

# Rendering the Untimely Event of Disaster Ever Present

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So-called ‘natural’ disasters are an integral part of the Australian landscape, with the nation being celebrated as a land of fire and flooding rains. Yet extreme events do not often impact directly on most Australians. A disaster, by definition, comprises relatively exceptional phenomena. It is often experienced as a mediated product and representation of something that has already happened and is now a fading memory or a threat looming closer, perhaps, but always still to come. The disaster is no longer or not yet present in the landscape and is thus located elsewhere, relegated to the past or the future.

The absence rather than presence of such events is no more evident than in the way they are handled in the conception as well as actual practice of disaster management. The common approach is generic in that four main stages are identified, with preparation and planning for a possible event and then response and recovery should it ever arrive (Williams, 2008; Williams, et al, 2009). Whilst rarely remarked, there seems to be a process of foreclosure at work here, refusing to let the horrendous blot that is a disaster remain on the landscape for any length of time beyond what is deemed absolutely necessary. The associated ‘before’ and ‘after’ periodisation dominates how we might engage with an event, encouraging its erosion from the here and now. Referring to ‘post-disaster landscapes’ also contributes to such a temporal ordering.

I caution against dismissing any disaster as ever fully over, gone or driven from the landscape, however, and instead suggest exploring it as a possibly more enduring material presence. I start with a review of the spatio-temporal understandings of landscape in relevant disciplines as they have shifted from the fixity of framing to a fluidity of feeling. I note how some of the most significant bushfires over recent decades in south-eastern Australia still tend conversely and quite problematically to get ‘fixed’ in time and space as elsewhere in the past with, subsequently, limited connection to any here and now. Responding to this concern, I document and reflect on the temporal phenomena of one particular bushfire-affected landscape with a meditative sojourn along Old Farm Road in South Hobart, Tasmania.

## From framing to feeling in the temporal landscape

Understandings of landscape in the disciplines of geography, archaeology and anthropology as well as landscape architecture have shifted significantly in recent decades. The relatively static framing of landscape as viewed from afar grew out of the painterly and writerly traditions of centuries past. Its spatio-temporal perspective on the world has since been pulled in different directions. Cultural

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## REFLECTION

geographers first advocated a focus on landscape as ‘a cultural image, a pictorial way of representing or symbolising surroundings’ (Daniels and Cosgrove, 1988, p 1). Their iconographic concern with representing space also draws together the historical aspects of environment, art and politics but has primarily been dialectical such that ‘the material face of the land reflected the social face of the landscape polity ... The physical environment was a reflection of the political landscape’ (Olwig, 2002, p 21; also Mitchell, 2002; Naylor, 2006).

These historico-geographical stances towards the landscape have, however, given way to a more dynamic ‘enchantment’ with worldly things and interactions with ‘more-than-human’ as well as human bodies and their ‘affects’ (Bennett, 2001; Braun and Whatmore, 2010; Lorimer, 2006; Rose and Wylie, 2006; Whatmore, 2006). Such scholarly developments have followed the move away from representational epistemology towards ‘non-representational theory’ (NRT), which has a stronger ontological focus on the relational constitution of things in place (Anderson and Harrison, 2010; Thrift, 2005, 2008). This latter concept has also appealed to landscape architects not least because of the shared interest in material objects (including, to some degree, their form and function). In this journal, Abbott (2012, p 25) asked recently, ‘what are the ways we should move, inhabit and sustain ourselves within landscapes, such that the activities we undertake bring us *within* the wider ecological weavings of the environments in which we dwell?’. His critique of the descriptive empiricism dominating cultural geography’s work on the material landscape invites an attention to temporality that he has explored elsewhere (see Abbott, 2007a, 2007b, 2011).

