The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking

Cara Courage, Tom Borrup, Maria Rosario Jackson, Kylie Legge, Anita McKeown, Louise Platt, Jason Schupbach

More than a mural

Publication details


Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek

Published online on: 31 Dec 2020

How to cite :- Samantha Edwards-Vandenhoek. 31 Dec 2020, More than a mural from: The Routledge Handbook of Placemaking Routledge

Accessed on: 17 Oct 2023


PLEASE SCROLL DOWN FOR DOCUMENT

Full terms and conditions of use: https://www.routledgehandbooks.com/legal-notices/terms

This Document PDF may be used for research, teaching and private study purposes. Any substantial or systematic reproductions, re-distribution, re-selling, loan or sub-licensing, systematic supply or distribution in any form to anyone is expressly forbidden.

The publisher does not give any warranty express or implied or make any representation that the contents will be complete or accurate or up to date. The publisher shall not be liable for an loss, actions, claims, proceedings, demand or costs or damages whatsoever or howsoever caused arising directly or indirectly in connection with or arising out of the use of this material.
My journey to Gija Country began in the hot and sticky coastal town of Broome, over 3,000 kilometres from my home in Melbourne. As a middle-class woman of Celtic-European heritage and privilege, the material and psychological scars of the legacies of invasion, colonisation, dispossession set against the rugged and formidable backdrop of the Kimberley region’s spectacular geological formations, afforded a challenging and confronting visual landscape that called into question my sense of belonging, cultural identity, and place, well before I reached my final destination.

I am deeply indebted to the Gija Elders and their families for their support and guidance. This project would not have been possible without the endorsement of the Gija community and its project partners: Warmun Arts, Muralist Tom Sevil (aka Civil), Warmun Council Inc. and the Warmun Indigenous Justice Program, Gija Rangers, Purnululu School, Ngalangangpum School, Former Principal Leanne Hodge and teacher Cimony Vanderpol, Warmun Arts Assistant Manager and Curator Alana Hunt, Community Programs Coordinator Anna Crane, and Linguist Frances Kofod. Special thanks to Rusty Peters, Morris Peters, Desma Juli, Imran Daylight, Nancy Daylight, Andrew Mung, and Terry Mosquito for their contributions and guidance with regard to the location, design, and cultural appropriateness of public artworks. This project acknowledges the traditional custodians of the land on which this research has been conducted, the Gija people, Elders past and present, and the unique diversity of the Indigenous community in the Kimberley region. Despite the lack of constitutional recognition, this project recognises the sovereignty of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. This research is grounded in protecting, recognising, and acknowledging the continuing Indigenous ownership of the traditional knowledge, cultural expressions, and intellectual property rights of its participants (AIATSIS 2012). This project has been funded by Swinburne University of Technology and approved by Swinburne’s Human Research Ethics Committee in line with the National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Human Research.

Introduction

Warmun is an Aboriginal community in the East Kimberley region of Western Australia. The town is built on Turkey Creek which flows into the Ord River near Kununurra, a major service town close to the Northern Territory border. The main languages spoken are Gija, English, and
Kimberley Kriol. From the 1880s, Gija people were put to work by European farmers who came to exploit natural resources and run cattle on their traditional lands. This marked the beginning of the traumatic spiritual and social displacement of Gija people, the loss of their homelands and their cultural practices (Pelusey and Pelusey, 2006). In the 1960s changes to Government laws meant that the pastoralists were required to pay Indigenous people the same as non-Indigenous workers. Turkey Creek was established in the 1970s after Gija people were moved off surrounding cattle stations when some pastoralists refused to abide by these laws. Gija people renamed Turkey Creek ‘Warramun’ after the Ngarranggarni (dreaming story) of Warrarnany (wedge-tailed eagle) (Kofod, 2016). For the Gija people, the Ngarranggarni explains how things came to be and are continually occurring and ever-present. It is a way of being and knowing that explains and defines social structures, complex kinship systems, language, law, mythologies, creative expression, and place-based relations (Kofod, 2016). Today, the community comprises nearly 100 homes, a school, health clinic, police station, roadhouse, recreation centre, community store, sporting ground, and the internationally celebrated Gija-owned Warmun Art Centre, who partnered on this research.

