



## SHIFTING GROUND:

### *Negotiating Values in a Gentrifying Community*

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My presentation is about Fremantle in Western Australia. This is the land of the Nyoongar people of the South West of Australia and I wish to acknowledge their ownership of the area they know as Wal-y-up. If not for their care and stewardship over generations I would not be in a position to raise questions about what it means to live in this place or to call it my 'home'. This paper outlines work I've been doing for the past two and half years funded by a Fellowship from the Community Cultural Development Board of the Australia Council.

There's a research process, which you'd probably describe as action research, which entailed

- lengthy face-to-face interviews with about 50 people from across the community
- a series of articles in the local paper over the last three months outlining the sorts of issues people raised in the interviews and inviting readers' responses,
- an exhibition of work by eight visual artists which I curated exploring their relationship with Fremantle which was exhibited in a heritage gallery space during the Fremantle Festival
- and a series of public discussions or 'Community Conversations' which I facilitated in the exhibition space during the exhibition

From all this there are (or will be!) findings and recommendations. In fact, it may be that what I describe today offers something to other gentrifying or seachange communities to assist with the extraordinary challenge of negotiating values in a rapidly changing community.

But most of all this is the story of me searching for a way to live lovingly and in my skin in Fremantle, which has been my chosen home for the most part of 30 years. Because four and half years ago I found myself feeling very disconnected from my community. I had lost the desire to participate in local things after years as an active contributor both professionally and in a voluntary capacity. In particular, I felt silenced in the face of what was passing for public debate.

It seemed to me that the letters' pages of our local papers, the articles in those papers and the approaches people were taking to campaigns for local causes or local elections, reflected fear, anger and division that was expressed through an obsession with single issues, with people holding hard and fast views and a tendency to mark anyone with alternate views as the enemy. Debate looked to me more like repetitious argument, and frequently with a nasty personal bent.

I couldn't see how to contribute in this environment.

How adding one more opinion on various matters was going to do more than raise the noise level in the already-cacophonous letters' pages?

How to offer ideas or venture opinions in the hope of meaningful exchange with others?

How to set single issues in the context of larger questions about Fremantle?

How to put forward musings that were not hard and fast positions but suggestions that required shared creative thinking to become possible solutions?

I didn't want to go to public consultation meetings which result in Council's consultants threatening to sue local campaigners, as happened once. Or go to precinct meetings that end in physical altercations, as one did. I wondered if other people felt like I did. Were others withdrawing from civic involvement because of similar misgivings and questions? And if so, where did that leave Fremantle?

Fortunately, once I became aware of how disengaged I'd become (and how regular my fantasies of moving to Melbourne were), my impulse was to connect with others. I recalled my days as a journalist with the locally-owned paper when I was in my mid-20s, interviewing people for a weekly column that profiled different characters around town.

Sitting listening to people's life stories and them talking about their relationship to Fremantle was the highlight of my week at the paper. I used to develop a real connection to the people I interviewed and through their stories felt my relationship with Fremantle was strengthened because the things they told me might be new to me or because together we shared our pleasure about some aspect of life here.

The enthusiastic response the column used to get from readers was also rewarding - undoubtedly for my ego, since I'd taken on

the job as journo on a fake-it-til-you-make-it basis and was always afraid I'd be discovered for the fraud I was! But also because the process of sharing other people's stories in a respectful and sensitive manner seemed to reinforce more broadly what a special place this community was and how lucky we all were to share it.

I decided to go back and re-interview some of those people, and from that grew a desire to interview people from across the community. This process was a way of checking out my own responses, of listening to what others think, and it provided me with a basis for mulling over local issues it also gave me an excuse to make connections with all sorts of people across the community. I also hoped that hearing other people's stories would generate some ideas about how to contribute in a meaningful way.

Fortunately, the Fellowship allowed me to really indulge this idea and I now have hours of recordings with all kinds of people:

- older people who have lived here since their birth,
- people who (like me) came with the first wave of gentrification in the 70s and 80s following the restructuring of the port (the introduction of container ships) and the departure of many working class families.
- young people who are the children of this group and for whom Fremantle has always been home
- people who've chosen to leave Fremantle (most of them in opposition to the impact of the America's Cup) and some who've subsequently returned
- people who've very recently arrived and taken up residence in the recycled warehouse apartments or the new developments that are the result of active infill policies

From this basis I started to build a picture of some of the challenges we faced in maintaining a functioning community at a time of considerable change.

