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Curating Inclusive Cities through Food and Art

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Abstract

Flavours of Glenroy (2013-4) was a socially engaged art research project focused on developing strategies to connect the diverse, mobile and transforming community of Glenroy through the theme of growing and distributing edible plants. The project was action research based, where artist researchers used creatively imagined mobile edible gardens to connect and engage with locals through project presentation and execution. The process of producing, presenting and conversing about edible gardening revealed Glenroy to be a transnational Australian dream suburb, reflecting the fluid globalising conditions of our cities. The project emphasized how social relations encouraged through art, has the capacity to transform social spaces, providing a platform to introduce new voices and narratives of a community and encourage inclusive participation in sustainable citizenship.

Curating Inclusive Cities through Art and Food

The love of growing, producing and consuming food is a common passion on an international scale, inspiring social, cultural and religious expressions in cities the world over. The rituals, habits and behaviours relating to food have also inspired contemporary artists with legendary projects including *FOOD* (1971-74) an artist-run restaurant in New York founded by artists Carol Goudden, Tina Girouard and Gordon Matta-Clark, which bought together artists and communities over meal sharing. In 1992 Thai-American artist Rirkrit Tiravanija's *Untitled (Free)* (1992) famously turned 303 Gallery, New York into a kitchen and served up Thai vegetable curry and rice to audiences, inviting them to consider contemporary art practices from a more sociable and cross cultural perspective. Closer to home, *Luxury with Leftovers* (2013) by Melbourne art collective, the Hotham Street Ladies, used cake decorating ingredients such as fondant, butter cream, royal icing, food colouring and gum paste to re-create the evidence of a share house dinner party, installed in the foyer of the National Gallery of Victoria for the exhibition *Melbourne Now*. The work was developed by a collaborative group of female artists and friends who shared a house at various times over a five year period; Cassandra Chilton, Molly O'Shaughnessy, Sarah Parkes, Caroline Price and Lyndal Walker. The work humorously celebrated their friendship through the communal act of cooking and eating, playfully re-imagining the domestic in relation to contemporary notions of the feminine.

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With this history of artists connecting communities through food, I embarked on *Flavours of Glenroy (FoG)* (2013-4) an action based art research project focused on Glenroy, Victoria. Rather than the cooking and sharing of food, *FoG* focused on the growing of edible plants to engage, acknowledge, connect and celebrate the intensely diverse cultural interests and practices of the neighbourhood. By creating an event focused on presenting playful mobile edible gardens, we exchanged conversation about the gardening of edible plants with local participants.

The project aimed to counter claims that the suburbs are lacking in culture[i], but to recognise and express the cultural diversity existing as a result of a 'super-diverse' society, a term coined by sociologist Steven Vertovec (2007). Using participatory public art, the project focused on the universal theme of food, through edible plants, as a way of connecting locals on a number of levels. The project became a platform to reveal the character of local suburbs as many places within place as part of a globalising city (Massey 1994, p. 156) and as a way of encouraging the right to the city through active citizenship (Lefebvre 1968). The aim of the project was to interrogate the local relationship between the local and the global in the suburbs, through engaging participants in an accessible dialogue on their food growing practices in relation to their personal environments.

In this project, I turned my attention to the suburbs being the site where the majority of urban populations live and a part of the city not often associated with arts and cultural access,[ii] or the focus of global cities research. As an artist and curatorial researcher, I focus on projects, which draw out urban community narratives to 'curate inclusive cities' with action-based projects designed to 'care for' urban sites and their social relationships. In my research, 'curating' refers to the origins of the meaning of the term '*cura',* meaning 'to care' in Latin, usually in the context of a collection or exhibition (Oxford Dictionary 2018), in this case the collection being urban narratives, spaces and communities, expressed through creative art projects.

This expanded notion of 'curating cities' considers the curation of urban spaces as a distributed model of exhibition practices, an alternative yet parallel model to the traditional museology. The curation of cities contributes to the urban public sphere by encouraging participation, particularly in a time when urban spaces are increasingly contested in gentrifying global cities. These projects are developed and implemented with community partners in appropriate parts of the creative process. In my projects working in the field, I have worn the hats of both artist and curator, mostly due to working in locations where there is less formal arts infrastructure, activity and limited resources, so it has often required me to act in more than one

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role. My earlier research focused on central urban environments, where traditionally institutional arts and cultural activities are based in Australian cities. During this project, I focused the research on the suburbs as a site of exploration to understand how a targeted suburban community experiences arts and cultural activity. I consider myself a curator of the community. In this case, I initiated the project as both the curator and as a collaborating artist. The two project collaborators were Australian artists Rowena Booth and academic Shane Hulbert.

