maps and pictorial collections to construct an alternative way of seeing. Expanding on the work of Carol Burns and Andrea Kahn, in their book Site Matters: design concepts, histories, and strategies, we aim to engage and make present embedded or marginalised site stories, histories and its actants. As with partitioners like COMU in Japan or Officine Gap in Vietnam, we

live in the community in which our work is situated and so part of our process is defined by on-the-ground exchanges and relationships forged in place. Resisting top-down architectural processes, we make long term engagement with the community and construct an agile design framework.

Through those processes we develop an intimate site knowledge. Operating beyond the physical, we aim to engage with unspoken stories that are often of systemic disadvantage and uncomfortable histories. These untold narratives have as much impact on the environment as a site's physical reality. For this paper we reflect upon and engage local Indigenous histories and current Indigenous communities, as well as those suffering from systemic disadvantage, the housing crisis, the communities homeless, women in need, and local support groups including My home Network, Vacant Home dwellings group, Tiny Homes on Wheels and local Indigenous activities. In doing so our research and architectural methodologies build and make visible a new understanding of site – a new reading of site.

This research coincided with the Australian architectural profession's policy change that now requires 'recognition of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples' ongoing connection and custodianship of Country', and includes several new competencies covering this new knowledge domain as outlined in the National Standard of Competency for Architects in 2021 (AACA Explanatory Notes and Definitions). However, for us,

this requirement for architects to engage and reconcile with our nation's First Nations peoples is inherent and for this research it is the Dja Dja Wurrung people and their Country in which we engage. For this process it is also the simple act of 'truth telling' and making evident past events that have shaped the present condition. Engaging and listening to community is paramount, and so at times our attentive silence to listen rather than act, is what is needed. In this paper, we reveal a process of observation that draws together detailed First Nations histories as well as socially orientated housing issues, all part of the process of 'healing country,' according to local Elder, Uncle Rick Nelson. Included are preliminary translations of this research into design methodologies and architectural drawings.
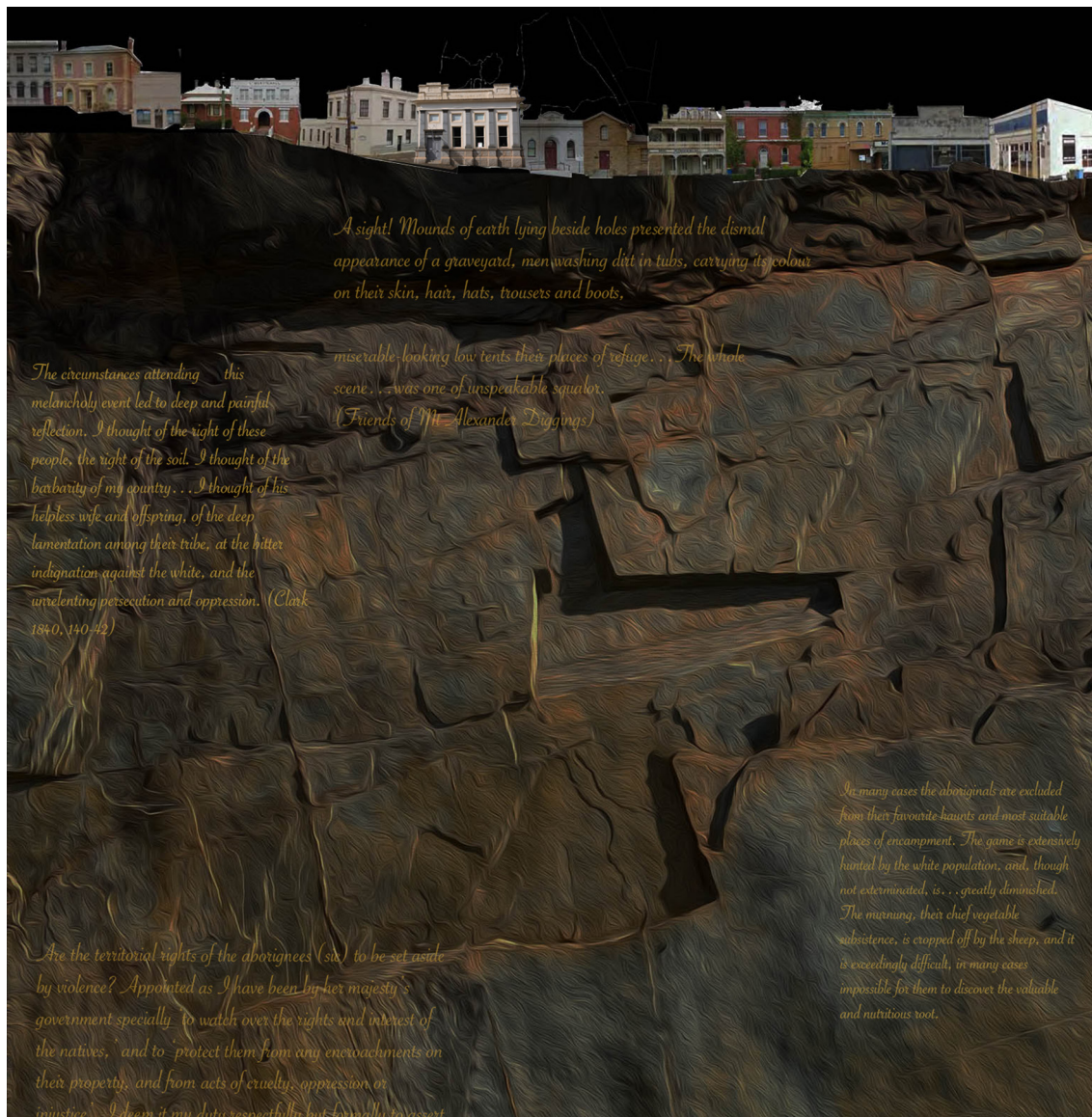

