

Wolli Creek: A community under construction

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Outline

This is an account of Wolli Creek, where I have been a resident of since the end of 2015. The apartment I live in was bought 'off the plan' and is situated in the first of the three Southbank buildings on Levey Street.

Living in close quarters with thousands of people has proven to be stimulating in terms of thinking about place and community. I've taken a narrative approach to bring together and interpret different histories, as well as incorporating personal observation, media reports and interviews to illustrate the past few years here and my experience of it in particular. This period included the crane crash, which drew national attention to this fledgling 'community under construction'.

Areas such as Wolli Creek will only be more common in Australia's large urban centres in the future, so I believe there's much about life here that will be applicable elsewhere. Given that the area is still developing and growing, it felt most appropriate to aim for a snapshot rather than a full account. In several more years, when the construction has ended, a more comprehensive historical account of Wolli Creek will not only be warranted but welcome. But even as things stand, it felt important to me to describe what it is actually like to live here, and I felt that this was best undertaken as an abbreviated personal account.

My interest in Wolli Creek's history partly stems from what it means to live in a community where residents have 'limited historical context to feel alienated from' and the town square is a virtual one. How does the online world affect the day-to-day interactions of the community, if at all? We might think of the internet as being ephemeral because it yields few physical artefacts, yet our lives have been fundamentally altered by the internet and websites such as Facebook.

In terms of research, it's also where the historical record has shifted towards, rather than printed material of old. So much of what we rely on for news about our neighbours is now only available online. Given this, I have largely used internet sources to inform this work. I've noted these where possible, though am mindful that in the future such information may not be available because of the ever changing landscape of the internet.

I admire those who undertake the enormous amount of work required to produce local histories. However, as a writer and radio producer for ABC RN, I generally create shorter-form and accessible works. In this spirit, a version of this piece entitled 'Good Fences' was originally published in *Griffith Review 61: Who We Are* (July 2018). The *Griffith Review* aims to enrich Australian public life and has a significant national audience, so I'm proud that my account of Wolli Creek is part of a much broader conversation, demonstrating how local experiences and histories connect to national as well as international concerns.

Finally, first-hand accounts and oral histories are vital sources for historical research and bringing the past to life. Samuel Pepys comes to mind, given the contribution he made with his diarising. In a far more modest way, I have tried to emulate that, with the hope that this work demonstrates the complexities of Wolli Creek and its multicultural population in a nuanced and layered way.

At ground zero

Rubbernecking. There's no denying that was my intention as I huddled with the growing crowd behind the blue-and-white checkered tape, our smartphones at the ready. On the other side of the temporary barrier were dozens of emergency workers in high-vis vests.

All heads were turned skywards to where a tower crane had crashed into the eleven-storey Arc apartment building in Wolli Creek, falling over from the Marq East construction site.¹ The former was completed in 2014,² the latter due for completion mid 2018.³ Residents had been evacuated, as well as those in the adjacent buildings. Police were mobilised to prevent looting, control traffic and ensure public safety. The developer, Frasers Property, and the building company, Probuild, were in damage control in all senses.⁴

At the exact moment of impact twenty-four hours earlier, I was with my husband and then seven-month-old baby. Walking home from a café close to the site of the accident, the distant boom didn't even register given the constant clanging and clanking in our neighbourhood. After all, we live in a suburb with one of the highest numbers of residential cranes in Sydney.⁵ According to the RLB Crane Index, a useful way to diagnose 'the construction sector's health within Australia'⁶ is to count the number of active cranes. Looking up from the pavements of Wolli Creek, the construction sector is as healthy as it's ever been – though clearly it can come crashing down as well.

