A space for memory

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In this article I examine the possibilities of reparation in an era of privatisation and de-industrialisation. I examine the effect of a recent project Sunshine Memory Space, a space, designed to evoke memories of a de-industrialised urban Melbourne suburb Sunshine. This project offered the opportunity for the effects of industrial change to be publically represented, remembered and valued. I offer an analysis of the significance of relational localised curatorial work.

Keywords: *memory, de-industrialistion, curation, psychoanalysis.*

The *Memory Space* project operated from a council run art space over two weeks. In an effort to rejuvenate a section of the suburb of Sunshine, Melbourne Brimbank City Council offered low rental on two shop fronts to be used as art spaces. One shop front houses practising artists and the other is an exhibition space. The purpose of the *Memory Space* project was to facilitate members of the Sunshine community to curate stories that were of significance to them. In effect the space would be one where the community could represent memories of the suburb. A key aim of the *Memory Space* project was to generate a space where older members of the community had the opportunity to reflect on and share their memories of the suburb. The idea for this project came from inter-generational work I initiated with undergraduate university students that would culminate in social history exhibitions. In this work I began to recognise the significance of an older person's narrative being realised

in a public setting.

Sunshine is located in the western suburbs of Melbourne and has a long industrial history. In more recent times Sunshine would best be described as post industrial changing radically the spatial dimensions of the suburb. In the past Sunshine was home to major industries, the largest of which was the Sunshine Harvester Factory, the biggest of its kind in the southern hemisphere. At its peak the Sunshine Harvester Factory employed nearly 3,000 workers. This factory is celebrated in the *Landmarks* exhibition in the Australian National Museum in Canberra as a segment of an exhibition that celebrates other milestones of industrialization as markers of progress. However, there are virtually no stories of the lives of people connected to the factory. As Tim Edensor (2005:43) notes "when 'universal', rigorous, scientific techniques are applied to the classification of objects and places, archives and archaeological traces, they tend to predominate over local memories or even efface them." Included in this installation is a harvester, early 1900s advertising posters of the harvester and photographs of suburban housing and garden[1] developments funded by the owner of the harvester factory Hugh McKay. Given the significance of this particular industry, the physical loss of the buildings that housed the factory was given scant attention in the *Landmarks* exhibition. The subsequent closure and demolishment of the factory is represented by a single image and was captured by a local resident. Industries like the Sunshine Harvester Factory contributed to the social life of the community through dances, picnics and sporting clubs. In research prior to setting up the memory space site I found articles in the 'Sunshine Advocate', the local newspaper, attesting to numerous dances, picnics and sporting clubs linked to major industries in the area. This image and text overleaf are indicative of the kind of relationship employees had to their place of work.

Nettlefolds Factory Employees
(source: Sunshine Historical Society photographer and date unknown)

NETTLEFOLDS DANCE

*On Saturday evening there was a huge crowd at Nettlefolds'
dance, and the financial result should substantially assist the
funds. Lucas' band provided the music and Mr E. Nicholls was
M.C. In addition to a dainty supper, every patron received a bottle
of Coco Cola, a non-intoxicating beverage that tickled the palate.
Nettlefolds Social Club arranged the dance without any expense to
the special week of effort committee—a generous action that will
be applauded by all residents. Mr. Ron Duxson is chairman of the
club and Mr. Jack Davies secretary.*

'Sunshine Advocate' Friday 23 August 1940

Now there are scant traces of these factories. Historically manufacturing
and rail were two of the major determinants of everyday life in Sunshine.
Living and inter generational memories of the height of industry persist
amongst residents of the suburb.

The geographical area of Sunshine is split into north, south, east and west. This split is not just a cartographical separation but also a deeply felt geographical located identity marker. Indicative of this located identity are the strong opinions concerning a large railway overpass built in the early 1960's to alleviate traffic bank ups as a result of train movement. Prior to the overpass the movement from one side of the railway line to the other was regulated by a gated level crossing. One older resident told me that standing close by the gates when a steam train rushed through meant your clothes got steam cleaned. After the over pass was built it is still possible to walk from one side of the suburb to the other via an underpass. However, a number of people feel the overpass has split the suburb in half. Residents from the other side, the north side, visited South Sunshine less frequently despite the underpass. South Sunshine retains a low-density single shops village feel. On the north side are modern facilities such as a plaza and cinema complex. The main entrances to these modern facilities are all facing away from South Sunshine as though residents on the south are looking at the back of all the new development. In reality there is not a clear view of these modern facilities however the experience of those on the south side is as though the north has turned its back on them. South Sunshine is the site of the emerging Arts precinct.

