

reLOCATED

Many people in their lives shift house no more than fifteen kilometres from where they were born. Possibly this is because of a primal need for the village, the place where people first form their sense of self-identity. But there are sound functional reasons, given a choice, for not moving into alien territory. One loses the support networks of family and friendships, the priceless local knowledge of transport, employment opportunities, hospitals, doctors and shops: of how things work, of what fits where; of who matters at a time of crisis or celebration; of who can help in an emergency and who might join in the small and great rituals of everyday life.

Kensington is a small inner-city suburb with a population of about five thousand. The housing estate had been built between 1961 and 1971. There were three twelve storey towers, one eight storey and twenty-eight four storey walk-ups, and other flats nearby. Thousands of people had passed through or remained on this estate and even when people moved out, many didn't seem to move very far. I realised that at times more than half the population of Kensington had probably lived on this one estate.

Yet in 2001 much of the estate was being demolished and hundreds of tenants were being relocated. But no one was recording this mammoth social change or recording people's individual or collective memories of the estate. And so the question was one of how to quickly record all this, how to document shared memory and history and upheaval, how to involve people who were sometimes traumatized: and to do all this with respect for the dignity and pride of the tenants.

Jane Crawley, Team Leader, Cultural Development, City of Melbourne, *interview*

One incorrect assumption about public housing is that all tenants are transient. Some do come and go, but many do not readily forget the relationships they formed with other people and their environment on the estate. Residents often comment on how many former residents, even when they have moved to far-flung outer suburbs, return to the inner-city high rise estates for community activities. Others remain for twenty or thirty years, if not their entire lifetime. All to a greater or lesser extent share memories of their lives on the estate, of where they were, or are, located.

What happens to such lives, to such memories, if people are *relocated*?

In 1998 the Victorian Government had called for tenders from private companies for a redevelopment of the high rise towers to mixed public and private housing. The developer was the Becton Corporation which formed, with the Victorian Government, the Kensington Management Group. The Corporation was appointed to manage the facilities on the site throughout the five year redevelopment.

Two twelve-storey towers were to remain in situ.

The other tenants had been offered public housing in over forty other suburbs. At least half of those relocated said they would like to come back and live in the new units when they were built although there would be an insufficient number of units if they all returned.



Scenes of the demolition phase, Kensington housing estate.

When we first arrived on the estate, around April 2001, we met first with cranes, scaffolding and padlocked fencing. A sizeable section of walkup flats (four storey buildings without lifts) were reduced to rubble, while another sizeable section of the estate felt like a ghost town as flats were emptied and boarded up for **stage two demolition**. The simultaneous process of relocating, demolishing and renovating meant no easy access to people and communities. They were in the throes of moving beyond their community borders, moving from balconies to courtyards, moving from rooftop views to grassy borders, moving furniture, pets, babies...into new suburban landscapes with varying degrees of emotion, from deep anxiety to high euphoria, from **I can't wait to leave this place** to **I want to come back!**

The stories, photographs, opinions and feelings were gathered through a varied process of interviews, Polaroid, drama and writing workshops, informal discussions, on-site displays and Outreach connections... Several thick notebooks and hundreds of images and stills later, we wanted to creatively present our work in a way that reflected the structural demise and reinvention, and the complexity of feeling evoked through prescribed living and sudden change. Further, we wanted to acknowledge the estate as a pivotal piece of contemporary Australian history, so it was imperative that our final presentations be based at the estate.

Angela Bailey, Angela Costi, artswokers, Kensington housing estate.





Postcards placed around the Kensington housing estate.

Jane Crawley consulted with the nucleus of a reference group of residents and community development workers at the estate. Funds were supplied for photographer Angela Bailey to immediately commence documenting what was happening to the site and its people. Before long she was joined by writer Angela Costi. No-one knew what might eventuate. The imperative was to capture the time.

The success of long-term community cultural development (though no one at the early stage knew *reLOCATED* would ultimately be a two-year organic process) often depends on stage-by-stage activities. These usually result in artworks which have been developed in collaboration with the members of a community. They are presented to the broader community and invite responses which in turn feed into the next activity. Guided by the reference group of agency representatives and residents, the artists of *reLOCATED* began producing postcards and exhibitions in the flats.

In 2001, two types of postcards depicting the estate were dropped in letterboxes, posted to relocated tenants and distributed to the wider community. A series of photographs with text were produced as stickers and pasted around the estate, inviting public response.

FLAT EXHIBITION. Apart from a small war robe and a large poster of an Essendon football player, Flat 1/36 Derby Street was empty, stripped and ready for demolition. This three bedroom flat was turned into an exhibition space by keeping the flat's internal structures intact and highlighting life on the estate through:

- large scale photographs
- found items left behind
- portrait gallery of photos and dialogue
- mapping the estate
- origami crane curtain with photos and story
- poetry, stories and text on the estate's history.

Excerpt from book *reLOCATED*.



The Flat Exhibition space, Kensington housing estate.

Moving a rich history leaves behind empty rooms of so many views... snake gully, grass hill a scattering of palm eucalypt and pine playgrounds are many the embankment has grown over there's the Flem racecourse and there a skate park for extreme sports Community Centre's new pool old army barracks and cattle yards now Kensington Banks the pie factory still stands down there