As with most occurrences in the area, we only heard about what happened when someone posted a link to a story online later that day, the first of the extensive media coverage⁷ during the week in August 2017 that it took for the errant crane to be dislodged. Although the building was damaged, no one died. Three workers were injured and soon released from hospital. It was a freakish occurrence and one that gained national interest, albeit fleeting. Three months later, what seems to be a lone follow-up story appeared, reporting that the penthouse residents had been diagnosed with post-traumatic stress disorder and were still struggling.⁸

The virtual town square

For local residents there was a kind of thrill about the incident at the time, particularly those of us who didn't live in the affected vicinity. Facebook became the virtual town square where the inexhaustible discussion about the crane took place and news, official statements and links were shared.⁹ There was also what seemed to be a surge of civic spirit, driven by a genuine desire to be useful and help those in need.¹⁰ It wouldn't be the first time a disaster forged a community, as Rebecca Solnit wrote in *A Paradise Built in Hell*:¹¹

'When all the ordinary divides and patterns are shattered, people step up – not all, but the great preponderance – to become their brothers' keepers. And that purposefulness and connected-ness brings joy even amidst death, chaos, fear and loss.'

But this wasn't a disaster, just disaster-like. And perhaps we weren't even a community, just community-like; was the crane crash enough to galvanise the online discussions into offline connections? The whole incident served to highlight how compartmentalised we are, with little need to cross the thresholds of each other's homes between the strata-managed and developer-owned spaces. But it's in the mess of it all that we find and form connections and I wondered if this singular event would be an important spark for fledgling Wolli Creek, under construction in more ways than one.

Good fences make good neighbours but we have no fences here, only gyprock walls.

A rare feat of urban planning

Wolli Creek is bordered by its namesake creek, a river, an airport, a mosque and a pub. It nestles in where the creek meets the Cooks River, which then runs alongside Sydney (Kingsford Smith) Airport, Australia's busiest international airport, before flowing into Botany Bay. On the Arncliffe side of Wolli Creek's southern perimeter is the Fatima Al-Zahra Mosque, built in 1980 and one of the largest mosques in the country.¹² Just north over the river, on the Tempe side, stands what was once The Irish Harp (the building dating back to 1922)¹³ and is now the Riverside Hotel, with boarded up windows and lurid signs: *hot girls, cold beers, live shows daily*.

In a rare feat of urban planning, the train station at Wolli Creek came first, *before* the suburb itself was officially inaugurated two years later in 2002.¹⁴ Commuting to university from my home in Sydney's south-west, I'd occasionally wind up there, unsure why such a train station even existed given there seemed to be no local population. Nowadays, buildings rise from rezoned land, towering above the industrial landscapes like in many parts of the inner city.

This is luxury rather than low-cost living. Each addition to the growing cluster of high rises has been artfully designed with swimming pools and sculpted spaces. Apartments often come with a brand-new clothes dryer to discourage laundry being hung out on balconies. A swipe-card community is not where I thought I'd end up, yet it didn't take long to feel a sense of belonging. Perhaps it's easy to feel that way in neighbourhoods where everyone is new to the area, and why second-generation Australians and recent arrivals gravitate to such spaces, where there's limited historical context to feel alienated from.

Edward Relph writes of 'the deliberate making of standardised landscapes and the weakening of identity of places where they both look alike and offer the same bland possibilities of experience'.¹⁵ This is both true and not true of Wolli Creek: it may appear 'bland', but its character reveals a range of possibilities about what Australia could become.

The circus comes to town

'It was very different back then,' says Adam St James, ringmaster of the Stardust Circus, whom I catch on a lunch break one day.¹⁶ By his estimation, the circus had been using Cahill Park in Wolli Creek as a site for more than twenty years.

'The park has always been there but none of the high rises across the road. It was just the Princes Highway. It was just...nothing around. [Cahill Park] sat here untouched for a long time and I guess the council thought they could make some revenue on it and it was offered to us. It's the closest we can take our circus to the city.' The majority of councils close to the city have enacted a ban on circuses like the Stardust because of their coterie of 'exotic' animals.

