

## The Mythology of Absence: David Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street* and Stefan Ackerie's 'Skynedle'

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ABSTRACT: The folkloric power of place cannot be underestimated. This article examines the importance of David Malouf's childhood home in South Brisbane—12 Edmonstone Street—in shaping the imagination of one of Australia's most celebrated writers. It also addresses another very different kind of South Brisbane architectural site, hairdresser Stefan Ackerie's phallic Skynedle. What will be considered is how Malouf's now long destroyed weatherboard home preserves the sheen of mythology, whereas Ackerie's all too visible Skynedle short circuits the very possibility of being legendary because of its vertical omnipresence.

### *The Childhood Home*

In David Malouf's short story *12 Edmonstone Street* he lovingly recalls the contours of his childhood place. His memories of the weatherboard beginnings of his South Brisbane dwelling read like a eulogy to something precious that is now lost. As he puts it:

The house I lived in as a child is no longer there. Like most of old South Brisbane it has been torn down and a factory stands on the site, part of a process that had already begun when I first knew the area more than forty years ago.<sup>1</sup>

The absence now of 12 Edmonstone Street gives Malouf the liberty to re-construct it as a place of great mnemonic power. Thus its material non-existence enables a mythology to be spun around its original moorings. Malouf is very aware of this. He is also conscious of the efficacy of being shaped by early memories of spaces and rooms, verandahs and latticework designs that bind him to his home of origin. The physical features of Malouf's childhood abode become a synecdoche for a wider world:

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<sup>1</sup> David Malouf, *12 Edmonstone Street* (Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1985), p. 3. Hereafter all references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the essay.

...it is this whole house whole I want to go back to and explore, rediscovering, room by room, what it was that I first learned there about how high, how wide the world is, how one space opens into another, and from the objects those rooms contained, and the habits and uses they were caught up in (including the forbidden ones), what kind of reality I had been born into, that body of myths, beliefs, loyalties, anxieties, affections that shapes life, and whose outline we enter and outgrow. (p. 12)

In wishing to re-discover his old home before its division into separate sections—notably the housekeeper Cassie’s section of the house—what is conveyed is the desire for an original wholeness. Such a drive is deeply entwined within a process of memory where every nook and cranny of the dwelling is imaginatively restored. His early sense of a wider world that is vast and open is encouraged by childhood memories of spaces that are large, dark and sometimes tantalisingly ‘forbidden’. In remembering the physical reality of a home he ‘had been born into’ we are encouraged to imagine the figure of a small child trying to navigate expansive distances. The scale between the body of a child and that of a vast architectural site could well be the difference between Melbourne and the Gulf of Carpentaria. But of course, this is an exaggeration.

The epic scale of Robert O’Hara Burke’s and William John Wills’s ambitious and tragic exploration to the Centre, ingrained in Australian folklore, has nonetheless the capacity to encourage analogy no matter how hyperbolic. However, Malouf does want us to imagine his home as a large territory requiring a legendary form of psychological exploration. Unlike the journeys of many audacious 19th century explorers, the child in *12 Edmonstone Street* does conquer his landscape. We learn that the rooms and spaces he grew-up in are also the places he grows out of. The objects within the house evoke a mixture of feelings, ‘loyalties, anxieties, affections’ that fill the contours of his childhood. The word ‘myth’ in the passage is especially important in alerting us to the writer’s intention of developing a mythology around the first objects and spaces of his experience.

### *Re-crossing Boundaries*

Before the child in him can outgrow his beloved home he must first retrace its lineaments and rooms. 12 Edmonstone Street is re-approached as if he is entering it like a stranger. The journey begins from the street:

You approach it from the street via a set of concrete steps. Stained ox-blood red, they rise between grass slopes, no more than twelve feet wide from verandah stump to low street wall, green from constant sprinkling and perfectly trimmed at the edge. The wall has pillars topped with

painted spheres and linked with chains that passing larrikins are inclined to swing, though we, obediently, do not. (p. 13)

Malouf's use of the second person, in 'you approach it from the street', invites us into the private sphere of his dwelling. The choice of the pronoun 'you' also provides a sense of anonymity where much like the 'larrikins' who to rattle the chains of its exterior, we too are positioned outside. There is a dual sense of intimacy and anonymity captured in the second person pronoun that could refer to anyone, including Malouf or the many visitors who are 'entertained on the verandah' (p. 13). The extraordinary detail in remembering concrete steps that are 'stained ox-blood red' and a 'low street wall' that retains a blush green shade, because of a sprinkling system that touches upon a newly mown lawn, offers a memorable picture, one that is also olfactory in evoking the smell of freshly cut grass.