This chapter reveals a placemaking initiative, known locally as Art in the Streets of Warmun, centred on how the Gija community could reassert a positive relationship with their environment through the reclamation and visual activation of public spaces in the wake of the 2011 flood that ravaged the township and Government-led rebuild. The broader research examines the role of socially inclusive participatory public art in community building and healing, shaping new spatial encounters that foster belonging, trauma recovery and pride, cultural continuity and renewal. It rests on the premise that First Nations identities can be embedded in public art and architecture, enabling people to realise their stories and power and challenge-imposed structures, systems, and processes through assertions of cultural identity and connections to place (see also Edmonds, 2012).

Written five years on, this discursive chapter reflects on the outcomes, learnings, and challenges associated with the participatory placemaking processes employed. As a settler-colonial researcher, my understanding of what we did together has evolved and deepened as a result of the enduring relationships I have developed with the Gija community through subsequent collaborative creative endeavours. This project created a unique space when Indigenous and non-Indigenous worldviews, cultures, lived experiences, knowledge traditions, and placemaking practices came together, with often unplanned and serendipitous outcomes, impacts, and insights.

Through the ‘doing’ of this project, Art in the Streets of Warmun became less about ‘placemaking’ and more about understanding the interconnected relationship the Gija people have to place – what is known as ‘Country’ to Australia’s First Nations peoples and translates as ‘Daam’ in the Gija language. There are over 500 Indigenous clan groups or nations around the Australian continent, with distinctive cultures, beliefs, and languages. As a grammatical convention, the use
of a capital ‘C’ in ‘Country’ is intentional, as it makes reference to a specific nation, (e.g. Canada), or in this case, Gija Country. It also distinguishes the term and its embedded associations from Eurocentric perceptions of country, place, and land to be unpacked in the following section. This chapter seeks to contribute to understandings of the complex, problematic, and locally nuanced discussions around placemaking connected to place-related meanings in First Nations community development, as there was indeed no ‘place’ to be ‘made’ here, but rather enacted, reinforced, and made visible.

**Berrema daam ngarag noonamenke ngagenybe daam**

Placemaking is ‘the set of social, political and material processes by which people iteratively create and recreate the experienced geographies in which they live’ (Pierce et al., 2011, p. 54). It can also be understood as a process of reimagining the use and character of physical environments and structures, for example, and the focus of this chapter, public art, as well as, for example, market gardens, pop-up spaces, walking paths, that are more responsive to their inhabitant’s cultural, emotional, spiritual, and social needs (Hazen, 2013). The goal of placemaking, understood thus, is to bring about some form of change or transformation in which the focus rests on the skills, cultural traditions, knowledge, and aspirations of the community of interest (Hung et al., 2006).

*Art in the Streets of Warmun* was not about imposing urban settler-colonial placemaking practices and processes on the Gija community. Working within a relational knowledge framework which centralises Indigenous voices, narratives, and perspectives, this project sought to understand what place, placemaking, and public art meant to the Gija people of Warmun:

> Gija people have lived in the lands around Warmun since the Ngarranggarni, or creation time, when spiritual beings roamed the land and created everything in it. Their Country contains traditional hunting grounds, ceremonial sites and resting place of their ancestors, who embody the past and define the future. (Government of Western Australia 2011 p. 11)

Archaeologists have confirmed that Aboriginal people have occupied and thrived in the Kimberley region for 60–80,000 years. It was not until 3 June 1992, that the High Court of Australia announced its decision to overturn the legal doctrine of ‘terra nullius,’ meaning ‘legally unoccupied,’ the term applied by the British to land ownership of Australia, providing significant insight into the attitude of the denial of Aboriginal occupation and, by extension, the consequences enforced placelessness have had on the livelihoods, health, and wellbeing of the fundamentally place-based, sustainable, and state-free social order of Australia’s First Nations peoples (Havenmann, 2005).

