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Wastelands to Wetlands: questioning wellbeing futures in urban greening

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ABSTRACT

With a myriad of associated health, ecological and social benefits, urban greening has become a prominent policy strategy to renew historically neglected sites in cities, so popular that its implementation often eludes scrutiny. Utilising resident interviews, this paper investigates the distribution of 'well-being' narratives and objectives in such transformations. We demonstrate how affinities with nature are utilised to hasten green happy-futures, whilst neglecting to address ongoing questions of social and environmental justice. This paper foregrounds these injustices by attending to the affective dimensions of past and present experiences of environmental damage, advocating for the prioritisation of caring-futures over happy-futures in urban greening imaginaries.

Páramos a Humedales: cuestionando el futuro del bienestar en el enverdecimiento urbano

RESUMEN

Con una mirada de beneficios sociales, ecológicos y de salud asociados, el enverdecimiento urbano se ha convertido en una estrategia política destacada para renovar sitios históricamente descuidados en las ciudades, tan popular que su implementación a menudo elude el escrutinio. Utilizando entrevistas con residentes, este artículo investiga la distribución de narrativas y objetivos de 'bienestar' en tales transformaciones. Demostramos cómo se utilizan las afinidades con la naturaleza para acelerar futuros verdes y felices, mientras se descuidan los problemas actuales de justicia social y ambiental. Este artículo destaca estas injusticias prestando atención a las dimensiones afectivas de las experiencias pasadas y presentes de daño ambiental, abogando por la priorización de futuros solidarios sobre futuros felices en los imaginarios del enverdecimiento urbano.

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MOTS CLEFS

bien-être; avenir; écologisation urbaine; rénovation urbaine; contamination; amiante

Des zones en friche aux zones humides: les avenir du bien-être dans l'écologisation urbaine

RÉSUMÉ

Avec une myriade d'avantages pour la santé, la nature et la société qui l'accompagnent, l'écologisation urbaine est devenue une stratégie politique importante pour raviver des sites traditionnellement négligés dans les villes et est si populaire que sa mise en œuvre échappe souvent à tout examen. En se servant d'entretiens avec des riverains, cet article étudie la circulation de récits et d'objectifs de « bien-être » pour ce type de transformation. Nous démontrons comment les affinités avec la nature sont utilisées pour accélérer les avenir-heureux écologiques tout en se détournant des questions permanentes de justices sociale et environnementale. Cet article analyse ces injustices en s'intéressant aux dimensions affectives des expériences passées et présentes de dommages écologiques et préconise qu'on donne priorité aux avenir-bienveillants plutôt qu'aux avenir-heureux dans l'imaginaire de l'écologisation urbaine.

Introduction

Urban greening has become a prominent policy strategy to regenerate neglected sites in cities (Coffey et al., 2020). There is well-established evidence asserting the positive ecological and health benefits of greenspaces (Roy et al., 2012) and the potential to cool urban areas (Bowler et al., 2010). Some studies indicate that increased exposure to urban greenspace among is positively correlated with reduced incidences of non-communicable diseases such as dementia and stroke (Paul et al., 2020). In providing habitat for flora and fauna, urban greenspaces also stage opportunities for encounters with nature that can enhance wellbeing (Capaldi et al., 2015). Given the stated benefits, it is not surprising that the implementation of urban greening by development agencies and partners is regarded as a popular policy fix to a range of issues.

Drawing on evidence from on urban greening project in Melbourne, Australia, this paper shows how green nature-based futures are invoked in urban redevelopment, whilst neglecting historical environmental and social injustices. We argue that an attentiveness to the lived experience of socially disadvantaged and environmentally degraded landscapes would necessarily scaffold an ethic of care that responds to these injustices. The need for considering care and justice is becoming more urgent as the frequency at which greening programs are being incorporated into contemporary growth models for cities is increasing. Projects for rooftop gardens, roadway revegetation schemes, urban forest planting strategies and extension of urban parklands all form part of this new urban greening paradigm (Akers et al., 2019; McKendry, 2017). International, programs such as the European Union's *URBAN GreenUP* centres greening in municipal urban planning to address the effects of climate change and urban heating (*URBAN GreenUP*, 2020). In Australia, urban greening partnerships such as *Greening the West* in the western metropolitan region of Melbourne advance green-centred urban planning by seeking collaboration with all levels of government (*Greening the West*, 2020b). For Gould and Lewis (2016,

p. 152), within this greening-centred planning moment, 'urban growth coalitions' have emerged that seek to direct the appeal and benefit of greening into traditional growth orientated forms of urban planning and governance.

Perhaps because of its popularity and assumed benefits, urban greening often eludes close scrutiny. Anguelovski, et al. (2018) contend that a powerful political and scholarly discourse underpins this new urban greening orthodoxy, promoting benefits through technocratic process whilst 'omitting a deeper consideration of the social and spatial impacts' (2018, p. 418). Such critical perspectives question for whom the benefits of urban greening flow (Porter et al., 2020). As Immergluck and Balan (2018) argue, revegetation of urban landscapes can result in the capitalisation of property values, increasing displacement pressures for lower-income people. The inferred benefits of nature have become so positively correlated with urban greening, that the justification seems immutable even when faced with unfavourable outcomes for lower socioeconomic communities (Cole et al., 2017).

