



REFLECTION ARTICLE

# Building a Participatory Archive With an Australian Suburb: Case Study of Canberra's Biggest Bogan Suburb, Kambah

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## Abstract

Participatory appraisal and building archives with communities have been discussed amongst archivists across the world for decades. There is reportage on building community resources for and by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, but there is less reportage on these endeavours with other communities. This reflection reports on building an archive with the community of Kambah, a suburb with a mixed reputation in the Canberra community. A challenge for participatory archives identified through this project was scale – if successful, the volume of content quickly becomes overwhelming. Another challenge is the responsibility that goes with accepting content from contributors. Expectations are set up that the content will be used or shared. And crucially, participation means everyone. Strategies are needed to connect with contributors that go beyond relationships in easy reach for the archivist based on existing connections.

A final lesson comes from socially engaged art, a practice that focuses on community participation. This calls on the archivist to recognise their standpoint, the worldview they bring. Our sector has recognised that collections and building them is not neutral. For archivists, there remains much to do to work out how to meaningfully share that power and authority as collections are built.

**Keywords:** *Community archives; Participatory appraisal; Participatory archives.*

This article is a reflection about a project in the suburbs of Canberra that innovates in terms of its method for building a community archive by drawing on practices from socially engaged art. Its findings are provisional as the project is ongoing.

In January 2023, a project to build a digital community resource to depict life in Kambah was shared with the Canberra public in an exhibition called ‘Kambah’ at the Tuggeranong Arts Centre, an Australian Capital Territory (ACT) Government gallery in south Canberra.<sup>1</sup> This exhibition investigated the experience of living in Kambah, reported as a suburb with low social capital and known on the internet as one of Australia’s biggest bogan suburbs.<sup>2</sup> I have been living in Kambah for 10 years, involved in the community as a resident in a housing

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development that began as a 1970s co-op and through environment volunteering.<sup>3</sup> Kambah is on the southwest edge of Canberra bordered by one of Australia's most significant rivers, the Murrumbidgee, and Canberra's landmark mountain range, the Brindabellas. Residents consistently report a strong connection with nature.<sup>4</sup>

The suburb Kambah carries the name of the Bennet family station, resumed in 1968 for the new suburb, farmed by Canberra establishment figure Sim Bennet from 1940. Before that, there were a string of owners, documented in work by historian and Kambah resident, Glenn Schwinghamer. This area of the limestone plains is not known as a place where Ngunawal people stayed, but it was a place of passing through and along to other parts of the yam daisy fields and the Murrumbidgee River corridor, part of the Ngunawal estate.<sup>5</sup>

In the late 1960s, much thought went into the planning of Kambah, an example is a 1968 community seminar.<sup>6</sup> Kambah was part of the ACT Government strategy of interspersed public and private housing. When it was established in the 1970s, cheap housing was the norm. The whole of the Tuggeranong Valley, the district Kambah is situated in, became known as 'Nappy Valley', home to many young families.<sup>7</sup> None of these ingredients mark Kambah out as significantly different from other parts of Canberra that were developed in the 1970s and bogan status is fought out on the internet with other suburbs of the same era.<sup>8</sup> Furthermore, being bogan can be both a badge of pride and a pejorative.<sup>9</sup> But the real issue for Kambah is that lack of social capital means our 'glue' is weak enough that we have lost many community assets while other suburbs in Canberra have retained them.<sup>10</sup> In discussion with residents, I learned that many feel they live the 'good life' and feel there is much to value about Kambah.<sup>11</sup> Yet that expression of what they feel is valuable is not made public or shared. This exhibition sought to share a developing collection of residents' experiences. I gathered this reportage in a digital map as images, video, audio recordings and text that taken together are emerging as a community archive. This collection embodies a worldview that collections reflect values and therefore community aspirations.<sup>12</sup>

### **About the exhibition and Kambah's provenance**

The exhibition ran for 2 months in early 2023. It drew on my mixed disciplinary background in archives and media art. Visitors to the gallery engaged with archives through the digital map. My practice using obsolete media to make creative works was shared through a group of my pinhole photographs of Kambah. Digital copies of these are included in map entries.<sup>13</sup> The digital map was displayed on a screen, with a QR code to connect users to it on their mobile phones.