Gija Country encompasses impressive geographical formations, including Purnululu National Park, and is the site of the Daiwul (Barramundi) Ngarranggarni, currently Rio Tinto’s Argyle Diamond Mine. However, as Deborah Rose (1996, p. 7) explains, ‘Country’ does not just mean the creeks, hills, rock formations, and waterholes. ‘Country is multi-dimensional’. It consists of people, plants and animals. It also embraces the seasons, dreaming stories, and creation spirits. ‘People talk about country in the same way that they would talk about a person: they speak to country, sing to country, visit country, worry about country, feel sorry for country and long for country’ (Rose, 1996, p.7). In Aboriginal mythopoeia, ‘an understanding of the relationship between an ancestor and a place – developed through learning verbal and graphic stories, songs and dances – is necessary before one can read an ancestor in a place’ (Fantin, 2003, n.p.). Indigenous placemaking is understood thus as a form of land stewardship and learned and lived
psychogeography, also known as ‘Caring for Country’ by Australia’s First Nations peoples. In contrast non-Indigenous people often see land as something they own, a commodity to be bought and sold, an asset to make profit from (such as the Argyle diamond mine), a living off it, or a ‘home.’ However, for Aboriginal people the relationship is much deeper. Connection to Country is central to maintaining health and wellbeing (of both Country and community), cultural life, ‘individual autonomy and Indigenous sovereignty’ (Ganesharajah, 2009, p. 6). Even today, the pivotal role ‘caring for Country’ plays in the lives of Indigenous people and communities cannot be underestimated. In Australia’s First Nations cultures, identity and Country is inextricably and externally linked to the Ngarranggarni (in the case of the Gija people) of that place. Moreover, within an Indigenous framework, knowledge is also situated, dynamic, shared, and alive and mirrors the symbiotic and equitable relationship between ‘individuals, communities, generations, the physical environment, and other living creatures’ (Mann, 1997, cited in Kennedy, 2015, p. 28; see also Chow, 1995). This sits in stark contrast to Euro-Western knowledge frameworks grounded in empirical positivism. Accessing, harnessing, and honouring this interconnectedness was requisite to the participatory placemaking processes of Art in the Streets of Warmun.

Sadly, the denials and whitewashing of Indigenous land stewardship practices and forced removal of people from their homelands and families is ongoing. There was minimal consultation between the Government of Western Australia and the Gija community in terms of the design, suitability, and location of new homes after the 2011 flood. Despite Indigenous and non-Indigenous protest in April 2014 (around the time of my first visit to Warmun), the Western Australian Government decided that it may no longer accept responsibility for the provision of municipal services to remote Aboriginal communities (Harrison, 2014). Art in the Streets of Warmun afforded a timely and politically charged ‘on-Country’ intervention for people living on their homelands, enabling Gija residents to publicly reassert their connection to Country through the highly visible reclamation of their streets via public art. Along the Kimberley’s Great Northern Highway, protest banners with powerful slogans were hung from trees, serving as reminders that, despite the apparent invisibility and perceived remoteness of some Indigenous communities, ‘this is [our] home’; ‘money is nothing, Country is everything’ and ‘living on Country is not a lifestyle choice.’

Prior to the commencement of the project, a Gija language workshop was held at Warmun Art Centre with artists, linguists, and artworkers to consider and develop Gija phrases and expressions to understand and describe what art ‘outside’ means, how it translates, and how it is connected to the Gija experience of ‘daam,’ and informs the project’s intentions, outcomes, and locations. Through participating in this process (rather than reading about it in textbooks), I came to understand that Gija identity, culture, and creative expression is ‘not separate from external forces and influences and architecture is one of those influences’ (Fantin, 2003, n.p.). The language developed to describe Art in the Streets of Warmun mirrored this interconnectedness – Berrema daam ngarag noonamenke ngagenybe daam, which translates as ‘This my Country, I’m painting here.’ Reminiscent of a deictic expression, ‘I’m painting here’, is literally said, while pointing to a specific ‘place,’ surface, or place in time (e.g. creation time). Significantly, the Gija expression for painting on canvas and painting on buildings is interchangeable; in Gija culture, all forms of creativity and the making of artworks (e.g. printmaking, photography, pasted-up paper art with wheat paste glue, known as paste ups, and murals) are considered to be the caring, making (e.g. painting, drawing), celebration, and re-enactment of Gija narratives, traditions, Ngarranggarni, as well as specific sites and geographic formations.

