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**Making and sharing the commons: Reimagining ‘the West’ as
Riverlands, Sydney through a dialogue between design and
ethnography**

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Abstract

Scholars from the social sciences and humanities are increasingly seeking to improve the relevance and social impact of their research beyond the academy. In this context, ‘designerly’ thinking and methods are being drawn on to inform social change agendas, and a range of new relationships and collaborations are forming around this node of activity. This article critically reflects on this trajectory through a dialogue between ethnography, design and theoretical principles from anthropology and human geography.

We draw on the example from a workshop during the ICD Symposium and our response to the challenge of reimagining Western Sydney as ‘Riverlands, Sydney’. We found that various conflicting descriptions and residents’ experiences of Western Sydney warranted a critical take on the constitution of a ‘problem’ of Western Sydney and the possible solution as ‘Riverlands, Sydney’. We argue that a diverse mix of experiential and theoretical ‘knowing’ is needed to tackle locally embedded opportunities and challenges, and that local

knowledge must 'sit at the table' on an equal footing with design practice and academic analysis.

The article outlines points of contact that could be created to involve local people and organisations as experts in a hypothetical, collectively imagined project, and how this could lead to their active engagement as co-researchers, co-designers and co-producers in making and sharing commons. The article demonstrates how this type of critical and collaborative design framework incorporates theoretical and ethnographic dialogues, and how this approach provides the entry points for going beyond stale policy-based responses to contemporary societal challenges. Using a combination of experiential and theoretical tools to look beneath the surface of the already constituted 'question' or 'problem' allows possible re-framings to be explored before responses are developed. We argue that ethnographic understandings developed in dialogue with design, which are rooted in a perspective that takes seriously local ways of knowing as forms of equal expertise, can enable this.

Introduction

Social science, humanities and design research approaches are increasingly brought together in processes that seek to lead to social change and generate forms of wellbeing. Therefore new theoretical and practical propositions have begun to enter the design space, offering stimulating new possibilities for the development of design research and practice. However, such new disciplinary relationships and configurations do not come without their challenges. They invite not only collaboration but also reflexive and interdisciplinary forms of conceptual and practice-based interrogation. In this article we discuss this with reference to the example of an interdisciplinary encounter and propose how theoretical or ideal models of social change might be used as design probes rather than serving as pre-determined solutions in design research.

In 2014 we were invited to participate in a workshop that responded to the challenge: 'How can design activate public engagement in the commons in Riverlands, Sydney?' This challenge was posed in the context of a wider exploration of the reimagining of Western Sydney (Australia) as 'Riverlands, Sydney'. Here we draw on this experience to propose an approach for using the notion of 'the commons' in design research and practice.

Growing out of the workshop, we took the original proposition of 'Riverlands, Sydney' as a newly imagined version of Western Sydney as our starting point, responding to this particular brief in the form of a methodology. Rather than seeing 'Riverlands, Sydney' as a predetermined 'solution' that a design process should seek to create, we approached the issue from an alternative starting point by situating the outcome of design more closely within the process of researching and understanding. We argue that a diverse mix of experiential and theoretical 'knowing', derived from engaging with local people as researchers, is needed to tackle locally embedded opportunities and challenges, and that such local forms of knowledge must 'sit at the table' on an equal footing with design practice and academic analysis. Thus by attending to local experience, pleasures and aspirations, it becomes possible to reformulate 'problems' and identify value generated through, by and in the existing context. It suggests the benefits of an approach to design that is 'processual' rather than being problem-solution oriented, and that this approach enacts Schön's (1983) notion of the 'reflective practitioner'. This attention to local ways of knowing expands the possibilities for designers to explore situations intuitively and reflexively, with a view that 'problems' may not present themselves as such and 'solutions' may be multiple, or not the only design response (Catanzaro, 2015). We demonstrate this by outlining how points of contact could be created to involve local people and organisations as experts in a hypothetical collectively imagined project—as co-researchers, co-designers and co-producers in making and sharing commons to critically reconstitute the relationship between the 'problem' of Western Sydney, and the possibility of Riverlands, Sydney.

Western/Riverlands, Sydney offers an ideal case through which to explore this question due to its trajectory as a part of, and in relationship to, Sydney. Historically, the phrase 'Western Sydney' related to 'disadvantaged communities' close to the western periphery of central Sydney. This area has subsequently become gentrified and is now termed the relatively affluent 'inner west' suburbs. Due to urban development and population growth, what is now identified as 'the west' is positioned much further from the city centre. Concurrently the label of 'disadvantaged communities' has also moved further west, the new west being perceived and labeled as socially and culturally 'problematic'. Yet simultaneously it is recognised by many of its residents as culturally rich, economically vibrant and encompassing a wide range of environmental 'assets'. These conflicting descriptions invite a critical take on the question of how the 'problem' of Western Sydney and the possible solution of 'Riverlands, Sydney' is constituted.