Moving to Sydney's inner west in my thirties, circuses became a relic of my former life in the suburbs. So when the placards appeared along the Princes Highway to herald the arrival of the Stardust last year it was a childhood throwback. When the Stardust had set up their twenty-eight caravans, I'd walk past the big top on my way to and from the train station. Perhaps it was living in a high-rise that made me particularly curious about a circus that travels ten and a half months of the year. I would linger at the site and peer through the temporary fencing; even the sight of a banal chore like someone hanging up washing was fascinating – never mind the lions.

'The circus went through a downturn a few years ago with the influx of Playstations and all that type of stuff. We got really concerned for the business. But I think live entertainment is something that always will be there,' says St James. 'There's a new generation coming through of parents who perhaps don't want their kids sitting in front of a television all the time. And in turn, the circus industry has picked up again. It's always been families that have come to our circus.'

More than a year after my conversation with St James, however, I realise that that was the final time the Stardust Circus was to ever use Cahill Park. Construction began shortly after on the site where the Big Top had sat – only this time it wasn't a new apartment block but a large state-of-the-art children's playground, which was quickly completed and unveiled on the site in mid September 2017.¹⁷ It serves an increasing number of young families, including many living in the nearby apartment blocks and has become a popular meeting place for play dates.

Young families in the inner city are making do with apartments so, in lieu of backyards, parks with good playgrounds become a necessity. In any case, circuses like the Stardust are perhaps more popular with families living elsewhere, who may otherwise lack the entertainment options their inner-city counterparts have in abundance.

Multi-million dollar ghetto

Just when it seems as if there's no land left to develop in Wolli Creek, a new hole in the ground is excavated, another crane appears, a new block eventually emerges. For the past two years, our balcony has been blanketed with a fine layer of concrete dust while construction occurs on other building sites nearby. The 2016 census indicated 6,843 people live in this tiny suburb,¹⁸ but it's certainly more now given how many buildings have been completed in the last two years.

In a recent article about Wolli Creek on the real estate website *Domain*, an agent is quoted as saying, 'Yes, there are a lot of apartment blocks down here but it doesn't feel overcrowded. You can still see the beautiful blue sky and enjoy the beautiful breezes and sunshine. It's not like you're in the middle of a ghetto. It's very well designed.'¹⁹

Ghetto. A word that rolls so easily off the tongue; how far we are past its original meaning that it emerges in the context of multi-million-dollar developments looking for buyers. But it's a slur nonetheless, a charge that could still be levelled at a suburb of high-rises where 97.4 per cent of residents live in apartments²⁰ and 55.5 per cent are renters.²¹ Here, investors rule. Among their ranks are many from China, and it's regularly reported that a large portion of new apartments are left vacant in areas just like this.²²

Around one-quarter of Wolli Creek residents were born in China, slightly more than the proportion born in Australia – and a large proportion of the Australian-born residents have Chinese heritage. There are also strong numbers of residents from Mongolia, Brazil, Indonesia and India.²³ So in this particular context it's almost impossible not to come across the word 'ghetto' and hear a faint echo of Pauline Hanson's infamous maiden speech: 'They have their own culture and religion, form ghettos and do not assimilate.'²⁴ It's hardly worth chiming in with my own critique, except to say that the current median price of a two-bedroom flat here is around \$780,000.²⁵

Given the key demographic and close proximity to the international airport, Wolli Creek is a one-stop shop for baby formula, ugg boots, lanolin cream, tea tree oil and vitamins, along with other local offerings. But what's most astonishing is the high concentration of restaurants in a residential area that's only two-thirds of a square kilometre.

My husband and I frequent the humble Cantonese-style eatery,²⁶ one where you can choose various options with rice, like three-cup chicken and stir-fried green beans with spicy minced pork. It's just about the only place my Anglo-Australian husband speaks Chinese, which he otherwise keeps under wraps because he feels self-conscious about being a white guy who can speak *pǔ tōng huà* – presumably one of the very few in the area. Well, aside from occasional Mormon missionaries who turn up in crisp white shirts tucked into pressed black trousers speaking perfectly accented Chinese.