Figure 1: Living Networks 1, created by authors Anna Johnson and Richard Black (cropped)

Behind the facade

The first site story we examine, and one that resides behind the colonial armatures of the town, is that of the Castlemaine's Dja Dja Wurrung people at the time of settler invasion into Victoria. The main highway is a five minute walk from the Castlemaine train station through town, groupings of 19th and early 20th century public buildings flank wide tree lined streets and form stage-like facades establishing the towns dominant visible character. Crossing the highway, the first building marking the corner is a former State Savings Bank from 1919 designed by Godfrey & Spowers architects, then a major Melbourne-based practice. This robust, handsome building described by the Victorian heritage register 'as an early example of austere classicism of the 1920s and 30s,' (Victorian Heritage Data Base) gives a refined civic elegance unusual for a country town. A few doors down, past the earliest telegraph building in Australia – a freestone building from 1852 – is the Post Office (1875). This two-story building with a clock tower in Classical Renaissance style, was designed by the now well-regarded 19th century British architect J J Clark and reveals the prominence this town gained following the discovery of gold in 1851.
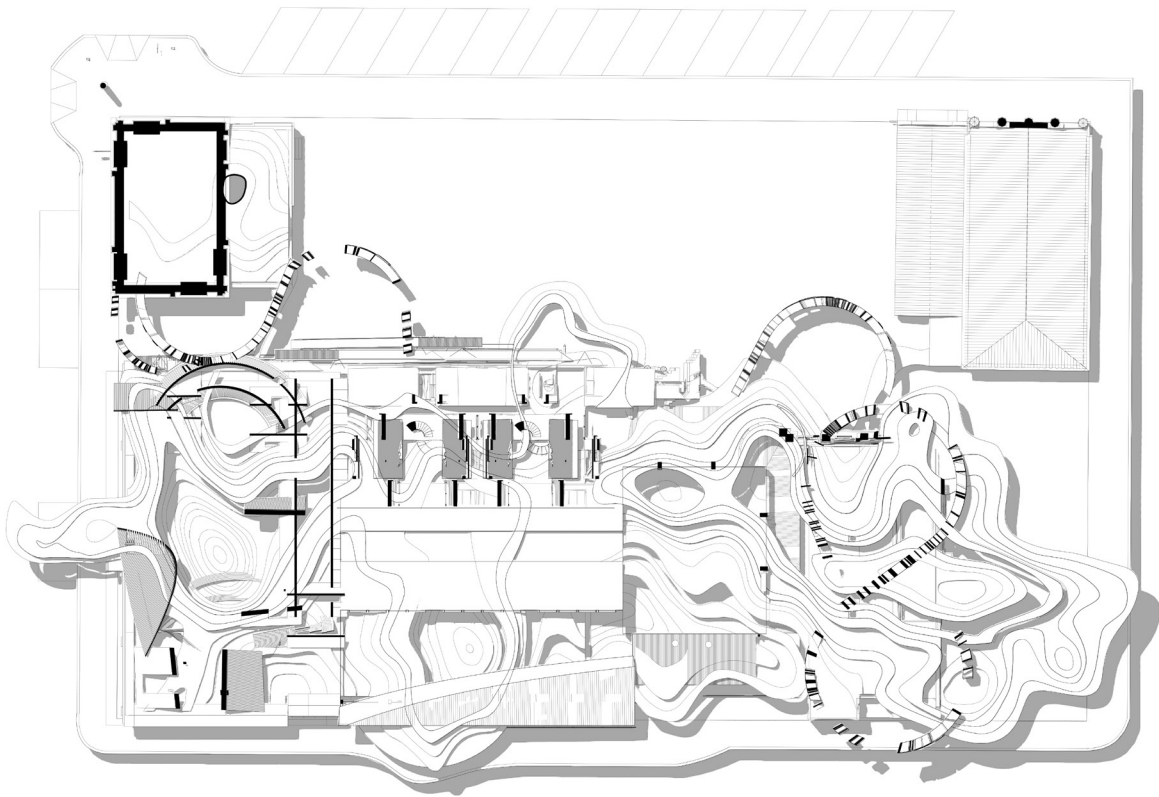

Figure 2: Surfacing Country, created by Zhuoran Chen, Johnson Black Design Studio

This building followed eight years after Clark's first and major commission: the Treasury Building in Melbourne (1857). This was a building that asserted clear allegiance with the British Empire in the newly founded colony of Victoria albeit still wet from the bloodshed and violence of the preceding years. However, against the grandeur of these buildings, and all they represent, a far less visible history was playing out—a cultural erasure of the bleakest kind—and one that we take up in this research. From the mid-1830s, 120km away from Clark's Treasury building, and just a few kilometres from the Castlemaine Post office, was the devasting and wholly unjust attack on the local Dja Dja Wurrung people and their Country.