Despite there being insufficient levels of scrutiny of urban greening, there is an emerging literature examining green gentrification. Studies critical of urban greening practices find significant relationships between urban greening and gentrification. Rigolon and Németh (2020) for example, studied parks built from 2000–2015 in socio-economically deprived areas of 10 US cities, finding that new greenspaces situated near essential infrastructure (such as transport nodes and activity centres) is a strong catalyst for gentrification. Checker (2011), drawing upon ethnographic research in Harlem, US, demonstrates how private developers appropriate the rhetoric and material successes of the environmental justice movement to initiate what they term 'environmental gentrification'. Parish (2019, p. 263) argues that the 'luxury pursuit for more affluent residents' that often accompanies urban greening, invokes a settler-colonial relation to land through a focus on healing populations and restructuring local demographics.

Gould and Lewis (2016, p. 151) characterise the green growth model of contemporary cities as a 'treadmill of production' built upon a capitalist 'political and economic arrangement of institutions and interests that promote economic growth as the dominant social goal', in turn 'increasing environmental degradation and increasing inequality'. Urban greening can run contrary to sustainability principles as it is embedded in urban growth principles that rely on supply chains with extractive logics. Despite this critique, policy pronouncements regularly foreground resident wellbeing and environmental sustainability. Partnerships that form green growth coalitions demonstrate a genuine concern for local communities, biodiversity and the climate as reasons for integrating green modes of urban development. One example, *Greening the West* (GTW), promotes urban greening through the improvement of informal greenspaces, where 'the express priority ... is the health and wellbeing of residents' (*Greening the West*, 2013, p. 8).

One flagship project under the GTW coalition is the Upper Stony Creek (USC) Transformation Project, an urban greening initiative accompanied by a separate government-led housing development along a section of drainage channel in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine North. After decades of toxic waste dumping in the area, the intended housing site has been reimagined as 'a new way of creating a connected, master planned-community of homes that inspire healthier living' (Luma Sunshine

North, 2020). The project follows contemporary renewal practices that target urban areas experiencing uneven development, marked by poor access to greenspace as well as uneven socio-economic outcomes, where their potential is amplified by the value of what may replace them (Ruming, 2018). These geographies of relative disadvantage attract urban renewal transformations that then drive prosperity agendas. As Pardy (2012, p. 1) suggests, under these conditions 'urban renewal is optimistically cast as a strategy for happy futures'.

Happy-future projects form part of a wider assemblage of urban change, whereby governmental strategic plans outline conditional visions of 'future cities' (Ruming, 2018, p. 27). In Melbourne, the main directive of the planning system is to promote 'a global city of opportunity and choice' underpinned by 'economic prosperity, social inclusion and environmental sustainability' (Government of Victoria, 2017, p. 4). Within this framework, urban renewal is positioned as an essential strategy for enabling this vision, defined as the 'process of planning and redeveloping underutilised medium and large-scale urban areas, precincts or sites for mixed land-use purposes' with the effect of creating 'uplift in future economic and social value' (Government of Victoria, 2017, p. 159). Such planning frameworks entangle economic benefits with social and environmental justice through specific revitalisation techniques such as urban greening. They do so by invoking future imaginaries where economic, social and environmental benefits are realised. This achievement is predicated on social relations yet to be realised; in other words, future relations made with populations that are not yet in place. Moreover, the target of 'wellbeing' in urban renewal prefigures an eminent future while deprioritising historical and contemporary relations between already-existing communities and place.

Drawing on the USC transformation case study, this paper interrogates happy-futures imbued with wellbeing imaginaries. Interviews with residents illuminate a sense of optimism in greened futures, reflecting the positive intentions of project partners. The entanglement of nature in the production of green happy-futures leads us to propose that the lived experiences of these places be attended to more meaningfully in future urban redevelopment projects. We argue that an attentiveness to past experiences in socially disadvantaged and environmentally degraded landscapes that attract urban greening, should catalyse an ethic of care that responds to the present need over speculative visions. This temporal reframing of wellbeing promotes positive outcomes for current residents, cautioning against the urge to defer responsibility for social and health outcomes to incoming populations. If urban greening is to be cleansed from the taint of gentrification, this is the kind of reorientation future greening projects should aspire to. Fundamentally, this paper advocates for a greener future that is inseparable from social justice, not just for populations who may inhabit the future, but for those that have endured the past and live in the present.

Upper Stony Creek

Site transformation context

The USC dissects a heavy industrial landscape in the suburb of Sunshine North (Figure 1), 13 km west of Melbourne. Approximately half of the suburb is zoned for industrial use and the remaining residential areas are proximate to two waste landfill sites and two large

