

10 The Memory Line: Art In Suburban Ecologies

MICHAELIE CRAWFORD AND JENNIFER TURPIN

Restoring the Waters is a model environmental rehabilitation project which aims to restore Clear Paddock Creek, a concrete canal in Sydney's western suburbs, to a natural creek system. The original creek was replaced in the 1970s with a storm water canal typical of the concrete channels that have usurped creeks throughout the contemporary urban environment. (Figure 10.1) This engineering expediency has undermined the complexities of fragile ecosystems and made storm water a major pollutant of our waterways and oceans. By contrast, natural creek systems sustain biological diversity and wildlife habitats and are superior managers of the quantity and quality of urban storm water. (Figure 10.2)

The Memory Line community and environmental art project for *Restoring the Waters* developed as a response to the cultural amnesia that had resulted from the erasure of the creek and its attendant ecosystem. Initial consultation revealed that many in the community, particularly younger or more recent residents, did not realise that a creek pre-existed the canal. Somehow a concrete storm water canal had become 'natural'. This response is symptomatic of a broader collective memory loss as the natural environment is displaced by the ever-encroaching suburban sprawl.

The Memory Line project incorporated both an ephemeral environmental artwork and a community art project that involved over a thousand members of the local community, including hundreds of school children. Much of the intent of these projects will find

permanent form in the proposed second stage environmental artwork, *The Remembering Line*, which will be built as part of the restoration of the creek and its surrounding landscape.

Central to the overall project is the belief that to understand why and what we hope to restore in the future, we have to understand what we have lost from the past. Both 'lines' are based on the joint premise of creating community involvement and developing cultural memory. They seek to create a deeper understanding of, and responsibility to, our natural environment through a close engagement of the community in the making of the artworks. To that end they aim to invoke



FIGURE 10.1

The Memory Line, view of *The Memory Line* and the existing canal, Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, 1996, ryecorn grass, 1 m x 4 m x 2.7 km, Clear Paddock Creek, Fairfield, Sydney. Photograph: J. Turpin

right: **FIGURE 10.2**

The Memory Line, view of the canal easement. Photograph: I. Hobbs



centre: **FIGURE 10.3**

The Memory Line in its context. Photograph: B. Royal



below right: **FIGURE 10.4**

The Memory Line is intersected by the road. Photograph: I. Hobbs



community memory through the creation of ecological and cultural memorials. (Figure 10.3) Together these principles mark the significance of the site, celebrate community action through events and create installations that seek to foster the healing of the disturbed relationship between urban communities and their natural environments.

'Nature' is often thought of as separate to human culture and outside the urban context. In *Restoring the Waters* the rehabilitation of Clear Paddock Creek to a 'natural' ecology necessarily engages in the nature–culture dichotomy. Here nature, far from being 'out there', resides between the backyards of suburban culture. The art project sought to creatively elaborate on the relationship, rather than the schism, between the cultures of 'nature' and 'suburbia' so as to explore and celebrate the possibilities of the eclectic nature of our contemporary urban ecologies. (Figure 10.4)

The Memory Line marked, in tall rye grass, the last of the ever-changing meandering lines of the original Clear Paddock Creek before its destruction in the 1970s. Over a metre tall, four metres wide and almost three kilometres long, it snaked along the canal easement in stark contrast to the hard straight line of the concrete channel that it intermittently crossed. (Figure 10.5)

Its growth, over an eight month lifespan, was an ongoing event, a collaborative performance between the local community and nature. Members of the community marked the line, prepared the soil and sowed the crop. Some even harvested sections of it. Its ephemeral presence graphically marked the change in the seasons as the first shoots grew tall and brilliant green, then dried to a golden yellow before being returned to enrich the soil. Its cultivation was reminiscent of the rural interface between people and nature. In this suburban harvest the 'crop' was a deeper understanding and enriched memory of our relationship to the natural environment.

The Memory Line is a potent symbol, a line that became the thread between a destroyed past and a rehabilitated future. It has become the interface between two versions of natural — an 'original' natural and a 'restored' or 'reconstructed' natural. Like *The Memory Line* the new creek will always be a 'cultivated' creek. It is important that the restored creek is recognised as such, so that we can acknowledge and learn from the shifting paradigms within our society that are embedded in its history. The insistence on the difference between these understandings of 'natural', honours nature before the ravages of urbanisation, and in some way highlights remnants that have survived elsewhere in the city. It also acknowledges the superiority of a well-managed 'natural' system over engineered solutions and values society's vision that has sought to return modified natural systems.