The work of the architect is as much about looking and reading place, extracting a wealth of knowledge from the visible and invisible realities of site. This first glance at Castlemaine is a striking example, and our work has been to discover and build an alternative site knowledge, a network that forms what we see as the first stage of place responsive design work.

We argue to build a future for a regional town like Castlemaine, with its pressures to grow and better accommodate the current diverse community, these stories and facts of place must be told. They also form a more robust framework of resistance to what Patrick Wolfe says is the ongoing reality of Settler Colonialism (Wolfe 2018, 343-348). The first section of this paper, in part a truth-telling exercise, concerns the Dja Dja Wurrung people and their experience. As the now recognised traditional owners

of the land, the acknowledgment of that story is critical for future work in this town. Following this account and details, we show how this has translated into the first stages of spatialising and building into an alternative site narrative. Methodologically, we see the first act of design is to render visible this history, to build site drawings that represent and capture that information thereby folding it into a contemporary understanding of place. As is evident in Figure 1, the town's architecture sits somewhat ungrounded on top of the shear-exposed rockface and destructed geology of Country. Into that ancient façade, dialogues and letters from the time are inscribed onto its surface. Further on (Figures 2 and 3), two other strategies concern the active disruption of that dominant colonial fabric described above, a destabilising of those self-assured facades and institutions to alternatively fold into them the landscape and the physicality of the Country. Inverting the dominant relationship of building and landscape, these design moves rupture pre-existing stability and demand a rethink of buildings' signification, boundaries and program.

This first story begins in 1836 when the new British Colonial administration appropriated the lands of the Dja Dja Wurrung as the Loddon District—an area of 2500 square kilometres. An event that irrevocably threatened if not ended, the lives and traditional livelihood of the First Nations peoples (Attwood 2017, 5). Here, it should be noted that the Australian Indigenous community had already been devasted by two smallpox epidemics brought in by colonial explorers

and traders in 1788 and 1829. Before 1788 the Aboriginal population had been about 60,000 with the Dja Dja Wurrung population numbering between 3,000 – 4,000, but by 1840, it was reduced to about 2,000 (Attwood 2017, 6).

This invasion into the Port Phillip District (Melbourne) coincided with the establishment of the Aboriginal Protectorate in 1836, under the authority of senior protectorate George Augustus Robinson, set up to protect the rights of Aboriginal people of the Port Phillip District of the New South Wales colony (what would become Victoria in July 1851). As has been studied by historian Bain Attwood in unprecedented detail, much of the events and exchanges that took place between the Dja Dja Wurrung and the colonists is revealed from the journals and exchanges between those tasked with 'protecting' the Aboriginals and administering the colonisation. There is not scope in this paper to discuss the complexities and injustices of that protectorate system—most significantly that they were instructed to 'civilise' and Christianise the Aboriginals. Important here are several insistences in which these people did serve to protect them and attempted to have those who harmed the Dja Dja Wurrung people tried in court. As will be discussed later, this protectorate system contributed to the wellbeing and cultural continuity of the rapidly diminishing Dja Dja Wurrung people albeit within the greater framework of wrongdoing and injustice inherent to British colonialism.

For this research, it is the exchanges of George Augustus Robinson and then Loddon District protectorate Edward Parker that are important and details of these are critical for building our site research. Through their work and humanitarianism, this pair came to recognise (to varying degrees) the injustices enacted by colonists and the dire consequences for the Aboriginal people. On one of Parker's first tours of the Loddon district in 1840, in search of a location to set up the 'protected reserve,' he noted that these new pastoralists took the Dja Dja's Wurrung's most precious land. Reporting to Robinson he wrote, 'the very spots most valuable to the aborigines [sic] for their productiveness—the creeks, water courses, and rivers—are the first to be occupied' (Parker 20 June 1839). Over the next years, displaced from their land, and with their food shortages drastically reduced by 'white man's stock' led to massive cultural compromise and conflict for the Dja Dja Wurrung people from the 1830s and onwards (Parker 20 June 1839). Violence was commonplace. Often made up of prisoners of the Crown, the enforcing Border Police were notoriously quick to punish. This, along with the conviction that they were superior, led to the ease at which they inflicted aggression. For the protectorates, this was upsetting. One instance led to the death of a young Indigenous man 'savaged' by the mounted police and affected the Chief Protector Robinson who wrote in his journal on 27th January 1840:

The circumstances attending this melancholy event led to deep and painful reflection. I thought of the right of these people, the right of the soil. I thought of

the barbarity of my country…I thought of his helpless wife and offspring, of the deep lamentation among their tribe, at the bitter indignation against the white, and the unrelenting persecution and oppression. (Clark 1840, 140-42)

