



# Expanding Cultures

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## THE PINK ROOM

Helena Spyrou with photos by Angela Bailey

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### Abstract

*This presentation will explore images and representations of life on the Carlton Housing Estate in the context of a major redevelopment, exploring culture, place, people and urban life through narratives and collective memories of tenants. This developmental project seeks to document the current redevelopment of this public housing estate, involve current and relocated tenants in this process, acknowledge the scale, impact and meaning of this redevelopment and the associated relocation of tenants, and also to celebrate the contribution made by the communities living on the estate to Carlton and to Melbourne generally. The project was produced by the City of Melbourne and supported by the Office of Housing.*

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Media sound bites conjure up distorted and stereotypic images about people who live in public housing estates. *The Flats* Arts Project aims to redress this by placing public housing tenants at the centre, to acknowledge their voices and their rich and complex history. Given the diverse mix of people living in a public housing estate, the task of the artist is a sensitive one. Such a task respects the differing ways people communicate – their public and private personas, their words and their silences, their interests, passions and connections to each other and to their environment.

*The Flats* Arts Project, initiated and managed by the City of Melbourne's Community Cultural Development Program and supported by the Office of Housing, engaged two artists, Angela Bailey (a photographer) and myself (a writer) in a long term arts project on the Carlton Public Housing Estate, spanning four to six years. This project builds on the *Relocated* project that the City of Melbourne produced in partnership with the Office of Housing and the Tenants Union of Victoria during the Kensington housing estate redevelopment between 2001 and 2004. Through *The Flats*, the City of Melbourne acknowledges and celebrates the cultural contribution made by the communities living on the Estate. Angela was one of the artists on *Relocated* and brought to this project her rich experience. I had grown up in Carlton and had also worked with many communities living on the Estate as a literacy educator.

In mid 2006 we began our work with tenants who were being relocated from the four-storey walk-up flats at the Carlton Estate at two sites – in Rathdowne and Elgin Sts. These 192 walk-up flats, built in the 1960s, will be demolished and replaced by 246 public housing flats and 550 privately owned flats. Carlton, in inner Melbourne, was once considered a ‘down and out’ suburb, but is now a much sought after commercial landscape. Consequently, this public-private mix causes much concern to many on the estate as much-needed public housing land is being sold off. Most tenants love living in Carlton and are relying on the Office of Housing’s assurance that they can return once the new flats have been built. Some have spent nearly forty years of their life in their walk-up flat and have shared entire lives with their neighbours.



### *Walkups in Rathdowne St*

A base in one of the vacant walk-up flats gave us a presence on the Estate, and the long-term commitment of the City of Melbourne to this project gave us the latitude and the budget, to focus on process rather than any preconceived outcome, which is paramount if tenants are to be placed at the centre.

Our intention was to draw out memory, understanding, experience, opinion so that tenants could tell their stories as well as develop their own way of expressing the impact of relocation and the proposed redevelopment upon their lives.

Initially, we were perceived as one of the many groups who’ve come on the estate to ‘research the tenants’. In addition, the ‘Tenants’ Association on the Estate was not fully representative of the diverse estate communities. Consequently getting to know tenants – building trust and developing effective relationships – was a slow and challenging task.

We began by introducing ourselves to community workers. We ran workshops in classrooms at the primary school and the neighbourhood literacy centre. We visited people relocated to suburbs all over Melbourne. We cold-called on people waiting to be relocated. We distributed fliers and stickers about our project. Most importantly, we hung around a lot – at the playground, the community garden, the after-school program, the sewing group, the homework club. And we got involved in whatever was happening on the Estate.