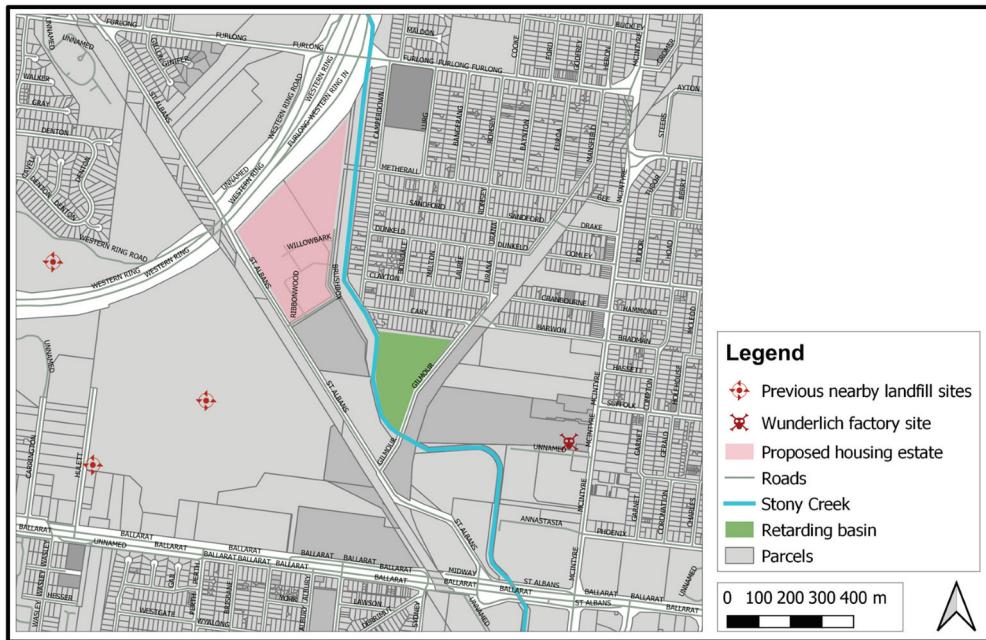


Figure 1. Map of case study area, Sunshine North. Source: Leila Mahmoudi Farahani.

open stone quarry pits. For decades, the area hosted factories that manufactured hazardous industrial products, including asbestos. Like many urban infill sites in the western suburbs, the area abutting the creek has contaminated soil.

Nearby residents refer to the creek un-affectionately as a 'concrete drain', 'culvert' or 'pit' (Farahani & Maller, 2019). The creek and surrounds are undermaintained, attracting illegal dumping and host various informal activities. In May 2015, Brimbank City Council, the local government authority and development partner,¹ announced the redevelopment and revegetation of a neglected section of the creek. The announcement, *From Wasteland to Wetland: Upper Stony Creek set for transformation*, outlined a vision 'consistent with a key aspect of *Greening the West* ... to ensure sustainable future greening initiatives' (Brimbank City Council, 2015; *Greening the West*, 2020a, np).

Central to the vision was the enhancement of ‘community connectivity, health and well-being’ (Mekala, 2014, p. v), but the implementation of the project was hampered by external constraints. By July 2019, the project stalled with the discovery of asbestos contamination. A large portion of the project budget was consumed by remediation costs, and there was no initial commitment from partners to support completion. A number of months passed and the community began to express fear that the project would remain incomplete. In response, the Council initiated a Victorian Parliament Petition calling to ‘Complete the Upper Stony Creek Transformation Project’:

Don't let this become an example of environmental injustice in the West. Brimbank ... carry the burden of landfill and toxic waste issues and get little back in support for environmental projects. We need to finish the job at Stony Creek (Brimbank City Council, 2019).

The project's postponement provoked discussion in social and print media, foregrounding questions of environmental justice. Whilst recommencing in 2020, the critical response to the interruption highlighted a concern that the non-delivery of the project *is itself* the injustice, forcing residents to further endure toxic environments. This perspective belies acknowledgement that residents have already lived with the effects of toxicity for decades, including enduring the death and ill-health of household members.

Asbestos was a common building material in Australia from the 1940s until the 1980s, used widely despite known negative health impacts resulting in early death from asbestos-related diseases. In Melbourne, 11 asbestos manufacturing sites were in operation at one time, one was the former Wunderlich factory located east of the USC site ([Figure 1](#)). Although remediation of the site took place, the area is still of contamination concern. A history of neglect appears manifest, not only in the approval of the factory to begin with, but more seriously in the way the state government have since taken responsibility for the management and clean-up of the site and in their care for impacted residents. According to Lamperd and Hore ([2014](#), np) the Environmental Protection Agency 'had not monitored the land around the factory site, even though asbestos was dumped on ... the property for most of its decades operating until 1983'. It was revealed by investigative journalists in 2020, that the government had known about toxicity for a number of years and identified a 'high risk to residents' in the area, with 'radioactive materials, solvents, paints, oil, acids, poisons, manure and other household and industrial waste' (Vedelago & Bachelard, [2020](#), np).

Residents report that 'on some days asbestos would swirl in clouds above the suburb and a white powder would cover windows and car dashboards in the factory's peak years from the 1950s until the 1970s' (Vedelago & Bachelard, [2020](#), np). Since 2014, several cases of death (16) and ill-health (8) have emerged, although the total number of people will be unknown for some time due to the protracted nature of the development of asbestos-related disease (Lamperd & Hore, [2014](#)). Research participants' lived experience is situated within this context of inquiry as well as the concurrent transformation project that seeks to enhance health and wellbeing among nearby residents.

Participant profile and methods

Sunshine North is an area of very high socio-economic disadvantage with only 35% of residents living within 400 m of open space greater than 1.5 ha (Australian Urban Observatory [2020](#)). The Vietnamese and Chinese community consist of 30.8% and 9.4% of the population respectively, 78.5% of persons had two parents born overseas and >75% of households spoke a language other than English (ABS [2016a](#)). Despite the Vietnamese and Chinese community making up over 40% of the population (ABS [2016a](#)), the research team lacked proficiency in Chinese and Vietnamese languages, and consequently no members of this community participated in this research.