The project resulted in the development of a socially engaged art project made up of a fleet of transportable garden beds filled with a wide range of herbs and edible plants. These mobile garden beds were used initially as a public art intervention *FoG* at Post Office Place (2013) and also at a number of local events such as the Glenroy Festival (2013 and 2014) when we held *The Great Mobile Edible Garden Races* (2014) and at our *Gathering Glenroy* (2014) art event. Herbs with their aromatic scents were specifically chosen as they relate to many people of various cultural backgrounds and inspire the senses. Edible plants have the ability to remind us of past experiences and perhaps even transport us to other places, times and cultures.

Considering space, time and engagement in Glenroy

FoG used an action research methodology, used by various social practitioners. Action research is a systemic approach, where a practitioner implements their practice in a particular context and reflects on the processes of practice, taking into consideration the complex dynamics of a social context (Stinger 2007, p. 1). The research uses a continuous cycle of investigation, taking into considerations variables of the projects. This gives the practitioner an opportunity to reflect, analyse and understand the research in the context of actual circumstances, communities, relationships and place and gain new knowledge about the social context. In this case, we were able to gain insight into the development, implementation and impact of a socially engaged public art project, to gain a deeper understanding of the artistic, social and cultural context of the suburb of Glenroy.

In relation to contemporary art practices, my methodology focuses on socially engaged art practices, which has a long history throughout the twentieth century. Various artistic movements such as the Dadaists (1900-20s), the Situation Internationalists (1960s) and the Community Arts movement (1970s) all used processes of socially engaging people and communities as a key part of their practice. In recent years, the concept was promoted again, reframed as 'participatory art' by curator Nicholas Bourriard, through his publication *Relational Aesthetics* (2009), discussing artists' renewed focus on relations in artistic practices,

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and a shift away from art as an object only to be viewed, but rather a social experience. The strategy of focusing on relationships was of key consideration in the development of this project. In particular, we focused on how to engage local people, encourage dialogue, exchange knowledge and create connections between individuals of the community.

FOG initially developed from a temporary public art perspective, focusing on the site and place of Glenroy. However, during the course of the project it became evident that the project was more aligned with the relationship between space, place, communities and local narratives. As we collected stories, powerful histories emerged that marked Glenroy as a constantly transitioning suburb – from an early farming community, to a returned-soldiers "Australian Dream" suburb, to the super-diverse, global neighbourhood that it is today. This emerging diverse character, informed by the large population of new migrants, is still to be recognised as an enriching trait of the community. The aim of our project was to draw from these dimensions, to not only acknowledge, but also embrace and celebrate these diverse and abundant influences in Glenroy.

In exploring Glenroy's narrative of a transitioning social space, I began to consider expanded notions of space, in particular spatial urban theorist Edward Soja's idea of 'Thirdspace'. Soja redefines space as a "three-sided sensibility of spatiality-historicality-sociality" which has evolved from the "…interwoven complexity of the social, historical, and the spatial, their inseparability and interdependence" and also to consider the impact of mental spaces including imagined and re-imagined spaces in the past, present and future (Soja 1996, p. 3). This expanded notion of space greatly appealed to me as an artist focused on creatively considering, re-interpreting, transforming and imagining ideas of space and therefore place.

Soja was also greatly influenced by sociologist Henri Lefebvre (1901-1991) a pioneering author on urbanisation and the production of social space as a result of capitalist processes (*The Production of Space*, originally published in 1974). Lefebvre's writings on urban social space later led to his ideals of 'The Right to the City' (1968) which promotes further consideration and participation in the social and cultural aspects of urban life to further the rights of urban citizens. In relation to my research on curating art in urban environments, the more evolved concept of 'third space' allowed me to consider the relationship between the various people of the community, their mental spaces (actual and imagined) of a place, the physical built environment and their relationship to the natural environment.