Slowly we made connections and drew together threads of who knew who – whose child was at the local school, whose parent went to the ESL class, whose friend came to the drop-in centre or whose friend had a garden plot in the community garden. One introduction led to another and visits became frequent. Short chats turned to long conversations and the sharing of knowledge, ideas, stories and memory. Soon after came the invitations to one tenant’s art exhibition, another’s group excursion with their gardening group, another’s offer to show us her collection of photos, another’s performance at La Mama. We went on camp with the Horn of Africa families’ group. We walked around the Carlton gardens with the Vietnamese walking group. We watched the boys play soccer at midnight during Ramadan.

The City of Melbourne initiated and convenes the project reference group, comprising tenants, community workers and the Office of Housing. This reference group assists in the development of the project on a number of levels. As we have been getting to know the physical, social and internal landscape of the Estate and the people we have met, we have collaborated and negotiated with all concerned to mediate potentially differing perceptions and expectations and to make decisions about artistic outcomes.

The Office of Housing relocation team were supportive, but central office posed many problems for tenants as the relocation timeline became like shifting sands and clear, regular information was not provided. Another big problem for tenants was the lack of maintenance support. We would visit homes that had been flooded weeks before due to the theft of copper piping in the roof and tenants were still waiting for repairs. Although we were not formally engaged as community development workers, in the absence of someone in that formal role we became advocates, interpreters, assistants as well as listeners and observers, while at the same time we actively supported local agencies to pursue funding for such a position. All this and the staggered relocations was fragmenting the community. Our role had become very delicate. We had to make sure that we were not perceived to be problem solvers of housing related issues while at the same time clarifying and explaining to tenants our role as artists on the estate.

After the first group of tenants were relocated and just prior to the demolition of the first block of flats in late 2006, we began our visits to each 'empty' flat. During these visits we came across the things that people had left behind. In one of the flats we were surprised to discover, in amongst the faded and yellowing beige of all the other rooms, a room that glowed. It was painted a bright, rich pink – the walls and the ceiling. Angela photographed this pink room and its stages of demolition and we sent the images to the person who was relocated from that flat. Soon after, we visited him in Brunswick. He told us he came to live in the walk-ups in 1979 when he was six years old. He moved out when he was in his early 20s and returned a few years later, this time to a different flat. He told us he painted the room for his children and they loved the images we sent.





*The original pink room in its stages*

## The Pink Room Exhibition

*In the pink room stories unfold, memories, dreams and hope, alongside whispers of the unknown.*

### *Pink Room Exhibition*



The *Pink Room*, our first public exhibition of *The Flats Arts Project*, was held in September 2007. The *Pink Room* was inspired by this room and its story and was a testament to the way each person has made their mark on the estate and within their communities. In the same way each person personalised their living space, giving their home its own character, we personalised the many stories shared with us about living in the walk-ups and the range of emotions

about being relocated from one's home. We wanted to tell the bigger picture of what had been happening on the estate as well as the personal picture. In a visible and artistic form, through stories and photographs, we recorded people's ongoing history and their lives together as close and diverse communities with both surface and deeper layers, to create the full range of people's experience and pay tribute to their lives on the Estate in the concept of a pink room.

Tenants were used to visiting us our walk-up flat at 3/486 Drummond St. It was a familiar space and therefore an important space to house the exhibition to celebrate as well as bid farewell to the walk-ups.

### **The pink room**

For the first element of *The Pink Room* exhibition, we painted one room pink – walls and ceiling – and this room followed a number of story threads shared with us as well as the story of the original pink room itself. What we created in this room was a montage of text, image and found objects that explored culture, place, people and urban life through narratives and collective memories of tenants who have been affected by relocation.

