The Afterlife of Disasters: Remembering Home in a Suburban Landscape Transformed by Bushfire

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A devastating firestorm destroyed hundreds of homes in the Canberra suburbs in 2003. This paper explores links between recovery, memory and place in the first 12 to 18 months after the fires. In particular, the paper examines how changes to suburban and natural landscapes were understood and experienced by survivors who had either lost their home or were continuing to live within transformed neighbourhoods. The memories of survivors reveal that recovery processes have both a geography and a history. Understanding the long-term impacts of material and spatial change on the lives of survivors is important both to understanding how people recover from bushfire, as well as how to include recovery processes as an element of the written history of disaster.

INTRODUCTION

In January 2003, devastating bushfires burnt across farms, forestry areas and regional communities in the Australian Capital Territory and nearby areas of New South Wales, culminating in a firestorm that entered the suburbs of Canberra and destroyed hundreds of homes. The firestorm ripped through bushland, pine plantations and adjacent suburban streets with terrifying speed. Tree-filled neighbourhoods, which had afforded residents a sense of living within nature while just minutes from the city, were devastated by the flames. In the days and weeks after the

firestorm, many survivors expressed determination to rebuild and restore their lost homes. Yet, rebuilding and regrowth did not restore the pre-fire appearance of lost spaces. Instead, recovering neighbourhoods were transformed into something new. The ways in which survivors remembered lost homes and understood their altered suburbs suggest both the blurry spatial boundaries of home and the long afterlife of disaster. Memories of loss were etched into the landscape in lasting ways, leaving survivors to rebuild a sense of home in a space that was permanently changed by fire.

In 2004 and 2005, the National Library of Australia commissioned a series of oral history interviews with survivors of the ACT firestorm.[1] Undertaken by oral historian Mary Hutchison, these interviews explore memories of life in Canberra and the ACT before the fires, the events of the firestorm itself, and the longer-term impacts of the disaster in the 12 to 18 months leading up to the interview. These longer-term impacts suggest the uncertain temporalities of disaster history and the value in tracing a disaster's lingering material, affective and emotional meanings. Although the media often positions disasters as temporally discrete events and moves on quickly to other stories once the immediate catastrophe has begun to fade, oral history interviews allow exploration of a disaster's long afterlife, including interactions between the personal memories of survivors and the material memories found within the landscape.[2]

Oral history interviews with bushfire survivors thus encourage attentiveness to the links between recovery, memory and place.[3] As David Lowenthal argues, 'The past is everywhere … Most past traces ultimately perish, and all that remain are altered.

1 Dr Mary Hutchison recorded 19 interviews with people impacted by the 2003 fires in Canberra, in rural and regional ACT and in nearby areas of NSW. Ten of the interviewees granted permission for me to access and quote from their interviews. I am immensely grateful both to Dr Hutchison and to the interviewees for the extremely informative, moving, evocative and thoughtful recordings they created together.

2 See for example Brian Miles and Stephanie Morse, 'The Role of News Media in Natural Disaster Risk and Recovery', *Ecological Economics* 63, no. 2–3 (2007): 365–73; Penelope Ploughman, 'The American Print News Media "Construction" of Five Natural Disasters', *Disasters* 19, no. 4 (1995): 308–26; Stephen Sloan also notes the important role of oral histories in including voices often missing from media reporting of disasters. See Stephen M. Sloan, 'The Fabric of Crisis: Approaching the Heart of Oral History', in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (eds), Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis (New York: Oxford University Press, 2014), 262–74.

3 For discussion of oral histories of bushfire in Australia, see Peg Fraser, *Black Saturday: Not the End of the Story* (Melbourne: Monash University Press, 2019).

But they are collectively enduring. Noticed or ignored, cherished or spurned, the past is omnipresent'.[4] For survivors of the ACT firestorm, their recovery process took place (or continues to take place) in spaces filled with material reminders, not only of a highly traumatic event, but also of the often fondly remembered homes, neighbourhoods and landscapes lost to the flames. Ideally, recovery might be seen as aligned with a process of rebuilding, in which evidence of the fire's most brutal impacts is gradually replaced with unscarred structures, offering a sense of revival. Equally, fire might be understood less as destructive of the environment, so much as it is regenerative. Across large areas of Australia, fire is an element of natural cycles and is necessary for the reproduction of many plant species.[5] Human recovery is often symbolised with images of this more-than-human renewal, with images of green shoots on burnt trunks suggesting the possibility of return.