Given the significance of industry, the first exhibition in the memory space was *Industrious Sunshine* consisting of a series of photos from the past depicting Sunshine. This exhibition was curated in partnership with the Sunshine Historical Society. The premise of this exhibition focus was the hope that the content would serve as a catalyst to elicit democratic determined future exhibitions. The photos used in this exhibition are usually hung at Sunshine Harvester Primary School. The memory space offered the opportunity to exhibit the photographs to a wider audience. Three photographs depicted a narrative of Sunshine over time — a shot taken from the same corner in the early 1900's again in the 1950's and lastly in the late 1980's. Further, a shot of workers leaving the Harvester Factory through massive iron gates demonstrates the number of employees at this particular industry. The railway is a significant part of Sunshine's heritage. Sunshine station or Braybrook Junction as it was formally known was the site of one of Australia's greatest rail disasters[2]. Three photographs reflected the railways, one

was of three men sitting on the platform with matching Gladstone bags, a 1900s shot of Braybrook Junction and another was of the train disaster. The other images concerned the Sunshine Harvester Factory and the associated fair wage case[3]. The photographs in the exhibition served as a prompt in the Memory Space to facilitate memories. What differentiates this concept from a social history museum, which also functions as a memory space[4], is the connection of object in and to a local place. The premise of a memory space is a community historical connection to a local place continues to be a significant emotional investment. However, certain geographical places are denied the possibility of symbolic frameworks for memory. This assertion is based on a hierarchy of cultural value whereby what becomes memoralised and preserved is thought to stand for the universal but in reality does not. Other fragments of the past persist but are considered insignificant such as industrial and de-industrialised landscapes. However, as Edensor (2008:313) notes:

> *Modern imperatives to swiftly bury the past produce cities that are haunted by that which has been consigned to irrelevance. Accordingly, the contemporary city is a palimpsest composed of different temporal elements, featuring signs, objects and vaguer traces that rebuke the tendencies to move on and forget.*

The creation of a memory space provides a located symbolic framework for memory and recognition of that which has been consigned to irrelevance.

There were many visitors to the memory space all of whom negotiated the re-calling of the past. A lot of older members of the Sunshine community came to the memory space and a memory of the railways in Sunshine was a recurring theme. One such visitor was Nigel, a man who has lived for most of his life in Sunshine and worked for the railways— most recently as a signalman. Nigel reminded me again of this absence of a symbolic framework for memory. He came to the memory space keen to offer photographs of the railways and to make an oral recording of his memories of the railways and Sunshine.

> *I joined the railway in 1985. It was really good you could get a job at the council you know if you were no good at reading and*

writing you could get a job as a laborer you could get a job at the railways or the dock yards...it was really easy to get a job if you weren't too good. I liked working outside I didn't like working in the factories. I was lad trainer I think that's what they called it and I was getting $7 an hour, which I thought I was quite rich I was nineteen years old.   My grandfather got me the job in the railways we worked from 7.00-3.00 got morning tea lunch and afternoon tea. He was a boilermaker at Newport. My Dad's father worked in the railways as well, he was a gate keeper at Park Street. The house front door was seven feet from the train line. He retired in 1962 he had been in the railways since the Great War finished. I started as a labourer and from working as a track end I became a yard person my duties were to clean points and my other duties were working at the Sunshine G.E.B. big (wheat) silos cleaning the points and help put the trains together with locomotives which was good fun. There was over 60 shunters there but they are gone.