The guiding principle of the participatory framework I worked with was one of decolonisation, ‘a process of conducting research in such a way that the world views of those who have suffered a long history of oppression, trauma and marginalisation are given space to communicate from their frames of reference’ (Chilisa, 2012, p. 23). This project also drew upon the long-
standing legacy of Community Based Participatory Action Research (CBPAR) (Kendall et al., 2011; Ritchie et al., 2013; Lucero 2013; Wallerstein and Duran, 2006), especially Transformative Participatory Action Research (TPAR), as introduced by Bagele Chilisa (2012), as prioritising self-determination, social and personal transformation and emancipation, and encouraging participants to become engaged citizens through developing a sense of individual and shared accountability for their decisions and outcomes. Crucially, TPAR affords a means whereby the focus of the research originates in the community and the problem (such as legacies of the rebuild) is defined, analysed, and resolved by the community.

The challenge I faced was providing the space to build the trust required to initiate these kinds of intimate exchanges and community-led processes given the project’s restricted time frame. By chance, I drove into Warmun in a bright-yellow hire car. Clearly, no one was going to miss me. What had been an initial source of embarrassment (for me) turned out to be a means of connecting with people. The car became an identifier, a conversation starter, and the butt of many jokes (e.g. Uber/taxi service.). It was only then that people started to open up to me. Time was spent ‘going for a cruise’ with old people, young folk, and artworkers handing out and putting up posters, providing opportunities to assess and photograph potential locations that could be documented and discussed in the planning sessions. Through ‘cruising,’ I learned that official street signs (as locators) were largely redundant, as were roads. The community divided itself into six distinct camps, known as ‘Top Camp,’ ‘Garden Area,’ ‘Middle Camp,’ ‘Big Bottom Camp’ (circular cul-de-sac), ‘Little Bottom Camp’ (smaller circular cul-de-sac), ‘Overflow,’ and ‘Other Side’ (of the creek). This kind of counter-normative relational spatial awareness defined the playful and political physical dynamic of Warmun and played a central role in the assessment and location of public art outcomes. Passengers would point out sites of cultural significance, Ngarranggarni, ‘sorry business,’ and massacres. Much to the amusement of my travelling companions, cruising involved numerous ‘cut-throughs,’ ‘side-tracks,’ and ‘short cuts’ that meant going literally off the ‘colonial’ road, and onto the red dirt of Gija Country. I found you could traverse the entire township (on both sides of Turkey Creek) without touching bitumen. This kind of transgression correlates to the notion that Country is experienced physically and is deeply rooted to belonging and wellbeing. Much like official street names, the bitumen is a barrier to the way that place and home is sensed and experienced by the Gija people.

With funding secured, the project was framed, planned, and enacted over a period of six months in the 2015 dry season (March to August). Climate (temperature and conditions) played a critical role in the timing of the project. A staged approach with more ‘formal’ meetings at the Art Centre or Rec Shed (as well as ‘cruising’, which involved picking up and dropping people home) was taken to understand and incorporate the voices, interests, aspirations, priorities, and cultural knowledge of the people who would drive the form and content of the outcomes. Elders, senior artists, artworkers, schoolteachers, and Gija linguists were brought in as guides to facilitate the process. Tom Civil, a Melbourne-based street artist who had developed ongoing relationships with the art centre and with Elders and their families, was commissioned to instruct and oversee the making of large-scale mural-based artworks.

**Art in the Streets of Warmun**

This section outlines the activities that shaped the substance of *Art in the Streets of Warmun* as it unfolded. This is because the working processes and visual outcomes can be better understood as critical spatio-temporal junctures of conversation, negotiation, exchange, collaboration, and co-creation to reveal new knowledge about Indigenous approaches to placemaking. High-school students were responsible for the first large-scale public art installation in Middle Camp
More than a mural

that heralded the start of *Art in the Streets of Warmun* in July 2015. It was hoped that this installation would generate broader community interest in the project and give young people the chance to make their mark on the spaces and surfaces where they spent time together would, over time, generate a sense of respect, ownership and self-empowerment. Affixed to the handball wall in front of the recreation centre, this artwork took the form of a large-scale ‘paste-up’ (3m × 3m) of digitally produced self-portraits which comprised graphic silhouettes of the student’s profiles filled with photographic images of textures taken from the surrounding bushlands. The digital files were emailed to Melbourne, assembled, printed, and brought back in my hand luggage. It resulted in a striking and contemporary visual exposé exploring the interconnectedness of identity and place, while disguising the identity of each person represented. It also covered up a proliferation of tags and faded scribbles on the concrete handball wall. Students commented on how they felt pride seeing their artworks publicly displayed, without feeling exposed and at risk of being tagged over or defaced by their peers.