While I was growing up, my father constantly reiterated that the Chinese colonised us – ‘us’ being the Vietnamese – for a millennium. Knowing this history was long an effective deterrent to learning Chinese, and even being in a relationship with a China studies scholar for the good part of a decade didn’t motivate me to move past such Old World enmity. But moving to Wolli Creek finally did. Living in the bosom of a Chinese enclave in Sydney – the kind of scenario that’s often invoked as a threat to Australia’s so-called ‘way of life’ – has felt surprisingly cosy, just as learning Chinese has proven to be. Though the deeper I waded into the language, the more I discover that the ease I feel probably has something to do with just how deeply colonised the Vietnamese were. So many everyday Vietnamese words are words assimilated from Chinese, like electricity (*điện/diàn*), teacher (*giáo sư/lǎoshī*), government (*chính phủ/zhèngfǔ*).

Now that my time is consumed by a toddler and other concerns, I’m already forgetting the little Chinese I had. But knowing a bit of the language certainly helped to overcome barriers during my maternity leave, given how much time I spent close to home. It didn’t take long before I started to flounder whenever I tried to speak with a Chinese grandmother who I often see in Cahill Park with her two small grandchildren; I’d even muddle the basics like *wǒ* and *nǐ* (‘I’ and ‘you’). She always points out if my baby isn’t dressed warmly enough, but I don’t need Chinese to understand this because it’s exactly the kind of thing my parents would say.

Forming connections

From an historical standpoint, the most significant building in Wolli Creek is Tempe House. It’s a neoclassical Georgian villa from the 1830s that was occupied by various colonial figures, including Caroline Chisholm for a short time, and the adjacent St Magdalen’s Chapel was built around fifty years later.²⁷ The two buildings were eventually run by the Good Samaritans order as a refuge for ‘fallen women’, including unmarried mothers.

The deconsecrated chapel is currently where a number of facilitated playgroups for children occur each week,²⁸ perhaps somewhat ironic given its history. One of the playgroups was initially aimed at Chinese grandparents, identified as an isolated group mainly here to help with childcare. This was soon expanded to include all carers.²⁹

Moving into a ten-storey off-the-plan development, I’d somehow given into a fear that knowing my neighbours could lead to awkwardness because we were already too close for comfort. But what ended up pushing me to go beyond the virtual interactions of Facebook was the very concrete experience of raising a child. Like I said earlier, it’s in the mess of it all that we find and form connections, and few experiences are perhaps as messy as raising a child. My daughter is enrolled in the family day care operating on the floor above ours³⁰ and it’s how I’ve met more local parents from nearby buildings, including the nameless Chinese of the Census data, both Australian-born and more recent arrivals.

In St Magdalen's Chapel each week, I meet a broad range of women, including a large number of adult migrants from even further afield. Like one woman from Jordan, who came to Australia to undertake a PhD in haematology; and another woman who tells me how she always felt at odds with life in Portugal but feels a sense of freedom to be herself here in Australia. 'This is home now,' she says.

The playgroup is where I finally meet Teresa Parish – the community facilitator who often pops up in Facebook discussions – in person for the first time. Teresa works for a non-government organisation called Connections Community Development, which specialises in building communities in new housing areas.³¹ Connections has been contracted by Frasers since 2013 in Wolli Creek. It's surprising to learn that a property developer has committed resources to such an undertaking.

'That's what I was asking myself when I first started in this role – what's in it for them?' Teresa tells me.³² 'Frasers are a commercial organisation so they can't be doing this for the feel-good factor... Or are they? But I've found there are some good people in that organisation who really do care about the homes that they're creating for people. Also, if they're going to be investing at the community level they're going to be seen more favourably, right? The better a development is rated, the more support it's going to get from government, from other investors, and the more desirable it is for investors and buyers. The property industry's green star rating system is all about sustainability – and a flourishing community is a great example of liveability or social sustainability.'