Abbott (2012) seeks to prescribe current action with an implicit view to the future, but other aspects of time, especially the past, are central to his work on heritage landscapes (Abbott, 2007a, 2007b). This focus on environmental or ecological history is valuable in portraying the landscape’s spatio-temporal constitution as both ‘multiple and discontinuous’ (Abbott, 2007b, p 32) and ‘a time-driven living process’ (ibid, p 36). Alternatively, much research on performative, embodied and affective ways of being in the landscape tends to be captive to the now. Abbott (2011, p 81) also sees landscape simply as providing ‘an opportunity to develop moments, both in time and place, that show sensitivity not only to the qualities of specific places, but also to the experiential and cognitive possibilities that these places afford’. Similarly, some of the leading acolytes of NRT advocate dismissing a Cartesian ideal of certainty ‘for “infinite” and distinctly geographical understandings – *taking-place*, *making-sense* – which speak of the time of the present, not of all Time’ (Dewsbury, et al, 2002, p 440; emphasis in original). To explore disaster’s presence in the landscape, a non-representational stance seems appropriate. Still, its under-theorised temporality becomes a problem if one is investigating a phenomenon’s duration or persistence with linkages backwards and forwards through time as much as any experience or sensing of some single ephemeral moment (even though this latter remains key). Hence, Thrift (2005, p 139) is critical in this context of one of NRT’s key concerns and notes, ‘One thing which is often neglected about affect is that it involves temporal extension’.

The notion of dwelling in the landscape (so familiar to landscape architects) thus proves helpful here. From the archaeological and anthropological disciplines,

Ingold's work is most relevant because he adopts a phenomenological perspective on our being in the world that has parallels with NRT but also addresses 'the temporality of the landscape' (2000, pp 189–208; compare Abbott, 2007b; Cloke and Jones, 2001; Massey, 2006; Wylie, 2007). For Ingold, time as well as space has its basis in embodied human perceptions and practices. He is therefore critical of *chronos* or historical clock time and prefers the seasonal and social forms of lived time that are associated with the continuous present of duration. Of 'this moment, a particular vista of past and a future', he suggests 'it *constitutes* my present, conferring upon it a unique character':

Thus the present is not *marked off* from a past that it has replaced or a future that will, in turn, replace it ... And just as in the landscape, we can move from place to place without crossing any boundary, since the vista that constitutes the identity of a place changes even as we move, so likewise we can move from one present to another without having to break through any chronological barrier that might be supposed to separate each present from the next in line (Ingold, 2000, p 196; emphasis in original).

This phenomenological temporality has us interacting with the landscape 'not as spectators but as participants' (ibid, p 196). It is in contrast to most approaches to understanding and managing disasters, however, where instrumental conceptions of space and time continue to rule.

### Locating the event of disaster: Bushfires in Australia

Bushfires present an exquisite case of disastrous natural phenomena, being reduced to brief but specific moments and locations in the landscape. Consider some of the biggest fires in the Australian psyche and a collective living memory: Black Friday on 13 January 1939; Black Tuesday on 7 February 1967; Ash Wednesdays on 20 February 1980 and 16 February 1983; and Black Saturday on 7 February 2009. Each is fixed on just one specific day of destruction that occurred somewhere in south-eastern Australia. Their temporal pinpointing is precise and most pronounced in comparison with the relative looseness of any spatial framing that might be afforded (as Tasmanian, South Australian and Victorian bushfires).

As an event, a bushfire heralds both change and surprise as an unexpected unfolding of the world. As such, the event constitutes a break with the background and its particular socio-material configuration. Derrida (2003) states of the 9/11 disaster in New York, for example, 'something took place' that we never saw coming:

But this very thing, the place and meaning of this 'event', remains ineffable, like an intuition without a concept, like a unicity with no generality on the horizon or with no horizon at all, out of range for a language that admits its powerless and so is reduced to pronouncing mechanically a date, repeating it endlessly, as a kind of ritual incantation, a conjuring poem, a journalistic litany or rhetorical refrain that admits to not knowing what it's talking about (p 86).

Major bushfires likewise inspire shock and awe and are often followed by due processes of inquiry. Australia's most recent and disastrous event, therefore, saw the 2009 Victorian Bushfires Royal Commission endeavouring to understand

what had happened. It examined not only Black Saturday but many other days and related incidents from around that time. In the process, numerous stakeholders helped the commissioners and the public to better understand what had eventuated over a period of protracted but notably ‘unprecedented’ weather to give rise to so many intense bushfires. Although the worst aspects were a culmination of the firestorms rather than bushfires occurring on that one day, and with 177 human fatalities concentrated in several now sadly remembered townships, much damage had already been sporadically incurred with the burning of native habitat on protected areas as well as the loss of agricultural land and properties across hundreds of thousands of hectares over several weeks (Teague, Mcleod and Pascoe, 2009).