In what follows we outline a critical and collaborative design framework that incorporates theoretical and ethnographic dialogues in response to this challenge. We argue that such a framework can provide the entry points for going beyond policy-based responses to contemporary societal challenges. Using a combination of experiential and theoretical tools and knowledge to look beneath the surface of the already-constituted 'question' or 'problem' allows possible re-framings to be explored before responses are developed. We argue that ethnographic understandings developed in dialogue with design, which take seriously local ways of knowing as forms of equal expertise, can enable this. Finally we reflect on this framework in order to return to the question of how the 'commons' might be treated in design practice. First we explore the notion of the

'commons', its relationship to property, and how it might be connected to social science research and design practice.

The 'commons' as a site for design practice

In a context where social sciences and humanities scholars are increasingly seeking to improve the relevance and social impact of their research beyond the academy including new ways to participate in change-making, there are a growing number of connections between design practice and social or cultural research agendas. While participatory design research and practice have long been implicated in social change processes, perhaps in some national contexts more than others including Sweden (e.g. Ehn, 2014) and Australia (e.g. Akama & Prendiville, 2013), the current interest in connecting design with social science approaches to social and environmental issues brings a shift in emphasis and interdisciplinary collaboration (e.g. Pink et al., 2013). We understand the brief/challenge to consider a reconceptualization of 'Western Sydney' as 'Riverlands, Sydney' is a further gesture towards this form of collaboration.

An applied anthropology approach (e.g. Pink 2005; 2007) to understanding such a 'problem' would characteristically seek to turn the question around. Therefore, if asked 'how to imagine?' Riverlands, Sydney in a way that local people best benefit, we might reconfigure this original question to determine a number of sub questions. These include what local people already see as being of benefit to them, from where their existing forms of well-being and creativity are derived, and how these might feed into a revised vision for making/imagining Riverlands, Sydney – if that goal continued to be relevant in the light of our investigations. This is not to criticise the brief we were given, but to refigure it as a proposition and as a probe rather than as an end goal.

For anthropologists (e.g. Strathern, 2000; Pels, 2000; Amit, 2000) and designers (Pink & Akama, 2015), the *uncertainty* of not knowing what is going to happen next, or exactly what the outcomes of our work will be or how they will be manifested, underpins the participatory research and design process discussed here. Likewise for the reflective practitioner 'situations of practice are not problems to be solved but problematic situations to engage in' (Schön, 1983, p. 31). Our starting point in developing the methods we outline below was the idea of co-designing for an uncertain future. The idea of turning around the provocation of Riverlands, Sydney was built on the principle, that design cannot be prescriptive, a principle that is also fundamental to ethnography (see Akama et al., 2015). By embracing uncertainty as the most inspiring and exciting part of design rather than seeing it as a problem, (we don't need to predict a future to design into), we acknowledge that aspects of the context might change. We could be designing with people whose lives are changing or see that environments and institutions are changing and that, given this context of change and uncertainty, design is ongoing and might never end. Thus our commitment to making a design intervention in Western/Riverlands, Sydney might not be something that had an end focus, but a process of continuing engagement and co-design – with local people, groups and organisations – which would be continuously adaptive in its aims and outcomes.

The import of this perspective means taking 'Riverlands, Sydney' not as an end-point or a goal, but as a speculative probethat we might interrogate, undermine and play with in the process of determining how a reconfiguration of property and the relationships through which it is constituted and experienced in Western Sydney could enable renewed forms of wellbeing. Gibson-Graham, Cameron and Healey (2013) argue that one dimension of:

“ [t]aking back property for people and the planet involves recognising that it is the relationships between people with respect to property that matter in the making and sharing of commons (p.147). ”

If we consider making to be an ongoing activity in the world, projects of making are not fresh starts, but make withwhat is already there. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold reminds us:

“ We are accustomed to thinking of making as a project' [that starts with] 'an idea in mind, of what we want to achieve (Ingold, 2013, p. 20). ”

But there is another way to think of making, which we follow here, of 'making as a process of *growth*' (italics in original) which Ingold writes, 'is to place the maker from the outset as a participant in amongst a world of active materials.' The maker 'intervenes in worldly processes that are already going on' rather than 'imposing his designs on a world that is ready and waiting to receive them' (Ingold, 2013, p. 21). To undertake a project that concerns re-imagining property that is already existing, and is specific to a material locality, we therefore need to determine how property and that locality might also already exist in the imaginations of local people before seeking to add external layers of definition to this. The ideas of recognising (and identifying) the relationships that matter, and of 'making and sharing' are also fundamental principles in ethnographic and some participatory design practices. They refer to understanding the relationships of humans to their environment, and to making

as a form of intervention or ongoing working towards change. Thus we consider two questions, first theoretically and then in relation to practice, to understand: 1) The significance of the human-property relationship for how humans are situated as part of an environment; and 2) how understanding, imagining and making as part of everyday activity can inform us about ways to enable people to engage in the participatory making of commons.