Yet, new or renewed residential structures and suburban landscapes also act as reminders of that which they have replaced, symbolising not so much a happy return, but a regrettable substitute. New houses quite simply do not look like the homes they replaced and act as material evidence that post-fire renewal is a process of transformation not restoration. Cultural geographer Alison Blunt describes home as 'an affective space, shaped by everyday practices, lived experiences, social relations, memories and emotions'.[6] It is a space in which memories are stored (both literally and figuratively) and at which identities are attached. The sudden destruction of home is therefore deeply destabilising, producing fears that the memories and identities the space once held have also been destroyed. New houses are evidence both of human capacity to survive tragedy and re-create home, as well as of the fragility of material structures and the history of their destruction in fire.

Compounding this distress for survivors of the ACT firestorm was the deep entwining of landscape, bushland, garden and home in the Canberra suburbs.

4 David Lowenthal, *The Past is a Foreign Country – Revisited* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 1.

5 Tom Griffiths, '"An Unnatural Disaster"? Remembering and Forgetting Bushfire', *History Australia* 6, no. 2 (2009): 35.1–35.7.

6 Alison Blunt, 'Cultural Geography: Cultural Geographies of Home', *Progress in Human Geography* 29, no. 4 (2005): 506.

Landscape historian Andrew MacKenzie argues that many Canberra residents 'don't distinguish between the suburban streetscapes and the urban bush when referring to the character of the city'.[7] In this context, the fire's impacts on the surrounding 'natural' environment were as devastating as the impacts on houses and other dwellings. In many survivor narratives, the borders of their lost home were not defined by the four walls of a house or by garden fences marking a physical boundary, but instead encompassed the surrounding bushland and heavily treed neighbourhood. For those fortunate enough to have saved their house from the flames, feelings of relief and pleasure were tainted with distress for anguished neighbours, ravaged natural surroundings and scarred suburbs. Equally, those rebuilding were conscious that they could reconstruct a house, but not a neighbourhood or a landscape. Would their new house feel like home without the surrounding natural and suburban landscapes within which a sense of home had been created?

The blurry borders of home in the Canberra suburbs equally reveal how nature and society are interwoven and mutually constituted within and by disaster.[8] Disaster researchers in the social sciences have largely rejected the term 'natural disaster', arguing that to describe a disaster as 'natural' is to ignore the pivotal social factors that determine a disaster's impacts and the uneven vulnerability and resilience of social groups.[9] Instead, disasters triggered by natural hazards, such as bushfires, cyclones or floods, can be better understood as occurring at the nexus of the natural and the social. Oral history is well placed as a method through which to explore the complex and shifting interactions within this nexus.[10] Oral history interviews with survivors of the ACT firestorm make clear how changes to the natural environment

7 Andrew MacKenzie, 'The City in a Fragile Landscape: An Exploration of the Duplicitous Role Landscape Plays in the Form and Function of Canberra in the Twenty First Century', in Andrea Gaynor (ed.), *Urban Transformations: Booms, Busts and other Catastrophes*: *Proceedings of the 11th Australasian Urban History/ Planning History Conference* (Perth: University of Western Australia, 2012), 165.

8 Eleonora Rohland, Maike Böcker, Gitte Cullmann, Ingo Haltermann, and Franz Mauelshagen, 'Woven Together: Attachment to Place in the Aftermath of Disaster, Perspectives from Four Continents', in Mark Cave and Stephen M. Sloan (eds), *Listening on the Edge: Oral History in the Aftermath of Crisis*, 183–206.

9 Benjamin Wisner, Piers M. Blaikie, Terry Cannon and Ian Davis, *At Risk: Natural Hazards, People's Vulnerability and Disasters* (Hove, UK: Psychology Press, 2004).