With this more expanded notion of space as a theoretical framework for the project provided by Soja, I also made use of philosopher and historian Michel Foucault's

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(1926-1924) method of 'unearthing genealogy' developed in his own studies of the discourses of marginalised communities such as the prison and the medical system. These studies became ways of understanding the relationships of power between social, cultural and political structures and the idea that power is dispersed as micro power through a social system. Foucault's discussions on power were useful in considering the existing narratives of power existing in the neighbourhood. Recorded documentation of Glenroy from media, local government and historical reports pointed to narratives of a struggling Australian working class community, colloquially known as 'Aussie Battlers'. In recent years, media representations have focused on bad behaviour exhibited in the local area (such as hooligan driving, shooting incidents and poker machine addiction) indicating economic disadvantage affecting a proportion of the community.

I also spent time in the physical location, speaking to people, walking through, observing and photographically documenting the place, to gain further insight into the locale. A large majority of these people were new immigrants, who seemed far removed from the media stereotypes portrayed of the local community. I was greatly interested in understanding these historical perceptions of place, real and imagined, in comparison to the physical location and the gaps between what is recorded as documents, what is remembered and imagined and who's voice is represented. By understanding these gaps, it seemed the voice of a celebrated cultural diversity was unrepresented. This knowledge provided our research team with an opportunity to re-imagine Glenroy as a place rich and dynamic in cultural influences through art, culture and food.

From Australian dream to transnational suburb

The Wurundjeri people of the Kulin nation were the original inhabitants of the area now known as Glenroy. After Australia was established as a British colony in 1788, colonisers settled Melbourne in 1835, with land in Glenroy sold soon after. The first colonial landowners were the Cameron's, giving the area the name Glenroy, a result of their Scottish ancestry. The area was established as pastures for agricultural use. The rural community began to develop in the 1880s, as State Library of Victoria documents of 1888 promote Glenroy as the 'Toorak of the North', an attempt by the property sector to elevate the urban fringes as a middleclass luxury neighbourhood, a property development strategy still commonly seen today to lure investors. Yet the campaign reputedly failed, leaving Glenroy with a few grand estate properties of the era, now listed as heritage sites. The suburb remained relatively dormant, until the post war 'suburban dream' era, when the quarter acre block was king and promoted to returned soldiers and their new families.

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Glenroy became a classic middle ring working class neighbourhood in Melbourne's north and even has its own series of award winning literature *The Glenroy Novels*, which recalls the author Steven Carroll's post war experience of living in an 'Australian Dream' suburb as a child of the 1950s, eerily recollecting the transition from township to frontier suburb, sold as a national narrative of aspiration. The legacy of this era is still evident around the neighbourhood through the remaining weatherboard suburban houses and the aging strip shopping precinct located near the railway station.

Today, Glenroy is experiencing further transformation, as a result of urban population growth, with many former suburban blocks being transformed into more adequate housing for urban density through consolidation. Many Australian Dream houses are being replaced by a 'six pack' of town houses, leaving the formerly prized suburban backyard disappearing. Due to relative affordability and close distance to the centre of the city, and a growing urban population, the suburb attracts new migrants, although this is slowly being contested as the gentrification of surrounding neighbourhoods takes place, further displacing low-income residents. As an urban researcher, I was interested in the inequality of the suburbs throughout the city. This inequality is dictated by the historical precedence of a working class population, social housing located in the surrounding area and the local political landscape. Evidence in the lack of care for the local infrastructure and lack of services over many generations, is seen in the central retail precinct of the neighbourhood. The continuing argument from the community to remove the level crossing, which cuts the suburb in half, is a legacy of this aging infrastructure.

Today under globalising conditions of mass migration and urban growth and density, it is an extremely culturally diverse neighbourhood. According to the Australian Census of 2016, data published on the City of Moreland's profile of Glenroy showed that 50.8% of the population was born overseas, with the majority of residents migrating from India, Pakistan, Italy, Nepal and Lebanon. Participation in tertiary education is at 19.1% lower than the average for Moreland at 27.3% (City of Moreland, 2018) and is considered socially disadvantaged (rated Category 2) according to the *Census of Population and Housing: Socio-Economic Indexes for Areas* (SEIFA), which maps social advantage and disadvantage according to suburb (Australian Bureau of Statistics 2016).