Terresa's approach includes building on the interests of residents to formalise spaces for socialising and, even more simply, connecting people – stepping into places local councils rarely tread. She catalyses processes that, perhaps, ultimately require fermentation in order to last.

'I was reflecting on the crane incident,' says Teresa when we meet again a week after the crash. 'There were obviously people who came out of the woodwork immediately and were really quite empathetic about the situation: "Okay it looks like Frasers are looking after you, arranging temporary accommodation; but what about your pets – can they come and stay with you? I can offer your pet a temporary home!" That was really thinking things through in a very empathetic way. I thought that was amazing, that there was a real community being built out of that. There were also people saying, "If I can help, if I can do anything..." but not following through. Then there was, of course, the finger pointing and the blaming and the witch-hunt. But what I thought was interesting was this little group of people really displayed empathy. That took it from an online community to physically helping your neighbour with a problem.'

To temporarily overturn a middle-class and internet-mediated culture, powerful disruptors are required. The fact that mutual reliance – or something approximating it, anyway – now feels like a novelty reveals much about what life is like in a community under construction.

Notes on text

¹ Community masterplan by Frasers Property indicates the locations of the Arc and Marq East buildings: https://www.frasersproperty.com.au/-/media/frasers-property/residential/nsw/discovery-point/website/pdfs/disc6146_masterplan_icon.pdf [accessed 3 July 2018]

² Frasers Property Spring 2014 newsletter refers to completion of Arc: <https://www.frasersproperty.com.au/-/media/frasers-property/residential/nsw/discovery-point/website/pdfs/grapevinespring2014.pdf> [accessed 3 July 2018]

³ Frasers Property call centre inquiry, 3 July 2018.

⁴ Official communiqués from Frasers Property, on behalf of Probuild, was shared on their website and Facebook with posts such as:

<https://www.facebook.com/discovery.point.100/posts/875533589282603> [accessed 3 July 2018]. An insightful commentary about this ‘communications crisis’ is here: https://www.propertycouncil.com.au/Web/Content/News/National/2017/Insights_from_the_coalface_during_a_communications_crisis.aspx [accessed 3 July 2018]

⁵ Hook C & Hennessy A, ‘Three injured as crane crashes onto building at Wolli Creek’, *The Daily Telegraph*, 6 August 2018: <https://www.news.com.au/finance/real-estate/sydney-nsw/sydney-the-crane-capital-of-australia-rlb-crane-index/news-story/99d722f498fcc5b976e2829c05d639ee> [accessed 3 July 2018]

⁶ Rider Levett Bucknall, *RLB Crane Index*, 11th edition (Q4 - 2017): <http://assets.rlb.com/production/2017/09/27090730/RLB-Crane-Index-Australia-Q4-2017.pdf> [accessed 3 July 2018]

⁷ The extensive media coverage included articles such as this one published on the ABC: <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2017-08-06/crane-falls-onto-unit-block-at-wolli-creek-sydney/8779014> [accessed 3 July 2018]

⁸ Adams, A. ‘Exclusive: Traumatized Wolli Creek residents still suffering months after crane toppled into their building’, *9 News*, 5 November 2017: <https://www.9news.com.au/national/2017/11/05/19/18/wolli-creek-residents-still-suffering-three-months-after-crane-collapse-into-apartment-building> [accessed 3 July 2018]

⁹ The popular Facebook group is called ‘Wolli Creek Community (NSW 2205)’: <https://www.facebook.com/groups/wollicreekcommunity> [accessed 3 July 2018]

¹⁰ This observation has been made based on the large volume of posts in the Facebook group during August 2017. Here is an example of a post which received a huge amount of comments and likes and explicitly talks about ‘great community spirit’: <https://www.facebook.com/photo.php?fbid=10155005818108741&set=gm.792472667580039> [accessed 3 July 2018]

¹¹ From Solnit, R., *A Paradise Built in Hell*, Penguin Random House, 2010.

