

Fresh Water: New Perspectives on Water in Australia

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New Perspectives on Water in Australia

Edited by Emily Potter, Alison Mackinnon,
Stephen McKenzie and Jennifer McKay

Fresh Water is a deceptively modest publication that subtly opens a space for new discourse dealing with Australia's serious water situation and for design practices that seek to cross disciplines to effect innovative outcomes. Many of the contributors to this edited publication are known to me, and, in the course of preparing this writing, I mentioned that I was reviewing the book for *Landscape Architecture Australia*. As none are landscape or design practitioners – rather they are Indigenous and non-Indigenous artists, cultural geographers, writers, scientists, academics, historians and educators – most were pleased but surprised that knowledge of their publication would be of interest to the professional design community. Surprised at their surprise, I am prompted here to focus on selected writings and projects in *Fresh Water* in light of their potential to influence new and ethical approaches to landscape practice. This review infers an additional musing on what landscape practice is and what it may be, considering ongoing debates and concerns into the future of the profession and its expanding boundaries.

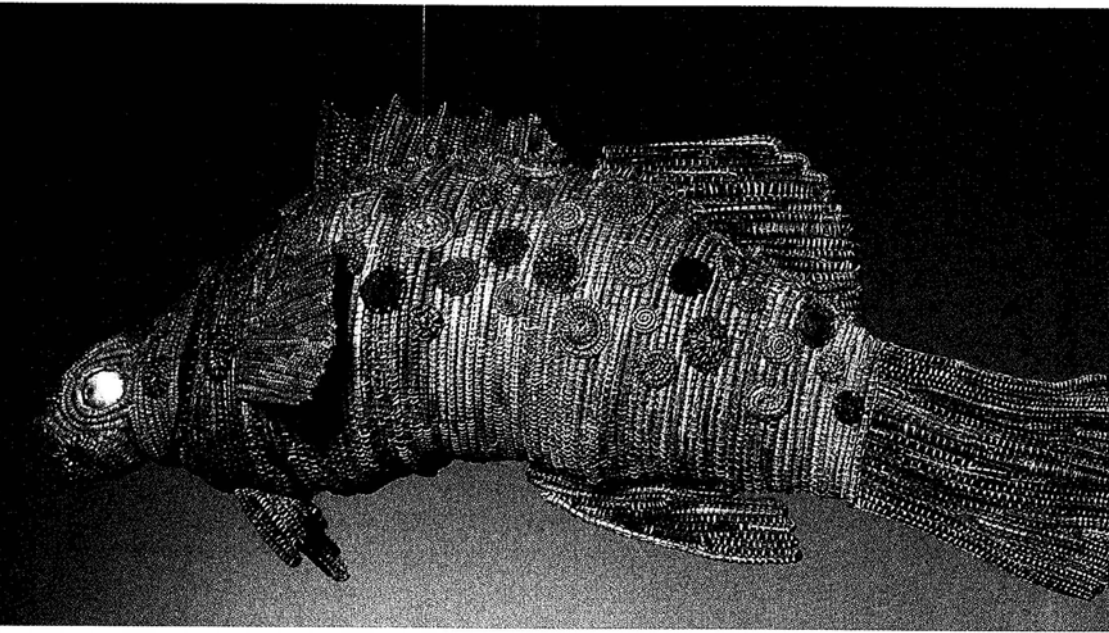
Fresh Water began with a gathering on that most iconic of Australia's rivers, the Murray, where researchers from around Australia, driven by an eco-social perspective, met to discuss pressing issues facing the nation. From this meeting of

interdisciplinary minds, the Adelaide Water Justice symposium was convened in 2005, with one important outcome being this publication. Important for landscape discourse is the documentation of this process – for gathering together the necessary knowledge and expertise to begin to record past histories and new thinking. This will ultimately develop new landscape metanarratives for water projects. Beyond this discourse, it prompts us to develop relevant and informed responses to immediate environmental issues through the generation of interdisciplinary projects and experimental practices inspired by landscape practice.

The editors, brought together by the Hawke Research Institute for Sustainable Societies at the University of South Australia, frame the eighteen essays around current concerns clearly played out in the popular press: our preoccupation with water or the lack of it; our uncertain futures in this arid land; the visible and physical presence of too little or too much water; the narratives that are written everyday around the country, spurred by global warming and its effects; and the possibility of multiple responses to such critical issues. We are reminded that the theme is water justice, but that its "meaning is diffuse rather than fixed" and that our responses must take into account the social

and political influences that operate alongside more obvious ecological and physical conditions. The implication for design practice is that greater familiarity with the science and culture of the landscapes we inhabit is necessary to ensure outcomes that operate beyond typical design and management practices based on conventional developmental briefs and strategies.