A purpose of the exhibition was to develop entries for the map. The exhibition included a series of public events to tell Kambah residents about the map and seek their contributions: a face-to-face meeting of the Kambah community Facebook group, a walk with a local historian around what remains of Kambah station, a community discussion about government plans to increase housing in Kambah and an inaugural meeting of artists from Kambah and the wider area. Each event was a community gathering in its own right, but there were also opportunities to tell people about the map and seek entries from them.

The digital map began during the COVID-19-induced lockdown that occurred in Canberra in 2020. Funded by a small ACT Arts grant, the digital mapping tool I use was created by two artists, primarily for use with a mobile phone while on the move in the location.<sup>14</sup> It combines video, audio, text and images into entries. It uses a web browser that means no app downloads or log-ins are required. The format options allow a wide range of digital objects to be included, including digital items from public collections like the Canberra District Historical Society and the National Library newspaper collection.

### Rules of engagement

I learnt that Kambah has low social capital. This means the relationships and networks amongst residents are not strong. This was reported in research from 2007.<sup>15</sup> I wanted to find out how documenting our experience both in the present and from the past, might help bring us together and build our social capital. I recognised that this experience documentation needed to be gathered. A meaningful way to do this for the community was by locating experiences on a map. I have explained that the digital map involves making entries based on accounts of community members. These are supported by photos of places, events and items such as cookbooks or school memorabilia. I also explained that I have added to this through my consultation with heritage collections that contain material relevant to Kambah. Like notes for file, the accounts from community members are reports of experiences of Kambah. Their authority lies in their link to lived experience and the credentials of the speaker as a resident, alumni or visitor to Kambah. My endeavour was to gather and report what was told to me.

### The archivist as broker, the archival conversation

My method to build entries has evolved. To gather entries, initially I made appointments with community leaders such as a member of the region's community council, a politician and a long-term community activist. I also made coffee dates with long-time community members known to me through environment volunteering. My invitation to them was to help me map our experience of Kambah and to share with me what they know about Kambah that others may not. Initially, many people drew a blank in response to my question 'what's important to you about Kambah?'. The question evolved to 'what do you know about Kambah that others may not know that you'd like to share with the community?'. In conversation, I was able to flesh out that I was interested in their attitudes (*I like this but not this*) and their qualitative accounts of experience (*that was scary, that was fun*).

### The map as an archives

To get started I made entries based on the work of my historian friend, Glenn Schwinghamer, focused on the pastoral history of the blocks that are now Kambah. I also made entries for some places of particular significance for me such as the cockatoo roosts amongst mature yellow box and red gum lining the old road to the Murrumbidgee river.

There are two features to the map entries. The first is connecting the story to an image. Building an image into the entries allows an interpretation of the social facts recounted in the stories. Some of the images are records, for example brochures of land releases and government promotional material. Others are aesthetic responses and artworks. For example, several of the stories are accompanied by my pinhole photographs. The pinhole process produces an image that is not only faithful to the scene it captures but also upside and back to front; thus it contains both the one-for-one evidence of a physical place but also an interpretation, allowing more than one interpretation.

The second feature of the map entries is that their development requires having conversations. I showed would-be contributors the map and I built on the question 'what do you know that others may not' with the qualifier that their contribution can be tiny or seemingly insignificant. I emphasised that negative stories are also important. Often, the conversations began with the comment, 'I don't think I've got anything worth hearing about'. Ten minutes into the conversation something was uncovered that we both recognised as valuable to others. Some conversations stayed general and no specific event or story emerged, thus no content for the map.

I quickly realised the limitation of my networks and I sought out social workers in the area to explore how I could broaden my conversations. That phase of accompanying the social work team on their public events has not yet taken place. The next phase that has been successful was to use the 8 weeks of the exhibition to have conversations with visitors to the exhibition and public events I described above.

### **Retelling as a method, standpoint**

My role as the broker archivist was to report on what the community shared with me in a way that reflected the responsibility of receiving contributor's stories. Questions I began with included who am I to bring this together? Can I speak on behalf of my community? I used a model of retelling. It is clear that the authorship of the map lies with me; that this is my reportage of the community's experiences. For example, entries built on historian Glenn Schwinghamer's work spell out I am reporting back on what Glenn shared with me. My intention is to pass on the standpoint of contributors, to participate in this exchange as a broker. It is tempting to use the word conduit, but that image of a smooth, frictionless pipe ignores the sticky, personal nature of interpretation. As Jay Phillips writes about Indigenist standpoint theory,<sup>16</sup> drawing on Maggie Walter's 2006 description, this starts with the question 'where does my knowledge come from and what is its purpose and impact'.<sup>17</sup> It starts with taking stock of what has shaped the views and knowledge you have. That place of recognition is the first step in supporting change or development in those knowledge and views.