Residents were recruited using flyers delivered to 600 houses within 1 km of the creek – the response rate was ~3%, with 20 interviews conducted with 23 residents.² Flyers were only distributed in English. Some residents have lived in the area for 50 years, yet most had lived there less than 20 years (Farahani & Maller, [2019](#)). Interviews were ~45 minutes in length and primarily conducted in residents' homes using a semi-structured format. Interview data were transcribed and thematically analysed using NVivo.

The research aimed to understand the perceptions, preferences, uses and values of informal neighbourhood greenspace and vegetation of residents by collecting baseline pre-intervention data on residents' lived experiences and current use of USC. Following previous research (Kothencz et al., 2017; Lee et al., 2016), we considered participant perspectives on nature to be critical in determining usage of urban greenspace. Many of the interview questions were therefore centred around a generic notion of nature and how residents use greenspaces and their gardens.

Wellbeing and nature, 'it's all good'

Interview extracts presented in this section are representations of themes that were frequently articulated in interviews. Overall, participants expressed an inherent affinity with nature, either optimism or indifference toward the development, and had varied self-evaluations of their current wellbeing. Wellbeing was derivative of participants' own subjective health status, including reflections on eating habits and level of physical/recreational activity. Responsibility was commonly individualised, unsurprisingly after decades of 'the new public health' movement where government policy has sought to achieve self-management (Baum & Fisher, 2014). For example, when asked to describe their own wellbeing, Isabelle replied:

Very good, because I make it good. I want to be healthy ... if I don't go for a bike ride, or if I don't go for a walk, I get agitated. I feel like a big lump if I haven't done anything. So, it's in my mindset.

However, health and wellbeing were also acknowledged as structurally influenced. Links were made between the demands and impacts of everyday working lives and emotional stress. When wellbeing discourse converges with personal responsibility, it potentially ignores the influence of environmental and structural factors that can impact health outcomes. For instance, Tom says:

The doctor says I'm just on the healthy side of healthy, but if I'm not a good boy I'll get diabetes and all these sorts of bad things. I'm probably a bit of an anxious person, so walking helps me to calm myself. If I don't walk, I feel pretty average, if I walk, I feel quite good. But if I can walk somewhere beautiful, well that's better ... Healthy parks, healthy people, that's what they say.

Tom connects his own wellbeing to accessing healthy greenspaces. When these relations are made, wellbeing status becomes entangled and potentially dependent upon the provision of these spaces. Research has established links between wellbeing and access to high amenity greenspace (e.g., Giles-Corti et al., 2005), however the impact of 'unhealthy parks' on 'unhealthy people' does not figure strongly. Spaces beyond workplaces and homes are not centred in public health and social policy when evaluating the deleteriousness of present or historical health. Future health, on the other hand, is intimately entangled in versions of wellbeing whereby people are supported to make better choices that relieve stress and produce happiness. Better choices are imaginatively enabled by having aspirational 'healthy parks' that are inflected with utopian tonalities but absent content descriptions.

Suboptimal health and wellbeing are routinely associated with scenarios of life that are slow, mundane and seemingly unavoidable. Nora, who lives with two children and husband with disability responds:

Could be healthier. It's just getting older and things are falling apart ... we probably don't walk as much as we should ... Every day is stress.

Walking outdoors is perceived as an activity that offsets the slow decline of health and livelihood. Patrick notes, that although their health is good, it could be improved by 'walking around the area more', but that there's 'nothing particularly attractive' in the area that compels them. Patrick says that the project 'will have huge impact' on their desire to become active, 'if it can kind of be beautified more, that would be really great.'

Annette similarly equates healthy a household 'exercise' and 'good diet.' Ill-health and declining wellbeing are reduced to matter-of-fact life events such as ageing, work/life balance, bad diet and physical inactivity. Narratives of problematic environments that contribute to declining health and wellbeing were only subtly present. The industrial surrounds were seen as an aesthetic blight that impacted upon the usage of outdoor spaces, but any connection with most participants' health status was not explicitly apparent. There were some exceptions such as Yvonne, whose narratives of place related air pollution to the health of their household:

I'm a little concerned about my partner's health because he has hay fever and asthma, and I don't know what it is, but there's something in our area ... air pollution is a concern, we have the paint factory down the road, basically it's polluting the local area ... you get this kind of burnt rubbery smell.

Anna also outlines potential impacts of heavy industry, but relations are made tangentially with a lack of certainty:

There's been quite an ongoing issue with that AkzoNobel [paint manufacturer] plant over the other side of the railway, emitting really foul odours. It smells like a burning plastic or something like that. It's revolting. I just wondered whether there was something in that? This is a really underprivileged area and maybe this is overstating it because I love nature and I see the value in greening areas, I feel that it [the project] would have an uplifting effect on people who don't really have much.