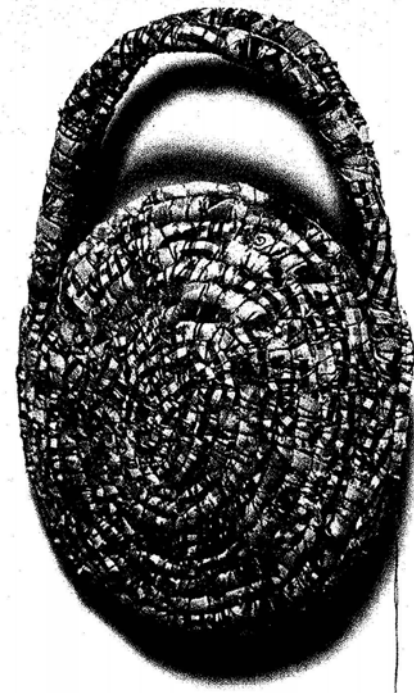
There are potent demonstrations of altered practices contained within the essays. Emily Potter's discussion on Paul Carter's *Nearamnew* and Kay Lawrence and Nici Cumpston's *Weaving the Murray* project describes public art and design projects framed through place and water narratives that are simultaneously ecological and cultural, yet realized through radically different making processes. These critical writings reflect upon the thinking and design that underpin each project. They reveal an interdisciplinary approach to place history alongside collaborations effected through storytelling between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people. We are reminded that place-making is at the same time an art and a consultative practice where the designed outcome is inspired by many perspectives. In these projects, the remade landscape is re-imagined through experimentation based on the layering of places and peoples. ▶



1
PONDJI, 2001, FROM WEAVING
THE MURRAY.

2
SISTER BASKET, 2001, FROM
WEAVING THE MURRAY.

PHOTOGRAPHY:
MICHAEL KLUVANEK



Indigenous attitudes to water and to place are the subject of, or the underlying reference for, many of the essays. These perspectives are developed through personal narrative, theoretical reflection upon working with people in and of their landscapes, and also in the abstract. Concepts of life and death emerge in water stories that remind us that the underlying meanings of landscapes and their past interventions resonate with deep sociocultural consequence. Deborah Bird Rose writes that any new ethos for water projects “must be cross-cultural and inclusive” and that ceremony and narrative are implicit in “multiple water knowledges [that] offer both challenge and inspiration.” Further, she encourages an activist approach to developing new water projects. Yet many current landscape practices fail to embrace approaches informed by competing knowledges – for example, “between scientific knowledge that values complexity, and ontological reductions that treat water as a utility.” Rose and others, including Hattam, Rigney and Hemming, contend that learning from projects that have embraced critical research and community activism is useful for expanding practice processes. However, this

requires time, commitment, and consultation and reconciliation with affected communities, supported by an inclusive strategy for intervention (which may include design).

Other contributors are concerned with examination of sustainable practices in water and landscape management – they draw upon case studies from around Australia to demonstrate both the successes and failures of past and current practices and policies. Syme and Nancarrow’s review of wetland conservation in Western Australia systematically charts research into public perception of wetlands and the politics of planning processes that shape a “just” response to water allocation and wetland management. McKay similarly investigates the processes that define ecologically sustainable development, legislation and water allocation across Australia. Both essays suggest that public perception and transparent processes are necessary for an equitable system for working with water to succeed. For landscape practice, a working knowledge of the relevant legislation and political influences on project development is essential for developing workable projects that will be supported by developer and

community alike. These writings demonstrate that contemporary knowledge of the politics of development and the ecologies of community must be understood and written into strategies for responsive and inclusive landscape practice.

The essays in *Fresh Water* speak individually to particular situations across complex Australian landscapes and, in this, they are immediately relevant to landscape practice. Beyond specificity, they also develop wide-ranging fundamental themes applicable to design thinking – “the enacting of cross-disciplinary conversation,” ways of working within landscapes and communities of “complexity and connectedness,” the need “to build a post-colonial water ethos” and, ultimately, the development of ways to re-present critical and often marginal landscapes through an overarching ethos of sustainable and practical reconciliation with landscape and the water that nourishes it. I recommend this work to all thinking practitioners as a useful addition to their research libraries.

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