As an ageing suburb, the central community services and retail precinct has the feeling of being abandoned due to the lack of maintenance and infrastructure of the physical space, left from an earlier suburban era. In terms of cultural infrastructure, there is little in the area, most activities in the past occurring as temporary

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community public art projects or as local festivals. The cultural diversity is most apparent in the food related businesses dominating the area. In particular, a stroll through Glenroy leads to encounters with Nepali, Indian, Vietnamese, Chinese, Assyrian, Sri Lankan, Pakistani, Lebanese, Polish and Italian grocers, cafes and restaurants. It is a suburb you could describe as characteristically super-diverse, a society which experiences incredible diversity in population as a result of the processes of colonisation, increased migration to address labour gaps and the increase in people seeking asylum. In Australia, the super-diverse character of globalising cities is not always celebrated or viewed in a positive light as evidenced by media reports focusing on social problems of new migrant communities.

As a researcher of an immigrant Chinese background, my work focuses on the transformative aspects of arts based projects as a way of re-imagining perceptions of place and community, through the engagement and sharing of cross-cultural knowledge to re-imagine and celebrate local people in relation to place and for those involved in the process to gain a sense of belonging. This super-diverse characteristic allowed me to consider geographer Doreen's Massey's conceptualisation of globalising cities embracing its character made up of other places (Massey 1994 p.156). Many associations to other places were observed in the main streets of Glenroy, representing many cultures of the business owners, although I didn't have the sense there was pride in this character, due to the overall lack of care for the neighbourhood.

We were not the only people thinking about these issues in the neighbourhood at the time. I began having conversations with the urban planners from the City of Moreland, who also identified similar issues with the ageing infrastructure and the connectivity of the community, due to a large and transient population of new migrants settling into the area. As a resident, I spent time conversing with local urban planners about the potentials of a creative project to encourage community connectivity, deeper engagement with place through a creative and playful process.

In considering these transforming migration conditions of the Australian suburbs, I turned to the community garden movement for influence in developing this project to encourage participation from local audiences. The recent interest in establishing community run gardens has created social and physical spaces for local people to connect, share cultural knowledge and build relationships through collaborative activities. Community gardens are another type of 'third place', an informal publicly accessible place where people can gather and interact for community vitality, as framed by urban sociologist Ray Oldenburg in *The Great Good Place* (2009). Community gardening creates social spaces inviting participation from individuals to engage with their local urban environment and community to encourage sustainable

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citizenship and the right to the city (as championed by Lefebvre) and offers an alternative to consumption-based activities. In the conceptual development of the project we used this underlying philosophy as the basis, adapting these ideas to suit the specific conditions of a transient community to reflect the character of a migrant community in the design of the project. The lack of a local gallery or a performance space, asked us to consider and explore how a public art project focused on social engagement would be a suitable approach for the Glenroy neighbourhood.

Mobility, connectivity and edible plants

Reflecting on the conditions of the neighbourhood led to the design of an art project focusing on food as a unifying factor, mobility, community gardening and working in partnership with local community groups. The project was publicly focused due to a lack of an arts infrastructure in the area, but also because a public project would be more accessible for reaching out to a broad cross section of the community.

I saw the local neighbourhood, as full of cultural influences, but lacking a method of expressing, reflecting and taking ownership of the neighbourhood character in a contemporary way relevant to many locals. Our project sought to value the diversity through an arts platform that reflected the local community. Through our site analysis, we found food to be a universal theme, which was a common trait of various community groups represented by local businesses. Walking through the neighbourhood you could smell the many spices used in the local cooking of the cafes, restaurants and grocers. Conversations with local business owners often led to discussions on specific cultural and religious practices in relation to food, such as the Islamic festivities relating to *Eid Mubarak* and the important role played in fasting and celebrating by feasting.