The Indigenous research method of yarning (also referred to as a ‘yarning circle’) at the recreation centre (affectionately known as the ‘Rec Shed’) in Middle Camp provided a space for Elders, artists, artworkers, and interested community members to gather, drink nalaga (tea), contest styles, thematic and potential location of public artworks. As described by Melissa Walker, ‘yarning is a conversational process that involves the telling and sharing of stories and information. Yarning is culturally ascribed and cooperative; yarns follow language protocols and result in some acquisition of new meaning,’ insights, and knowledge (Walker et al., 2014, p. 1217). Each morning, I would set up a number of chairs in a loose circle in the open-air interior expanse, put the urn on to boil, layout large tin camp-style cups, open a packet of biscuits, and wait. People would visit, stay for a yarn, and leave, then return the following day to talk through ideas or to paint. Specific meeting times were set in keeping with prevailing temperatures when decisions (about what to paint, where, how, and why) were required. In these yarning circles valuable conversations took place around visual expression, communication modes, appropriate acknowledgements of Country, and reinterpretation of images from rock art sites, paintings, and Ngarranggarni. In line with the participatory methodology, the decision-making processes were deliberative, ongoing, and shared. A3 printouts of photos taken of buildings and potential surfaces were used to stimulate discussion and to sketch out and share ideas. The idea of painting a colourful interactive path in the shape of the rainbow serpent (a recurring figure in Aboriginal mythopoeia) on the concrete floor of the Rec Shed came out of a discussion about how to encourage young people to utilise the space. It stemmed from the idea of painting the game of ‘hopscotch,’ naively put forward by myself, and quickly squashed with much laughter because, as I was told, ‘black fellas don’t play hopscotch.’

After much deliberation and reconnaissance, the Rec Shed’s spaces, structures, and surfaces were chosen for the enactment of this initiative as part of a broader strategic redevelopment plan to reactivate youth areas in Warmun. The building itself and surrounding toilet blocks, gym, canteen, basketball court, handball wall, fences, boulders, road signs, poles, and paths were covered in a proliferation of typographic inscriptions comprising long lists of first names, family names, and crew names (e.g. ‘Roo Boy’s’, ‘Sisters 4 Life’), doodles, rude words, and slang codes, some of which predated the 2011 flood. I learned that, much like Western forms of ‘tagging,’ this kind of naming graffiti was not well regarded by the community, and that Elders, in particular, frowned upon it. However, for young people, rather than disconnection and isolation, these illicit writings evidenced strong family bonds, skin and kinship ties, and place-based connections and belongings, as well as boredom, disenfranchisement, and frustration. Despite this, the Warmun Council hoped to encourage young people to more creatively and caringly engage with these spaces and surfaces. The Rec Shed was also chosen because of its scale and significance as a
central gathering place (in Middle camp) and site of communal performance, celebration, and play, as well as its high visibility to residents and the visiting public; however, budget and time constraints also played a role. By focusing on one central location, efforts could be consolidated, and the visual impact of public art outcomes maximised.

**Garnkiny**

The production of the ‘Garnkiny’ (Moon Dreaming) mural developed organically from a conversation that unfolded over several days with Rusty Peters, one of Warmun’s senior artists. Pointing to the sky with his walking stick and then to the interior open-air corrugated expanse of the Rec Shed, where movies are screened at night, Rusty suggested creating a mural based on recurring cosmic imagery in his own paintings – the Milky Way. Rusty’s paintings recreate ‘Garnkiny,’ a moral tale of forbidden love (wrong skin) from his father and grandmother’s Country where he was born on Springvale Station (Peters, n.d.). Working with Rusty, we began by creating a miniature version of the proposed mural on paper. Rusty instructed us (Desma Juli, Nancy Daylight, Tom Civil, and me) in the technique he used to create the stars, guiding, pointing, and directing. Involving Desma was essential; as Rusty’s granddaughter she has permission to translate the story and re-enact the visual expression of it. The completed mural blurred ontological, astronomical, and cultural distinctions and insider and outsider relations in its collaborative undertaking to realise a shared vision of our galaxy, extending across a narrow strip of corrugated iron around two internal shed faces, with the crescent moon and blur of the Milky Way forming the centrepiece.