In making entries, I need to think through the consequences of putting different knowledge in the community side by side. A question I grappled with is how must entries be put together so contributions are visible in an appropriate way? For example, I attempted to have a conversation with community members about Kambah's reputation as bogan. Some residents were totally unaware of this reputation and my perception was they were affronted by it. For others that reputation is fun and playful. For others, it came from a particular time and place. But how to put that into a map entry is a complex problem – for archivists, the question is what are the records that would document 'being bogan'?

What follows are some examples of experiences community members shared with me. They include some context about the story and some reflections from me on how these contributed to it.

### **Some examples of community experience**

#### *25c durries at the Livingstone Street shops*

Canberra has a practice of building local shops into the design of suburbs, a practice included in the design of Kambah. These shops have mixed fates over time, some thrive and others fall into disrepair. The Livingstone Street shops recently were turned over to residential development. But in conversation with a former Kambah resident, I asked him what he might know that others might not – he shared that you used to be able to buy single cigarettes at these shops. For me, this was exactly the kind of anecdote I was hoping to draw out. For me, it shines a light on a whole social history of smoking, of a time when a single cigarette was worth buying and selling.

#### *The first computer lab in an ACT government school*

A resident shared with me how her husband had introduced computers to one of the Kambah primary schools. Working in the industry, he was able to provide them cheap. The school welcomed that initiative and brought those computers into the classrooms. For me, this shines a light on a different kind of relationship between families and schools that has

operated in the past. It also runs contrary to the perception of our community in Kambah as uncouth and unpolished reflected in that bogan reputation. We had the first computers in our schools.

#### *The drag strip at the tip*

Canberra has a system of parks that protect the hills dotted throughout the city, a network known as the Canberra nature parks. Kambah has one of these on its western edge that was home to a tip well into the 1980s. A resident shared with me that the drive towards the tip was a spot he used for some informal rally car driving.

#### *The tip*

There were interesting accounts of the tip. It was a foraging site for some; others described accompanying parents who would back up vehicles and offload a huge variety of items including chemicals and paint into the tip pit.

#### *The mid-winter fire-cracker bonfire night*

Several people reported on the community bonfire night that took place in mid-winter on a park on one edge of Kambah. It came about as a way for households to incinerate garden waste and other burnables and it doubled as a firecracker night.

#### *Vic and Rick's*

I knew our local grocery store by its franchise name, IGA. But I soon realised the community knows it as Vic and Rick's who were the proprietors for decades from the 1980s. Stories included that one of the pair was generous with kids' lollies; the other was tough on kids shopping without parents.

### **So what are the lessons?**

This project connects with our discourse about putting the archivist in service to the community,<sup>18</sup> turning the archivist into a broker between the community and its keeping practices. So, this means inviting the community to recognise the value of their own experience and to think about what might be useful in the future from their stories. My solution to the problem of the neutral archivist is to make my authorship clear and to use a model of re-telling.

Within my question 'is there something about Kambah you know that you would like other people to know', I wanted to extend my community's understanding of what can be archived and how we can build our shared understanding of our place and our community, not just through objects and documents we recognise as heritage, but through individual stories of experience.

So, what did I learn from this that is useful for others seeking to build community archives with communities?

### **Scale – A backlog quickly built up**

I learnt that from a practical standpoint, the number of stories quickly became overwhelming. I built up a backlog of entries that remain several months later. Conversations take time and expectations are established. Initially, I expected success felt like as much engagement as possible with my community, but I realised this generated a problematic backlog. Each engagement involved establishing a relationship, one that was undermined by just gathering stories and adding them to the backlog. In practice, I dealt with the backlog in two ways – I have a 'future contacts' list for those I will follow up and there is a Kambah people's map 'scrapbook', a public-facing blog I use to jot notes relevant to future entries.<sup>19</sup>