*I grew up in High St, Carlton near the Clare Castle hotel. My mum said there were 12 or 13 of us kids, but I only remember nine. My grandmother and mother were both barmaids at the Clare Castle. My dad was from Geelong. I moved from there to 1018 Lygon St and in 1974 into the walk-up at 41 Palmerston St with my four kids. They were the best years of my life. People undermine the flats, but I'll never be as happy as I was there. I'd go back there tomorrow if they'd let me.*  
(Joyce)



*I like it here. I'm very happy. I walk and walk, and walk. Everywhere is not far. I have many friends in Carlton. In my block there are many Vietnamese. At 7.00 every morning we meet each other at the bottom of 520 Drummond St and we go walking to the Carlton Gardens. We've been doing this for 10 years now.*  
(Ngoc)

*We are refugee boat people from Vietnam. We came to Australia 20 years ago and moved into 503 Drummond St. I was one year old and my sister was two. My other sister and little brother were both born in Melbourne. Most of my brother's friends live here. Everyday after school, his friends call out to him and when he hears his name, he'll ask to go downstairs. With the people we know, we have an unspoken trust, a mutual trust of neighbours looking out for each other. When we don't see a neighbour's car we wonder where they are. When we see them again we get their story. We love it here. It's a safety net. It's a home. It's a family. There is a lot of history, a lot of stuff in this house, a lot of memories.* (Vy)

*It's sad as everyone is leaving and it is getting lonelier by the day. Before, in the morning, I used to be able to smell food cooking. Different smells would waft out of each flat as I came down the stairs. I'd imagine what each person would be having for breakfast. I'd say, oh, so and so must be having toast, and so and so is having dumplings.* (Vy and Shukri)

*I take two buses every day to bring my children to school in Carlton. All my friends and all their friends are here. We were relocated to Brunswick, but we are not happy there.* (Mrs Zhang)

*It's the blandness of this estate that's imprinted in my brain. There's something about blandness that's really soul-destroying. You need more colour. You have to have more colour. If you have colour at least you've got variety.* (Doug)

*The day I moved in to 521 Rathdowne St was the day that woman, the ex-warden, stole a helicopter to get that guy, out of prison. The day I moved in was the day she took refuge in the flats and I couldn't get into the flat. And I thought, 'If it's going to be like this, I won't get through this'. But I did. I had experienced a dramatic shift from one life to another. When I moved here, I was still in crisis, but now I had a place where my kids could come and stay. To have this refuge was amazing for me. I lived opposite the swimming pool and a great deal of my life revolved around the pool. It was a great place to take my kids and I often swam there in the mornings. Just being in the water was very healing for me. Everything I needed and everywhere I wanted to go to was within walking distance. The nine years I spent there helped me to become physically and emotionally healthy again. And telling this story has been really therapeutic for me.* (Doug)

*This is the way of life moves. One day you are here and the next day you are somewhere else. Change becomes part of life. But it is hard, especially for kids. In 1994, when my eldest boy was born, we ran away from Somalia to Ethiopia. In Ethiopia, our two girls were born. From Ethiopia we went to Yemen. From*



*Yemen we went to Saudi Arabia. From Saudi Arabia we got deported to Egypt and then deported back again to Saudi Arabia and from there we came to Australia. We arrived in Melbourne in 2000 and moved into 521 Rathdowne St. Here our two youngest girls were born. Then in 2006 we moved to the high-rise and here our youngest boy was born. On the day we were moving we took our children through every room. We said to them: 'This was our kitchen, this was your bedroom, this was our lounge, and this is our box that is going to the new flat'. Although we have a big family with six children and it was overcrowded, we loved our flat. Our neighbours were from many nationalities. It was very friendly. Here our kids go to school by themselves. They like their school and they have many friends. (Abdi and Batulo)*

#### *Object*

*I came to Australia 12 years ago and I moved into the flats in Elgin St. I now have ten children. The youngest is one year old and the oldest is eighteen years old. I put in an application for a house ten years ago. I said no to one house because it was far away from public transport. I said no to another house because it had only three bedrooms. I'm still waiting for a house. (Fadumo)*

*Fadumo and Family*

Another room was inspired by the prolific and creative work of a previous tenant relocated from the walk-ups. Felicity was born in Greece in 1941. She came to Melbourne in 1965. She has raised three children here.