In this exerpt of Nigel's recorded memories he is noting the intergenerational continuity of working for and employment with the railways. When Nigel started work in 1985 the railways was owned and operated by the State Government. Further, I can imagine his own employment in the railways would have been an affirmation of his grandfathers' working lives. What a worker invests in their work and what work has meant over generations is often a silenced and repressed aspect of industrial change. Critiques of neo-liberalism are characterised by its ahistorical propensity. As Henry A. Giroux (2013:21) notes, "History has been stripped of its critical and transcendent content and can no longer provide society with the historical insights necessary for the development of a collective critical consciousness..."

In the place of a collective critical understanding the difficulty encountered by workers to changes to a work place is often read through a neo-liberal rhetoric of failure to adapt to change. Further, in neo-liberalism there is a denial of the affective realm of what has been lost in the past. To name what it was, what it did and what it felt like is consigned to the realm of at best nostalgia. Nigel and other visitors to the memory space had a strong desire to participate in a symbolic framework for memory that is location specific. That is in part they

wanted to name what it was, what it did and what it felt like relative to Sunshine. Of course this raises questions about place and space. Analysis of modernity suggests that place is no longer influenced by localised activity. Anthony Giddens (1990:18) has argued that one of the consequences of modernity has been the separation of space from place. Place is determined by spatial forces quite removed from place. Certainly the place of the railways in Sunshine has been influenced and re-made from a space beyond the local. Consortiums made up of French and Finnish companies have owned and operated Melbourne's metropolitan railways for a number of years[5]. What a critique of neo-liberalism and the ever pressing push for economic reform reveals is the seductiveness of the teleology of progress — that demands a relinquishing of the past. What became clear in speaking with Nigel was how deeply affected he is by the privatisation of the railways, the subsequent changing of hands of ownership and the continual 'make over' of this particular industry. In part of his recording Nigel spoke of his wish for the railways to go back to government ownership:

> *I would love the railways to go back to the government but they won't do it. I find that public transport is public transport…you move people not to make money when you got to put a dollar on it, it's a bit hard. Because what happens is the railways gets fined for a certain amount of time its late that pressure goes onto the drivers to the signalmen and everyone else and its just pressure all of the time. Every time a new company come along its always hierarchy which is new but the people at the coal face are the ones that have to do the work we keep seeing all these different people and they keep having all these new ideas but we've all seen it before.*

In a neo-liberal world the people working in industry are synonymous with the other mechanisms of production. In a subsequent change of ownership the commitment on the part of the workers to the railways as a form of public service is evident in Nigel's following remark:

> *We work pretty hard like in 1999 I worked for Bayside trains it was M Train I was a union delegate we just got an agreement to get a pay rise for everybody then we got a phone call all the signal boxes in the metropolitan area got a phone call saying M Train*

> *are leaving they are pulling out National Express are pulling*
> *out they are going. So the workforce at the time could have said*
> *we could have stopped all the trains but we didn't we just kept*
> *working we were not sure what was going to happen we just*
> *kept working. I don't think the public knew that. We could of just*
> *stopped but we didn't we just kept working.*

Human agency is disregarded as though an individual should respond as
a newly calibrated machine. However, a person's relationship to space is
not so easily adjusted. Drawing on Henri Lefebvre, Edensor (2010:70)
writes:

> *Serial features install a sense of spatial belonging, including the*
> *shops and houses passed – the street furniture – and routinised*
> *practices such as the purchase of the daily newspaper enfold*
> *social relations into the daily ritual. The daily apprehension of*
> *routine features may thus provide a comforting reliability and*
> *mobile homeliness.*

I want to put into this mix the rhythms of work in of itself a routine
practice and one that also encompasses social relations. At the time of
this *Memory Space* project the railway line was undergoing a substantial
change that will culminate in the up grade of the line for a regional
rail link but has meant the closure of the Sunshine signal box—Nigel's
place of work. At the time of writing it is unclear if the signal box will
remain or be demolished. If it is demolished this erasure will add to the
accumulation of a triad—demise, closure and erasure of many other
iconic Sunshine sites. Nigel has four hard drives full of photographs and
a large percentage of these images are of the railway. Many of Nigel's
images are shot from the signal box. When I asked Nigel his reasons for
taking these pictures he was clear that it was to capture for the sake of
memory this disappearing landscape.