**Always was, always will be Aboriginal land**

Conscious that it may have appeared a cliché or cursory choice or even an unwelcome political sign, considerable time and community consultation went into making an informed decision to paint a 4m × 4m reproduction of the Aboriginal flag on the rear wall of the Rec Shed that faced the main entrance to the town. Fran Edmonds (2012) has suggested that ‘murals provide alternative approaches for Aboriginal people … to assert their Aboriginality and provide a visual language for “re-membering” history from an Aboriginal perspective’ (p. 21). A painting of the Aboriginal flag can then be understood as a way of performing this kind of re-membering. It also makes a clear and recognisable statement about land rights and unseeded sovereignty of Australia’s First Nations peoples to outsiders, service providers, and tourists visiting the Warmun Art Centre. During such a politically charged time, in the midst of proposed Government forced closures, the flag was (and is) not only a powerful symbol of cultural pride that enables Indigenous communities to realise their stories as assertions of identity and connections to place, but also supports a ‘rhetoric of difference’ (Edmonds, 2012). It also serves as a reminder that this country has a rich history that precedes European colonisation. Its large scale and uniform shapes and colours meant that people of all ages could be involved in its painting, allowing a broader spectrum of Warmun youth to be engaged, with school buses bringing in kids of all ages from Frog Hollow community (20 minutes down the Great Northern Highway) to assist in its production.

**Warrarnany Gooningarrim-Noongoo**

With the smaller murals completed, the focus shifted to the 15m corrugated expanse of the Rec Shed – the largest, longest, and most visible public space in Warmun. Consideration was given to the reproduction of iconic paintings incorporating the visual styles of senior Gija artists. Considering the centrality and size of this interface, the planning committee wanted to ensure that the mural was not just participatory in its making, but also in its communication. Consequently, the Gija Ngarranggarni, Warrarnany Gooningarrim-Noongoo (wedge-tailed
More than a mural

eagle and crow dreaming), which speaks to how Warmun came to be, was chosen. The wedge-tailed eagle is also the mascot of the Warmun Eagles, the much revered Warmun football team, and remains a cultural force and binding figure in everyday Gija life.

The main challenge was deciding which parts of this complex and multi-layered Ngarranggarni of Eagle Hawk and Crow, who were once human in form and husband and wife, were to be communicated without losing its core messages. In Katie Cox’s powerful retelling on canvas,

Eagle Hawk asked Crow to help him make spearheads to hunt kangaroo, but she was a lazy woman and said ‘No.’ Eagle Hawk built a fire for cooking, then went hunting and brought back a kangaroo to the camp. He found Crow still sleeping. He was proper angry and put hot rocks in her eyes and burnt her all over with the coals from the fire. They turned into birds and live in the trees at the top of the hills behind Warmun. The white band of quartz in the hillside is their campfire – and this is why the crow is black with white circles in her eyes.

(Cox, n.d.)

A narrative-based style that focused on key elements and visual references (e.g. hills, kangaroo, eagle, and crow) was agreed upon. Knowledge-holders led the interpretation of the narrative in mural form with extracts of the written text in Gija language that points to the three main characters. The chosen text reads Moolarriji thoorroob wananyjinde jiyirrem miyalgaleny! (He’s the best hunter, he never misses a kangaroo – Number one hunter!); Danya garayi wiyinji miyaleboorroo biyaya wiyinji (He’s flying around, looking for meat); Ngeleli Wanggarnal, Ngajigal-Noongoo (This is the crow; she is his sister) and Jiyirriny Nginiyin Goorrngam-Boorroo roord nginji yilag (The kangaroo has come for water and he is sitting down there). Linguists, Elders, Gija Rangers, and local community members were central to its production. Tom Civil utilised a digital projector at night to trace out the location of the text and placement of key elements. The final outcome was impressive, immediate, aesthetically pleasing, and responsive to its scale and location, as it faces the hills behind Warmun with a depiction of the Eagle flying over the town. The constant re-experiencing of this mural on a daily basis by people walking, riding, or cruising by has provided a way to remind and reinforce the importance of its motifs and messages over time, instilling feelings of happiness and pride to those who experience it on a daily basis, and by visiting Gija community (from surrounding outstations, such as Bow River) who come to play or support the Warmun Eagles or Bow River Blues. It has also prompted conversations with tourists about its meanings and ongoing significance. The inclusion of exerts of the narrative in Gija in such a prominent location affirms the centrality of language to Gija life. In these ways, it is much more than a mural.