Although connections between the environment and wellbeing are made, pollution in the area and its link to ill-health was seen to be remedied by more nature, not necessarily by having less pollution. Contamination's affect is multisensory and therefore difficult to articulate when not represented in statistics on population health and environmental impact. Nevertheless, odours and negative sentiments figure here as indicators of *something more* that eludes capture in such data. Odours are affective and influence how people relate to places, marking zones within the urban landscape that stratify and segregate bodies un/deserving of wellbeing (Tan, 2012). The presence of olfactory industrial pollution perhaps gestures to an industrial age that has since passed but seems to linger in this place as a barometer of something not-quite-right. The slippage that we observe within resident narratives, entails a privileging of visual cues over the ubiquitous presence of other sensory registers. When Walter is asked how they feel about the site as it currently stands, they state that 'it could be more attractive if it was greener.' Although

the area has established trees and a variety of native flora and fauna species, many participants advocated for more trees in the area as a form of visual remediation, with Walter saying:

I'd like to see more. You have the factory across there, it'd probably be good if there was something in front of it just to shield it. And the smell. I don't know if there's the pollution smell from this one, but you smell something coming.

It is implied that **visual environmental improvements mitigate manifest pollution**. Urban greening policies attempt to create new relations upon the strata of the old but fail to fully account for factors that make living in place hazardous. Experiences of the present are temporally compressed between hopeful clean futures and problematic pasts, all the while avoiding the experiences of bodies that endure toxicity in the present. Whilst not an explicit focus of the study, themes of pollution in interview data reveal affective relationships with a contaminated present, what Calvillo (2018) distinguishes as an *attuned sensing* whereby by narratives of sensing air quality render the qualitative conditions of toxicity visible. It is in these moments of attunement to one's environment, that ethical considerations should be made as to the condition of bodies when they arrive in a greened future, and if they have been accounted for in policy (Calvillo & Garnett, 2019).

The smell of factories producing paint is unlikely to dissipate with the introduction of greenspace that screens their visual presence. Here, nature is positioned as a mode of visual adjustment to contamination, whilst other bodily senses continue to register its affects. **The role of nature is important in this process of renewal; it lubricates the salience of a future that is cosmetically justified.** Recognising contamination in resident narratives exceeds the visual, and ultimately, when residents imagine the future of this space as with development agencies, it is a utopian rendering of nature replete with the affective imprints of past encounters that are savoured.

When participants were asked to describe how they feel about nature, personal reflections, experiences, and memories of nature were drawn upon. Responses were mostly affirmative, even nostalgic recollections with biophilic sentiments toward nature. Research has shown that people who savour contact with nature, feel happier and have more positive outlooks on the future (Sato et al., 2018). Participants were often enthusiastic about their affection, with Nora expressing 'wow, yeah, nature ... it's wonderful, isn't it?'. Affection was commonly invoked, and as such our questions were often taken by participants as being rhetorical, as if unreflexive affections and attachments to nature were ubiquitous. When Tim is asked how they think about nature, they simply reply 'fond of it.' Perhaps sensing a need to express their affinity more forcefully, Anna, Tim's partner, retorts 'I love nature and I love noticing every little thing.' Others, like Stuart, carefully consider how they might express their own version of attachment, 'how do I put this into words ... I am a huge, huge believer, almost an extremist when it comes to nature.'

Mental health and wellbeing were recognised by many participants as a key relation to nature. Studies have demonstrated that experiences of nature decrease levels of anxiety, rumination, negative affect and can increase positive affect (Bratman et al., 2015). Nature has corollary effects on wellbeing, evident both in the interviews with residents and in the research literature. In another study where participants' levels of happiness were measured upon contact with nature, Marselle et al. (2016) found that participants who had a higher perception of restoration through contact with nature, recorded increased levels

of happiness. When considering the balance of evidence on the relation between nature and wellbeing, Russell et al. (2013, p. 473) conclude 'that knowing and experiencing nature makes us generally happier, healthier people'. Participants confirmed these findings, Patrick stating:

I think it's a very important part of our surroundings, having those open greenspaces. I know it affects my mood greatly if I don't have an outlook with trees and with nature.

Nature's importance rests on its ability to produce calming atmospheres that facilitate positive moods. As participants narrate their thoughts on nature, there is a connection made between the visuality of nature, of being able to see nature, and the affective states that viewing promotes:

You've got to have something beautiful to look at ... Nature makes things peaceful. (Walter)

You can't be grumpy with nature. (Trevor)

The implication in asking questions about nature is that it reveals a predictable refrain, that nature is intrinsically good. Within the context of derelict urban spaces that have contaminated histories and presents, cosmetic improvement led by urban greening projects is therefore hardly opposed, and often perceived as a panacea. Nature invokes powerful attachments. Placing these attachments within the wider background context of planetary climate change, the promotion of greener future creates an uncritical equivalence with notions of 'good'. We suggest that these equivalences produce representations of optimistic futures that minimise community opposition and claims to environmental justice that exceeds the predominance of visual attractiveness.

Harnessing optimism as a component of greening renewal

Whilst developers, both private and public, identify spaces with low amenity in order to redevelop and realise 'value uplift', residents primarily consider the cosmetic improvement to the environment in such projects. Optimism is pervasive in green-led development, especially when the provision of greenspace is already so impoverished. This creates an optimal scenario for redevelopment where the work of selling an idea is aided by the perceived gap between its current utility and the imagination of what the space might become. In considering the specifications of this future place, residents show less fidelity to their own ideal nature spaces, but rather, become enrolled in an abstracted utopia relative to how place has historically been experienced.

Various preparation works had been intermittently conducted on the site, and given that two of the major partners were water authorities some residents assumed the project was more utilitarian in focus, such as flood management. When presented with the masterplan for the creek redevelopment, sentiments and attachments changed. Nora, when asked about her first encounter with the plans, stated:

The first I found out about it was when we received this flyer from Brimbank Council. I was just so excited, especially when I turned it over and there's this big beautiful map. I thought, 'Wow this is wonderful' ... the first thought I had was, 'It's about time.'