We wanted to design a project that expressed mobility as a part of the globalising conditions of the city, engaged local community groups and also sourced materials from as local as possible – this included sourcing our materials from local businesses, charity stores and local organisations. We designed a fleet of six *Mobile Edible Gardens*, which were creatively imagined using locally sourced materials. The bodies were made from up-cycled wheelbarrows, colourfully painted to be eye-catching and attract attention. Our gardens were enhanced by vibrant patterned beadwork and dress fabrics sourced from local Indian textile business, which sold fabric used for traditional Indian dress for celebrations, ceremonies and festivals. Our participants from many parts of Asia, also commented that these fabrics were often used in other cultures of Central Asia and in the Middle East, reflecting some of the shared cultural practices across the region, dating back to the Silk Road era as early as

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200BC. We also explored the many 'discount' stores of Glenroy, which also sold an unusual combination of products, often humorous and quirky, to be used as part of the design, items such as loud bicycle horns and trinkets. The process of focusing on locally sourced products revealed Glenroy's local is global, as people, products and services were from many other places, an idea resonating with Massey's idea of places that link to beyond, showing Glenroy's potential to be viewed as open, porous and embracing of difference.

For the project, we engaged local businesses, the neighbourhood house, the local choir, the library, social service groups, the local community garden and nursery. Each of our partners was involved in different ways and chose to be involved based on a level of commitment appropriate for their services. The project was about place and the more we worked through the project the more I realised how many disparate communities make up a neighbourhood. It was challenging reaching out to an entire suburb, as there was a lot of support and interest from social services groups, but it was often difficult to engage their clients, due to lack of experience working with artists. Many of the organisations showed interest, but very busy providing their services to the community to commit to engaging in our project.

In the end, we focused our relationship on a partnership with Scope, a local disability service. Together we developed edible planting workshops with their clients through their day service programs to contribute to our garden beds. They were keen for their clients to be involved in social activities and to participate in the local community. They grew basil, thyme, curry, parsley, mint, rosemary, spring onion and chives. We also received excess plants as donations from the local CERES Nursery for use in the project, as they also wanted to contribute back to the community. Local government also supported by providing space to work in, project and financial support. The local choir, *The Glenroy Harmonisers*, led by a community minded music teacher, also supported by contributing songs about gardening.

Creating a public platform for private habits

Our project accumulated into a one day *Mobile Edible Garden* intervention in Post Office Place, where we used the project as a way of engaging local people through dialogue around gardening, edible plants, eating and cooking interests and habits. With our edible gardens on display, we had conversations with participants about their personal experiences of their own edible gardens. In exchange for the conversation, they selected an edible plant to take home as an addition to their own garden.

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The activation of the site through our combined activities of presenting our garden beds, the performance and a barbeque attracted much attention from people passing by. It was a surprise to find cultural activation in the street, a transformation from the usual conventional uses of the space, which included post office visits, catching the train and other general errands. The engagement resulted in enthusiastic responses from local participants who were excited to see the street transformed by creative expression. Conversations revealed our audiences were passionate about edible gardening with extreme proclamations such as "I'm Italian, growing food is in my blood!" As the project was dialogue based it was initially conceived as appealing to adults. But as the garden beds were designed to draw attention through sight, colour, sound and smell, we also found many children were drawn to the project, creating a buzz, they in turn gave their parents permission to be inquisitive and to participate. These observations made me consider how the aesthetics of the project, such as colour, design and music, have the potential to create inclusive and accessible social spaces for many age groups.

Our fleet of garden beds had a local presence, as we were in conversation with various partnering groups over six months. Even if some community groups weren't able to physically be involved, they were aware of a Glenroy based art project in the planning. After the garden beds were built, other opportunities presented themselves to re-perform the project in different contexts, such as the local festivals and community events. The Glenroy Festival director invited us to participate in 2014 and together we conceived *The Great Mobile Edible Garden Race* to be more inclusive of how children and families could engage with edible gardening in an active and embodied way. In this instance, we partnered with the Itiki Pacific Islander Sports Network, a local sporting group made up of children, teenagers and families in the local area. They supported by participating in racing and encouraging other people to be involved. The Vicseg Iranian Asylum Seekers Social Health group were also partners, participating by assisting in managing the project and the children of the group taking part in racing.

Transforming social spaces for community expression

As artist researchers, the project allowed us to consider further expanded ideas of space in relation to local inhabitants. It led to researching notions of 'third space', by considering the social, historic, spatial and imagined spaces of Glenroy to inform the design of the project. Reflection and analysis of the site allowed us to identify food from diverse cultures as a key theme connecting the community through the activities of consuming food such as purchasing ingredients and eating at local cafes and restaurants, at the time of the project. This finding of the common thread of

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food influenced the design of our method, as we recognised that local people, also enjoy the growing of food, rather than just consuming. As a private habit, not completely based on consumerism, these activities are not often publicly expressed. This finding led to using the mobile edible garden theme as core to the project with the aim of providing an opportunity to develop a new social space celebrating the diversity of the neighbourhood through material forms to stimulate discussion about the migration of cultural habits to the area and reflecting the globalising transnational nature of the neighbourhood.