Having served in the army or the British East India Company, some of the pastoralists were also skilled, in fact trained, to administer harsh punishment and kill (Attwood 2017, 54). The situation in the late 1840s continued to deteriorate. Deprived of their former food sources, the Aboriginals starved. Women were forced into prostitution by the men or turned to it themselves in exchange for food or supplies. Inevitably, this led to the spread of venereal disease. At this time, Parker set up at the protectorate station at Larrnebarramul at Mount Franklin in 1841 (known also as Franklinford) and established a genuine exchange with the Aboriginals based on the care and attention he took to learn their customs and culture. This was reciprocated by some of the Dja Dja people who valued his support and friendship, and a genuine relationship was formed. In his journals Parker had noted:

In many cases the aboriginals [sic] are excluded from their favourite haunts and most suitable places of encampment. The game is extensively hunted by the white population, and, though not exterminated, is…greatly diminished. The murnung, their chief vegetable subsistence, is cropped off by the sheep, and it is exceedingly difficult, in many cases impossible for them to discover the valuable and nutritious root. (Parker 20 June 1839)

As a result of this, he concludes, 'The unfortunate aborigines (sic) are in a state of destitution, deprived of much of their ordinary means of subsistence'. Parker also recognised that, 'It is an important and unquestionable fact that the Aboriginal's are not insensible of their original right to the soil.' (Parker 20 June 1839)

During its peak, the station at Larrnebarramul had up to 170 Aboriginals that came and went as they pleased driven by seasonal changes, ceremonial needs with children, woman or younger people often staying (Attwood 2017, 118). On one occasion, it was recorded that Larrnebarramul was visited by large groups of Dja Dja Wurrung people (over 300). Not uncommon in this situation, the colonialists and local pastoralists had sexual relations with the Dja Dja Wurrung woman—we imagine non-consensual. A devasting result of this was that by 1841, nearly 9/10ths of the woman on the station had syphilis rendering them infertile and infecting newborn babies (many of whom died).

Remarkable about this history, and noted by historians such as Attwood, is that some of these settlers advocated for the rights of the Aboriginals in ways not dissimilar to the claims made by Aboriginals and their supporters in the 1960s and 70s. As is evidenced by Parkers' report to Robinson from Sept 1, 1839 – 29 Feb 1840, he writes:

Are the territorial rights of the aborignes [sic] to be set aside by violence? Appointed as I have been by her majesty's government specially 'to watch over the

rights and interest of the natives,' and to 'protect them from any encroachments on their property, and from acts of cruelty, oppression or injustice', I deem it my duty respectfully but formally to assert the right of the aboriginals [sic] to the soil and its indigenous productions until suitable compensation be made for its occupation by reserving and cultivating a sufficient portion for their maintenance. (Parker 1 September 1839-29 February 1840)

If it were not for those stations—despite the problems—it has been noted there would have been even less Dja Dja Wurrung people remaining.

Gold: upside down country

By the time gold was discovered in Dja Dja Wurrung country, the livelihood and population of this community was greatly diminished. Today and visible from the train ride from Melbourne to Castlemaine 5 kms from the town centre, is the Castlemaine Diggings National Heritage Park, assessed in 2004 as being a significant landscape to the State of Victoria. Within this now turbulent landscape all sliced up, with piles of stone, carved-up rockfaces and the traces of hand labour all around, gold was discovered in 1851. Upending the landscape, the Country and those that lived on it, this event also transformed 'the demographic, social, political and economic complexion of Australia …' (Friends of Mt Alexander Diggings). With the landscape turned into what Dja Dja Wurrung people now refer to as upside down country, this mining site was described by a local in 1852, James Robertson, as:

A sight! Mounds of earth lying beside holes presented the dismal appearance of a graveyard, men washing dirt in tubs, carrying its colour on their skin, hair, hats, trousers and boots, miserable-looking low tents their places of refuge…The whole scene…was one of unspeakable squalor. (Friends of Mt Alexander Diggings)

But from that unspeakable squalor, and in less than a decade, 5 million ounces of gold were extracted. An amount equal to over 18 trillion Australian dollars—nearly 10 times more than Australia's current GDP.

This wealth came at a great cost for the Dja Dja Wurrung people. Although wiser to the opportunistic ways of settlers and some spoken English, by the end of the Gold Rush in 1863, the Dja Dja Wurrung people were recorded as numbering just 38. The previous year, saw the completion of JJ Clarks Treasury building with its gold vaults in the basement all ready to receive the bullions, but by this time the rush was over and the gold fields a ruin along with the traditional lands of Dja Dja Wurrung. Their camping areas along the creeks and streams had become alluvial sites; trees, plants and wildlife had been destroyed and sacred sites violated (Attwood 2017, 149). To feed the mines, the forests of central Victoria had largely disappeared; the hills around Castlemaine were almost bare' (Lawrence and Davies 2016, 15).

Despite the entrepreneurial spirit demonstrated by the Dja Dja Wurrung and their attraction to the goldfields for its possible employment and activity, the going continued to be very tough.

Several of the mining community had genuine interest in engaging with the Dja Dja Wurrung in a positive way, but for the most part exchanges and relationships were exploitative. With much of their traditional lands destroyed, the Dja Dja Wurrung were often severely malnourished. Although eating the floury products of the miners and consuming alcohol, this was no substitute for their previously nutritious diet of vegetables, fish and meat. Additionally, in the crowded circumstances of the mining villages, respiratory illness and gastric problems were widespread and many became too unwell to work, hunt or gather food (Attwood 2017, 157).