The excessiveness of the event was manifestly evident but was reflected also in the way it escaped representation. In its wake, Australia’s then Deputy Prime Minister, Julia Gillard, described the Black Saturday event in *exceptional* terms:

‘The seventh of February 2009 will now be remembered as one of the darkest days in Australia’s peacetime history ... A tragedy beyond belief, beyond precedent and really beyond words ... It will get worse and Australians need to prepare themselves,’ Ms Gillard told the nation’s parliament (*The Age*, 9 February 2009).

An appreciation of the growing threat has now seen need for a new language. The interim report from the commission recommended, amongst other actions, developing ‘a revised fire severity scale for use in bushfire warnings based on new fire danger ratings’ (Teague, Mcleod and Pascoe, 2009, p 25). The new ‘catastrophic’ level of fire danger, superseding the previously highest level of ‘extreme’, has subsequently been introduced. Yet our language will, and perhaps inevitably must, fail to capture events that are by nature excessive (Griffiths, 2012).

With work on risk management for climate change and terrorism, scholars are, likewise, now also noting the way in which the unknown potentialities of disaster are being anticipated and enacted with specific logics such as precaution and pre-emption (Anderson, 2010). These attempts to look at and then throw ourselves into the future have analogues in probabilistic prediction, actuarialism, insurance strategies and scenario-building approaches for adaptation to uncertainty (Williams and Jacobs, 2011). The worlds thus created might approach a virtual reality but in truth must remain unknowable. Future events are only ever just about to become present and, hence, available to the sensory experience that renders true our faith in and knowledge of the world. Meanwhile, our existence remains on a knife-edge that separates the familiar and everyday from unimaginable calamity.

It can seem easier to claim that we know and understand past events, with their locations claimed as quite precise. The retrospective treatment of disasters will sometimes involve memorial sites and landscapes of remembrance that involve careful siting in time as well as space. Examples here include responses to such specific and sensitive events as the Holocaust and various wars as well as terrorist acts, including most notably 9/11. Yet they are still inevitably subject to political contest (Edkins, 2003). Even the discretely bounded, everyday spaces of cemeteries are similarly seen to be connected beyond to the different interpretations of cultural meaning with profound attachments to place and

investments in the broader landscape (Bowring, 2000). Their temporal ordering of our worlds is similarly about relating absence and presence.

The Black Saturday bushfires in Victoria have presented similar tensions, for example, around the ‘stay or go’ policy on householders’ decisions either to remain and defend their homes or leave early, and likewise with questions of whether or not to rebuild exactly in situ those townships razed by bushfires. Any response will speak somehow in memory of that particular event (and perhaps also to future ones). The environmental historian Tom Griffiths sees the differential relationship between remembering and forgetting as critical to how Australians might continue to live – or otherwise perhaps die – with bushfires (Griffiths, 2009a, 2009b). Whilst wary of the tendency to describe major bushfires as unnatural, he does note that the long tradition of Australians living with the bush is now faltering. Therefore, he cautions against losing our particular temporal, or what he terms ‘local historical’ as well as environmental, connections to this landscape.

There is a dangerous mismatch between the cyclic nature of fire and the short-term memory of communities, and there is often an emotional need, as people return and rebuild, to deny the ‘naturalness’ of the event, and to remain unbowed. It is hard for humans to accept, and therefore to remember, that nature can overwhelm culture. These bushfire towns – where the material legacy of the past can never survive for long – need to work harder than most to renew their local historical consciousness (Griffiths, 2009a, p 35.5).

Griffiths (ibid, p 35.6) concludes with the comment that those Australians returning to rural Victoria to rebuild their communities are conducting what he describes as ‘the most intriguing and important experiment’. But then, peopling the Australian landscape has always been a challenging interaction and iterative process of both testing and being tested, over and over again. I would also add that any such experiments are, by their nature, immediately embodied, experiential engagements with the transitional intensity of a world. Thus, they are something we all might variously and perhaps unavoidably conduct over time.