*The first time I met Helena and Angela was the day they pulled down the first block. I told them I was moving to Brunswick and every day I go by tram to bring my things there.*

*The next week they came to help me to bring my small things to my new flat and Angela took a photo of me with my favourite flower. They started to visit me and I talked about how I've been writing songs in Greek since I was young and that for 25 years I haven't sung but I keep the songs because my granddaughter has a nice voice. ... The song I sang for the exhibition, I wrote in 512 Drummond St. One day when I was walking to Safeway I was singing to myself and when I got back home I started writing and in two days I had this song. (Felicity)*

We introduced her to Melbourne born singer and song writer Anthea Sidiropoulos. Anthea and Felicity collaborated to bring together a live performance of Felicity singing three of her songs (in both Greek and English) at the launch of *The Pink Room* exhibition. Anthea has also taken Felicity to a recording studio and together they have recorded a CD of Felicity's songs.

*Just keep writing your songs (x2)  
And I'll keep on singing them*

*Just keep telling your stories (x2)  
And I'll keep on listening from here*

*Don't talk to me about love (x2)  
Just keep writing your songs  
And move on, got to move on*

*Felicity room and Anthea and Felicity*



The lounge had a feature wall painted pink depicting the story of Amina in both English and Somali. I had met Amina in one of the English classes at the Carlton Neighbourhood Learning Centre and during a series of workshops I ran with that group, Amina wanted very much to write her own story.

*I live in 3/503 Rathdowne St. I have lived there for eleven years. My children and my husband live with me. I have three children, two boys and one girl. One boy and the girl are twins. Next year they are 16. The other boy is 18. My neighbours are Chinese and Vietnamese and I am from Somalia. Next to me in No 4 is a Chinese family. Their children play with my children. Above me in No 5 is a Vietnamese family. She makes my clothes and her daughter helps my son with his homework. Next to them in No 6 is another Vietnamese family. Together we share many things. Sometimes I finish oil or I need egg, I go to No 4 or No 5 and I take oil or egg. Sometimes I forget or lose my laundry key and I take my neighbour's key. Sometimes they separate and fold my clothes and bring to my door and I do same for them. We also look after each other's children and we make food and give to each other's children. (Amina)*



We visited Amina, met her family and got to know her 16 year old daughter Shukri, who later gave an eloquent speech at the exhibition launch about growing up on the Estate.

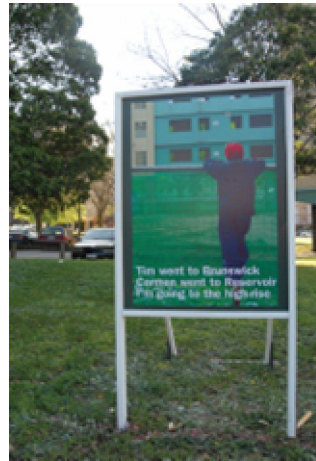
*Shukri in front of her mother's text*

The kitchen featured a montage of images Angela had taken over a twelve month period of a seat on the intersection of a number of internal paths connecting the walk-ups and high-rise. This seat was always being used. It was a resting place, a place to contemplate, exchange gossip, pass the time, wait for others or have an afternoon nap.

The second montage in the kitchen was of the internal stairs of the walk-ups. Each railing carried the memory of each person who had traversed the stairs.

### The photo panels

The second element of *The Pink Room* exhibition was the installation of thirteen public photo panels located inside and on the perimeter of the estate sites around the estate. Each panel tells a story in text and image of relocation and community. Installing the photo panels helped us to learn to whom the external space 'belonged'. In the first couple of weeks we rearranged the position of the panels to accommodate various groups in the Estate communities. For example, one panel was positioned in the space where a large group of young men would congregate at night and the urge to try and unearth it was irresistible, so we moved it a few metres away from their 'turf', so to speak, and there it remained intact for the following three months.



*Hue in situ*



*Hue at launch*



*Object in situ*

### The light installation

The final element of *The Pink Room* exhibition was a glowing pink light installation from dusk till 11pm that emphasised that sense of living and occupying.