A place of reconciliation, a reconciliation of place

Thank you for asking permission. Thank you for listening to us. No-one has come here and done that before.

(Terry Mosquito)

A community barbeque was held at the Rec Shed before Tom and I left Warmun, providing an opportunity to celebrate, yarn, and reflect on the outcomes and our collective experiences. From the outset it was made clear to us that this had been the first time the community had been given the opportunity to participate in and direct a project that impacted on their own lives and livelihoods. Terry Mosquito’s feedback spoke to the unforeseen negative and positive effects of divergent and oppositional modes of placemaking practice. The Government had come in after the flood and made decisions on the community’s behalf concerning the rebuild;
Art in the Streets of Warmun had enabled local residents to reclaim their community and buildings and make more visible their rights and place-based connections via street art, transgressing top-down government decision-making. Gija residents commented that they felt the murals made their community look beautiful and that this enhanced their experience of their own public spaces. Residents expressed satisfaction and pride in the positive image the murals projected of Warmun to people visiting the community for work or social reasons and to service providers. In this respect, the project enhanced a sense of community, building resilience, pride, and place. Such large-scale collaborative works had not been attempted in Warmun before, opening up the possibility of further projects exploring the transformation of public space (Personal communication with Anna Crane, 25 August 2015). Five years later, the Rec Shed remains a highly activated space. The large-scale murals have become popular locations for selfies and family portraits that are circulated widely via personal social media networks. Crucially, the painted murals remain undefaced, except for one micro penis symbol on the body of the eagle, which was quickly painted over:

Today places like the Kimberley are rich with creative projects bringing together methods historically linked to anthropology and social research with those from the domains of arts and community development, engaging diverse groupings of collaborators to facilitating the telling of local stories and furthering a range of social and political agendas. (Havilland, 2016, p. 44)

Looking back, Art in the Streets of Warmun went onto develop a life of its own in ways that were unforeseen or predicted. In 2016, Ngalangangpum School students transformed the handball court into a rotating gallery of ephemeral paste-up art. I was invited back to the school to instigate a place-based design education program, providing opportunities for high-school students to explore the connection between culture, art, design, media, and sustainable local employment (Edwards-Vandenhoek, 2018). In 2016, Warmun Council secured Western Australia Government funding to instigate a community-led wayfinding project to replace existing and irrelevant public signage. Tom Civil returned to Warmun in 2017 to work with artworkers and families of senior artists to reproduce their artworks on the newly opened aged care facility. In 2018, I was engaged by the Warmun Art Centre Board to co-produce two collaborative community films focused on the revitalisation of language and archiving of stories connected to the practice of ochre extraction, production, and use for the Western Australian Museum.

Conclusion

Art in the Streets of Warmun sought to understand how place, placemaking, ‘art outside,’ and, by extension, meaning-making, is understood and enacted by the Gija people of Warmun. As I would slowly come to understand, to Australia’s First Nations peoples, the landscape is the source of their identity – inseparable to place. Connectedness to Country permeates all facets and layers of Gija life – from the Ngarranggarni, law, familial relations, and creative expression, to cruising, drinking nalaja, and watching football. As a problematisation of placemaking, Art in the Streets of Warmun was an act of decolonisation, a conscious attempt to destabilise power relations connected to race, identity, and land, and prioritise Gija culture, values, and place-based meanings. It afforded a space where relations between participants, operating systems, methodological processes, knowledge systems, and places could be reimagined. Contributing to Indigenous perspectives on placemaking, surfaces were transformed into access points and conduits to hidden
More than a mural

meanings, new knowledge, and deeper relationships. Questioning settler-colonial practices of placemaking and its effect on claims for land ownership, coupled with the knowledge that no formal treaties are in place with Australia’s first peoples, this research also highlights the deeply troubling nature of attempts to ‘make’ place on lands (urban, regional, or bush) that have, in effect, been stolen from Australia’s First Nation’s people.