#### *Our Role?*

As strangers, visitors or intimates we approach Malouf's home gradually in learning that its verandah door is made of lattice and is painted a brilliant white. We also learn that the front verandah operates as 'an invisible barrier', one where 'children are forbidden to pass' (p. 17). The forbidden is exciting to the child and so its tiny body crosses the barrier in search of discovering 'at least one mystery' the other side might yield (p. 18). To the child's disappointment, 'there is no mystery', only an unfamiliar smell that is identified with a 'jar of Pond's cold cream' (p. 19). The housekeeper named Cassie occupies the off limits side of the verandah and she is associated 'with things to eat' and so the child guilelessly gobbles down the face cream to its 'last sickly dollop' (p. 19).

#### *The Role of the Verandah*

We are informed that the child and his sister sleep in 'home-made cots on the verandah' and this kind of bedroom is not appreciated since it is not considered part of the real house (pp. 19-20). Instead it is perceived as a public space where travelling salesmen spruik their wares and where visitors who are not quite on intimate terms with the family sit and are provided with refreshments. It is decided that verandahs in general are a 'no-man's-land border zone' that keeps contact with the house and its activities while also remaining detached and open to the public street, and to dark nights whose mysteries extend beyond the material boundaries of the home (p. 20).

The child of *12 Edmonstone Street* seeks to reject his verandah bedroom. Many times in the night he crosses its border in gaining access to the heart of the house, only to awaken in the morning restored within the verandah's threshold. Perhaps what is so unsettling to the young Malouf, sectioned to sleeping in this border zone, is the ambivalence of occupying a space that is also traversed by strangers. The sense of being cast out is likened to being abandoned in a rainforest where wild stag horns grow. The fernery space is especially scary to the child since its location is very close to his cot on the verandah. The proximity of the fernery is a source of anxiety. The nightmare image of stag horns as 'huge blunt-nosed decapitations' that 'go too far back to the primordial damp and breath of things' captures a genuine fear of the unknown (p. 19). Yet what a magical place to grow up in, where ancient plants grow alongside plaited latticework features in forming a porous world that protects, exposes and feeds the child's imagination.

#### *The Sense Perception of the House*

Malouf's ability to re-enter his childhood home is extraordinarily poetic in its detailed recollection of odours, colours and shapes that open across horizontal territories and distinctive furnishings such as wicker chairs, cane lounges and venetians. The numerous friends, visitors, and door-to-door salesmen that temporarily occupy this space are also aesthetic features that make-up the distinctive character of *12 Edmonstone Street*, both as a novel and an address.

What is called up is a world long gone: a sphere of enchantment and mystery that has, sadly, disappeared. The frightening fernery, whose primordial plants grow close to the sleeping child, is especially memorable in evoking the ancient native landscape that distinguishes southeastern Queensland from the rest of Australia (and indeed, the world). The generosity and complex tapestry of Malouf's luscious vision can be distinguished from the bareness of another South Brisbane architectural site, Stefan Ackerie's Skyneedle.

#### *Stefan's Skyneedle*

The Skyneedle first came into being at Brisbane's World Exposition in 1988. To be more precise, it was constructed for that event. Like its name, it is a long, thin and circular structure, 88 metres in height. At the very top, it has a light that is believed to be visible from more than 60 kilometres away. Developed for Brisbane's coming out world event in 1988, afterwards it was going to be relocated to Tokyo's Disneyland. But Brisbane hairdresser Stefan Ackerie disrupted the transfer. He wanted to own the structure and to turn it into vertical advertisement. Notably, his signature rainbow rings were added to the top of the tower, evoking his

business interests and spreading the news of his wealth and celebrity status.