The relationship between humans and property can be theorised from multiple perspectives. Here we account selectively for those that have useful implications for the design project with which we are concerned. As such, we tread a line between social science and design approaches. For anthropologists, theoretical coherence and development is necessary for an investigation to proceed, because the relationship between the ethnography and theory is iterative in nature –ethnography is used to critically build theory, while theory is used to critically guide how we make meaning from the things and people we encounter in the world. In contrast, design research has greater licence to engage theory to serve the objectives of practice, as an enabler for change making. Thus our approach to theory will not be inconsistent, but we are licensed to use it instrumentally in ways beyond generating theoretical arguments. The most relevant approaches here are those that are political and activated as a critique of private property itself, and those less politically motivated approaches that seek to understand the materiality or affordances of property as they are implicated in an environment that they share with humans. These approaches are different but not necessarily incompatible or irreconcilable since rather than making critical arguments against each other, their respective emphases can be complementary. We outline these to suggest a framework for understanding the relationships between property and people in a shared environment.

For Gibson-Graham et al. (2013), the notion of the commons entails a particular relationship between people and property. As they put it:

“ So what is it that characterizes a commons? Commons and community go hand in hand. And it is because of this intimate interconnection that rules and protocols can be developed to manage the commons. To be a commons:

- access to property must be shared and wide,
- use of property must be negotiated by a community,
- benefit from property must be distributed to the community and possibly beyond,
- care for property must be performed by community members, and
- responsibility for property must be assumed by community members

(Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, pp. 131-2). ”

The brief we were charged with reflected an aim to imagine a Riverlands, Sydney where this approach to property might be realised. It was pitched, we believe, as a ‘problem solver’ for Western Sydney that has been characterised as follows:

“ Western Sydney names an extensive residential, industrial and rural environment of nearly 9,000 square kilometers encompassing the major cities of Bankstown, Blacktown, Campbelltown, Castle Hill, Fairfield, Liverpool, Parramatta and Penrith, with a population of 2 million people. Currently the third largest economy in Australia (behind Sydney CBD and Melbourne), Western Sydney is earmarked for a ‘tsunami’ of population growth over the next twenty years, and with this a need for the creation of 20,000 new jobs. It has the highest concentration of immigrants, particularly the newly arrived, in Australia. Western Sydney is a contested landscape with a rapidly developing urban fringe. The region has for some time experienced a decline in food production (since the 1970s when turf farms in the fertile flood plains of the Hawkesbury region were reclassified as agriculture) and is facing specific climate change challenges including water scarcity, soil degradation and urban heat islanding (UHI) caused by the combination of hotter and more extreme climate conditions and hard urban development. Residents of Western Sydney are also more vulnerable than those located in higher density parts of Sydney to ‘lifestyle’ diseases such as obesity and depression, due in part to a lack of access to locally grown, fresh food coupled with the growth in private car use, ‘big box’ supermarkets, and poor public transport infrastructure. A consequence of these somewhat certain trends and development trajectories (which are certainly not unique to Western Sydney) is a diminishment of shared life resources – often referred to as ‘the tragedy of the commons’ <https://icd2014.wordpress.com/workshop-brief/>. ”

We were invited to recode Western Sydney in relation to its parklands and culture in that:

“ The Nepean and Hawkesbury rivers, Parramatta River and South Creek catchment traverse the region and exist in relation to extensive parklands and recreational areas. Equally, Western Sydney is layered by social and cultural landscapes that may not be as apparent to the naked eye <https://icd2014.wordpress.com/workshop-brief/>. ”

Our workshop's objective was to develop a methodology through which to interpret the brief with reference to local realities, and through which the brief (revised) might become locally meaningful, or embedded.

The question of the commons is not simply about urban regeneration, but about a much deeper philosophy and politics of ownership, sharing and collectivity. It does not exclude private property, yet it is committed to a specific appreciation of the relationship between property, ownership and access, which is inclusive and ethical. As Gibson-Graham et al. put it:

“ The question of who owns a commons is open. Commons can be created with any type of property-private property (that might be owned by an individual owner, a family, a corporation, or a collective), state-owned property, or open-access property. In other words, ownership of property is largely a legal matter and does not deter land or other resources from being managed as a commons (Gibson-Graham et al., 2013, p. 132). ”

Yet there is also a need to look at our relationship with the environments that we live in beyond the question of property. 'Property', as it is popularly understood, is simply a particular way of configuring the relationships between human and non-human entities that constitute our environments. The relationship between humans and what we might refer to as property itself deserves some interrogation: defining something as property determines it as being something separate from ourselves, that we are able to objectify and own. Yet when people express their relationships to things they become more intertwined. Indeed, as the discussion of Michelle's dad's perspective on his home (discussed next) demonstrates, the two have grown to become part of each other. Our relationship to 'the land' is often coined in terms of property, but is much more complex than an 'ownership' categorisation (such as private, public etc.) may suggest. As the anthropologist Tim Ingold reminds us:

“ The environment is, in the first place, a world we live in, and not a world we look at. We *inhabit* our environment: we are part of it; and through this practice of habitation it becomes part of us too (2010, p. 95). ”

Here, the concept of ownership becomes more than a claim to possess part of this environment. While the politics of property and the inequalities this is associated with are problematic, private property can also be fundamental to a lifetime of biographically accrued meaning and personal wellbeing.