It was not until 28th March 2013 that a Recognition and Settlement Agreement between the Dja Dja Wurrung People and the State Government of Victoria was signed bringing the 'Dja Dja Wurrung People back into the landscape…
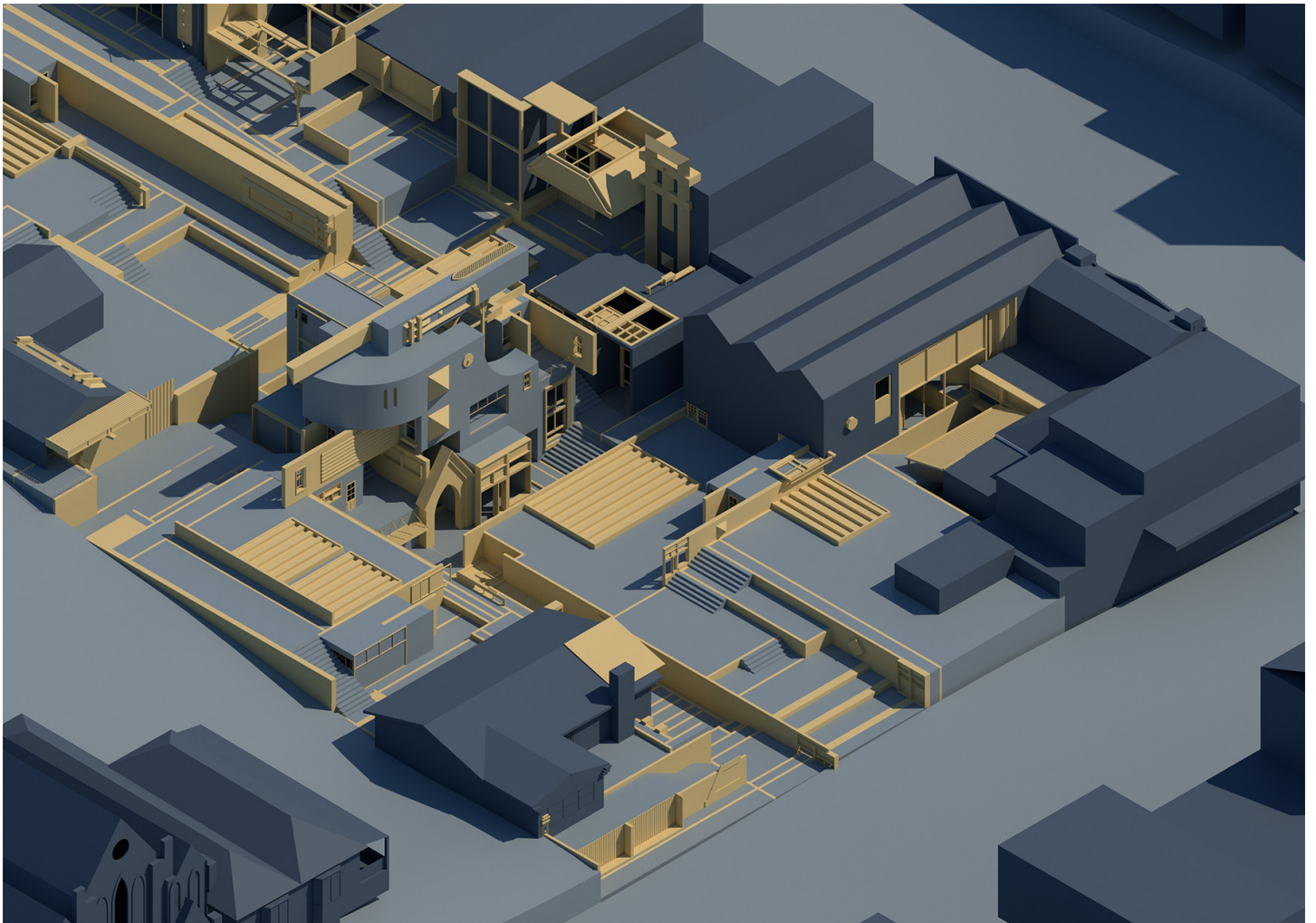

Figure 3: Disrupting the existing to make habitable, created by Joel Oster, Johnson Black Design Studio

and no longer being invisible,'(Dja Dja Wurrung Clans Aboriginal Corporation). In that agreement, the Dja Dja Wurrung also acknowledged the value of the protectorates. Now the Dja Dja Wurrung are growing in strength and their agenda to heal country is directly connected to living sustainably and affordably on Country, as said by local Elder Uncle Rick Nelson part of Mount Alexander Community Wellbeing Economy project.

A counter reading of Upside Down Country, used to explore modes of interpreting the built fabric of Castlemaine, extends this research into our design studio teaching. Holding narratives already discussed, these are used to critically explore existing conditions and disrupt the dominant colonial fabric through operations of inversion, disassembly and reassembly, exploring new forms of collaboration between: the vibrant vernacular (Figure 4), modes of occupancy (sharing resources, land) (Figure 5); surfacing Country within the most urban situations (Figure 2); and making habitable space through re-evaluating existing spatial hierarchies between property boundaries and built fabric, and between land ownership and degrowth (Figure 3).