### *Contrasts*

No architectural site could be more antithetical to Malouf's long demolished Edmonstone Street home, the location of which was a matter of only 100 metres or so from where the Skyneedle now stands. The difference in the structures is not just about the disparity of their forms, one a rambling home and the other a vertical spear-like emblem: it also involves their relationship to the wider symbolic world of Brisbane's history and storytelling. Stefan's Skyneedle and Malouf's weatherboard home tell very different stories.

One story revolves around the fact that the Skyneedle, unlike 12 Edmonstone Street, has its own Wikipedia page. It is recognised on the radar of Google Earth as a significant Brisbane site, whereas there is no entry for Malouf's childhood home. When you type into Google's search engine the name '12 Edmonstone Street', what comes up is not Malouf's home but his short story about it. Without Malouf's literary rendering of this dwelling it would be exiled and erased like so many other weatherboard structures in Brisbane. The Skyneedle's electronic existence is also not made synonymous with its owner, Stefan, whereas 12 Edmonstone Street's existence is anchored within the fame of its author.

What also distinguishes 12 Edmonstone Street from the Skyneedle is that the former is a domestic space and the latter is a public structure. Perhaps the privacy of Malouf's home might in part explain its physical and electronic absence, as well as its lack of symbolic importance. The tall, phallic structure of the Skyneedle, which can also function as a faux lighthouse, is proudly welcomed as one of Brisbane's very public structures.

It is also reasonable to speculate that Brisbane's Skyneedle attempts to imitate Seattle's 1962 World's Fair Space Needle. Certainly the name alone is reminiscent of Seattle's observation tower and its shape is close enough to bear more than a passing resemblance. Also, the fact that both structures were built for the purpose of celebrating world events is enough to assume that it is more likely than not a feeble attempt to replicate an impersonal and distant structure. One might wonder then why Brisbane has to duplicate the structures of other cities. The mimicking of overseas buildings can include adopting famous names such as Gold Coast's *Sands* apartments, or Surfer's Paradise *Monte Carlo* resort. Of course, the Gold Coast is not Brisbane, but it is only 94 kilometres away and has operated as the older city's expanding identity for decades now.

### *All Too Visible*

Functioning as a nighttime lighthouse, the Skyneedle sheds light as well as being a daytime monument, whose visibility is omnipresent. Having been purposely built for Brisbane's 1988 Expo, it will forever be associated with the city's debut on the world stage.

Indeed, throughout the ensuing decade—the 1990s—an era marking the twentieth century's finale, Brisbane locals and journalists alike often referred to Expo 88 as the defining moment, when Brisbane became a global city.<sup>2</sup> The Skyneedle's preservation operates as a visible reminder of Brisbane's apparent coming of age.

The question is: can this structure signify a city's coming of age? The grey contours of its thin circularity seems to evoke a town still coming to terms with its identity. The fact that journalists from commercial media organisations such as Channel 9's current weatherman, Garry Youngberry, have courted it as it was featured in one of his television broadcasts, testifies to its mass appeal as a narrow vertical structure. The Skyneedle may attract the attention of hairdressers, reporters and children—remember it was intended to be a feature at Tokyo's Disneyland—but it does not invite literary attention or speculation. Instead it testifies to a fear expressed in Malouf's coming of age novel *Johnno*—that by living elsewhere than Brisbane, one 'might pass for a serious adult.'<sup>3</sup> Part of the anxiety expressed in Malouf's first work of prose fiction is the idea that living out one's life in Australia's southeastern capital will turn one into 'an aging child'. The narrator-character who expresses this fear is called Dante, who wonders if staying too long in Brisbane would extend his adolescence. Famously, he says: 'I might grow old in Brisbane but I would never grow up' (p. 144).