This suggests that before theorising property, or assuming that a particular vision of the commons in a particular locality might be implemented, we need to first understand what property means to the people who already inhabit a locality. While ideologically the notion of private property might be opposed to the thesis of the commons or the argument for 'commoning', private property ownership is already part of what is meaningful in the context of everyday and biographical experience. And following Gibson-Graham et al. (as quoted above), the ownership categorisation of a piece of 'land' need not dictate the commoning potential.

Therefore, in the case of Western Sydney before re-imagining the area as Riverlands, Sydney, we would need to investigate the existing meaning of property for local people. Moreover in an economic, political and everyday reality where commoning is enabled across a range of property types, we would need to appreciate how forms of wellbeing are already generated through existing property configurations and uses. To mitigate against the forms of exclusion and other problematic outcomes often associated with private property ownership, a vision for commoning that encompasses the diversity of configurations and uses already existent is required. By learning from the material, physical and affective relations to property that already exist –including all forms of private property, such as home ownership – an inclusive and sustainable vision for Riverlands, Sydney becomes possible. As also shown by Pink (in this issue) in her work on the Slow City movement (and which likewise seeks to generate forms of wellbeing), we often encounter contexts where activists, policy makers or interested publics might be living with aspects of national economies, politics and societies that they do not agree with, in a pluralistic and interdependent system. This might involve constructing a bearable relationality, so we might engage productively and generatively with what we may otherwise disagree with (Pink & Lewis, 2014). We are interested in how such a trajectory could play out through ethnography-design dialogue and next we explore the

potential role of local stories of Western/Riverlands, Sydney in this.

Western/Riverlands, Sydney?

Our approach to the question or challenge of ‘How can design activate public engagement in the commons in Riverlands, Sydney?’ did not assume a predetermined methodology or linear process. We were interested in bringing together approaches from design practice and anthropological ethnography. We began by drawing on some of the insights about ‘bottom up’ processes of engagement such as those of the Slow City example, which emphasised the importance of local knowledge. We were also committed to developing an interdisciplinary approach to the challenge, having amongst us a communication designer, graphic designer, photographer, anthropologist, and social policy-maker.

We began by each talking through the interests and experiences we brought to the project. Following a feminist approach to telling the self, these accounts tended to be biographical and personal as well as professional. Our personal lives, biographies and subjectivities are always integral to how we understand what we find, and to our capacities to understand or imagine other people’s worlds (Clifford & Marcus, 1986) as well as their sensory, embodied and emotional experiences of the places they inhabit (Pink, 2015). As we began to speak it became apparent how our different biographies were interwoven with the ‘challenge’ we were working on.

Three group members had grown up in Western Sydney and their stories were essential to how we critically interpreted the brief. We outline this ‘insider informed’ critical interpretation in the next section. First, through one of these stories we set the scene of Western Sydney and show what an ethnographic story of local knowledge and experience contributes when it is introduced at the very outset of the interpretation of the brief/challenge (rather than being undertaken simply as a stage in a research process that seeks to create knowledge to follow the original format of the challenge). The group’s individual stories of growing up and living in Western Sydney, helped to refigure the ‘problem’ and to generate a critical perspective around the concept of Riverlands, Sydney. As we talked around the table we learned that Michelle had grown up in Western Sydney and as she spoke, a story of what was ‘right’ about the area began to unfold. After the workshop Michelle delved deeper into this story, asking her father to provide his own account.

My Place:



Figure 1: *Ciro Catanzaro on fresh block of land, Werrington, 1977*
Photo: Margaret Catanzaro

“ In 1977, our friends, Pepe and Karen, they brought us to see this block of land. I was not particularly keen to come here as, to me, it was the middle of nowhere. It was the last block of land in a street of empty houses, they had all been built but no one lived here yet, it was so quiet and the block backed onto bushland. After living in Stanmore, this place seemed so far away from everything. In Italy, where I grew up, people live on top of each other and family surround you. But my wife was very Australian and wanted a house for the kids, she thought it was important they have a backyard to play in. I never had a yard back then, I couldn't understand.

But, I love my wife very much and I wanted to give her everything, so we agreed and took a loan from the bank and they started to build in 1977. In 1978 we moved in. I will always remember, the first year was the hardest, it was so cold, this big three bedroom house with no furniture and no family to fill it yet, then, I didn't really like to stay here. ”