10 Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall, 'Introduction: Telling Environmental Histories', in Katie Holmes and Heather Goodall (eds), *Telling Environmental Histories: Intersections of Memory, Narrative and Environment* (Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, 2017), 1–27.

and the suburban landscape were among the more significant longer-term impacts of the disaster, while equally suggesting that distinctions between the two are often uncertain at best.

THE CREATION OF 'THE BUSH CAPITAL'

The ACT is located on unceded Ngunnawal, Ngarigu and Ngambri country and Indigenous people's ongoing relationships to this place span across tens of thousands of years. These relationships incorporate very different understandings of the place of fire in the environment, including the role of 'good fire' as a nurturing element of country.[11] Describing Maori relationships to watery landscapes in Aotearoa/New Zealand, geographers Meg Parsons and Karen Fisher argue that for Indigenous people, colonisation was the disaster, not floods, and this description is equally applicable in relation to fire in the Australian context.[12] For Indigenous Australians, the disaster of colonisation is ongoing and relationships to place continue to be entwined with enduring cultural relationships, as well as mourning and memory.

Canberra was established in the early 1900s as the purpose-built capital for a then newly federated nation.[13] In the 120 or so years between the beginnings of white colonisation and the site's selection as the location of the capital, the area had been largely stripped of trees and heavily used for sheep grazing. In 1900, much of south-eastern Australia was in the midst of an extended drought that had, at the Canberra site, contributed to the production of an eroded, dusty and bare expanse infested with rabbits.

Changes were thus necessary if this uninviting landscape was to house the capital of an ambitious, modern nation. The city's architects, Walter and Marion Griffin, saw the natural environment of the site as central to their design plans. Indeed,

11 Victor Steffensen, *Fire Country: How Indigenous Fire Management Could Help Save Australia* (Melbourne: Hardie Grant Publishing, 2020).

12 Meg Parsons and Karen Fisher, 'Decolonising Settler Hazardscapes of the Waipā: Māori and Pākehā. Remembering of Flooding in the Waikato 1900–1950', in Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds), *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020): 159–78.

13 Nicholas Brown, *A History of Canberra* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014).

as asserted by Christopher Vernon, 'the Griffins envisaged Canberra as a designed alternative to urban indifference to the natural'.[14] Walter Griffin was appointed as the federal director of Design and Construction in 1913 and an ambitious program of tree-plantings, developed by the Griffins in collaboration with horticulturalist Charles Weston, was undertaken prior to the construction of the city's major buildings. Weston oversaw the planting of more than two million trees in Canberra and its surrounding hills between 1913 and 1926.

The program included the planting of pine trees on Mt Stromlo in 1915, both for their aesthetic value and with an eye to establishing a future forestry industry.[15] The industry was further developed with the expansion of the Mt Stromlo pine plantation in 1926 and with the planting of pines at Uriarra, Kowen and Pierces Creek later that decade.

In 1920, Walter Griffin lost his official position overseeing the implementation of the Griffins' original design. He was replaced by an advisory board, the Federal Capital Advisory Committee (FCAC), which quickly began to deviate from the Griffins' plans. Grand ambitions began to wane amid budget fears brought on, at least in part, by the costs of World War I. Although the Federal Parliament would open in 1927, a lack of any substantial development saw the nascent city derided as simply a collection of homes for public servants scattered among the trees, leading to the label 'the bush capital'. This would not significantly change until the 1950s, when prime minister Robert Menzies began to advocate for renewed progress. In 1958, he established the National Capital Development Commission (NCDC), which instituted a new plan for a series of suburban centres linked by motorways through bushland, as well as another program of mass tree-plantings. Canberra's western suburbs, including Duffy and Holder, were established adjacent to the Mt Stromlo plantation in the 1970s.

14 Christopher Vernon, 'Canberra: Where Landscape is Pre-eminent', in David Gordon (ed.), *Planning Twentieth Century Capital Cities* (New York: Routledge, 2006), 135.

15 Brendan O'Keefe, *Forest Capital: Canberra's Foresters and Forestry Workers Tell Their Stories* (Canberra: ACT Parks and Conservation Service, 2017).