Sunshine Signal Box. Photograph Nigel Gillies 2010

This is one of the few photographs Nigel took standing outside of the signal box. This photographic image of the Sunshine Signal Box functions as a memory trace a mnemonic symbol of remembrance and loss. In an analysis of Walter Benjamin's work Graeme Gilloch writes, "There is a difference between a photograph as an enduring mnemonic device and a dialectical image as an ephemeral moment of remembrance". Gilloch continues, "It is memory which opens up the past to endless interpolations, rendering it incomplete and contestable" (2002:230). For Benjamin the dialectical image captures something that is about to vanish forever – an image of an image of history – an allegory. I suggest these images of the signal box; station and the railway can be understood as a mnemonic device, an ephemeral moment of remembrance but also as allegory. The railway becomes a phantasmagorical site. Railway-yards, shunting, railway sidings, idle engines all exist at fewer locations with even fewer workers but in memory they are a site of figural affect persisting over time in both the past and the present. As allegory the photographs are more than just an image of this particular instance of loss but all of what has been lost in de-industrialisation.

Alongside Nigel's memories visitors to the Memory Space described the geography of the past. Such as vast tracts of farm land separating Sunshine from the inner suburbs of Melbourne, a station built and used when the greyhound racing was on, no longer literally there but present just the same, dedicated privately owned railway line that moved harvesters in and out of McKay's Factory, the largest factory in the southern hemisphere, gone. Hearing the memories passed down of the 1908 railway disaster, such as the living memory of an Uncle who was meant to be on that train but changed his shift. Now the railway line is changing again.

A direct result of the *Memory Space* and the exhibition *Industrious Sunshine* was *Views from a Signal Box* (2013) an exhibition of photographic shots taken by Nigel from his perspective looking out at the railway line from inside the signal box. A series of Nigel's images were hung in the art space. At the launch a number of people who are supportive of Nigel attended including his sister, brother in law, his psychologist and an industrial officer form the Railway Union. The grief Nigel carries as a consequence of the changes to the railways was given a public presence through the images but most importantly through Nigel's presence as he spoke about the photographs. As Schaffer and Smith (2004:3) write:

> *Through acts of remembering, individuals and communities narrate alternative or counter-histories coming from the margins, voiced by other kinds of subjects… These counter- histories emerge in part out of the formerly untold tales of those who have not benefited from the wealth, health, and future delivered to many others by the capital and technologies of modernity and postmodernity.*

This exhibition might be understood as a cultural intervention; an arresting of the tendency to wipe from the collective memory what the historical experience of working in an industry was actually like. Geoff Bright (2012:1) in his work with young people in a former coal mining community, writes about, "how insubordinate community histories – particularly those imagining a radical reconstitution of society – can come to be silenced and their situation rendered literally 'unspeakable' when a collective psycho-social space once redolent with hope becomes

a space of ruin". I argue Nigel's artistic intervention during the initial privatisation and subsequent changes of ownership of the railways constitutes a kind of preservation of self. In psychoanalytic terms an act of protecting and preserving work in the broadest sense as an internalised 'good object'. The term the 'good object' is associated with the psychoanalyst Melanie Klein (1882-1960). Object relations theory primarily focuses on our relationship to objects. For Klein, the term 'object' refers to a person as well as other objects. Our relationships to people or other objects are not static or wholly external but rather to a certain extent determined by our capacity to introject, to internalise a given object. Something more is occurring for Nigel in relation to the internalisation of all of what the railways are, that can be further accounted for through Freud's theory of 'Mourning and Melancholia.' Freud writes, "...the melancholic displays something...an extraordinary fall in his self-esteem, an impoverishment of his ego on a grand scale. From the analogy with grief we should have to conclude that the loss suffered by the melancholic is that of an object; according to what he says the loss is one in himself" (168). Although there has been the very real loss of his job in the signal box Nigel is deeply affected by the loss of all of what work meant as an expression of himself in the external world and as consequence of this loss he had turned in on himself. Having said this psychoanalysis is very much concerned with the internalisation of the external world. This internalisation is just as 'real' as the external occurrence. Nigel was negotiating this loss of something inside of himself as much as the loss incurred by the changes to the railways. Something of this state was repaired when he was able to give representation to what his view from the signal box had meant to him. I have written elsewhere regarding psychoanalytic interpretation of what was occurring for people when they came to the Memory Space to share a memory (see Charman, 2015 Affective spaces—the contribution of memory to place). Instead of a complete break with the attachment to everything work had represented the public representation of the photographs of the view from the signal box functions in a symbolic sense. In a psychoanalytic understanding of symbolisation Deborah P. Britzman (2006:44) writes:

> *In psychoanalytic terms...symbolisation is never simply representing more accurately the qualities of objects in the world. Nor is it a problem of decoding what is already there. Instead,*

> *symbolisation is an emotional experience... Symbolization*
> *serves to link feelings to their ideas and as such is a resource for*
> *relatedness. It bridges a lifetime of losing and re-finding objects*
> *and its vulnerability and promise lean upon two precarious*
> *resources that are often at odds even as both require construction*
> *and interpretation: internal or psychical reality and external or*
> *historical reality.*

The construction of the external reality simultaneously gives expression to an internal psychical reality. The act of taking the photograph of symbolising the railways and then exhibiting them in a public space creates the conditions for relatedness. If there is no capacity to acknowledge the affective realm of industrial change to work practices, the resultant effect on the sensibility of the work place and if the terms of a given workplace alter so radically as to make someone redundant it makes what was once valued become meaningless. The onus is on the individuals to re-conceptualize themselves within the newly structured work place, to argue their own 'worth'. However, the terms of 'worth' are so narrow as to exclude the way in which an individual's work has been valued before and significantly for this article to silence the affective and relational realm of work. This demands such a negation of self-hence the internal damage. So the act of Nigel exhibiting his photos can be seen as reparation — to repair the damaged internal object in this instance the railways.

V-Line Country Train Photograph Nigel Gillies 2010

In Nigel's photographs there is a double framing occurring. This shot is framed through his compositional gaze and an additional frame through the window of the signal box. The image when read this way is as much about the interiority of Nigel in the signal box as it of what is outside of the box. As such these photographs can be understood as Britzman (2006:44) notes above, "… internal or psychical reality and external or historical reality." Further, the public iteration of this intervention brings the demoralising change in the railways to a space that enables broader community engagement. Something that Bright (2012) notes as a necessity for young people a generation on from the coal mining closures, "Basically, I argue for the importance of community youth support being equipped to help speak 'unspeakable' community histories, thus making them available for a re-envisioning of aspiration, resilience and wellbeing in a way that challenges the received confines of the neoliberal imaginary".

A selection of photographs from *Views from a Signal Box* was subsequently picked up by the local council's Community Arts Centre and were included in the *Sunshine Line: Photographs documenting change around the Sunshine Line.* At the launch of this exhibition Nigel's young daughter and son were in attendance. There was a sense of surprise and pride on their part at the focus on Nigel and his work. In these moments of public exhibition there is a merging in Nigel's identity—distressed, grief stricken and artist. However, there was a very different sensibility to this exhibition. The other photographs that sat along side Nigel's were more abstract. These photographs were a technical rendering of photographic proficiency and their compositional elements more abstract and therefore less readily situated as local. The power of Nigel's work is in part the context the photos were taken in and in order to bring the fullness of his work to the fore it is this broader context this article is addressing. The implications of this localised positioning of a particular worker in the prevailing neo-liberal discourse has required attributing the photographic work and therefore naming Nigel. To do otherwise would be to further anonomise his experience. Grant Krester (2011:143) draws on the anthropologist James C. Scott concept of metis as an analytic frame to understand localised knowing:

> *Metis is differentiated from episteme—knowledge that is generic, repeatable, and codifiable—and tech, or technical know-how. It has the implication, instead, of a form of knowing rooted in the specific conditions of a given site and the aggregated wisdom of the inhabitants of that site over time. Compared to the generalizing and abstract knowledge of Western science, imposed unilaterally on site, metis makes no claims for universality; it is "place specific," inflected by particular conditions and histories.*