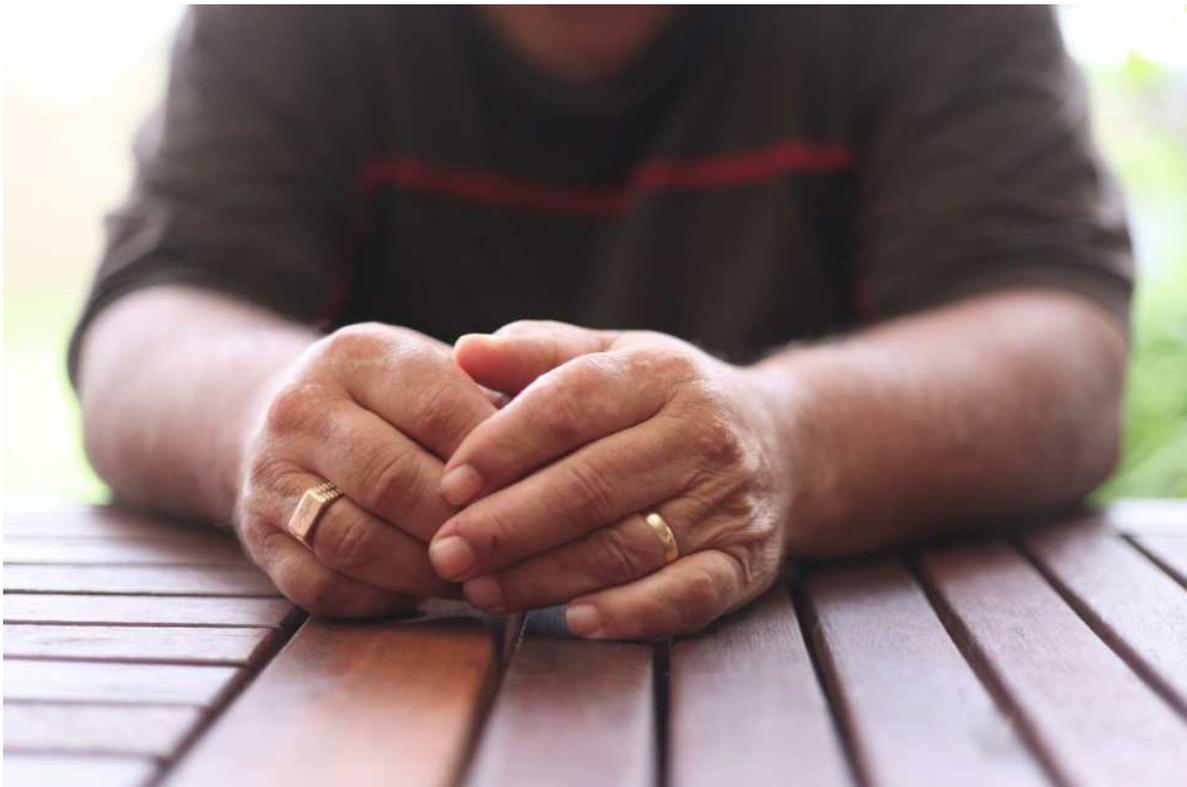


Figure 2: Ciro Catanzaro reflecting on his past at his home in Werrington, 2014
Photo: Michelle Catanzaro

“ But after that, things changed, I just loved this place. It is a fantastic place, a fantastic block of land. Slowly all the houses around us filled, and our neighbours became like our family. The suburb also changed, more people came and it didn't feel like nowhere anymore. If I showed you a picture of then to now, you wouldn't believe how this place has transformed and how many people have come here. We were lucky we came here first.

We have never stopped to make improvements on the house and the yard. The backyard offered my family so many possibilities, things I could never have even dreamed of as a little boy, and I was able to have a dog for the first time in my life, Amica ¹. It was so different to the concrete streets I played on when I was a boy. I remember I built my children a fort, they called it 'Fort Littlekid'. How they spent hours playing outside here and on the swings. We had a pool when the kids were young and all the neighbours could come and swim here, sometime there was so many people, I swear the pool had no water left in it at the end of the day. When the kids were older, we built a granny flat so they could have more space, I want to give my family everything. Now we have a beautiful deck and I just love to sit out here, I think it is the most beautiful place in the world. I have moved around a lot in my life and after leaving my family back in Italy, I was worried I wouldn't ever really find my place, but I can say that this is the only place I really call my home. ”



Figure 3: Ciro Catanzaro discusses his home drawing upon a Neapolitan proverb, 2014. “Casa mia, casa mia per quonado piccola tu sia sei sempre una abbazia” (trans) My house, my house although little you are, to me you are like a palace.

Photo: Michelle Catanzaro

“ I always joke with my children that I want to be buried in the backyard... As long as my grandson doesn't step on me, as he plays soccer in the yard all the time. ”

The critical impact of narrative/knowing: questioning the brief

As Michelle's father's story shows, the idea of Western Sydney as home is very much invested in the notion of the home, a privately owned locality, which is simultaneously part of a collective world with neighbours, friends, and material and social environments that matter. Western Sydney, seen here through this experience, is not a 'problem', but a joy, a place to belong to, to be *part of* and to be buried in – that is, to stay part of. The area was

a place for him and his family to live in, care for and grow in.

The narrative also shows how over time Michelle's father made his material and social home and world in Western Sydney. The contingencies and relationships through which the configuration of social and material relations described in his story came about are representative of how life can develop, generating forms of attachment and wellbeing. The production of such localised forms of wellbeing can be understood as outcomes of the everyday improvised activities of people as they go about their everyday lives. As design anthropologists have argued, people are everyday designers and this capacity should be appreciated in design processes. Michelle's father has been successful in generating and experiencing local forms of community, sharing and forming a relationship to the land, which grew over time, and which could not necessarily be designed through a narrowly conceived commons (exclusive of private property ownership) proposition for Riverlands, Sydney.

