

ESSAY 5: Understanding Site
compiled by alicia bell

CONVERSATIONS WITH:

ZENA CUMPSTON
SHANNON FOSTER, JO KINNIBURGH & WANN COUNTRY
MICHAEL MOSSMAN
DILLON KOMBUMERRI

Joanne Kinniburgh is an Indigenous woman and Shannon Foster is a D'harawal Saltwater Knowledge Keeper based in Sydney

“approaching site in these ways presupposes a deficit, a blank space needing to be filled - hence expressions such as...‘placemaking’. ...little respect has been given to local ecologies, as land clearance programs, parcelization and grid overlays amongst the existing Aboriginal pathways made way for rose gardens, lawns and suburban housing. even less respect has been afforded the Aboriginal custodians of the land themselves who experience on-going effects of ‘spatially practised’ colonisation.”

shannon foster, jo kinniburgh & Wann Country
FROM: 'NO PLACE LIKE (WITHOUT) COUNTRY', 2019:3

From her experience collaborating on a project with 'placemaking', Zena spoke of her frustration at the commodification of First Peoples' stories and culture to give projects a social edge.

Instead of listening and allowing themselves to be led by First People, her non-Indigenous collaborators walked heavy-footed: not listening to cultural cautions and continued practices demonstrating their sense of entitlement to other Peoples' and cultures' stories.

Zena expressed her frustration at this sense of entitlement, asking questions like:

Who is entitled to tell stories?
Where is the space for people to tell their own stories?
How are these stories, which are so significant and rich to one group, used flippantly as decoration by another?

Her experience demonstrated how rich and alive the stories of Country are. They are not historical, or mythic, as so many stories in Western culture are - but are alive, powerful and deserving of respect.

COUNTRY DOESN'T NEED WHITE INTERVENTION TO BE SEEN; ALL THOSE STORIES ARE STILL THERE YOU JUST NEED TO MAKE SPACE FOR THEM.

ZENA CUMPSTON is a Barkindji woman

“it was asking people to have a relationship with their ‘heightened sense of place’, but there was just a complete lack of meaningful engagement. for them it was just this sprinkling of aboriginal culture over whatever they were doing. the built environment doesn’t allow for our culture to shine through. how I see it happen, it’s not for Aboriginal people. it’s for non-Aboriginal people. they get to tell these stories - these rich stories. but what do Aboriginal people get out of it?”



zena cumpston
CONVERSATION ON CAMMERAYGAL AND WURUNDJERI COUNTRY , 05.03.20

michael mossman
CONVERSATION ON GADIGAL COUNTRY, 02.03.20

is a Yugembir person

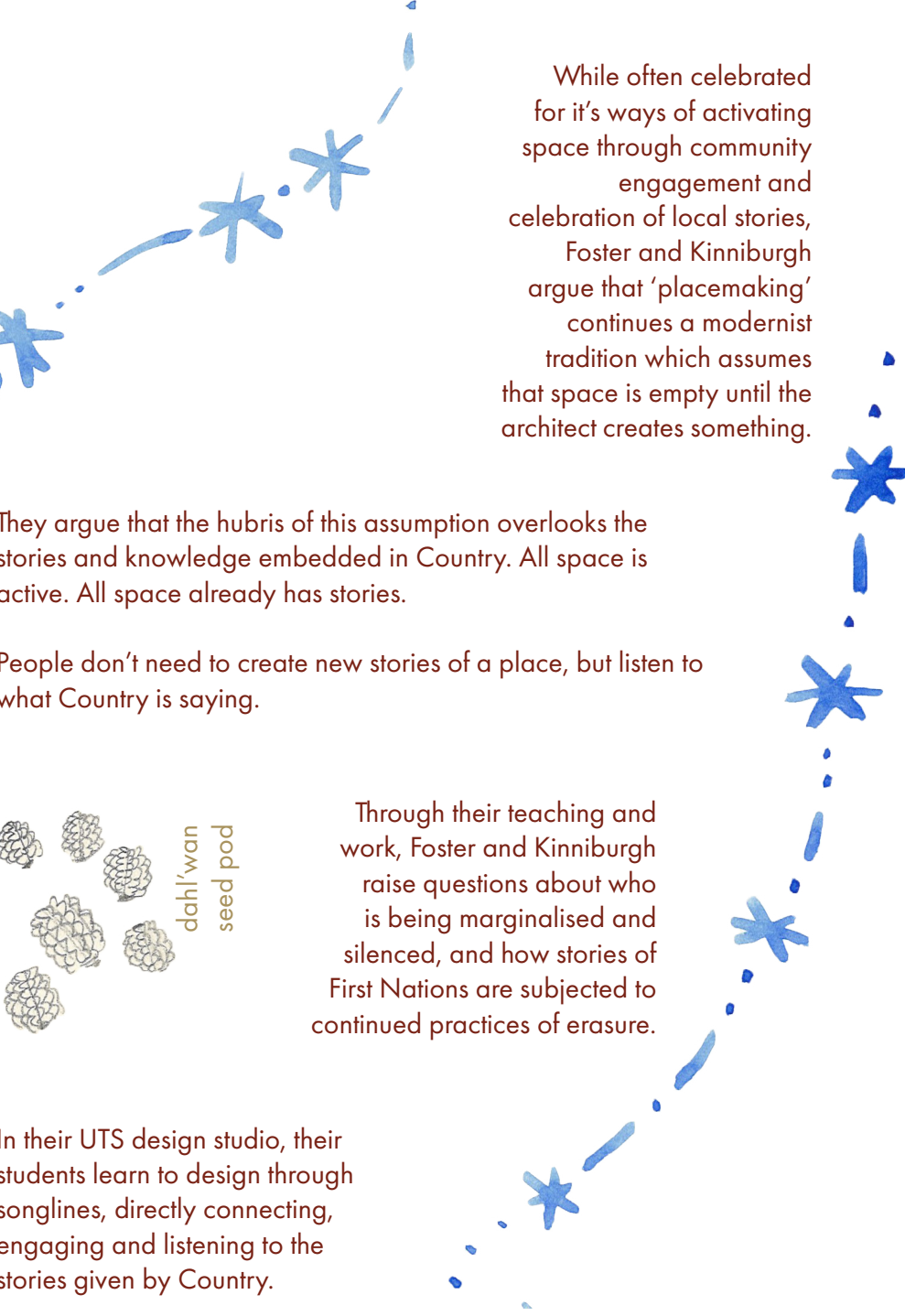
"WE NEED TO THINK VERY DIFFERENTLY ABOUT SITE ANALYSIS. SITE IS RELATED TO 'SEEING' AND TO 'SITTING' - THAT TELLS US THAT'S A FAIRLY ARMS LENGTH TO COUNTRY. YOU SIT AND YOU WATCH. ANALYSIS IS THE UNPICK-ING OF A COMPLEX THING INTO A SMALLER THING. COUNTRY IS A COMPLEX SYSTEM THAT NEEDS TO BE UNDERSTOOD, OR NOT ENTIRELY UNDERSTOOD. WALK COUNTRY. WALKING IS DYNAMIC. COUNTRY ISN'T THAT THING THAT IS OVER THE HILLS. COUNTRY IS EVERYWHERE.