### The launch

Relocated tenants and the wider community, some of whom had never entered a public housing estate, were invited to the launch of *The Pink Room*. The most frequent comment



we received from people living outside the Estate was their realisation of how diverse and connected this community is. After the exhibition a series of twelve postcards followed, depicting images from *The Pink Room* which of which a set was sent to all relocated tenants. We also video interviewed tenants who were involved in this first stage of the project.



*It's been a fascinating experience for me. I've loved all the chats that we've had about things and I've been intrigued with the way you've done things. This, for instance, the Pink Room. See, there's photos and stories here of people that I didn't know (and I know a lot of people) and it's taught me new things about the place even though I've lived here on and off since I was a kid. When I read the stories about individual people, the way they spoke about their experiences, well, that awakened me to a lot of things. (Shane)*

Shane

As artists our task is to facilitate a process by which the people involved can find their voice as individuals and as part of a community and they in turn help us to find our voice so that we can represent their stories honestly and respectfully. Together we have made decisions about what to make public and how to say it. We both have been actors and authors in the process. We both have needed to trust each other. As artists our task is also to work collaboratively with each other and to mediate our differing expectations and ideas about the artistic process. As a writer I have learnt a lot about the artistic process in working collaboratively with photographer, Angela Bailey.

### Where to next?

In the next phase of *The Flats Arts Project* we will consider space, place and habitation in a public arena. As well as continuing to work with tenants relocated away from the Rathdowne/Drummond Street walk-ups, we will work more closely with tenants relocated to and still living in the Elgin Square walk-ups (Station, Canning and Palmerston Streets).

We will explore themes that are driven and developed by tenants through their direct participation and involvement and consider strategies for tenant leadership, advocacy and activism. Some of the project's other activities in the next few months will be draping large vinyl banners from the rooftop of the pebbled wall of one the walk-ups and attaching cyclone fence material banners to the fence around the perimeter of the demolition site. These banners will feature text and images from *The Pink Room* exhibition.

The project will also engage tenants in a large group photograph on the estate. Tenants will be involved in the planning and lead up to consider the placement of people, the message and possible props. The concept of the photo panels will be redesigned, with each of the boards featuring a new image (people and place) accompanied by a Haiku. As Elgin Square lends itself to performance and sound/visual installations, we aim to hold an event within the courtyard of the walk-ups in the second half of 2008. This event will involve tenant participation on a number of levels including planning and development.

The City of Melbourne has a long term commitment to working with the Carlton Housing Estate communities and is currently inviting new partners to join the project and further enhance the opportunities for tenants' artistic expression over the next three years. The City of Melbourne will continue to develop and strengthen opportunities for cultural expression by disadvantaged and marginalised communities through its Cultural Community Development program.

*Helena Spyrou is a Project Artist on the Carlton Flats Arts Project. She has also worked as an artistic director/co-writer in the Saloni M project since 1998. This project has brought together both emerging and established artists (writers, musicians, dancers, film-makers) from Mediterranean backgrounds or with a connection to the Mediterranean, collaborating across their art forms to conceptualise and facilitate thematic performances. Since 1998, Saloni M has presented five new artistic visions in performances and exhibitions which facilitate the breaking down of prejudices and stereotypes in a collaborative way and involving relevant communities.*

*Angela Bailey is a photographic artist with diverse experience in community-based work, including projects with housing estate tenants, textile workers, older adults, young people, asylum seekers and women prisoners. Angela has exhibited both solo and group based work throughout Australia and overseas and has work in collections, including the National Gallery of Australia, Queensland Art Gallery and State Library of Victoria. She has a Post-Grad Diploma of Fine Art from the VCA and is currently completing a Masters in Art Curatorial studies at the University of Melbourne. In 2005, Angela received an Australia Council CCD Skills award for travel to the United Kingdom.*

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