Yet simultaneously, this shows that there is already a sense of the commons, of local community around relatives and neighbours in the area; that is, there are experiences, capacities and ways of being and knowing to build on. While from the outside it might appear that there is a lack of 'commons' in the area, the scene we encounter in Western Sydney through the eyes of Michelle's father, is not so much a 'tragedy of the commons' but rather shows it to be rich in commoning practices. The question therefore becomes how to move from a 'preconceived outcome' approach, through which the region is viewed as in deficit and 'problematic', to embracing and building on these evident and already existing ways of being, sharing and living that are generative of forms of wellbeing that are meaningful to the local area.

The brief or challenge had presented us with a very different version of Western Sydney to that which we encountered in just the few stories told by the members of our workshop group who had grown up in the area. These stories offered us pointers towards what to research to understand what the 'commons' of Western/Riverlands, Sydney actually means/should mean for design practice. Western Sydney was clearly, at least in parts, already inhabited and cared for, thus posing the question of how existing local forms of wellbeing might be harnessed for future wellbeing. This richness allows us to create a more complex interpretation of the brief; a different picture of the area that comes from 'inside'. We knew there must be more stories like this out there and that, if these could be drawn out, they would further contribute to the richness of biographical and personal experiences that we wanted to underpin our approach.

From an applied anthropology perspective this is unsurprising; anthropological responses to applied research 'problems' do not deny that problems exist, but they frequently refigure the research question and the 'problem'. This assets-based approach involves understanding what is already there, what is positive for people who live there, and how local people imagine a positive future. Thus what we propose involves asking what is already happening – that is, what are the existing generative, improvised and active ways in which people produce the kinds of relationships or processes that change-makers, who are proposing reform of some kind, are seeking to develop?

Techniques for imagining Western/Riverlands, Sydney

Our workshop aim was not to create a solution, but to generate a methodology or design practice and starting point through which to co-produce the ways of knowing needed for such a design process. This brought together anthropological ethnography and design techniques to create hybrid methods. These types of techniques open up and present previously unknown possibilities and potentials (e.g. Halse, 2013; Akama et al., 2015; Barnes, 2009; Chang, 2011).

What we learned from the story described above is that imagining what Riverlands, Sydney 'could' be may have been itself problematic, reinforcing popular representations that depict Western Sydney as dangerous, disadvantaged, or dysfunctional (Powell, 1993, p.12). An assets-based approach that builds upon what Western Sydney already 'is', appeared to be a more productive starting point. We also recognised the importance of seeing the project as temporal and evolving, having the potential to make an ongoing contribution to how Western Sydney can be imagined and/ or reimagined – rather than having as a goal the discovery of a singular, lasting solution or reaching for a finite recommendation.

Bianchini (2006) draws on Maruyama's term of the 'urban mindscape' in an attempt to define the urban imaginary, indicating it is something that exists between the physical landscape of a city and the cultural and visual perceptions of people. Bianchini (1999) explains that this can also be expressed as 'landscape of the mind', meaning that the city's mindscape can correspond to an urban 'image bank' consisting of local and external images of the city. These are manifested in a variety of forms, which he lists as: media coverage; stereotypes, jokes and 'conventional wisdom'; representations of a city in music, literature, film, the visual arts and other types of cultural production; myths and legends; tourist guidebooks; city marketing and tourism promotion literature; views of residents, city users and outsiders, expressed, for example, through surveys and focus groups (Bianchini, 2006, p.14). The 'Westie' stereotype associated with Western Sydney exemplifies this. A derogatory label:

“ ... perpetuated by news stories rather than distilled from real life, the Westie image has affected how people from Western Sydney socially and economically interact with other Sydney-siders (Sandbach, 2013, p.729). ”

This resonated with the group, and through our discussion it became evident that our individual understanding of Western Sydney relied heavily on media representations and hearsay, if it was not through our own experience as ‘insiders’. Due to our lack of first hand experiences, individuals were faced with a feeling of ‘existential outsidership’ (Relph, 1976), a self-conscious reflection of not belonging within ‘the west’. To combat this sense of alienation from the people and places of the west, we drew upon the personal narratives and stories of the ‘insiders’ within the group to enact a sense of ‘vicarious insidership’, where outsiders gain a sense of empathy and understanding about a place based on rich and emotive narratives that evoke experiences of ‘familiar places’ (Relph, 1976, p. 53).

This insight emerging from the personal and family narratives of those participants playing a dual role as professional expert and someone who had grown up in the area – in addition to our various expertise and knowing across fields of communication design; graphic design; urban photography; social policy; anthropology, ethnography – enabled us to bring together a series of informed views that together suggested the following:

- While the concept of Riverlands, Sydney offered an appealing solution, which drew on the qualities and affordances of the already existing environment, as researchers and designers our first task was to interrogate the brief and its underlying assumptions. This was not to disregard it, but to ask how such assumptions would intersect with what was already there.
- Local narratives and experiences were different from that of the Riverlands, Sydney proposition, they were less tragic, told of a nurturing and fulfilling world and of personal fulfillment through embodied and social engagement in the area. These did not tell the whole story, but signified that there was already a generative, improvised capability.
- To start to approach the problem of Riverlands, Sydney we would need to know much more, and to build a participatory and collaborative process with the stakeholders. We were not ready to design a process for making (as growth, in Ingold’s sense of the term) Riverlands, Sydney, but we were well placed to develop a methodology for getting to that position.