In one of my final conversations in Sydney, we spoke about the role of walking and language in knowing Country. Country gives names to places that tells us about the character of the place.

BURRAMATTA - THAT'S THE COUNTRY OF THE EEL WATER PLACE. COUNTRY IS TELLING US WHO IT IS.
GADIGAL - THE GRASS TREE PEOPLE. ALL THE NAMES COME FROM COUNTRY.

Naming and language can begin building a more expansive way of understanding sites, listening to Country, and making space for First Nations culture.

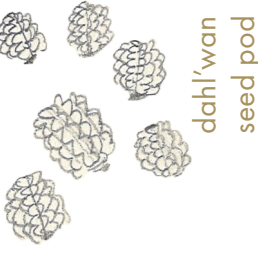
CONVERSATION ON GADIGAL AND BURRAMATTA COUNTRY , 10.03.20



While often celebrated for it's ways of activating space through community engagement and celebration of local stories, Foster and Kinniburgh argue that 'placemaking' continues a modernist tradition which assumes that space is empty until the architect creates something.

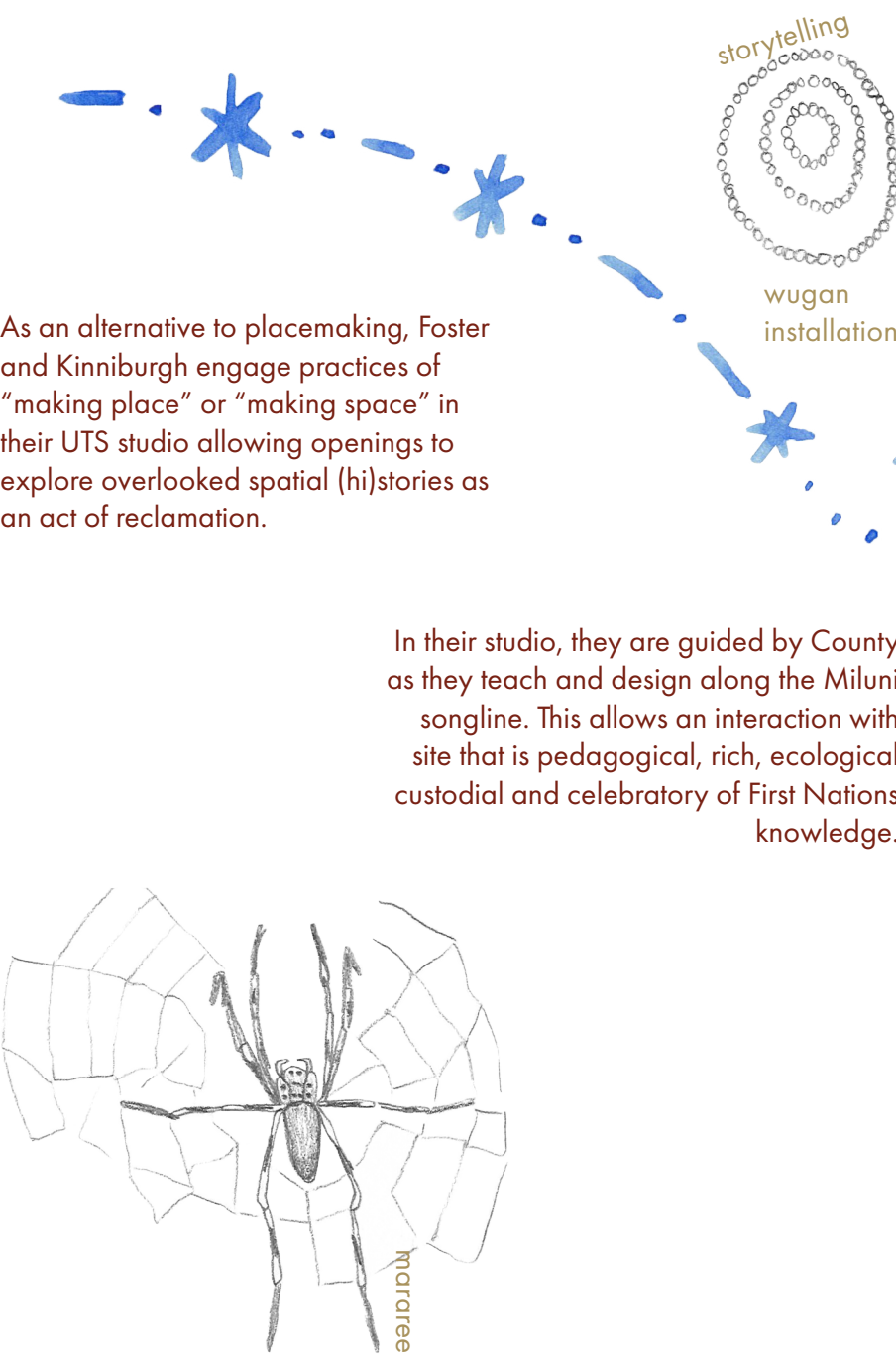
They argue that the hubris of this assumption overlooks the stories and knowledge embedded in Country. All space is active. All space already has stories.

People don't need to create new stories of a place, but listen to what Country is saying.



Through their teaching and work, Foster and Kinniburgh raise questions about who is being marginalised and silenced, and how stories of First Nations are subjected to continued practices of erasure.

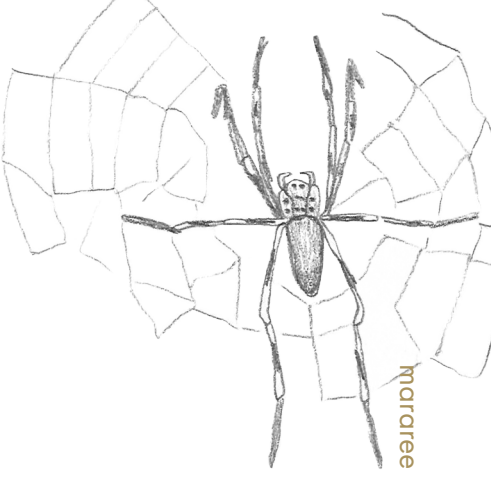
In their UTS design studio, their students learn to design through songlines, directly connecting, engaging and listening to the stories given by Country.