By 2002, the urban forest within the Canberra city boundaries comprised more than 400,000 trees in a city of around 300,000 residents. In the intervening years, the once derogatory 'bush capital' label had been embraced by locals as an affectionate description for the sprawling city of tree-covered suburbs in which the lines between the city and the bush were successfully blurred.[16]

THE 2003 FIRESTORM

In January 2003, the ACT and large areas of eastern Australia were once again in the midst of an extended drought, resulting in extremely dry conditions ideal for fire. Record level temperatures and low humidity only increased the fire risk. On 8 January, lightning strikes in bushland to the west and south-west of the city ignited two separate fires, which burned across large areas of bush, plantations and rural areas before combining eight days later.[17]

Figure 1 Photo of Woden Town Centre during the height of the 2003 Canberra Firestorm. Photograph by Angelo Tsirekas, CC BY-SA 4.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

16 Vernon, 'Canberra', 147.

17 Ron McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response to the January 2003 Bushfires in the ACT* (Canberra: ACT Government, 2003), 15.

January 18 was another extremely hot day in Canberra. Residents were aware of the fires burning in the hills over preceding days – the smoke could not be ignored. Very few, however, had any sense of their homes being under direct threat. In her interview for the National Library of Australia, Barbara recalled that, although she had been to bushfire preparation classes and was well trained in how to respond to the threat of a fire, a false alarm the previous year had left her cautious about overreacting.[18] She and her husband began to prepare their house, but did not realise the urgency of the situation. Another interviewee, Stanley, was similarly unaware of the degree of risk. Although, as the day progressed, he remembered that the 'physical situation was dark and foreboding' and he was listening to the radio for any warnings, none came.[19] He stated, 'I guess overall I had no obvious indication I needed to get out, so I didn't'. The first official warning was not issued until 1.45pm and was not received by ABC Radio until 2.31pm.[20] By 3pm, several suburbs were on fire.

Although still afternoon, smoke blocked out the sun. Interviewees described a world transformed by heat, wind and roaring noise. Allan and his wife fled their home at the last minute amid terrifying conditions. Remembering the events of that day remained distressing for him, 'Even now, I get very, um, shaky. I weep, I weep a lot'.[21] Sophie was just 13 years old and at home with her mother and younger brother when the fire hit. They prepared the house as best they could and quickly packed, but their garden was already alight. She remembered, 'I was watching things burn. That was pretty nasty. And when we were packing, I was watching things burn'.[22] Barbara was stunned by the speed with which the fire approached, stating, 'Cinders started to rain down and my

18 Barbara Pamphilon, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 9 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/6.

19 Stanley Sismey, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 21 August 2008, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/21.

20 McLeod, *Inquiry into the Operational Response*, 44.

21 Allan Latta, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 29 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/9.

22 Sophie Penkethman, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 12 August 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/11.

god they rained down'.[23] Jane fought the fires alongside her husband in an unsuccessful attempt to save their home. She recalled:

> Suddenly there was this huge roar, just a mighty roar, and a line of conifers along our neighbour's driveway just went. I can still remember the sound, a sort of VWOOMP sound, and I looked and there was this absolute wall of fire going into the sky and then it seemed to move forward and turned into fireworks that just seemed to move forward and land all in a sheet all over our front garden.[24]

Changed weather conditions brought an end to the fires late on 18 January. By that time, four people had died and three more were severely injured. Almost five hundred homes had been destroyed. Around 70 per cent of the ACT had been impacted to some degree, leaving large areas of bushland and pine plantations reduced to blackened trunks and charred ash. Many thousands of animals were killed. Several suburbs in Canberra's west, including Duffy, Chapman and Weston Creek, had been particularly badly hit. In one street in Chapman, 19 of 23 homes were lost. The suburb and its surrounding landscape had been permanently changed.

MEMORY, HOME AND THE ENVIRONMENT

A cherished element of life in the hardest-hit suburbs had been their close proximity to pine plantations and bushland. The neighbourhoods were largely comprised of family homes on large blocks, surrounded by tree-filled gardens. Asked to reflect on their homes before the fires, several interviewees described close – and in some cases lifelong – relationships to the surrounding natural environment. Jane and her husband had built a home in the suburb of Chapman just as the area was being established in the 1970s, and they had raised a family there. She recalled,

> We just thought we were so incredibly lucky. We lived on this acre block, on the edge of the Canberra suburbs backing onto a reserve, and you'd walk up

23 Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

24 Jane Smyth, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 24 September 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/12.