Nigel's photographic work is localised, situated and inflected by particular conditions and histories. The country, freight and suburban trains all move through this station. The place from which Nigel saw them is his views from the signal box. These photographs are indicative of how Nigel inhabited space and time in that he not only noted the trains as he regulated their passage through the respective platforms he recognised their aesthetic value as they made their slow pondering movement through the suburban landscape. He confessed to changing a train's passage through the platforms in order to get a better shot. He

initially used the computer in the signal box to store his images until they became too many. As a young boy, before the railways employed him, he walked with his father down to the railway line. His father was blind but he liked to listen to the trains. His grandfather had worked for the railways. His own father could not. The changes in the workplace instigated by the private operators, over determined by a neo-liberal imperative that could not recognise the importance of the affective inter-generational realm of the station and the signal box.

In *Views from a Signal Box* Nigel's photographs worked as a further catalyst for the local social context already established in the Memory Space of the centrality of trains in Sunshine. This is the essence of what can be thought of as a dialogical and therefore relational aspect of public curatorial work. *Industrious Sunshine* and *Views from a Signal Box* can be described as a form of relational aesthetics. In his own exhibition he was keen to talk to other people in the community who had experience of the trains. I had been fortunate to meet the signal box predecessor. A visitor to the initial Memory Space exhibition Frank, now 90 years old, was keen to get a photograph of the old railway gates. He really wanted one that showed an ephemeral moment of remembrance from just after the Second World War where recent immigrants to Sunshine would leave their bikes leaning against each other, as he said "If you got to the station first but didn't get home last you would not be able to ride home on your own bike you took what ever bike you could get but eventually you would get yours back. We never thought to take photos then well you couldn't afford to." Nigel had a photograph of the gates but not the bikes.

Conclusion

Setting up a memory space was a public expression of the importance of the past in an urban area where what had gone before had almost been completely negated. In the Memory Space project a collective sensibility began to emerge where people spoke to each other about Sunshine over time. In this way, collective memory not only reflects the past but also shapes present reality by providing people with understandings and symbolic frameworks that enable them to make sense of the world. (Misztal 2007:383) Experience then is re-constituted as being of value. The forced internalisation of discarded parts of the self through industry

change can be catastrophic as well as the loss of what was such as the satisfaction of routine sometimes boring but constant. Creating a memory space re-focuses community and "...community is the sense of belonging that comes to those who are part of it and that, through association with communities, individuals conceptualise identity". (Watson 2007:3) Public representation such as what occurred in the Sunshine Memory Space is generative as it enables the revisiting of a space where remembering the nuances of affect is allowed the possibility of expression.

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Endnotes

1. For an over view of the gardens see http://www.onmydoorstep.com.au/heritage-listing/11984/hv-mckay-memorial-gardens

2.   1908 train collision between two inward bound trains from Bendigo and Ballarat in which forty-four people died. See Cave, Buckland & Beardsell, *Steam Locomotives of the Victorian Railways-Volume 1: The First Fifty Years,* Australian Railway Historical Society, Vic. Div., Melbourne 2002.

3. The Harvester case is a landmark Australian labour law on a living wage for workers. For a broader discussion of Sunshine Harvester Factory see Ford, Olwen (2001). *Harvester Town: The making of Sunshine 1890-1925.* Sunshine & District Historical Society Incorporated.

4.   See Kavanagh, G. 2000 *Dream spaces, memories and museums.* New York: Leicester University Press.

5. M>Train and Connex initially operated half each of Melbourne's metropolitan rail service from 2001-2004. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/M-Train accessed 22/5/2013. Connex Melbourne was a wholly owned subsidiary of French company Veolia Environment.

Connex operated Melbourne's metropolitan rail service from 2007-2010 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Connex_Melbourne accessed 22/5/2013

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About the Author

Karen Charman's academic research is around memory, representation and communities. This research has been undertaken in a variety of different ways—education and museums and memoir and archives. This article reflects work undertaken in an approach to civic cultural engagement called a Memory Space. This concept provides a process whereby people attend a physical space consisting of memory prompts such as old photographs and recount stories that are generated not just by the physical objects but by the openness of a space to reflect and re-tell memories.

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