Fairfield's 'Festival of the Waters' inaugurated *The Memory Line* and celebrated the community's enormous involvement in the project. (Figures 10.6, 10.7) All the works, including sculptures, stories, masks, murals and banners were engaged in marking the importance of water in our lives and specifically in the issues surrounding the razing and restoration of Clear Paddock Creek. The spirit of the projects was distilled in *In the Stream*,

FIGURE 10.5
The Memory Line, aerial view.
Photograph: I. Hobbs



right: **FIGURE 10.6**
'Festival of the Waters', Fairfield.
Photograph: B. Royal



below right: **FIGURE 10.7**
In The Stream, 'Festival of the Waters', students from St Johns Park Public School and St Johns Park High, coordinated by Jennifer Turpin and Michaelie Crawford, 1996, Clear Paddock Creek, Fairfield, western Sydney.
Photograph: B. Royal



a 50 metre long installation of over 400 creek creatures suspended across the concrete canal. The creatures, made by local school children, represented the native aquatic animals that would once have inhabited Clear Paddock Creek. The community thus returned the creatures to their past and future habitat in a symbolic installation that remembered what had been lost and destroyed by us and celebrated the shared enterprise of its restoration in the future. (Figure 10.8)

Just as it was important to remember the original Clear Paddock Creek in *The Memory Line*, it will also be important not to obliterate yet another layer of cultural experience with the total eradication of the concrete canal. The Remembering Line will be a permanent memorial to the interweaving of cultural and ecological stories that are essential to the creek's and canal's history. When Clear Paddock Creek and its surrounding landscape is restored, *The Remembering Line* will mark the entire length of the concrete canal that is buried beneath it. The significance of the artwork will lie as much in its sculptural expression as in the community event that will help create it. (Figure 10.9)

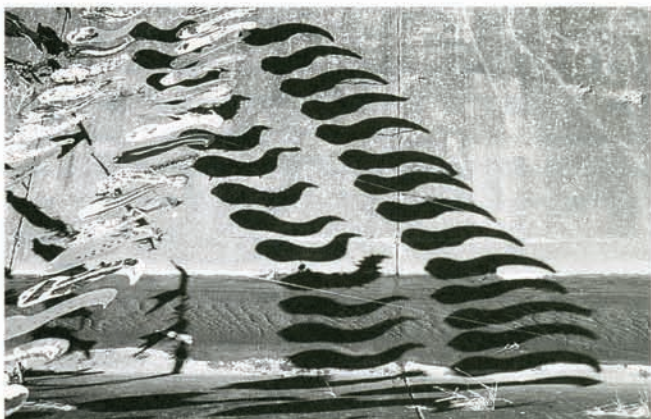
The environmental art projects engage a yearning for nature felt by many, alienated in contemporary urban environments. While marking what has been lost in a very real form, *The Memory Line* is also importantly about the poetics of place. As it sprawled across the entire length of the landscape incised by the canal its meandering form suggested a journey, an intimate movement through a broad landscape where the wind through the grass could create an empathetic reverie in the mind. That intuitively felt relationship between the natural world and ourselves should be honoured and fostered because it is at the heart of what will help us heal some of the damage we have wrought on nature. (Figure 10.10)

Project Coordinators	Schaffer Barnsley Landscape Architects.
Artists	Michaelie Crawford and Jennifer Turpin.
Project Contributors	Fairfield City Council
	St Johns Park High School
	St Johns Park Public School
	King Park Public School
	CSA Training Services
	Fairfield Liverpool Youth Health Team
	Greenfield Park Community Centre
	Fairfield Regional Heritage Centre
	Charlie Wells, Millie Davies and Diane Smith
	The Georges River Education Centre
	Fairfield Community Arts Network
	Arts Alive.

right: FIGURE 10.8
In The Stream, detail in the canal.
 Photograph: B. Royal



centre: FIGURE 10.9
In The Stream, detail of canal
 creatures. Photograph: B. Royal



below right: FIGURE 10.10
In The Stream, detail of
 butterflies. Photograph: B. Royal