> the back and look down into the Murrumbidgee Valley and the blue Brindabellas and we used to think it was the promised land. And sometimes I'd think I can't believe I'm a twelve-minute drive from the centre of the national capital. It just seemed so amazing that we had city facilities in this beautiful, beautiful place.[25]

Barbara and her husband had first moved to nearby Duffy in the 1970s and she similarly recalled the great pleasures of raising a young family in the area:

> [My husband and I] both really enjoyed sort of the less urban side of the world and here in Duffy we were right on the edge. Our children would very often, from a very young age, just go across the park here into the pine forest with their bikes – for little adventures.[26]

Over the years, the nearby pine plantation had become part of Barbara's everyday routine and memories of morning walks with a neighbour contained a life narrative:

> We had a route that we took through the pine forest for many, many years and then – and we used to jog when we were younger, we would walk and jog, walk and jog. When we got a little bit older and more sensible and stopped jogging, we actually changed the path to go up hills a bit more.[27]

Emma, a university student in her early twenties at the time of the firestorm, had grown up in a home directly opposite a pine plantation and described her cherished connections to the space:

> Just straight opposite from where we were there was sort of a little gate, so we used to just go in [to the forest]. We were discouraged to adventure too far away … there were big trees closest to where we are. So we used to run

25 Jane Smyth, 24 September 2004.

26 Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

27 Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

> around in there, and, you know, pine cone battles and all sort of mischief we used to get up to … Hide and seek was probably the biggest game.[28]

Emma also described her changing relationship to the space as a means of constructing a life narrative, charting her progression through the life course via her differing engagements with the forest. She stated:

> As you get older you perceive things a bit differently so the forest, instead of becoming a play area became an area to walk the dog, to do activities such as running, sort of more a time to be alone, rather than sort of being silly and running around.[29]

The memories of Barbara and Emma reveal the ways in which the borders of their homes were extended into the surrounding landscape through everyday practices.[30] In their memories of walking through the forest, recollections of home and environment were interwoven with memories of passing years and growing maturity. The tree-filled space was not just an attractive backdrop to their life, but was a comforting and essential element of home.

Emma was away from Canberra when the fires struck and returned the next day to find the house she shared with her father destroyed and the surrounding landscape in ashes. She recalled, 'Obviously, looking at the forest was just heartbreaking. It was like looking at another world. To be honest, I didn't even recognise it, just you know, the charred sort of trunks'. The fire had made the forest unfamiliar, leaving the childhood memories attached to the place more precarious.

Barbara's house survived the firestorm, although her sister lost her home in a nearby suburb. Aware of her relative good fortune compared to the losses of others, Barbara struggled with her ability or right to grieve for the pine forest. In the days after the

28 Emma Walter, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 15 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/7.

29 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

30 Blunt, 'Cultural Geography', 506.

fires, she drove to work and found herself in tears on her journey through Duffy and neighbouring Weston Creek. Barbara remembered thinking:

> Oh, poor Weston Creek … It was just like seeing someone hurting … And no pine forest. That's what triggered it. Just looking and thinking 'There's no pine forest!' … And then thinking, four people died, your sister lost her house. It's really not that bad.[31]

Yet, the pine forest had comprised an element of home and the great distress caused by its loss had real and ongoing impacts.

Figure 2 Aftermath of Canberra bushfires in the suburb of Duffy ACT 2003. Photograph by Gregory Heath, CSIRO, CC BY 3.0 https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0, via Wikimedia Commons.

In the days and weeks after the fires, damage to the environment had tangible qualities felt through the body. The once valued sensory impacts of the forest – its smell and sounds, the feel of a breeze blowing through leafy branches – were rapidly transformed. With no trees, there was no birdsong. The wind blew more strongly through

31 Barbara Pamphilon, 9 June 2004.

streets no longer sheltered by surrounding bush. The smell of ash combined with the charred remnants of metal and plastic from burnt cars, houses and other buildings. Jane's distress at the loss of her home was interwoven with her embodied experience of the transformed area. She stated, 'I went through a period of really mourning the environment because it was so awful. I mean it smelt toxic. It was disgusting. It was the most hideous wasteland'. Jane's use of the word 'mourning' again reveals how the landscape was understood, not as simply an attractive view or pleasant surroundings, but as a living entity, damage to which was deeply felt as an emotional and embodied response in the immediate aftermath of fire.