As partnerships grew, the mobile edible gardens attracted more opportunities in the community, which could be described as 'rhizhomatic' in formation a term used to describe the research process where there are multiple entry and exit points in data and interpretation in a project, rather than vertical and linear, an idea drawn from nature where there is co-operation from more than one species such as bees working with flowers in a relationship of multiplicity (Delueze and Guattari 1972-1980). The project developed with multiplicity in mind, in terms of drawing from and collaborating with various partners of the community and originally was focused on an intervention in Post Office place, but through the process we found there were many other outcomes such as building relationships with local groups, various roles and contributions were taken on by individuals of the groups and were able to contribute different types of knowledge, skills and resources through the process. The wider community experiencing the Post Office Place intervention led to further exposure for the project and thus other opportunities to develop the concept in different social contexts, unexpected in the early stages of planning, developing rhizomatically, as place and community cannot be contained, reflecting the fluid and transforming nature of cities.

From a local government perspective, the activation of *FoG* was an opportunity to pilot a model of artists working with local communities. The project led to the development of an 'Artists Incubator' research framework in partnership with the City of Moreland. The framework led to the establishment of a studio as an incubating space at the Wheatsheaf Hub, the former Glenroy Primary School, recently purchased by the City of Moreland for future community use. The purpose of the studio was to create a social space for artists to produce projects, focusing on community collaboration. A further six artists were invited to participate, working on projects over a six month period, leading to several public outcomes.

The activation of the Wheatsheaf Hub through arts activity led to building and strengthening community relationships in preparation for the development of the site as a new centralised physical community hub for Glenroy to address the growing community and ageing infrastructure and facilities of local services. The 'Artists

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Incubator' model was adopted by the City of Moreland as an arts policy approach towards working with north of Bell Street suburban communities, where arts infrastructure is minimal. The key approach adopted was the methodology of community led activation, reflecting and building upon emerging local narratives of new residents to create new inclusive social spaces, supported by local government through the provision of space and resources. The model of an arts project focused on social engagement, demonstrates how the application of new models of practice, can have an impact on local policy and planning.

Cross cultural learning through edible gardening

By surveying the site of Glenroy to develop a project focused on the growing of edible plants, the *FoG* project was able to create universal social and cultural connections, drawing out the super-diverse character through conversations, which were exchanged. The global nature of the locally sourced materials used to produce the garden beds, represented the migration of cultural practices and materials into the neighbourhood, representing the diversity of people and places making up Glenroy today. Relatable universal themes of growing, eating and cooking food was used as a platform to discuss various cultural interests, habits and practices expressed through our conversations with individuals and to connect disparate individuals through sharing experiences. By curating an urban community through a socially engaged art project, our research team was able to navigate the many layers of diversity experienced in the suburbs of globalising Australian cities. The creation of a new mobile 'third place' allowed locals to participate, express, exchange and celebrate their personal experience of growing, cooking and eating food, building the capacity of local people and encouraging them to take part in active citizenship.

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[i] In Australia, there is a history of criticism of the suburbs since architect Robyn Boyd's *The Australian Ugliness* (1960) was published. Boyd focused on critiquing the crudeness of the aesthetics of the suburbs, representing the nationalism of the era. More recently, new housing 'McMansion' developments were also attacked as 'monocultural' and promoting an unsustainable lifestyle in the mass media (including popular sitcoms such as 'Kath & Kim' which aired from 2002-7). Professor of History Mark Peel defended these claims as an elitist class divided attitude towards the outer suburbs, claiming the suburbs are actually culturally diverse and that criticisms are focused on blaming the suburbs for inadequate urban planning and growth issues which impacts on the entire city environment.

[ii] The Creative Suburbs funding program was established in 2016 by Creative Victoria to fund projects developed by local government communities and address issues of access to the arts in outer suburban areas the city. It was one of the key objectives of the Creative State Strategy of 2016.