Social justice: housing as a human right

Returning to the current day Castlemaine and turning off into Mechanics Lane is the Senior Citizens club, a cream brick building in the 1960s modern style of regional Australia. Looking past the well-proportioned facade and examining the

entrance and its cantilevering roof closely, there are traces of another marginalised and not quite visible protagonist—an elderly homeless woman. This winter has been unusually cold with temperatures of minus 4 degrees. Today a large, striped shopping bag and camp mattress tucked into that modest entrance, are the only sign of last night's sleeper. Traces of rough sleepers are all across the town, folded into the doorways and porches of the town's civic precinct, against public toilets and within the Botanical Gardens. More prominently and problematically for the local council, a make-shift camp was set up under the 'Welcome to Castlemaine' sign along the main highway. Authorities issued a notice to move on its 43-year-old occupant, Adam "Angel" Nieto who had been sleeping rough since he was 13 (Dalton 2023). But before Nieto had time to move, his belongings, the encampment, and entire site was locked off with a 2-metre-high fence. Following the sites 'cleanup', made with a small bulldozer, a metal wall was then erected around the site with a small sign with text 'private land keep out' (Dalton 2023).

Across Castlemaine housing services are in crisis and made worse over the last 5 years as prices continued to escalate following the Covid pandemic. With all its apparent attractions, Castlemaine has received a steady flow of people relocating from the city. This influx had a profound impact on housing affordability and availability. And for those on the margins, unemployed or simply on an average wage, the town is increasingly unaffordable.

Recent estimates say there are at least

36 people sleeping rough, and at least 250 experiencing homelessness across the Shire of Mt Alexander (Jungwirth 2024). Michael McMahon, the senior homelessness services worker at Dhelkaya Health Castlemaine said, 'It's unrealistic to think they will get into private rental, they need to wait for public or social housing which can take up to five years for the most vulnerable clients to be offered a house' (Jungwirth 2024). According to Carolyn Neilson, from Castlemaine's My Home Network (MHN) and the towns advocate for social equity and housing as a basic human right, there are 'no stereotypes of homelessness - it can happen to anyone suddenly, or over time, because of family violence, mental illness or people suffering as a result systemic disadvantage' (Neilson, 2024). She points out that women over the age of 55 are also an increasing demographic among the homeless.

Our research aims to surface these issues and work with these already existing and arguably inventive networks and support systems—what we see as informal 'practices' in their own right, as we will show. These reciprocal collaborations are part of our design process. We have observed powerful bottom-up strategies that form a service network for the community. One example
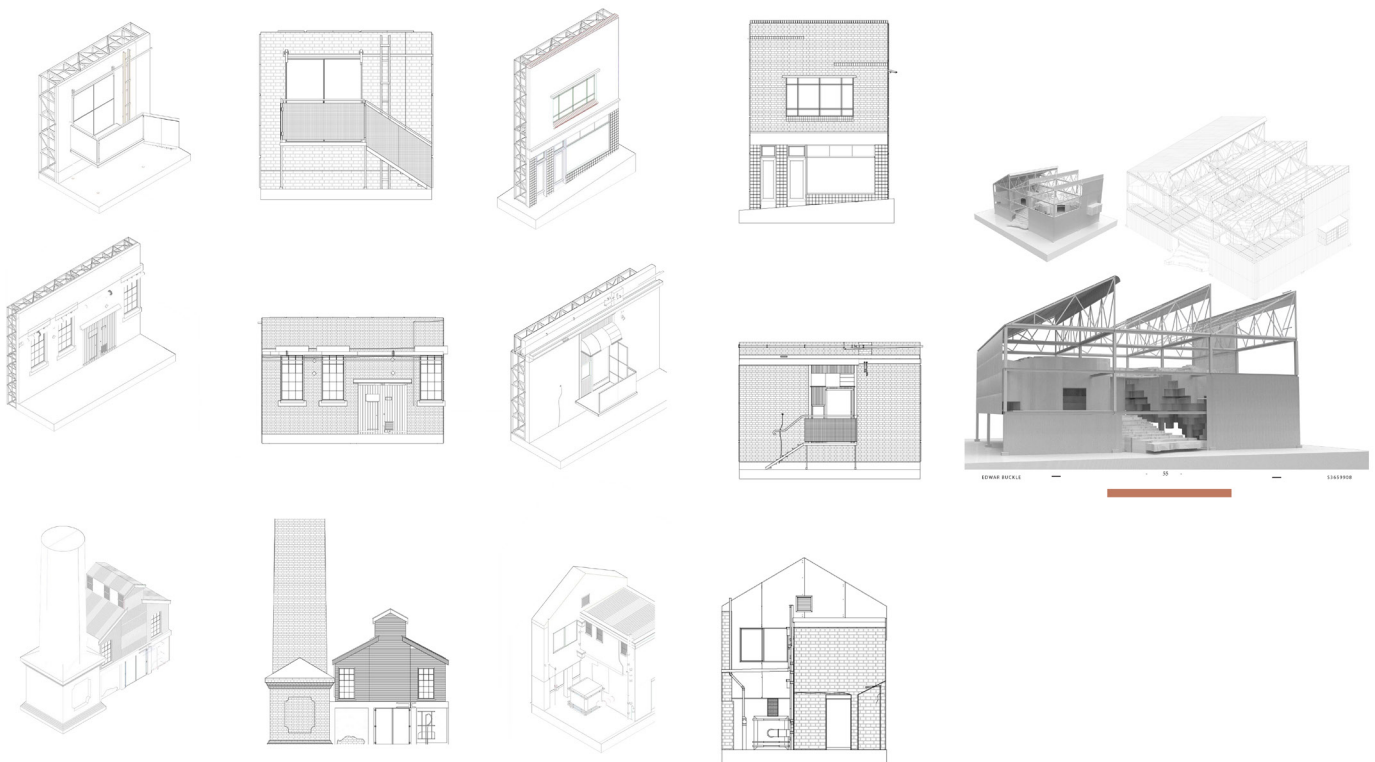