As these mourned spaces were gradually transformed over time, their meanings and uses shifted and yet they maintained important mnemonic resonances. Barbara described how her regular morning walks changed because of a changing landscape that carried memories of fire and a pre-fire world:

> The first couple of weeks, we went to the Duffy School oval and walked around there. It was horrible … I mean you had to walk past all the burnt stuff and then you walked around an oval. Well you see I'd been walking in a pine forest. And it was always cool in summer … So we walked around that oval for only a couple of weeks and we both said, 'This is horrible'. And so we started walking around the edge of the burnt out pine forest … and that was pretty good.[32]

Barbara and her neighbour changed the direction of their walk to include a beautiful view of the city made visible by the fire's removal of trees. Her relationship to that view was uncertain. Some mornings it was lovely, but its relationship to the fire meant that, 'at other times it pisses us off'. The lost forest remained part of Barbara's daily routine. She stated that she still refers to 'walking in the pine forest' each morning, despite the fact that the forest is gone.

32 Barbara Pamphilon, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 23 June 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/6.

As asserted by Butler et al., 'The loss of a familiar landscape is much harder to quantify than more tangible aspects such as economic loss and thus its acceptance as legitimate loss is harder to discuss'.[33] Survivors' memories reveal how damage to a landscape understood as 'natural', however much it had been constructed in the design of the city, had ongoing emotional impacts that played out both through the body and through longer-term relationships to place. Even as adaptations were made to routines and as the most obvious evidence of fire damage began to disappear, the pre-fire landscape remained present through memory.

MEMORY, HOME AND THE NEIGHBOURHOOD

In survivor accounts, the beloved natural environment is often difficult to distinguish from the suburban neighbourhoods within which it was interwoven. Nonetheless, there is value in exploring impacts on the neighbourhood itself, defined here as the streetscape, the types of homes and other structures, and the demography of the suburb. Each of these components of home were highly valued by residents and all were permanently altered by the fire.

Allan had moved with his wife and young daughter to Canberra only 12 months before the fires. They were renting a home, which they had decided to purchase, but it was destroyed in the firestorm. Allan described driving back into the neighbourhood the next day, stating:

> The devastation. We didn't realise it was this bad. We knew it was bad when it was burning but when you come back in the morning and [the fire is] out and daylight and you see what's left, it looked like somewhere over in Iraq or somewhere that's just been bombed out, you know?[34]

The changed neighbourhood in the immediate aftermath prompted constant, and at times surprising, reminders of the fires. Barbara went to bed in her still standing home the night after the disaster, but found that she could not sleep. Streetlights

33 Andrew Butler, Ingrid Sarlov-Herlin, Igor Knez, Elin Angman, Asa Ode Sang and Ann Akerskog, 'Landscape Identity, Before and After a Forest Fire', *Landscape Research* 43, no. 6 (2018): 86.

34 Allan Latta, 29 June 2004.

shone into her bedroom, all of which had been blocked by houses and trees just a couple of nights before. Most of the fences between neighbouring homes were now gone, as were the plants that once provided privacy. While the missing fences at first provided welcome opportunities to connect with neighbours, Barbara recalled:

> Fairly quickly, I wanted the fences back. Every time you made a cup of tea in the kitchen, you felt – I felt – like there were three or four people watching … In our area were the missing houses and missing back gardens … I wanted the fences back. … It was that sense of that community pulling together but also needing some privacy within it.[35]

Barbara longed for a healing of the suburban landscape in which she lived. She planted quick-growing plants to re-establish her garden and to bring some beauty back into her surrounds. She was continuing to live, however, in a distressing space while attempting to recover from a traumatic experience.

