

PRACTISING PLACE:

Stories around inner city Sydney

Neighbourhood Centres

John Rule

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Certificate of Authorship/Originality

I certify that the work in this thesis has not previously been submitted for a degree and is not being submitted as part of candidature for any other degree.

I also certify that the thesis has been written by me. Any help that I have received in my research work and the preparation of the thesis itself has been acknowledged. In addition, I certify that all information sources and literature used are indicated in the thesis.

Signature of Candidate

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ABSTRACT

The Neighbourhood Centres (NCs) in Sydney, Australia, were established to encourage forms of local control and resident participation and to provide a range of activities to build, strengthen and support local communities and marginalised groups. This thesis is concerned with exploring the personal conceptions, passions and frameworks, as well as the political and professional identities, of activists and community workers in these NCs. It also explores stories of practice and of how these subjective experiences have been shaped through the discourses around the NCs, some of which include feminism, environmentalism, multiculturalism and social justice.

The following key research questions encouraged stories of community practice: What do the terms empowerment, participation, community service and citizenship mean for community organisation? What did community workers and organisers wish for when they became involved in these community organisations? What happened to the oppositional knowledges and dissent that are part of the organisational histories? Foucault's concept of governmentality is used to explore the possibility that these NCs are also sites of 'government through community'. This theoretical proposition questions taken-for-granted assumptions about community development and empowerment approaches. It draws on a willingness of the research participants to take up postmodern and poststructuralist theories.

'Practising place' emerges in the research as a description of a particular form of activism and community work associated with these inner city Sydney NCs. The central dimensions of 'practising place' include: a commitment to identity work; an openness to exploring diverse and fluid citizenship and identity formations; and the use of local knowledges to develop a critique of social processes. Another feature of 'practising place' is that it involves an analysis of the operation of power that extends beyond structuralist explanations of how to bring about social change and transform social relations.

The research has deconstructed assumptions about empowerment, community participation, community organisations and community development, consequently another way of talking about the work of small locally based community organisations emerges. This new way of talking builds upon research participants' understandings of power and demonstrates the utility of applying a poststructural analysis to activist and community work practices. Overall the research suggests that if activists and community workers are to work with new understandings of the operation of power, then the languages and social practices associated with activist and community work traditions need to be constantly and reflexively analysed and questioned.