Figure 4: Vibrant Vernacular, created by Edward Buckle, Johnson Black Design Studio

designed by MHN and set in place with the collaboration of local businesses, is a network of care embedded into the towns existing fabric and borrowing from existing infrastructures within local business, including the bathrooms at the Castlemaine Fitness centre, free soup at Sprout Bakery on Mondays, Community Lunch held every Tuesday at the Town Hall along with other places for personal care, food and clothes assistance.

Other forms of intervention are constructed through a network of agencies with overlapping areas of focus across housing, health, community, social services and the Shire Council. Our

conversations with Neilsen made visible a range of inventive approaches to the complexities of homelessness. Key to this, Neilson explains is 'keeping the systemic disadvantage lens across everything we do and making use of great expertise across the working group' (Neilson, 2024). MHN interfaces with other sectors within the community to seek alternative housing options through advocacy, incremental short and long-term strategies and opportunities to make change for 'a right to safe, affordable, secure and sustainable housing' in the community. (Neilson, 2024)

Figure 5: New modes of occupancy, created by Alice Stewart, Johnson Black Design Studio

Aligned to our ethos rather than necessarily building more these groups work with what is already available. This has involved projects led by MHN's Vacant Dwellings Working Group and Tiny Homes on Wheels Groups, that involved collectively mapping existing vacant buildings, advocating for regulation changes and connecting people to knowledge networks. From available water and electrical meter usage data, it was revealed there are currently just over 1,000 vacant homes in Castlemaine – about a fifth of the total homes in town. We speculate many are investment properties but unoccupied. Some of these could be places for temporary or crises accommodation or even something more long term. This thinking led MHN to speculate that the recent introduction of the vacant residential land tax could be leveraged to release some of this accommodation. Through a recent coordinated action, building trust and negotiating between real estate agents, property owners and developers, MHN secured nine vacant buildings for use as affordable transitional housing. Similarly, they explored large and underutilised owner-occupied homes where a single owner could host or lease out a room with MHN liaising between homeowners and suitable tenants.

MHN provides a voice for the radically varying backgrounds of Castlemaine's homeless people. One example is Kathryn McGoldrick, who has been homeless for many years and moved 16 times over several years. She said, 'The uncertainty of living out of bags, moving around in the car to different places, and the weight of transient uncertainty was becoming quite difficult' (Schultz 2024). With her limited superannuation, McGoldrick explored the option of Tiny Homes on Wheels. However, regulations prevented them from being parked on private property, even with the owner's permission.

Aware of MHN, McGoldrick joined them to become a public face of homelessness for their campaign to change the Mt Alexander Shire Local Law 13, and its specifications about camping on private property. A coordinated approach led by MHN, with a team including McGoldrick, a Tiny Homes expert, social justice advocacy by MHN, and building upon lessons learnt from the previous attempt to change that law, they began a process of engaging with the Shire Council. At one of those meetings, presenting the reality of the situation, as Neilson said, 'blew them away…the local data and stories were crucial in raising awareness.' This collective and strategic approach was the catalyst to get council onside. On 21st of June 2023 the change was approved by Council. With more than 5,000 dwellings, many of which are on large 700sqm lots, the Tiny Home on Wheels option has potential to impact the housing crisis. This inventive and sustainable option provided incentive to share land and reduce sprawl.

Living networks

Our design-led research practice has evolved a mode of working where projects emerge from this process of investigating context. By engaging with community and place, we prepare the ground for what we have called Drawings for Collaboration where mark making, linework, notation, figuration and abstraction—the tools of translating fieldwork—make visible our critical and analytical thinking. Drawings are one of our means to form active modes of collaboration with place, revealing opportunities for intervention and modes of acting. They become a space to make visible participants within the expanded site; the hidden systems, ecologies and narratives of place. Making visible onsite and offsite research is where we conclude this paper with the Living Networks Drawing where we begin to speculate upon the hidden infrastructures for the homeless and Dja Dja Wurrung Country found through this research, where the typical spatial hierarchies of inside and outside, Country and town, and transient occupancy are reworked and spatialised into a network—sites for sharing resources, doing more with less, valuing what is already there, as a strategy for a regenerative future for rural communities.