And just to give you a picture of that change....

Probably the most telling statistics from Census data is the increase in those engaged in professional occupations from 12.4% in 1986, to 27.8% in 2001 and the corresponding decrease in labourers from 20.9% in 1986, to 6.8% in 2001. This is matched by a doubling of the percentage of the population in the top income bracket, the decline of conventional family households with 70% of households in Fremantle now occupied by either one or two people and an ageing population. The ethnic diversity of the community, which was a significant part of Fremantle's pre and post-War make-up, is decreasing (although we remain more ethnically diverse than Perth)

In this regard, I'm sure what we're experiencing is the classic profile of gentrification that Melburnians see in Williamstown or St Kilda and Sydney-siders see in Balmain or Newtown. I think there would also be similarities with many seachange communities along the east and southern coast. I can't offer you a neat round of conclusions from the research. Apart from having just finished yesterday and with lots of filtering of information to happen, if I've interviewed 50 people, I have gained an insight into 50 unique relationships with Fremantle. So it feels disrespectful and potentially dangerous to reduce that diversity and richness to generalities.

Having said that there were commonalities and themes that emerged in response to my questions which could probably be summed up as, 'what matters most about Fremantle?' They were:

- heritage and the built environment – the sense of history, the beauty of the buildings, the scale, the suitability for walking, compactness
- the port – its part in Fremantle's history, the coming and going, the feeling of connection to the world, the industrial landscape
- proximity to the coast and the importance of the ocean
- the street life or cultural life – a sense of vitality, people making connections, buskers, parades, festivals and events, the arts and artists
- and finally, the diversity of Fremantle and the sense that it is a tolerant community – that this is a relaxed place where you see all kinds of people and where people feel welcome

Not everyone cited everything in the list and people varied in thinking that these aspects of Fremantle were healthy, in decline, or somewhere in between. What I did observe (and feel) was that Fremantle is not just any place to the people who live here. Even if people expressed the view that it is changing 'for the worse' they still went on to identify myriad ways that they continue to enjoy Fremantle's offerings. Even if they were resident through circumstance rather than choice, people expressed strong feelings about the place and identified themselves as part of its distinct community.

Along with the passion for their community I also picked up a lot of anger, frustration and disappointment from many

interviewees with the way the place is changing. In fact for me, people's comments often revealed the intellectual ease with which we value diversity and tolerance - and the incredible difficulty of living it. Some people highlighted the ethnic diversity of Fremantle and the rich contribution of migrant communities across the years - the cappuccino strip, the restaurants, the fishing industry, the arts and cultural celebrations, the religious celebrations and the domestic architecture.

Others talked about the very different lifestyles people live side-by side in Fremantle, identifying the well-to-do, the not-well-off, the academics, the alternative lifestyleers and the downright feral. Others referred to the number of people with obvious mental disorders who make their way around the city, apparently comfortable and 'at home'. These features were consistently offered as positives. However, significantly, in many cases the same people would go on to express concerns about one group or another, who they saw as undesirable or as having a negative impact on Fremantle in some way.

I was taken aback by one interviewee who said that the development of a new university in town was disappointing because it was attracting dark skinned (African) students. The same woman felt that it was a shame all the welfare services were based in Fremantle because it attracted the wrong kind of people in to town. At the same time, this relatively young woman was extraordinarily honest in answering my question about why she and her husband had chosen to move to an apartment in Fremantle, sharing the quite emotional story of their attempts to have a family and the decision finally to abandon the dream home and adopt a completely different urban lifestyle in a community that had been important to them both as children, when their parents were migrant market-gardeners on the outskirts of Fremantle.

Her prejudices were one thing (and reasonably isolated) but far more consistent were the assumptions made by people who chose Fremantle as their home pre-America's Cup (which happened in the mid-1980s), that recently arrived wealthy apartment dwellers didn't appreciate Fremantle for anything other than its property values.

I came to feel that these prejudices were fuelling a particularly dangerous division in the community. The fabulous sense of ownership that we immigrants of the 1970s and early 80s felt towards Fremantle (and that we community cultural development workers prize!) not only drove the conservation of heritage buildings, renovating of old homes, the effort put into building community feeling and making things happen. They also seem to have led to a feeling that the place is 'ours'.