### *Another Moment of Brisbane's Growth*

As recently as late this year, the G20 summit was touted as another key moment testifying to Brisbane's adulthood. Premier Campbell Newman is reported to have compared it in significance to Expo 88, asserting: 'it's going to be the biggest party since Expo 88.'<sup>4</sup> Likening Expo and the G20 to a big party has a tendency to undo the idea that these events prove Brisbane's maturity. Indeed the image of hosting one of the world's biggest parties suggests that there is more than a glimmer

<sup>2</sup> See the *Brisbane Times* where Lord Mayor Graham Quirk is quoted for asserting the Expo was 'Brisbane's defining moment' in bringing the world and world class events to the city.' Accessed January 26 2014: <http://www.brisbanetimes.com.au/queensland/expo-88-babies-all-grown-up-20130427-2im9j.html>

<sup>3</sup> David Malouf, *Johnno*, Ringwood, Vic: Penguin, 1976), p. 144. Hereafter further references to this edition will appear parenthetically in the text.

<sup>4</sup> *The Sunshine Coast Daily*, Accessed January 26 2014: <http://www.sunshinecoastdaily.com.au/news/g20-brisbanes-biggest-party-expo/2221371/>

of adolescence partying still dwelling within the canopy of Queensland's Southeastern capital.

The stubborn visibility of the Skyneedle operates as a reminder of what is valued and preserved. Even as far back as 1975, when Malouf's novel *Johnno* was first published, he predicted that his hometown would fall victim to the whims of political movers and moneymaking developers: as Dante said of Brisbane, 'nothing seemed permanent' (p. 83). The political cliché of destroying old buildings in the name of progress is a misguided mantra. Destroying heritage buildings—which was done regularly during Joh Bjelke-Peterson's almost 20-year reign—was a wrong that arguably Brisbane has not yet recovered from.

Malouf's *12 Edmonstone Street*, first published in 1985 at the height of the Joh Bjelke-Petersen era, carries a sad wisdom in acknowledging the destruction of grand old houses for the quick money of factories and commercial companies. Another story of Brisbane exists, submerged from what it has lost or allowed to be torn down.

#### *And The Mythology of Absence*

While the Skyneedle stands erect and is a reminder of Expo 88 and of the hairdresser who claimed it before it could become a fixture in a children's wonderland, Malouf's family home has long been destroyed and replaced by a dull industrial setting. The invisibility of Malouf's childhood home enables him to remember it with fondness, and with more than a pinch of nostalgia. Its lack of presence makes it all the more haunting and powerful as a place that thwarts reality.

In conjuring up a world that no longer exists, Malouf makes us desire this world because it promises to bring beauty and magic into the ordinariness of our present lives. There is a strong mythology evoked through the absence of 12 Edmonstone Street. Its non-presence is well compensated for by a short story that restores it room by room. The home is imaginatively reborn as living body that gave birth to one of Australia's most celebrated writers.

In a very different way to Malouf's home, Stefan's Skyneedle also challenges reality, not because it is absent, but rather for its childish simplicity. Age has not been kind to it. In fact today it is hardly noticeable in a cluttered skyline. To some extent, its South Brisbane moorings enable it to remain relatively distinctive on the other side of the river. However, its distinctiveness comes across as more of a shabby beacon of 1980s kitsch than a sign of Brisbane's cosmopolitanism. One might wonder why such a gimmicky structure remains while so many elegant ones have fallen?

*Milestones Almost Forgotten*

What comes to mind in thinking about the erasure of so many stylish buildings is the destruction of the dancehall 'Cloudland' that was first resurrected in 1940. This dancehall was not only famous for its signature parabolic arched roof, but it also brought together countless couples who went on to marry and give birth to many Queenslanders alive today. Ugly apartments that do not even look out to a view of the river and the city have long since replaced its hilltop location on the edge of a cliff at Bowen Hills. In 1982, in the reign of Joh Bjelke-Peterson's government, developers tore it down. Looking out to the Bowen Hills cliff-top today where Cloudland used to stand, one's vision is disappointed by the dreariness of cheap housing. Again why do such superficial structures such as the Skyneedle and cheaply made housing remain while the majesty of Cloudland is long gone? The answer, too often, is power and money.

What cannot be bought is a literary sensibility that lies beneath the stone and mortar, wood and caprice of Brisbane's built environment. The heart of the city is still yet to be revealed as colonial buildings joust with modern structures in trying to hold attention and admiration. Perhaps there is no heart to this new city only a restlessness that searches for place and peace. Dwelling for a while within the pages of *12 Edmonstone Street* grants a temporarily a peace and wisdom that no physical structure is yet to come close to realising.

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