As noted above, Barbara expressed uncertainty about mourning her losses in the fire when her house still stood. Often labelled 'survivor guilt', these feelings are commonly identified post-disaster, and include fears that expressing distress at some forms of loss is unwarranted when the losses of others seem somehow more significant.[36] Jane, whose home was destroyed, offered strong words of support to those struggling to deal with neighbourhood and environmental, rather than domestic losses. She argued that such damage should be understood as a devastating impact with long-term consequences for those whose houses remained, stating:

> They had a terrible time too – the people whose houses survived. And they had to go on living there in this awful wasteland. I mean it was horrible. And we'd go out there and we'd have a little cry at our house that no longer existed … But we'd come away thinking, 'Well who are the winners and the

35 Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

36 Christine Eriksen and Carrie Wilkinson, 'Examining Perceptions of Luck in Post-bushfire Sense-making in Australia', *International Journal of Disaster Risk Reduction* 24 (2017): 242–50.

> losers?' Are you a winner if your neighbourhood goes? And you live on this burnt place?[37]

Jane here reveals the often highly difficult geographies of disaster recovery. Survivors were mourning multiple forms of loss while also attempting to recover from traumatic experiences in the midst of a traumatised neighbourhood. Driving to visit the ruins of a destroyed home was not only confronting in terms of facing the ruin itself, but also the embodied process of witnessing damage to multiple homes along the journey through suburban streets.

Over time, the most apparent material evidence of the fire's impacts on the neighbourhood began to disappear. Ruined homes were cleared, leaving empty blocks that slowly began to fill with new houses. The charred stumps of pines and other trees were cleared, leaving empty fields that were gradually repurposed. The former pine plantation at the base of Mt Stromlo, for example, became a mountain biking park and home, several years later, to a memorial site to the fires.[38]

Those who had lost their homes faced the difficult decision of whether to rebuild or to move elsewhere. For some, under-insurance or other factors meant they could not afford to build a new home on their now-empty block. Those who chose to rebuild faced a challenging process of approvals, negotiations with builders and decisions about the kind of home they wanted – or could afford – to build. Jane and her husband ultimately decided that they would move elsewhere, based largely on the view that, while a new house could be built, it could never return them to the neighbourhood they had loved. She recalled:

> And then there was a sense later that the neighbourhood had gone; that we wouldn't all be going back. And if we went back it wouldn't be the same

37 Jane Smyth, 24 September 2004.

38 For discussion of the memorial: Scott McKinnon, 'Placing Memories of Unforgettable Fires: Official Commemoration and Community Recovery After the 2003 ACT Firestorm', in Scott McKinnon and Margaret Cook (eds), *Disasters in Australia and New Zealand: Historical Approaches to Understanding Catastrophe* (Singapore: Palgrave MacMillan, 2020), 59–76; Susan Nicholls, 'Disaster Memorials as Government Communication', *Australian Journal of Emergency Management* 21, no. 4 (2006): 36–43.

> and we'd be in different houses. We weren't going back to an established neighbourhood where people mowed lawns and waved to each other. We were going back – if we did – to building sites and makings of gardens and starting all over again. So that realisation all came slowly.[39]

Others decided to negotiate the process of starting again in the same place. Emma's father, for example, immediately decided to rebuild their home, a process that was underway at the time of her interview. Emma expressed some concern about returning to the space, stating:

> I don't know what's going to happen moving back and whether it's going to be a strange experience. I mean, basically it's the same plan as the old home but it's a totally different home, different things. I mean, same area but I really don't know what to expect. Whether or not that's going to create any problems or anything. It'll be an interesting experience but I just, I mean I hope that, you know, it can be someplace where I can be comfortable and call it home again. But that may take a while because it is different and the area's different and there are a few different neighbours now and it will take a while but I think we'll get there.[40]

A significant element of Emma's concern centred on the role of memory in creating home, and the ways in which that memory extended into both the natural environment and the suburban neighbourhood. She noted,

> And obviously I do miss the forest and the area, um, I miss getting away from things and taking the dog for a walk and just not thinking about things. Or use that as a way to think about things. And I just miss I guess the safety and security of an area that's familiar to you.[41]

39 Jane Smyth, interviewed by Mary Hutchison, Canberra, 1 October 2004, Canberra Bushfires 2003 Oral History Project, National Library of Australia (NLA), TRC 5105/12.