Our intention extends beyond seeking to propose a specific project. Rather, we present a hypothetical example of what could be the next stage in the design/ethnography methodological process that this article argues for. This approach also aims to avoid the ‘trap of placemaking’. Thus the methodology is not designed to make places for people, but rather to work with them to grow the places they imagine. This move toward an alternative vision of urban spaces is becoming more commonplace as urban planners, city councils and local groups depart from the traditional dichotomy associated with the late capitalist approach of urban reorganisation (Cupers, 2004). Instead, we experience ‘a multitude of (dis)ordering interventions that constitute and transform the urban landscape’ (Cupers, 2004, p. 5). In embracing this approach, we could see urban spaces as places of process. No longer static and immobile, instead they become framed in relation to the continual construction of relations (Massey, 2005).

Our experience of sharing ‘insider’ narratives (Relph, 1976) highlighted the importance of learning from the past and present stories of those people who live in the places we hope will become more sustainable in the future. This approach seeks to engage people, through the notion of the commons, in developing a process that generates places that emerge *from* local knowledge, interests and capacities and which, through their very design, encourage diverse access, negotiation around use, distribution of benefits, joint responsibility and long-term investment in care. This means not arriving with pre-conceptualisations of what will be made and avoiding making the obvious, such as community gardens or skate parks. Rather, the emphasis is placed on developing a process which foregrounds the (perhaps not immediately evident) ways by which value can be added to the existing asset-base. Thus in this argument the proposition of Riverlands, Sydney remains a speculative probe for considering how positive change-making towards improved wellbeing might be played out.

In our aim to ‘design a methodology – not a solution’, our approach offers a way to work with people, rather than a solution to ‘problems’. This means, taking insights from the stories we encountered in our group, which undermine the assumption that the future participants will think there is a problem. Following our commitment to work towards a sustainable Riverlands through existing forms of human improvisation, the methodology we propose is for harnessing human activity in the world to work towards a common sustainable environmental and economic future for Western Sydney.

To achieve this we propose a suite of *methods for imagining the future* that seek to engage the past-present-future relationship as a form of understanding the Riverlands and their ‘problems’ and opportunities. Based on ethnographic, speculative and collaborative principles they therefore involve the researchers/designers going to where those people we wish to involve in this work already are and to engage with them in their localities. This avoids ‘parachuting in’ and would instead create research environments by working with organisations with strong local links, and that are neutral but active, mobile, and invite local participation.

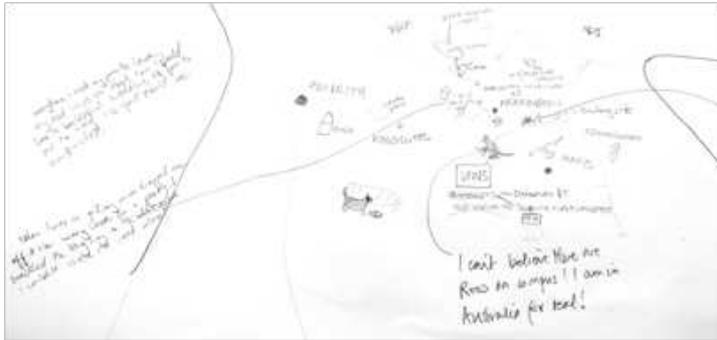


Figure 4: Those of our group who were ‘insiders’ mapped their journeys and movements through Western Sydney, showing us otherwise unrevealed elements of life in the area. This particular map depicts Penrith and surrounds.

Photo: Alison Barnes and Michelle Catanzaro

The insider stories told in our workshop took us through narratives of aspirations, hidden/invisible places, tacit mappings of the world, journeys and movement. They showed us the otherwise unrevealed elements of life in Western Sydney that are not appreciated by narratives that cast the area as a ‘problem’ or ‘tragedy’. They told us of the joys of living there, as well as the need to leave as young people, along with there being a possible later return (with kids). These stories began to build up a consistent image of the forms of wellbeing, and the ways of belonging and wanting to leave, that were part of being from Western Sydney. They demonstrated the need to collaborate with people living in the area, to generate more stories of past and present ways of living and being in Western Sydney, and to use these to invite and document imagined futures for the proposed sites of the commons and what they might be and be called in the future. To do this we developed a hypothetical mobile, multi-sited public art project. Inspired by what was meaningful to those people who loved living in Western Sydney described in the insider stories of our group, and by the kinds of things that typically contribute to a sense of the commons, we developed four themes: sharing, cooking, drawing and planting.



