

Fibro Façade

*And at night the fibro homes reverberated, changed their shape under the stress of love or strife, changed and returned, standing brittle in the moonlight, soluble in dreams.*¹

The classic fibro house is ubiquitous throughout the Australian suburban landscape. It is both celebrated, and by the very nature of its ubiquity, invisible. As a nation, we have an ambivalent relationship with these architectural structures. The humble fibro house is often associated with the large suburban developments of the 1960s public housing commission. However, its beginnings are far earlier, with the affordable material proving robust in coastal towns since the 1930s. With mid-century design receiving a resurgence of interest Catherine O'Donnell's installation is sure to garner a whole new audience to the story of this classic Australian house.

Fibro Façade offers not only an autobiographical perspective for the artist but delivers an understanding of the emotional attachment of the home. O'Donnell's draughtsmanship skills are some of the finest this country has ever seen and reflect this space of home rather than a house. Rather than create static replications of sites, she imbues her work with a pathos and resonance which reveals her talents as a storyteller. The installation delivers the perfect reflection for our very human "place attachment". A relatively new area of study by environmental psychologists who describe it, as one's emotional or affective ties to a place through long-term connections with a place. It is this strength that draws audiences beyond the awe of her life-like drawings, evoking the shared experience of home.

Clare Cooper Marcus is a British academic and author of the seminal *House As A Mirror of the Self*. As the former Professor of Architecture and Landscape Architecture for Berkley, University of California her focus was on the importance of what a home means to the human heart. -In particular low-income housing which interested her as most residents on low or modest incomes did not have a choice about where they live nor the design of housing projects offered them.²

*"Whether by choice or not, where you live and what you see around you are a reflection of who you are – or who society says you are."*³ *Fibro Façade* speaks not just of the fabric of the abode but the identity, stories of the inhabitants, their lives and aspirations.

Defying city-centric storytelling O'Donnell creates a historical narrative that is not anachronistic but celebrates the vernacular. The vernacular is flexible, it adapts to changes in perception with new information. It is this change of perception that O'Donnell manifests with this installation to encompass the intersecting meanings of home and our changing attitudes to these. A home is no longer seen as a basic source of shelter, its meaning is far more complex: it is a place of socialisation, or alternatively refuge; a signifier of our identity, a vehicle for self-expression and holder of our personal memories.

While *Fibro Façades* is an everywhere-everyman example of mid-century developments across Australia, it is also synonymous with Australian identity. Here O'Donnell has drawn specifically on her own childhood experience of home within South West Sydney's Green Valley. Developed as a utopian approach to solving the housing shortage for low-income families, Green Valley became an archetypal project of the period, housing approximately around 25,000 people in 6000 homes between 1961-64.

¹ White, Patrick, *Tree of Man*, Vintage, London, 1994, p. 394

² Cooper Marcus, Clare, *House As A Mirror of Self*, Nicolas-Hays, USA, 1997, p.3

³ Cooper Marcus, p. 211

The NSW Housing Commission introduced these public housing estates, and the Green Valley site became the largest public housing estate in the Sydney basin. Through a palette of banality in an era of post-geometric formalism, these suburban idylls that were once reviled now fill us with profound sentimentality. They are also a cautious manifestation of data visualisation through misguided government policy and socio-economic statistics. Hence, O'Donnell's art becomes a political and social space. This is because urban planning that was meant to improve the lives of the neediest and underprivileged in the community soon became a cultural signifier for working class families and their communities. While the new estates provided homes, there was little to no infrastructure to support the new arrivals. Although the local Oliveri Bus company provided the only public transport, (especially as not everyone had cars back then) these communities were largely dislocated from their origins, extended families or support structures, leaving them relatively isolated. However, human resilience prevailed and perhaps cultivated a sense of the communal through the authenticity of face to face contact. The locale became a personality in itself, a real place to call home. Here O'Donnell has built us an environment through *Fibro Façades* as it is not a house in isolation: and the twenty-metre drawing constructs a street that is evocative of belonging to a greater neighbourhood. As Clare Cooper Marcus articulates,

When we think of home, it encompasses much more than the house or apartment in which we eat and sleep. Home embraces also the neighbourhood, and if that fails to nurture and protect us, to express something positive about who we are, it matters little how beautiful or spacious our house is. Like any living being, humans need not only a nest or dwelling but a whole ecological setting in which they feel 'at home'.⁴

Today there is a renewed sense of pride to claim you were an original resident of the fibro housing developments. Whilst mid-century design has gained a resurgence of popularity, sadly the development cycle continues throughout Australian cities replacing these single-story dwellings with high density apartment blocks. In comparison the suburban fibro house appears to be the suburban dream.

Working within an idiom of mid-century developments (and the homogenisation of domestic homes) O'Donnell's installation voices the resilience of the occupants' variations of the prescribed architectural order. While the estates were constructed as part of public life, O'Donnell's work is a reflection of the exterior as interior. This is shown in the barely perceptible signs of life that audiences will have to study her work so not to overlook it. Hence, *Fibro Facade* depicts intensely private and emotional spaces, given away by tangible ordinariness of existence: a door left ajar, a half-drawn curtain, an open window. Simultaneously her work is an act of revealing and concealing, absence and presence.

Without the privilege of viewing a backyard, all assertions are created through a façade, as the artist offers us a static image which is not still. The illusion is enhanced by the signifiers of life rendering the drawing experience no longer inert, as echoed through the act of viewing. The breadth of this twenty-metre drawing is a walking experience for visitors, evoking the familiarity of walking the streets which inspired the artwork.

O'Donnell's love of Renaissance draughtsmanship continues to be present within the installation. A curious correlation is found in the great 18th century topographical Venetian painter Canaletto famed for his intense perspectives, masterful atmospheres and eye for detail. Canaletto's work is thought to favour the grandiose civic buildings, squares and streets of European capitals. Less well known,

⁴ Cooper Marcus, p.212

however, is that he also painted the humble working areas of cities. Canaletto was drawn to the daily life of the people in their city streets, and his former training as a theatrical set painter never denied them the same purpose of importance in a constructed space. Much like Canaletto, O'Donnell is fascinated by the spaces in which we dwell, live and our perspectives of built environments.

Further correlations can be found in Canaletto's capriccio where the distinction between real and imaginary is blurred. (Capriccio is a landscape painter's device of placing together buildings, archaeological ruins and other architectural elements in fictional combinations.) O'Donnell's work is not photo-realism, but careful editing of the architectural form to create the ideal of her street scenes and perfect perspectives. The success in this process is that it provides a space for viewers to engage between the real and imagined, facilitating familiarity between the internal and external.

O'Donnell has created a personal reflection which has a wider resonance for communities. *Fibro Façade* is a profoundly beautiful and resonant story that will nurture many memories for the visitors who frequent the installation, allowing ownership, connection and providing a re-perception of the expected, overlooked and un-studied nuances of outer suburban culture. A place we know, have seen, or even experienced ourselves.

While O'Donnell's childhood home no longer exists, a victim to the cycle of redevelopment, her installation is testament to the surviving fibro houses that are the "estates of tomorrow" as new families will make them their homes, and, create future community stories.