### **Getting past people like me, not just the good times**

This project moves incredibly slowly as my understanding of its methods develops. I am seeking to build a resource for and with my community. When participation is invited, an expectation is established in the minds of contributors that their contribution will be honoured and included. My questions include do they want it? What do they want to see in it? I have explained that I take a retelling approach where I report what I hear or learn from my point of view with no attribution to the story contributor. This means my role as a broker is visible and the map is authored by me. In addition to drawing on Indigenist standpoint theory, this takes its lead from socially engaged art, which Frasz and Sidford authoritatively define as creative practice ‘that aims to improve conditions in a particular community or in the world’ including those of disenfranchised communities. It goes by many names: ‘art and social justice, artistic activism, community-based art, cultural organizing, participatory art, relational aesthetics, civic practice, and social practice art’.<sup>20</sup> There has been discussion about the position of artists in these works. Tom Finkelpearl chooses the language ‘social co-operation’ because these works involve ‘a self-identified artist who can claim the title of initiator or orchestrator of the cooperative venture’.<sup>21</sup> As the map grows, it will become clearer if this boundary is more on the side where I lead and the community contributes, in which case more accurate language will be ‘participatory’.

### **Not just the good news**

A further challenge is the reportage of good news. A challenge was to get reportage of other kinds of experience. This was limited to a single report of a distressing experience in the 1980s of a male exposing himself to a young horse rider.

Census data show there is a mix in our socio-economics and like much of 1970s Canberra, we have a well-planned mix of public and private housing.<sup>22</sup> Not everyone is enjoying the environment and getting involved in seasonal street parties (although many stories shared with me reflect this). Community leaders working in schools and as social workers alluded to this mixed reality although none of these people belonged to these stories. Illegal activity was another area where some stories were shared, like accounts of the ‘munchies’ houses a former pizza delivery driver told me about where people would order lots of pizza to round out their marijuana smoking. To find ways to visualise stories like this without necessarily pinpointing them on the map is an interesting challenge.

### **Future directions**

There is much to do to make the entries from the community stories gathered through the exhibition in early 2023. The challenges are working out how to use the media affordances of the map to tell those stories in ways that retell accurately and respectfully. Also crucial is remaining mindful that these stories need to live together in the map with stories of the whole community. There is also more to do to tease out what socially engaged art can offer discussions of community archives.

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### **Notes on contributor**

Louise Curham explores the creative application of old media. Trained in archives, film and time-based art, Louise is a lecturer in the School of Media, Creative Arts and Social Inquiry at Curtin University in Perth, Australia. Her research outputs flow from her work in media art specialising in obsolete technology.

