

## **Cruel Sub-urbanism: Cool Commons Down Under**

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### **Introduction**

One theme that ran through the 2022 AAG panel memorializing the life and work of Lauren Berlant was an appreciation for Berlant’s capacity to hold together and in tension “multiplicity and power, the critical and the reparative, conceptual abstraction and attunement to phenomenal difference” (Ruez 2022). These operative tensions resonate with my own collaborative efforts to enrol research into processes of transition across a number of shared concerns.

Berlant’s concept of cruel optimism (2011) and her more recent theorization of the commons (2016), pared of its utopian content, have shaped an ongoing collaborative project focused on climate adaptation in Australia’s urban centres in areas of Western Sydney (Mellick Lopes et al. 2021). This rapidly growing region, home to new immigrants and socially disadvantaged communities, also contains suburbs that have posted some of the world’s hottest temperatures. By design, the optimistic trajectory of auto-dependent suburban development continues westward even as the realities of climate change—heat, bush fire, drought, flood—tell us it cannot go on (Mellick Lopes and Healy 2021). Across several projects cohering under the name “Cooling the Commons”, we have sought to identify knowledges, practices, places, and resources that allow for collective access to coolth (Mellick Lopes et al. 2018). Our interest is in both creating what Berlant (2016: 393) refers to as “patching”, forms of improvisation that work for residents while also trying to imagine and enact cooler, more convivial futures. From their perspective, learning to live with the heat

and one another also means “forgetting” our attachment to an urbanism that longer serves us. As memorial I intend to reflect on how the project puts these concepts to work.

## **Cruel Sub-urbanism**

In Sydney, population five million, urbanization has pushed westward world post-WWII, away from the coast and towards the Blue Mountains. The built form is low-density, auto-dependent, and suburban, with jobs and opportunities remaining centralised in the inner city until quite recently (Kent and Thompson 2019; O’Neill 2020). The “optimism” playing out here is familiar, where home ownership figures as central to the good life: belonging, investment, and the promise of economic mobility.

In Western Sydney, two things are becoming increasingly clear: that home ownership is increasingly out of reach, particularly for young people, but, more profoundly, the way anthropogenic climate change *already* threatens the continuity of life. The last half dozen years has seen the Australian east coast wracked by a severe drought 2017-2019, bush fires on a previously unimaginable scale 2019-2020, and flooding associated with two consecutive La Niña years 2020-present. The risks associated with these extreme weather events and ongoing uncertainties have led some to conclude that significant swathes of Western Sydney may become uninsurable by 2030 (Hutley et al. 2022). And yet, the design-trajectory of urban development continues largely unabated, now clustering around an anticipated second airport in an area vulnerable to heat and flooding.

What then to do? Following Berlant an initial step might be a moment of reparative recognition: it’s understandable to want a home, an investment in a better future, the social assurances of home ownership. It is also understandable to want home to be a place of cool comfort. What follows from coming to terms with our attachments, is exploring other ways of arriving at these homely possibilities while “forgetting” things which no longer work.

## **From the Common to Commons**

Berlant describes commons as an infrastructure for our times but, in saying this, they hasten to distinguish their meaning from a dominant conception of “the common”, mobilised in “the US and theory-cosmopolitan context, often signifying an ontology that merely needs the

world to create infrastructures to catch up to it” (2016: 395). Here one only need think of the great expectations sometimes attached to digital commons, the sharing economy, the multitude, etc. in order to apprehend how this dominant vision of “the common” reoccupies the same-old “optimism”. In contrast, Berlant (2016: 295) develops the commons in a decidedly different way:

The better power of the commons is to point to a way to view what’s broken in sociality, the difficulty of convening a world conjointly, although it is inconvenient and hard, and to offer incitements to imagining a livable provisional life.

The contrast between the “optimistic” version of the commons and one that foregrounds the broken as the precondition for “convening a world conjointly” helps to clarify what we are intending with our work on commons-based adaptive responses to climate change in Western Sydney.

The “optimistic” version of the common is readily discernible in dominant adaptation strategies in Sydney. Sydney’s “Resilient Cities” strategy revolves around a techno-fix with a green twist: widespread increases in urban canopy as well as the deployment of air conditioning in as many indoor spaces as possible, powered by renewable energy (Resilient Sydney 2018). What is optimistic here is essentially the same old modernist promises, now in their ecological guise, an adaptation allowing for continuity of urbanization as we know it (Mellick Lopes and Healy 2021). Following Berlant (2011), the cruelty in this optimism begins to surface when we look more carefully, looking for what’s broken. While renewably powered AC may be a promising solution for homeowners with good incomes, what about renters? What about those living in social housing? While AC secures access to coolth in largely private indoor spaces, it also contributes to urban heat when deployed in denser housing potentially undermining their effectiveness. So, what then? Urban canopy can help, but trees require ongoing care and years to grow before they create shade, assuming you have planted trees adapted for tomorrow’s climate. Who will care for these trees as they grow? What do we do while we wait?

Keeping with Berlant, the point of these questions, at once critical and reparative, is not to reject ecomodernist efforts entirely, but rather to divest ourselves of set-it-and-forget-it optimism in favour of the difficulty of living and acting together. Following Berlant's lead, we are looking to the practices of commoning to identify and mobilise widely accessible and useful resources, knowledge, and practices that help to care for Western Sydney residents on hot days. In our work with existing social housing communities this might take the form of peer-to-peer heat emergency preparedness, shifting hot activities like cooking outdoors, enticing people into social life outside at night. In collaborating with developers, it involves seeing how to enrol patterns of shade, the breeze way, trees and the built environment as a kind of patchwork that maximises outdoor urban coolth.

The net effect of these efforts, far from an optimistic eco-modern city, is instead something that is experimental, piecemeal, and provisional in nature. It is a commons that "convenes a world conjointly" where coolth exists as a distributed property. Our project aims towards the "livable" knowing that time may not be on our side in Western Sydney and that multiple threats—fire, drought, flood—already disrupt the continuity of life. Our aim comes close to what Machado de Oliveira (2019) terms the "hospicing" of modernity, easing the passage of a form of low-density urbanism that no longer works, while imagining sociable forms of coolth that are commons insofar as they require collective effort.

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