Figure 5: Concept prototype for the *Food for Thought* bus: a mobile, multi-sited public art project.

Photo: Katrina Sandbach

At the centre of our method for generating stories of the past, present and future of Western Sydney would be the *Food for Thought* bus. The bus would be inhabited by an ethnographer and a designer and co-design volunteers, who would be involved in the process of collaboration, and would join the bus during its travel

through the area. The bus would be mobile, open, regularly repainted (like Melbourne graffiti walls). It would be a place where people make food, its sites would become places for planting and trees, and people would invest their stories in it through their cooking, painting, talk or performances. Using the bus as a mobile base, the ethnographer and designer would document images, sounds, performances and live objects that are generated and the stories interwoven in them. The researchers would continuously analyse, determine the patterns, commonalities and differences, and start to understand what is shared, what is known and what is imagined and what excites people. Working in this way we would shift the question of Western Sydney, and what it means, away from being a 'problem' that needs a Riverlands, Sydney to be its design solution. Instead we would reconfigure it as an ongoing co-design opportunity in which project participants would become co-designers of what happens next, and reflective and critical reviewers of any process that we proposed.



Figure 6: Food for Thought media pack: The bus can facilitate co-design processes – for example, by asking users to respond to a 'thought of a day' related to the project in material (e.g. postcards above) and digital (e.g. social media) form.

Photo: Katrina Sandbach

In creating a material, sensory and tactile world around the *Food for Thought* bus, we also propose forms of digital presence and engagement. The bus and its movement through the area would not only be local, but also virtual and connected to wider narratives, stories and collaborations. The digital presence would tell the story of the bus, as our main character who moves through the environment, beginning its story at an event where it is named by children we have connected with through local organisations. Using digital mapping and social media, the bus will be traced online. It will connect digitally to the activities and shared aims of partner organisations and engage wider communities in its work, while also reporting in a responsible and ethical way on the findings of the research and design process. The online presence of the bus would also enable broader participation through the digital exchange of stories and imagined futures. As such the local narratives would be connected through the journey of the bus, creating a larger narrative of the region.

The *Food for Thought* bus is the starting point in the journey in our design/ethnography research process. It is a participatory method through which the local population can be engaged, by joining them in the material and online localities they already inhabit. It is not a 'solution' to the problem of Western Sydney and it is not a process that will lead to the prototyping of Riverlands, Sydney. Instead it is an investigation that poses the commons of Riverlands, Sydney as a probe and asks what Western Sydney has been, is, and could be. This, we argue is where research and design processes need to start. That is, through a careful dialogue between what is imagined by different stakeholders; by an interrogation of what an 'insider' perspective may reveal about the otherwise hidden; and by creating a participatory process that attends to local narratives and seeks to foreground the unspoken ways of being that are fundamental to wellbeing.

Engaging with intervention: Some conclusions

We have outlined an approach to confronting a supposed 'problem' – that of reimagining as 'Riverlands, Sydney'

the 'tragedy' of the commons of Western Sydney (Australia), or as it was posed to be used in the original design brief, 'diminishment of shared life resources – often referred to as 'the tragedy of the commons' (op cit.). By building upon emerging modes of interdisciplinary practice, and specifically meshing together approaches typical to applied anthropology (Pink, 2005; 2007) and design, we have turned this brief around to interrogate the problem statement. This has allowed us to check the validity and the embedded assumptions underpinning it. The information we gathered, though not substantial enough to make a claim, pointed to the 'problem' of Western Sydney as one that is, at least in part, generated by outsiders who seek change. Insider perspectives shared with us provided an equally important voice that foregrounded a different and more positive perspective.

Dealing with multiple stakeholders and varying perspectives in regeneration projects is nothing new. Our interest is not in reviewing how such challenges are usually confronted in policy and community development settings. Rather, we have focused on how an interdisciplinary anthropological ethnography and design process can confront the brief. Our collaboration allowed us to reveal local knowledge to interrogate the problem and identify how and by whom it has been constructed; reveal hidden realities and opportunities; and imagine locally relevant and effective futures that cultivate wellbeing. We have proposed a set of methodologies informed by design and ethnography and highlighted a further need to develop new interdisciplinary and multi-stakeholder tactics that can support better futures for communities. In an environment where such disciplines are increasingly being required to, and indeed seeking to, engage with intervention, public engagement and policy projects, we argue that new models for working and collaborating across these spaces are needed.

Footnotes

1. *Amica* in Italian means female friend or companion.

List of figures

Figure 1 (1977) Photo taken by Margaret Catanzaro

Figure 2 (2014) Photo taken by Michelle Catanzaro

Figure 3 (2014) Photo taken by Michelle Catanzaro

Figure 4 (2014) Mapping Project as a result of ICD workshop by Alison Barnes and Michelle Catanzaro

Figure 5 (2014) Bus prototype begun at ICD workshop and further developed for publication by Katrina Sandbach (original bus decal design applied over Royalty-Free image ©iStock/NoDerog)

Figure 6 (2014) Media pack prototype begun at ICD workshop and further developed for publication by Katrina Sandbach

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