Many residents expressed excitement about the plans, not for the detail per se, but for the larger representation of an ideal. Nora continues by saying:

It would be really wonderful but, when I look at it, all the little details, . . . there's a lot of things that I sort of wonder whether . . . some of it may be wasted.

Tom likewise says that 'at the moment it doesn't look very pretty. But, yeah I like it for what it will become'. When asked about the plans, Tom says:

We know they're gonna put lots of plants and trees. The flood plain, they're gonna turn that into ponds. It will make it cooler, cleaner, greener, more cuddly.

Enthusiasm for the project is in part accompanied by an acknowledgement that this historically neglected residential area is now receiving some of the attention. Tom describes this as 'Christmas':

we're very grateful for what's about to happen, it feels like Christmas has come. Yeah, I don't know why they chose us . . .

Despite not having been aware that project was being undertaken, Stuart, after been informed by the interviewer, says 'It won't be Kakadu National Park, but it will improve. Any change is good.' Carl similarly when asked what he knows about the plans, replies:

Now that you've brought it to my attention, yeah, it would be nice to see what happens there. Previously, before being asked and before having all the information sent out to me, it was out of my mind.

Without previous engagements in the process, residents struggled to anticipate how they might use the future space, beyond walking or cycling, or the value it will bring to their neighbourhood. Despite ambivalence toward the project, there is a tacit assumption that any green-orientated improvement to the site will be a good thing. Tom's sentiments are representative of the participant group, saying 'we're very happy how it's been organised and we're very much looking forward to it happening.' Detail in the project is infrequently narrated. When Trevor and Thea are asked if they envisage using the space more or less after the redevelopment is complete. Trevor says 'Don't know. What do you think Thea?':

depends on what it's like. It's another safety issue because you are behind fences in a sense. There is a [housing] estate going in on the other side of the creek . . . so that would put people on the other side. It depends upon how safe it is and whether I am on my own or with someone from my point of view. (Thea)

Trevor says that there was little opposition to the transformation project by residents, however participants were mostly unaware of the housing development on the site. Thea and Trevor admit that they had taken little notice of the housing estate development and that there was no discussion amongst neighbours that they had spoken with. Thea describes the new housing as a potential good that might provide safety. For residents such as Harry, the housing component is seen as a way to retain nature:

I know they're gonna develop all in there as well. But I like the way they do things these days, you're not gonna chop down all those trees if it becomes a housing development.

At an outdoor consultation event hosted at the site during June 2016, residents were given the opportunity to discuss the greening plans with the project team. Harry reflected on this moment:

So, I spoke to a few of the people ... I first heard about the housing development when signs started going up. But then it wasn't until actually saw [the plans], I thought, 'This is great.' I think they're great ... 'At least you're doing something.'

Imaginaries of infrastructural development are powerful cultural forces that value progress beyond utility. Imaginaries are anticipatory and don't yet exist, yet they create a palimpsest of desire over places, washing over sedimented layers of literal toxicity that have accumulated over time. There are few nostalgic anecdotes and happy histories that exist here, and so, an engineered imaginary that disrupts toxic historical realities finds little resistance. Tess Lea (2016, p. 64) argues that the 'cultural work enacted by infrastructure ... impels a modernist orientation to a perfectible future via the promise of movement and progress' in which the ills of the present 'will be solved when technoscience and engineering delivers desired transformations.' We contend that what is desirable in transformations such as the USC Project, is not the salience of the content or utility of the transformation, but the momentous idea of transformation itself. Resident optimism services progress, regardless of the specific configuration of future spaces. A common sentiment is that anything is better than the inheritance of the present. In the section to follow, we suggest that greening is useful in creating optimism for urban redevelopment, but is not necessarily contingent for delivery.

Caring urban futures

Throughout interviews with residents of Sunshine North, there was little opposition to the development of greenspace, the representation of the project plans, or indeed, detail identifying that a majority of the site would be a separate private housing development. Interview transcripts were imbued with optimism about the greening of a dilapidated drainage channel. The specifics of the plan mattered less to the residents than the prospect or aspiration of change.

The initial concept plan (Figure 2) was developed in 2014, prior to the project partner City West Water selling 12.5 ha of the site to government developer Development Victoria in 2015. With the discovery of asbestos contamination, a revised site plan (Figure 3) was developed in 2019. Renewed plans included over 300 residential townhouses – some of which have already been sold – and a significant commercial and retail precinct. The remaining 5.7 hectares of the site will be preserved as open public space and will include the revegetation of the drainage channel and the creation of ponds. In November 2019, Melbourne Water, the newly appointed lead partner of the USC Project, provided a community bulletin on its website:

Works began on the project in April 2018 but unfortunately, large quantities of asbestos were discovered during the wetland excavation works. Due to the increased costs associated with the removal of this asbestos, the project was put on hold to determine the most appropriate way forward for the project.



Figure 2. Concept design – April 2014. Source: Melbourne Water.



Figure 3. Preliminary site plan – November 2019. Source: Melbourne Water.