I also felt a real resistance to change of any kind and wondered whether the dominance of heritage as a focus for community feeling contributed to a stuck in time approach. On the other hand people choosing Fremantle as their home should be expected to respect the community they're moving into, the history and spirit of the place that was, in my experience of interviewing them, part of what attracted them here. There were terrible stories of infill developments that took no account whatsoever of the privacy or dignity of neighbours. Of new inner city residents complaining about noise from the port, from late-night venues etc.

A piece I wrote for the paper about the value of back lanes and other 'wonky bits' of Fremantle, elicited an example of one back lane that had been the site of communal activity for years until a new neighbour purchased the land, fenced it off, landscaped and installed electronic gates and surveillance. Obviously acts like this completely destroy community trust and indicate a newcomer who is entirely antagonistic to the pre-existing environment - not much hope there.

If you see gentrification as some sort of evolutionary process, it seemed to me that we had hit stasis on the evolutionary path. I don't think it's coincidental that this has happened during a period of low-level leadership from Council and an increasingly corporatised approach to local government management. This is a subject on which I expanded with some passion at the first Cultural Planning symposium so I'll save you from that rant and refer you to those papers.

Back to my meandering process. From the outset I'd thought that an exhibition might be a productive way of bringing some ideas to the public so a year ago I started working with artists with whom I had some form of previous connection. We talked about the kind of work each of them could make about their connection to place. Again the richness of the relationship each of them felt provided source material for a fantastic exhibition - *Shifting Ground*.

Some examples of the work are Holly Story's *Flora Notes #2*, South Fremantle - which is weeds pressed into lead flashing. Weeds from a walking track near Holly's home that are being mown down and replaced by couch. In the catalogue Holly writes - 'weeds that have come here over the years with the newcomers that have changed this place forever. What if we suspended the rules and let these 'weeds' flourish? Just to honour tenacity, remember a history and be reminded that change need not be feared'..

Theo Koning and Megan Kirwan-Ward's, *Garden of Curiosities* - which plays with the beautiful in the everyday, the tenacity of plants that survive a hostile environment, the juxtaposition of waste and life and the increasing cultivation of a wild environment. Frank Morris' tribute to the Fremantle Pigeon Racing Club which folded last year after an almost 100 year history. Pigeons are no longer welcome in the backyards of changing Fremantle and with them have gone the unique social connections that

sustained the working class sport for generations.

500 people turned up to celebrate the opening and a steady stream of visitors to the gallery during its run (including lots of repeat visitors) suggest to me that this was a powerful way to present some of the ideas that had emerged from interviews. It's also the joy of approaching those issues tangentially.

At the same time the newspaper articles were concluding, having canvassed many of the issues I've touched on as well as;

- what lies Beyond the Boomers - why young people are absent from civic involvement and what they had said about life in Fremantle through the interviews
- whether we wanted our relationship with Council to be about customer service or citizenship
- the way in which all the wonky bits of Fremantle contribute to people's sense of place and how to protect those wonky bits in the face of a 'beautifying' mentality and a risk-averse public domain (Public art and the dumbing-down of imagination)
- how individual or neighbourhood initiatives such as street parties, plantings or wall art add to the sense of a creative engaged community and how we might seek to encourage rather than 'manage' this creative energy

The articles drew a very positive response. Not so much about the issues, but it was more people thanking me for saying things that they felt really needed to be said. It highlighted for me the importance of not only examining gentrification and demographic changes through gathering statistics but also of engaging with the emotional experience. I had started with the intention of exploring people's felt sense of change and I held onto that in writing about people's comments.

Then, last week, during the Festival I ran a series of Community Conversations in the exhibition space to encourage community members to come along and talk about life in Fremantle. Small numbers but great conversations. The first night was "What is 'very Freo'?" A term used to describe people, an experience or event, the way someone dresses and at one time used by the Council for a marketing push with the slogan Shop 7 days a week – very Freo.

This conversation had 20 people along and the group very quickly got to a discussion about tolerance and the nitty gritty of living it. After considering the question 'What is Intolerable?', the group concluded that the loss of socio-economic diversity would be the single most intolerable experience in Fremantle.