As an alternative to placemaking, Foster and Kinniburgh engage practices of "making place" or "making space" in their UTS studio allowing openings to explore overlooked spatial (hi)stories as an act of reclamation.



In their studio, they are guided by Country as they teach and design along the Miluni songline. This allows an interaction with site that is pedagogical, rich, ecological custodial and celebratory of First Nations knowledge.



MICHAEL MOSSMAN is of Kuku Yalanji and Warangu descent

"OUR UNDERSTANDING OF SITE AND PLACEMAKING NEEDS TO BE EXPANSIVE AND INCLUSIVE. THERE'S A HISTORY OF PLACE IN EVERYTHING. WE JUST NEED TO BE MORE AWARE OF IT AND LOOK FOR IT. PLANTING THOSE SEEDS IN EDUCATION ALLOWS US TO SET THINGS UP FOR THE NEXT GENERATION."



How can you be connecting and building relationships with First Nations Elders and communities?

How can you prioritise listening?

Who's stories are we telling?

And, how can co-design let others tell their own stories amongst your stories?

SO HOW CAN WE LOOK AT SITES NOW?

How often do you spend on site listening? And what are you listening to?

What aren't you listening to?

How can you listen? How can you walk the site in a way that allows you to hear?



Michael ended our conversation with a laugh, saying,

"Stay in touch, and let me know what you learn about us!"

Of course I have learnt a lot about "us".

'Us' as finding a way for all us to co-exist.

'Us' as a way of seeing what our systems do. The way they silence. Or split us apart. Or limit our ability to talk, human to human.

'Us' as a new way of listening and telling stories about our shared place.