¹² Al Zahra Mosque entry on the Shia Directory website: <http://shiadirectory.com.au/places/australia/new-south-wales/arncliffe/mosque/al-zahra-mosque> [accessed 3 July 2018]

¹³ An entry about what is now called the Riverside Hotel can be found in Paul Davies Pty. Ltd., ‘Marrickville Review of Potential Heritage Items – Vol. 1: Final Report’, June 2009: <https://www.marrickville.nsw.gov.au/Documents/Marrickville%20Assets/heritageitemreport.pdf> [accessed 3 July 2018]

- ¹⁴ Rockdale City Council's profile of Wolli Creek refers to the brief history of the suburb: 'The new suburb was to be called North Arncliffe, but residents in the area petitioned the Council to conduct a vote to select a better name. Wolli Creek was the most popular choice. Wolli Creek railway station opened in 2000. Wolli Creek was officially declared a suburb in 2002': <https://www.rockdale.nsw.gov.au/OurTownCentres/Pages/TC-WolliC.aspx> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ¹⁵ Relph, E. 'Overview of non-place/placelessness ideas': 1 March 2015 <http://www.placeness.com/sense-of-place-an-overview> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ¹⁶ Interview with Adam St James, 21 April 2016
- ¹⁷ The playground was completed in September 2017 as described in this post from Bayside Council: <https://www.facebook.com/BaysideNSW/posts/1845480735767242>. However, the official opening of the playground did not occur until 3 February 2018: <https://www.facebook.com/BaysideNSW/posts/1914827622165886>
- ¹⁸ Bayside Council community profile of Wolli Creek population: <https://profile.id.com.au/baysidensw/population?WebID=330> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ¹⁹ Stapleton, Dan F. More than just a train station: Wolli Creek emerges as one of Sydney's densest areas, *Domain*, 21 February 2017: <https://www.domain.com.au/news/more-than-just-the-end-of-a-train-line-wolli-creek-emerges-as-one-of-sydneys-densest-areas-20170220-gucqgq> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁰ Bayside Council community profile of Wolli Creek 'dwelling type': <https://profile.id.com.au/baysidensw/dwellings?WebID=330> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²¹ Bayside Council community profile of Wolli Creek 'housing tenure': <https://profile.id.com.au/baysidensw/tenure?WebID=330> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²² An example of such an article is this one on the *Sydney Morning Herald* website, 'Up to half of Chinese buyers leave apartments vacant': <https://www.smh.com.au/business/companies/up-to-half-of-chinese-buyers-leave-apartments-vacant-20170822-gy1n5p.html> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²³ Bayside Council community profile of Wolli Creek ancestry: <https://profile.id.com.au/baysidensw/ancestry?WebID=330> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁴ Pauline Hanson's maiden speech on 10 September 1996 as recorded in the Hansard: <http://parlinfo.aph.gov.au/parlInfo/search/display/display.w3p;query=Id%3A%22chamber%2Fhansard%2F1996-09-10%2F0038%22> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁵ Median price data: <https://www.realestate.com.au/neighbourhoods/wolli%20creek-2205-nsw> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁶ The restaurant is called Diner Express in English; *Qian Bai Wei* in Chinese.
- ²⁷ NSW Government, Office of Environment and Heritage, Tempe House & St Magdalenes Chapel <http://www.environment.nsw.gov.au/heritageapp/ViewHeritageItemDetails.aspx?ID=5045451> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁸ The free weekly playgroup in St Magdalen's Chapel is facilitated by Integricare: <https://www.frasersproperty.com.au/nsw/discovery-point/news-and-events/events#sz97xzX2McX1SuGi.97> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ²⁹ Interview with Terresa Parish, 18 August 2017
- ³⁰ Ira's Day Care: <http://almalisa.wixsite.com/ira-s-day-care> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ³¹ Connections Community Development: <http://www.connections.com.au> [accessed 3 July 2018]
- ³² Interview with Terresa Parish, 18 August 2017