40 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

41 Emma Walter, 15 June 2004.

The fire disrupted the material connections that had interwoven the familiar space, the everyday practices that made the space home, and the memories that the space held. The gradual process of repair and rebuilding offered a complex mix of both assurance – that things could get better and life could go on – but also sadness – that the former places of security were gone forever.

Living in the disaster zone, Barbara witnessed gradual changes to the neighbourhood over time, some of which were reassuring, some deeply disappointing. She stated, 'Every little improvement to the suburb is valued, but it also points out what has been lost. It's a bitter-sweet type of thing'. Barbara's experience of the changed neighbourhood reveals the firestorm's long afterlife, in that the apparent impacts of fire may no longer be visible, and yet the new structures that took their place still comprised constant reminders of change. Describing her neighbourhood 18 months after the fire, she stated:

> The new Duffy is a mixture of really good and really bad … It's wonderful that there are blocks of land now for young families … But equally so, there are people who have bought blocks of land as speculators and built these godawful things … There are these big, two-storey, ugly buildings that use every inch of the land and so it's all house … that's what I hate.[42]

Barbara reflected on the desire to return to familiar spaces, which provided secure memories of life before the fires. Yet those spaces were no longer available and return to the pre-fire neighbourhood was not possible. She expressed concern for people returning to the suburb and moving into newly rebuilt houses, describing the process of rebuilding home as deeply challenging:

> And that everywhere you look there's a loss. And I guess that's one of the harder things of living in the suburb is everywhere you look is a loss. Now, I've been lucky that I've stayed in the suburb and I've had a long and gradual awareness of that. But for somebody who's had to put all of the energy into rebuilding a house and all of those decisions and then to move in – phew,

42 Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

> and relax and I'm back – then, I think, it becomes stronger and stronger to them in a bit of an impact that it's not the place. It's not – it's not what I wanted. It's not home.[43]

CONCLUSION

Attending to the spatial, material and emotional afterlife of a disaster offers important lessons both for understandings of recovery processes and for incorporating those processes within the written history of disasters. In the words of geographer Stewart Williams, 'I caution against dismissing any disaster as ever fully over, gone or driven from the landscape … and instead suggest exploring it as a possibly more enduring presence'.[44] In the suburbs of Canberra, even as bare blocks were repopulated and trees regrew, their new forms and altered materialities carried continued reminders of the firestorm and of the cherished neighbourhood it replaced.

For survivors, slow and often difficult recovery processes were undertaken within the context of this transformed, now precarious landscape. Reid and Beilin argue that, 'people's longing to restore a sense of safety, security and constancy – is an often overlooked aspect in post disaster policy and practice'.[45] What these stories of ACT fire survivors highlight is that the search for constancy and security takes place in spaces defined by change. This includes both the changes initially triggered by the flames – the destroyed buildings and blackened forests – but also the new structures and environments that replaced them. The shiny homes that gradually dotted the suburb in some senses symbolised resilience and recovery. And yet they also contained memories of the disaster. The new suburb was as much a product of the fires as were the charred ruins that it replaced.

For many survivors, the tree-filled landscape of their neighbourhoods had provided a sense of security, of familiarity, and had contained memories either of happier times

43 Barbara Pamphilon, 23 June 2004.

44 Stewart Williams, 'Rendering the Untimely Event of Disaster Ever Present', *Landscape Review* 14, no. 2 (2012): 86.

45 Karen Reid and Ruth Beilin, 'Making the Landscape "Home": Narratives of Bushfire and Place in Australia', *Geoforum* 58 (2015): 97.

or of comforting spaces through which difficult times had been endured. Indeed, the landscape had been an element of home. After the fires, the transformed landscape contained new, often difficult or even traumatic memories. These memories have their own history that entwines with the history of the Canberra suburbs, with the environmental history of the ACT, and with the lives of the individuals who survived the fires. Ultimately, listening to survivor accounts reveals the value in looking beyond histories of disaster as temporally discrete events and in tracing a disaster's enduring impacts on landscapes, homes and lives.