Indeed, my own forays into the bush near home have of late been undertaken increasingly in the style of experimentation, although the material legacy explored is more obdurate, I suggest, than Griffiths permits. I described earlier how the arrival of bushfire ‘heralds both change and surprise as an unexpected unfolding of the world’. Such an event warrants – or rather demands – an analytic approach that is open to both experience and experiment. In fact, the two are intertwined in the knowledge and sense of our being thrown into a world that is always already immediately present whilst in the process of becoming otherwise. From a pragmatic, vitalist perspective, one might agree with Dewey (cited in McCormack, 2010, p 205) that experience ‘is experimental, an effort to change the given. It is characterised by projection, by reaching forward into the unknown; connection with a future is its salient trait’. Such an approach provided the methodology for my sojourn into the field as described below. I used mixed methods including the sensing of embodied experience, writing journal notes and taking photographs whilst also engaging in reflection and theorisation. However, in addition to the usual alertness to the future, this experiential and experimental foray was also sensitive to a connectedness with the past.



**Old Farm Road, South Hobart, Tasmania: 10:30am Tuesday,  
20 March 2012**

On a beautiful, bright morning, the crisp, clean and cool mountain air circulates around the back of South Hobart; sunlight warms the houses, the roads and fields that run up to the bushland cloaking the foothills of Mount Wellington. The familiar sounds of human activity nearby merge with the clicking of insects and rustle of wrens. I walk along Old Farm Road and am embraced by the changing vista that discloses itself to me.

It is hard to believe that bushfire is not truly banished from this mosaic landscape of wet sclerophyll and rainforest refugia. Walking briskly, I draw in the sweet, cold, dew-laden air and the tinkling refrain from the small stream of the Hobart Rivulet, with the lush green cushion of marsupial lawns springing back against my footfalls. It is an idyllic place but one that belies another reality: dry winds, heat and flames have also always been part of this environment and remain essential to its regeneration. In 1967, the Hobart bushfires tore across the terrain, resulting in the loss of 62 lives and more than 1,260 homes. This event gets surprisingly little mention nowadays, though. In the meantime, development proceeds apace, with ever more and ever bigger homes and subdivisions continuing to spring up on ridges and hillsides, encroaching into bushland and reworking the city's skyline to capitalise on the wonderful scenic views of the River Derwent glinting far below.

Our attention is perhaps being diverted. In the case of disasters, we look neither to the future nor to the past and, when thrown into their midst, we aim to have everything cleaned up as quickly as possible. Homes and livelihoods need to be reinstated, and the insights from lessons learnt warrant implementation as soon as is feasible. But then people also want to forget; they seek closure. The healing they might want is different from that of a landscape that appreciates these fiery events and is nourished by the hot ash, smoke and cinder. Yet the intensity and trauma, then scarification, that it yields up are part of the processes and experiences of natural change, growth and ageing. These have, for a long



*Old Farm Road, South Hobart,  
Tasmania.*



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time, been embodied in the rituals of Australia's indigenous peoples, amongst others, as well as in the biophysical environment's own natural cycles. It therefore continues to haunt and be sensed in the landscape.

Old Farm Road starts just 4 kilometres away from the Hobart central business district and, within minutes of walking, opens up another world altogether. It comprises more than just the supposedly 'natural' environment. Here, there are the remnants of human lives impacted by and surviving or succumbing to bushfire events. It is an eerie feeling, with the traces of 1967 still so present. Out of the tempering heat of fires past, rust-red oxidised farm gates and fencing have been salvaged and born again; pickets and droppers, chains and latches, all are reused. Also quite remarkable are the remaining timber rail-posts that still mark driveways and boundaries on old properties; rescued iron now butts up against newly installed galvanised water tanks, Hills Hoists (clotheslines) and rebuilt homesteads. Relict power poles stand as solitary sentinels with their more recent recruits marching in a line up the hill behind. This renewal lends deeper meaning to the idea of Australia being a renovation nation.