Having undertaken this research, we acknowledge and value those organisations working within the community and reveal ways the urban environment and its residents are assisted by these groups—these active networks —that include altering a local law and working with strategies for sharing and social inclusion within the community. One of our findings is that understanding and acknowledging the existing systems and support networks operating in a community is critical to understand the town and its

community's concerns. The research reveals an interconnected strategy operating within the fabric of a town can have as much if not more impact, than top-down bureaucratic solutions. Rather than impose expensive new-build architectural and programmatic solutions, a successful way to grow a community is to rethink what constitutes design processes and its representation and therefore what constitutes an architectural solution. The first part of this paper, discussing Castlemaine's indigenous history is a critical process for reconciliation and for building the strength and agency of those communities. Housing a community with equity and working with all its inhabitants, is an essential part of healing Country and engaging Indigenous communities. We bring our design sensibility and scholarship of site knowledge to bear on this and through this research bring into relationship an awareness and respectful recognition of the events brought by settler colonial structures. Our Living Network project begins to spatialise these intangible voices and places, revealing a more sustainable future for Castlemaine.

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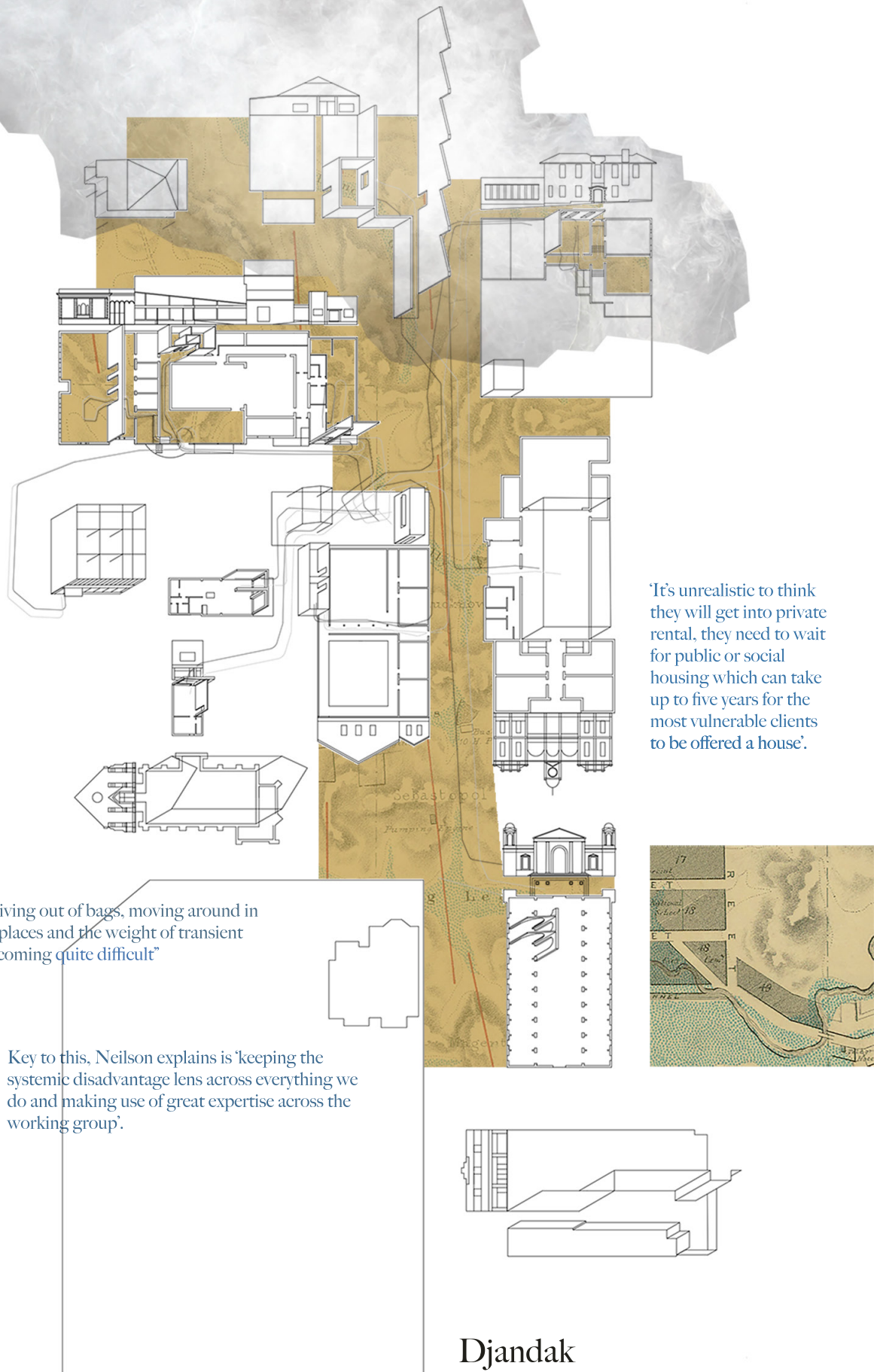
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Figure 6: Living Networks 2, created by authors Anna Johnson and Richard Black

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