## Notes

1. 'Kambah', exhibition at Tuggeranong Arts Centre, Jan to Feb 2023, exhibition information, available at <https://www.tuggeranongarts.com/events/lousie-curham-kambah/>, accessed 1 June 2023.
2. Kambah Peoples Map, 'Top Bogan Suburb?', 2 March 2022, available at <https://kambahpeoplesmap.tumblr.com/post/677655112432467968/top-bogan-suburb>, accessed 1 June 2023.
3. Urambi Village began as a co-op, with the first houses built in 1976, see 'About Urambi' on the Urambi Village website, available at <https://www.urambivillage.com/>, accessed 1 June 2022. I have been a con venor of a volunteer group in the ACT Parks and Conservation ParkCare Network, Urambi Hills Group, since 2014, see Urambi Hills Group on Facebook, available at <https://www.facebook.com/urambihillsgroup>.
4. Kambah Peoples Map, 'Notes from "kitchen table conversation" Kambah 2050, Feb 2023', 1 Mar 2023, available at <https://kambahpeoplesmap.tumblr.com/post/710590858879238144/notes-from-kitchen-table-conversation-kambah>, accessed 1 June 2023.
5. Ngunawal man Wally Bell has shared publicly about Ngunawal relationships with Kambah in in two public events on Urambi Hills (2015 and 2020), a Kambah park, see, for example, Urambi Hills Facebook events 24 May 2015, 'Aboriginal Heritage Walk', available at <https://www.facebook.com/events/1008961625788124>, accessed 1 June 2023. I draw my spelling 'Ngunawal' from conversations with Wally Bell.
6. Kambah Peoples Map, 'Tuggeranong Sociological Seminar', 22 Feb 2021, available at <https://kambahpeoplesmap.tumblr.com/post/643821817128157184/tuggeranong-sociological-seminar-1969>, accessed 1 June 2023.
7. 'Good Times Tuggeranong – More Than Just a Nappy Valley', *The Canberra Times*, 24 November 1988, p. 38, available at <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article110616171>, accessed 1 June 2023.
8. The Riot Act, 'Australia's Top Bogan Suburb – They Name a Few in Canberra!', 4 Aug 2009, available at <https://the-riotact.com/australia%E2%80%99s-top-bogan-suburb-they-name-a-few-in-canberra/13177>, accessed 1 June 2023.
9. This was reported in discussion with a Kambah resident during the exhibition 'Kambah'.
10. Pierre Bourdieu's definition of social capital applies, 'a durable network ... of mutual acquaintance and recognition ... which provides the backing of ... collectively owned capital', see Pierre Bourdieu, 'The Forms of Capital', in John G. Richardson (ed.), *Handbook of Theory and Research for the Sociology of Education*, Greenwood Press, NY, 1986, p. 249. The Concerned Residents of West Kambah report, 'Learning from our land – a visionary strategy for West Kambah' includes a definition of social capital, 'increased skills, better networking and improved knowledge of the local community', p. 47. To learn more about assets lost in Kambah see Kambah Peoples Map, 'How did Urambi Primary Turn into Marigal Gardens Instead of a Community Hub?', 11 Feb 2021, available at <https://kambahpeoplesmap.tumblr.com/post/642822005235826688/how-did-urambi-primary-turn-into-marigal-gardens>, accessed 1 June 2023.
11. Kambah Peoples Map, Notes from 'kitchen table conversation'.
12. An article that eloquently discusses the power of archives as collections is Joan M Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: The Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 1–2, March 2002, pp. 1–19. doi: 10.1007/BF02435628.
13. The exhibition included cyanotypes, a photographic process that dates from 1706, see Christina Anderson, 'Cyanotype: The Blueprint in Contemporary Practice', Routledge, London, New York, 2019, p. 4.
14. Urambi Project, CGEO Maps, available at <https://cgeomap.eu/urambi/>, CGEO tool created by Fred Adam and Geert Vermeire. See also Mike Duggan and Christina Kiminami, 'Reflecting on Locative Media Art with Fred Adam and Geert Vermeire', *Living Maps Network*, available at <https://www.livingmaps.org/fred-adam-and-geert-vermeire>, accessed 1 June 2023.
15. The report, Concerned Residents of West Kambah, 'Learning From Our Land – A Visionary Strategy for West Kambah', 2007 is in the ACT Libraries network and can be available at [https://drive.google.com/file/d/1svaDXmpGC\\_84VRPRrAqdAa71MhYX4GhY/view?usp=sharing](https://drive.google.com/file/d/1svaDXmpGC_84VRPRrAqdAa71MhYX4GhY/view?usp=sharing), accessed 1 June 2023.
16. Jay Phillips, 'Indigenous Australian studies, Indigenist standpoint pedagogy, and student resistance', in George Noblit (ed), *Oxford Research Encyclopedia of Education*, Oxford University Press, UK, 2019.
17. Maggie Walter, *Social Research Methods: An Australian Perspective*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2006, p. 11.
18. The scene for this article is set by literature on building archives with communities, notably from Kirsten Thorpe (2017), Lyndon Ormond-Parker and Robyn Sloggett (2012) and Leisa Gibbons (2020). It is also informed by literature on appraisal, processes that result in what gets selected as archives, from Terry Cook (2013), Caswell, Cifor and Ramirez (2016) and Stevens, Flinn and Shepherd (2010).
19. Kambah Peoples Map, blog, available at <https://kambahpeoplesmap.tumblr.com/>, accessed 1 June 2023.

20. Alexis Frasz and Holly Sidford, 'Mapping the Landscape of Socially Engaged Artistic Practice', in *Art Making Change*, Helicon Collaborative, 2014, p. 4, available at [https://heliconcollab.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FINAL-art-making-change-report\\_092517.pdf](https://heliconcollab.net/wp-content/uploads/2022/08/FINAL-art-making-change-report_092517.pdf), accessed 1 June 2023.
21. Tom Finkelpearl, *What We Made: Conversations on Art and Social Cooperation*, Duke University Press, Durham, London, 2013, p. 6.
22. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 'Kambah 2021 Census All Persons, Quick Stats', available at <https://www.abs.gov.au/census/find-census-data/quickstats/2021/SAL80082>, accessed 1 June 2023.