The preliminary site plan (Figure 3) reveals a major revision of the development plan, with specifications of the greening aspect changed drastically since the remedial clean-up of the site. The concrete drainage channel will remain despite this being a primary factor to change in the original plans, the proposed wetlands have been downgraded to a drainage pond, and established trees cleared despite resident wishes to keep them. Importantly, the housing development is absent from the 2014 concept design, with the space

identified only as a 'future development site', highlighted in green ([Figure 2](#)). In the revised version released in late 2019, the design included a housing development, now highlighted in grey ([Figure 3](#)). This change went largely unchallenged, with participants stating that 'residents didn't take up a petition when the new housing estate was proposed across the creek' (Trevor), others saying that 'I took no notice of that' (Thea).

The version of the USC Project presented to residents was the original 2014 concept design ([Figure 2](#)). Whilst greening was still a component of the transformation, completed in October 2020, it was not to the specifications that many residents were originally presented with. We question whether this matters to the residents and to the development partners; whether the environmental justice called for in the community and local council demand to finish the project is likely to be achieved; and indeed, whether this version of environmental justice repairs the damage already done from living in a contaminated place. This critique is formed alongside the emerging realisation that urban greening practices as a form of renewal have the potential to disregard the very principles of social and environmental justice that they purport to adhere to. As Anguelovski et al. ([2019](#), p. 1079) argue:

cities are in many cases actively creating a new green utopia for the creative class and a green mirage for lower-income and minority residents, who may end up excluded from the neighbourhoods where greenspaces are created or restored.

In thinking about the representation of green utopias in the initial introduction of the USC Project, we turn again to the notion of happy-futures, arguing that the affective associations between nature and wellbeing are harnessed to garner tacit approvals in urban renewal projects. This approval manifests as optimism in the narratives of residents, with common refrains such as that offered by participant Lucy:

It's exciting! I'm excited for it. I think it's, it's a wonderful idea. And I think people will really, will really enjoy it.

As is the case with USC, wellbeing-orientated urban greening was introduced and scaled back, whilst the specifications of the housing estate development site became more detailed. All the while, improvements to the environment that were to usher in a wellbeing future which compensated against residents' toxic exposures, has subverted the memories of vulnerable bodies, both human and non-human. Residents living near the factory site and dumping ground expressed concern when recalling cancer spikes in the area. One participant, Anna, states, 'I've heard that there's these, like, cancer clusters around Sunshine, and I was thinking, oh my god.' Another participant, Tim, adds that the presence of a cancer cluster was 'a bit of coincidence that two dogs, in what should have been the prime of life, got lymphoma.' For some residents lived in the area during the period of asbestos manufacturing, their recollection is more troubling. Long-term resident Peter states:

the asbestos factory over there, we called the White Junk. That was a well-known asbestos factory right there ... thousands have died from it, from asbestos ... we all played there ... it took several years when it all started to come out, the cancer and everything. A bit too late for us. A couple of my friends have died from it.

The effects of asbestos in this environment are significant and known to some participants. But the status of acknowledging the vulnerability, exposure and due compensation for residents remains uncertain. New bodies will inhabit this site in the years to come, some in part due to normal population churn, others imported through the adjacent housing development. What becomes of the responsibility to care for compromised bodies when a forgetful future becomes the present?

Ahmed (2010, p. 160) approaches aspirational futures in normative wellbeing discourses by cautioning that 'an attachment to the future would mean to be missing something, unable to experience the past or the present as something other than hasty, as something we have to get through, rush through, in order to be somewhere else.' Ahmed proposes that the problem of normative futurity discourse is that it serves as a mode of eradicating negativity, stating that 'all dreams of "some more perfect order," can be described as performing the logic of futurism, which in turn would require negativity to be located in those who cannot inherit this future' (2010, p. 161). Finding affirmation in the rejection of normative modes of futurity, of happy-futures, Ahmed argues that 'hope rests on the possibility opened up by inhabiting the negative' (2010, p. 161). Butler (2012) argues that the objective of wellbeing is commonly conflated with a maligned version of the good life that obscures exclusion. Groups with lesser capacities to attain proximity to these wellbeing spaces experience a structural foreclosure of the good life, yet the pervasiveness of the imaginary, and the affective attachments to it, ensures that the fantasy is never totally extinguished.

Geographies of wellbeing circulate in an economy of 'happy objects' (Ahmed, 2010, p. 38), as images imprinted with promises that accumulate affective intensities the more they circulate and the more we seek out proximity to those objects. As Gorman-Murray and Bissell (2018, p. 236) observe, 'how we internalise wellbeing and its achievement is subject to social, cultural and political discourses, histories and values'. Whilst plans outlay visions for development, their wellbeing value is the product of ongoing cultural value formations. In critiquing happy-futures of urban greening, our attention is drawn to contemplating how wellbeing is distributed. Within the vast apparatus of official documentation, particularly within the redevelopment discourse, wellbeing is near ubiquitous. To imagine space as no longer derelict, is to imagine a space where the problematic presence of tainted bodies and histories are cast off under the momentum of a looming happy-future.