Contributing to more just Indigenous–settler relations, *Art in the Streets of Warmun* demonstrated that as an outsider and an ally, it is possible to develop relationships and provide resources that can be utilised by individuals and communities in ways that allow them to draw from their own spiritual references and cultural practices (i.e. caring for Country) to add value their own lives. Its enactment required attending too, listening, taking time and care; accepting that not everyone wanted to be involved; respecting internal conflicts and tensions (tags vs. murals); and creating unexpected spaces (like a yellow car) for dialogue. As intimated by Lucero (2013), building trust was paramount to all endeavours. Often, it was in the space between what I thought I should be doing and what I was doing that people revealed information (e.g. side-tracks and cut-throughs) and stories that formed the substance of *Art in the Streets of Warmun*. Crucially, this process involved understanding that Indigenous knowledge and placemaking research is an ‘engagement within a field of powerful and often hidden cultural, environmental, historical and social relations’ (Sheehan and Walker, 2001, p. 14; see also Maddison, 2020). There are registers of relationality that I may never truly comprehend as a non-Indigenous person.

A recent independent report by the Australian Human Rights Commission highlighted the continued failure of the Commonwealth of Australia’s ‘Closing the Gap Strategy’ to address Indigenous disadvantages and noted that the most successful attempts to improve health, education, and socio-economic outcomes for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have taken place at the local and grassroots level (Holland, 2018; Hunt, 2013; see also Behrendt et al., 2012). Key to the success of these endeavours has been the centralisation of culture and language and ‘the formation of relationships between community leaders and trusted outsiders, and the shared understanding and new knowledge they derive’ (Moran, 2016, n.p.). While imperfect, hard to fully articulate, and small scale, I believe that this project’s decolonising mindset and attempts to honour it through our actions – shifting power relations, promoting cultural revitalisation and development plans – provided a space for Gija people to shape and assert their own identities while realising forms of collective agency. *Art in the Streets of Warmun* speaks to the power of Indigenous approaches to placemaking in supporting healing, reciprocity, and knowledge acquisition, leading to more socially resilient and autonomous local First Nations communities.

References


More than a mural


Further reading in this volume

Chapter 1: Introduction: what really matters – moving placemaking into a new epoch
   Cara Courage

Chapter 4: A future of creative placemaking
   Sarah Calderon and Erik Takeshita

Preface: ‘Disastrous forces, accidental actions, and grassroots responses’
   Tom Borrup

Chapter 8: Queer placemaking, settler colonial time, and the desert imaginary in Palm Springs
   Xander Lenc

Chapter 13: Sensing our streets: involving children in making people-centred smart cities
   Sean Peacock, Aare Puussaar, and Clara Crivellaro

   Martin Zebracki

Preface: The radical potential of placemaking
   Cara Courage

Chapter 22: Embedded Artist Project: Epistemic Disobedience + Place
   Frances Whitehead

Chapter 31: Seven generations: a role for artists in Zuni PlaceKnowing
   Theodore S. Jajola and Michaela P Shirley

Chapter 32: The Hollywood Forest Story: Placemaking for the Symbiocene
   Cathy Fitzgerald

Chapter 35: Planning governance: lessons for the integration of placemaking
   Nigel Smith

Chapter 36: Facilitator skills for effective collaborative placemaking
   Husam AlWaer and Ian Cooper

Chapter 37: The Neighbourhood Project: a case study on community-led placemaking by CoDesign Studio
   Lucinda Hartley, Eliza Charley, Sana Choudhury, and Harriet McKindlay

Chapter 40: Transforming community development through arts and culture: a developmental approach to documentation and research
   Victor Rubin

Chapter 41: Rituals of regard: on festivals, folks, and findings of social impact
   Maribel Alvarez

Chapter 45: How the city speaks to us and how we speak back: rewriting the relationship between people and place
   Rosanna Vitiello and Marcus Willcocks

181