The second night was a smaller group and we were discussing how we communicate in Fremantle. This highlighted the importance of gathering places, places of connection in Fremantle and they were identified typically as cafes, local shops, the beach (particularly the dog beach), local schools. We discussed whether you could aspire to a single connected community or whether what we needed to encourage was a web of connections within the community so that various sub groups maintained their strong connections and that those sub groups were easily linked or cross-referenced to build a community foundation.

How that linking occurs is key. For example with the divide between longer-term residents and newcomers. If they are older couples with no kids attending local schools, how do we make those connections?

The last conversation on the topic of 'Fremantle's in our hands' took place on a Saturday afternoon. Thanks to a young local band playing, we had a small number of young people mixed in with oldies (like me) to talk about what they felt was important. This led to a discussion of the lively contemporary music scene in Freo – John Butler Trio, the Waifs, Little Birdy, Eskimo Joe and others, all identify Fremantle as their roots. But there are pressures all the time on licensed venues, the noise issue and anti-social behaviour after hours. It was really useful to hear young people talk about the challenges of surviving as musicians, what they see on the streets as buskers and the different modes of behaviour they experience in venues where the focus is on selling alcohol and the venues where the focus is on original music.

We also had about 120 primary students through for a couple of conversations in the exhibition space. They were really engaging events and the kids insights were useful and not dissimilar to their older counterparts. They valued the sense of personal relationships, the relaxed environment, the beach, the parks, the ice cream shops...

So, I haven't had a chance to sift through the Conversations yet and weigh up the value of them - quantity and quality - but I think I will continue to look for opportunities to conduct them. Final comments about what's been gained from this process?

### **Content**

I think it's fair to say that the process has started a different kind of conversation in Fremantle. Last week at the Chamber of Commerce's Fremantle 2020 Conference, a number of the matters I'd written about were referred to in some of conference papers and made their way to the centre of discussion.

In particular I think articulating the gap between rhetoric and reality on the subject of tolerance has been useful, and encouraging

people to speak honestly. Raising the issue of young people and their place in civic life and engaging a number of them in an active way throughout the process has been useful and enjoyable. I will be pursuing this.

The process has also reinforced the importance of people feeling genuinely listened to and this raises a lot of questions for me about various methods of consultation that are in place in our community, particularly from Council. They appear good enough to win Best Practice Local Government Awards but leave many members of the community feeling disenfranchised and unheard.

The features that I think contributed in this case were:

- one on one listening is a privilege – for both interviewee and interviewer. Maybe not cost-effective but sampling could be a good way to go.
- listening well meant the depth of things people shared were significant
- the articles fed back what people said so they could see what I'd done with what they'd said and how accurately I had interpreted their comments.
- I invited interviewees to become involved in the project in other ways – many of them spent time staffing the gallery over the last two weeks
- there was no 'agenda' to my questions or pre-determined outcomes floating in the background. I was not aligned with any cause or institution. I approached people with genuine curiosity and a willingness to let the conversations go where they needed to go – both interviews and group discussions.

### **Personal**

At the personal level this project has been a constant learning process and at times very confronting. I felt pressure to construct a sound research process so that what I learnt would be taken seriously, and I seemed to have pre-conceived ideas about what a sound research process is – lots of data, which would make great overheads etc.... while all the time my desire was to follow my nose and see where I ended up. So I dealt with lots of questions about who I was doing this for? Was it just a huge personal indulgence?

Much of that didn't really resolve itself until I wrote the articles and got such an overwhelming and warm response. What I discovered (or re-discovered) is that staying true to my own process and being unafraid to show my passion, to write and talk in a loving way about the things people had shared brought others out of the woodwork. So quite contrary to the warnings from people that if you stick your head up in this community, you'll get it lopped off, what I found was that people are hungry for honest enquiry, straight talking, and thinking that takes into account both the head and heart of loved experience.

The process has been an outstanding success in reconnecting me to my community and I now easily share an intense concern with the future direction of Fremantle with a remarkable number of new friends and colleagues.

*June Moorhouse has lived and worked in Fremantle on and off since the mid-1970s. She has over 25 years experience working in the arts, much of that in senior management positions and as a consultant. The values of community cultural development are at the heart of her work and she has recently completed a two-year Fellowship from the Community Cultural Development Board.*

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