Such spaces are enigmatic to those that were never intended to dwell there. It is the affective properties which Ahmed also points to, that become the target of wellbeing fantasies, not the image or space itself. Optimistic attachments facilitate a particular future, and the implementation depends upon residents' hope that it will renew their own savoured experiences of being in and with nature. Richard, when asked about the transformation and the prospect of more nature, shares a memory of going to the nearby Maribyrnong River as young adult, 'I just enjoyed it then, being out in the bush, hearing birds twittering along and not seeing civilization. So you know, I'm really in for nature'. Edelman (2004, p. 4) cautions that 'such a hope ... would only reproduce the constraining mandate of futurism'. Future renewal projects constrain the realisation of wellbeing by deflecting attention away from toxic histories; or by neglecting to properly remediate these sites prior to any conceptualisation of what that space might be transformed into. Popular representations of wellbeing futures produce an ethical fix that questions who

gets to inherit the intended future, and what the characteristics are of those who would be out-of-place. The geographical literature that brings wellbeing and the health-enabling qualities of place together is well established (e.g., Atkinson et al., 2016; Kearns et al., 2014). However, scholarship on environmental justice suggests that the hitherto focus on wellbeing has been theoretically underdeveloped to the extent that it 'obscures ontological and epistemological differences' (Edwards et al., 2015, p. 9).

This paper moves to amplify the affirmative potential of confronting negativity: the harmful exposures that wellbeing discourses seek to overcome. The presence of vulnerability and overexposure in compromised environments can too easily rationalise a progressiveness that seeks to eradicate vulnerability. Instead, progressive policy should seek to provide a space where overexposed bodies are encouraged to dwell and repair. One way to refocus the malignity of wellbeing, is to articulate an ethics of care for those who already inhabit space. Geographies of care, as a body of literature, draws heavily on Tronto's (1993, p. 113) description as an 'activity that includes everything that we do to maintain, continue, and repair our "world" so that we can live in it as well as possible'. The emphasis on the continuity of *our world* suggests that the temporal coordinates of care are not fixed or deferred to the future. Placing care in the present would resist eliminating uncomfortable narratives in a wellbeing future, instead mapping a *future of becoming well* that simultaneously acknowledges the damage that bodies and places have adjusted to over time. The temporality, or what Puig de La Bellacasa (2017) terms the 'pace', of caring should focus upon the present-day mundane enactments of maintenance and repair. What compounds a lack of attention to present relations is that contaminated environments are often viscerally indiscernible. Whilst bodies accumulate the conditions of their environment, how the environment registers and signifies its existence requires methods of community engagement attuned to its intimate presence, rather than rushing to the future.

From happy-futures to caring-futures

This paper argues for the promotion of care in the historic-present alongside obligations to the future in urban greening renewal. Greening transformations inhabit imagined futures that don't yet exist but nevertheless harness enduring attachments to utopian happy-futures that render injustice and inequity moot. The implications of this happy-future is that all investment in care for others is contingent upon that future's arrival. An important question for policymakers and planners is: what becomes of responsibility in happy-future-projects when their specifications are undeliverable – when imagined futures are compromised by delays, modifications and abandonment? This paper suggests that urban greening policy should more meaningfully attend to historical lived experiences of these places. This involves addressing the obvious indicators of injustice – such as health, socio-economic and environmental outcomes – as well as the less obvious effects that manifest in the experiential narratives of residents – smells and non-human illness. Participant interviews foregrounded how residents experience these places and register the effects of their environment. Our reading of these narratives suggests the need for a method of community engagement that is more attuned to the environment's historical and ongoing impact upon life that is accompanied by the adequate remediation of the harmful legacies that are carried by people and place.

Urban greening that follows growth agendas present in orthodox urban renewal projects are at risk of pursuing a cosmetic form of justice. Disadvantaged areas that become greener, attract maintenance and responsibilities for care on the part of local authorities, are often framed as intrinsically good. However, green renewal fails to consider residents' social vulnerabilities to exclusion in the very spaces that are said to be designed for them (Pearsall, 2010), further exacerbating gentrification. Urban greening is an important response to climate change and increased calls for urban sustainability; however, without scrutiny and care such projects can easily veer back to business-as-usual. This means that urban greening can gain tacit approval from local populations that often rationalises more capital-centred approaches as well as optimistic notions of wellbeing. Indeed, we are critical of the current absence in the environmental justice scholarship that fails to account for the difference in lived experiences of wellbeing and wellbeing as an ideal objective (Edwards et al., 2015). As a policy fix supported by government, partners and development agencies, and uncritically analysed in urban research (Anguelovski et al., 2018; Porter et al., 2020), urban greening projects may carry burdens – of environmental and social injustice in present-day populations – that are not properly accounted for in the rush to the future.

Urban greening transformations entangle both notions of wellbeing and futurity, positioning the future as the primary spacetime of wellbeing. In doing so, projects may defer obligations to environmental justice in the present, and harness affect to facilitate imagined futures devoid of negativity. The danger for redevelopment partners and populations that stand to benefit from urban greening, is that any adjustment to the imaginary risks the attainment of wellbeing. For bodies that endure the negative effects of contaminated landscapes, there is a risk that the desired future was conceptualised without their specific wellbeing in mind. Wellbeing therefore becomes conditional upon one's capacity to attain proximity to a narrowly defined future space. This paper argues that the identification of social and environmental injustice should catalyse an ethics of care that attends to present conditions rather than a speculative happy-future wellbeing.

Notes

1. Partnership including Brimbank City Council, City West Water, Melbourne Water, Development Victoria, the Victorian Government Department of Environment, Land, Water and Planning (DELWP), and Greenfleet Australia.
2. Ethics approval October 2016 (CHEAN B 0000020416–09/16).

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