Amongst bulldozed bricks, collapsed frames and formwork, cables and rubble, there are now other, often new and different residents making their homes from the remnant materials at hand. Cracked concrete, crumbling to dust, has collected in secret crevices; leaf litter and the microscopic life-forms attending it follow. This matter subsequently affords a foothold for the adventurous insinuations of root and tendril, accommodating what will become – however momentarily – the next new community. Long-buried potential is realised as burnt seed pods split open; seeds germinate; corms and rhizomes explode with energy. Life pushes through the surface of things, reaches out and takes hold. It is life – and death – that have always made themselves present in the changing forms and patterns encountered at different moments in the landscape.

I encountered powerful presences and potentialities on my sojourn along Old Farm Road. My recounting here resonates with the familiar experiential or phenomenological descriptions of being in the landscape detailed by others



*Old Farm Road, South Hobart, Tasmania.*





(as noted above). In addition to the feelings and possible memories evoked, and the energy or life-force sensed here, the landscape is littered with the materials and artefacts of many (human and non-human) lives. Their duration, albeit in changing form, affords us a place in the world that is constituted through a persistent presence as well as flux, which returns us to issues of temporality in the landscape.

### **Coda: Rendering the untimely event of disaster ever present**

The untimely event of disaster can strike and advance rapidly across a landscape but then also appear to recede at a similar rate. It is commonly situated through those instrumental understandings of space and time that are used to pursue, from emergency headquarters, for example, such practical ends as the identification and management of a specific disaster. Whilst it can subsequently lose any substantive, phenomenological sense of historical as much as environmental connectedness, such is the nature of the event. Reflections on the still-present material evidence of Hobart's 1967 bushfire, as a major incident seemingly long since finished with, have been provided here in text and photo documentation that suggests a need for greater attention to its enduring temporality in the landscape.

The persistence of various aspects of those natural and sometimes disastrous phenomena of fire and flood demands better accommodation than is usually provided through modern approaches to disaster management. Rather, we need to exist with them as the constantly excessive, if also contingent and dynamic, manifestations of a material life-force that we all share. Landscape designers, architects, planners, developers and others would therefore do well to consider how we represent or misrepresent these powerful and at times all-pervading (yet perhaps too easily then dismissed) events. In addition, there is the real and substantive matter of how we might bring them back to presence in our own undertakings so as to continue living with them now. By way of conclusion, I provide examples and suggestions for proceeding, which are set in different contexts and look to floods as well as fire.



There are numerous arenas in which we might actively come to appreciate the multiply constituted complexities of natural disaster. In Australia, at the University of Tasmania, the postgraduate unit KGA518: *Planning and managing for climate change* (taught by this author) offers practical opportunities for student planners to engage with the social-ecology of bushfire (University of Tasmania, nd). One opportunity includes a tour of the local environs to view and discuss recent burns (deliberately planned or otherwise). It also has students interacting with community elders who survived bushfires from as far back as 1967 in Hobart. These actors are deemed critically important here, just like any other stakeholder agency or individual. Their animated retelling of these events reveals embodied memories and experiences of times and places that continue to translate into key learning outcomes for students long after the fact. Similarly, in New Zealand, Abbott (2011) notes research in landscape design that has explored various materials, technologies and ways of being in the landscape (as well as education programmes) that facilitate a more participatory engagement with it. Sympathetic, intimate and enduring relationships are stressed as being key here.

Internationally, landscape architects are also making significant contributions. For example, Mathur and da Cunha (2009, 2010) offer a compelling re-reading of floods in India. They describe various times as well as places in the subcontinent's monsoon terrain through an unusual but most meaningful lexicon. Here, the *nullah* is 'a surface that gathers and dissipates [water] with a complexity and temporality that beguile the eye' and to be considered alongside the *maidan*, which is associated with times of dryness and 'not a demarcated space within the city but one among multiple appropriations of an open terrain that works by the times of various calendars' (Mathur and da Cunha, 2010, np; also 2009). Theirs is a new and exciting approach to how we might think about (and so then get on with living amidst) the persistently problematic, if also enchanting, imbrications of human settlements, history and ecology. It certainly speaks likewise to the need for more novel and timely renderings of natural disasters as ever present with us in the landscape.

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