

SCOPE

Contemporary Research Topics

Art & Design 27: Architecture

August 2024

Encounters

<https://doi.org/10.34074/scop.1027009>

ON FIRES LIT
AND WALLS CRUMBLED

Mark Baskett

Published by Otago Polytechnic Press.

CC-BY the authors;

© illustrations: the artists or other copyright owners or as indicated.



ON FIRES LIT AND WALLS CRUMBLLED

Mark Baskettt

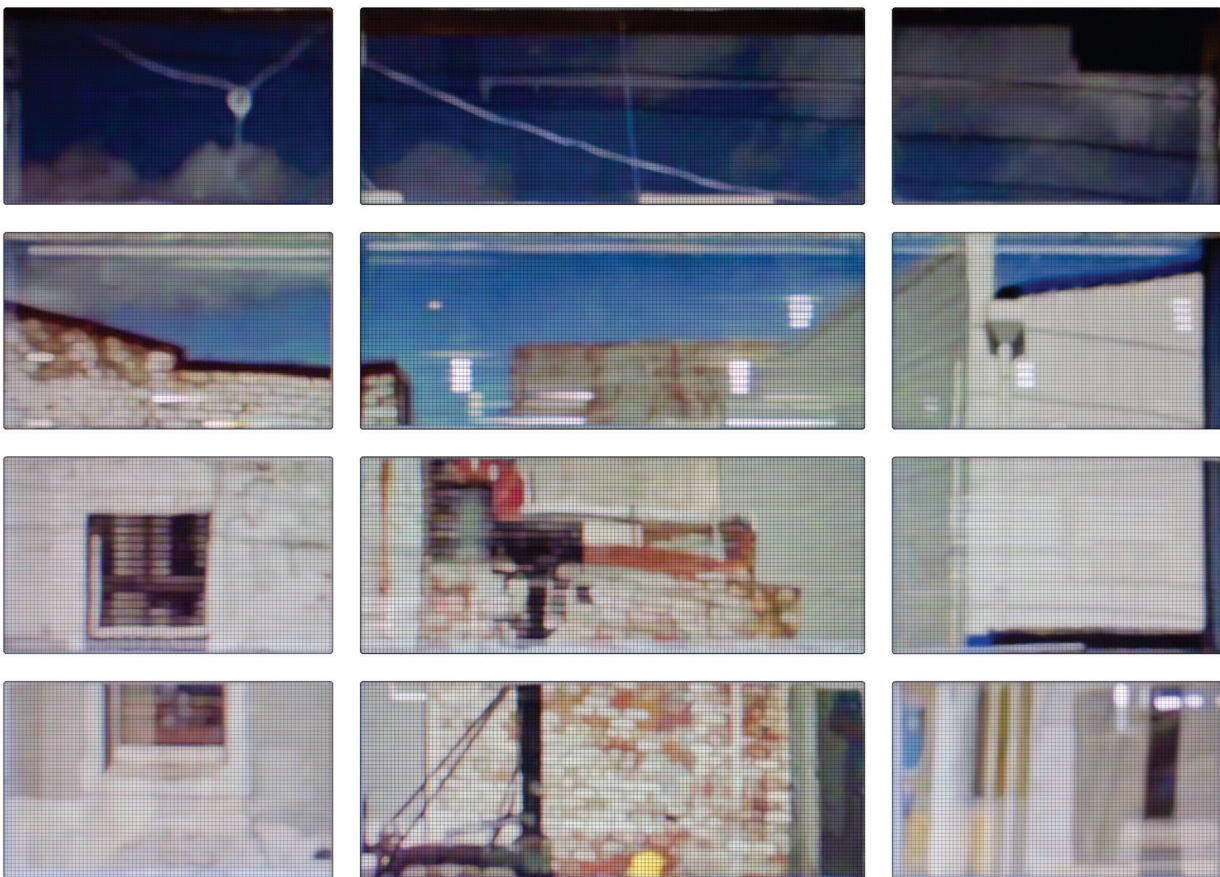


Figure 1. The Neighbourhood (revisited) – Panel #3.
Mixed media digital print, 420 x 594mm.



I.

At home up on a hill, just the two of us together, before my days of packed lunches and the schoolyard—my mother dreamt up a jumble of activities to get us out into our local surrounds. Sometimes we'd simply set out into the streets, wandering in a random, zig-zagging fashion until we'd appear again at the pathway to our own front door. Or sometimes we'd stop at the corner of Kirriemuir Street, sit in the tall grass, and point out the sights from the district stretching out before us on the plain below. The shoebox-shaped houses, the green football field with its puddle that never disappeared, or the brick walls, the smokestacks, and the enormous gasholders of the city's old soot-covered gasworks. My mother told me stories about those gasholders—telling me how they moved up and down without end, moving like monstrous mechanical lungs, breathing fire into homes throughout the city.

Figure 2. The Neighbourhood (revisited) – Panel #4A.
Mixed media digital print, 420 × 297mm.



2.

But before the gasworks and the houses and the streets, the district down the hill that reached out to the sea had existed as a complex sub-aquatic environment, made up of wetland, tidal marsh, and lagoon. Its transformation began in the mid 1850's, as the city's new-founded colonial settlement began to rapidly expand. Plans were developed, a workforce was assembled, and in the following decades the entire flatland area was slowly-yet-decisively drained. Significant parts of this work was undertaken by the newly arrived Chinese market gardeners, who cultivated land leased from city council using techniques first learnt in Guangdong, China. Yet beyond more recent acknowledgements by the local historian, Barbara Newton, and the publication of Lily Lee and Ruth Lam's remarkable book that chronicles those Chinese migrants who took up market gardening, very little in the way of public reports shed light on this arduous labour.¹ In difference to this, historical accounts of individuals expressing prejudice against Chinese people are widely recorded and in plain view. It is a type of public outcry that by the time of my childhood seems to have morphed into a form of silent communication; into sidelong glances, short intakes of breath, a looking and not looking at those thought condemned to the murk of the city's long shadows.

Figure 3. The Neighbourhood (revisited) – Panel #5A.
Mixed media digital print, 420 × 297mm.



3.

Built on a mixture of re-used rock, blue puggish clay, and silica sand, the Dunedin Gasworks began operating in 1863, fed day and night on a smoke-producing brown coal mined and hauled from the island's north-western coast. Soon other buildings and businesses appeared, bringing with them tight clusters of worker-housing. More industries developed, more dwellings were built; to the point that South Dunedin began being known as the country's most densely populated area. But by the early 1980's, with a decline in the use of coal-gas and with antiquated machinery in dire need of replacement or repair, the Dunedin Gasworks was closed and dismantled.² What's left can now be viewed at the Gasworks Museum; a small heritage site boxed in beside a supermarket, not far from a do-it-yourself megastore. Traces of the gasworks also still appear in articles from the city's newspaper. Here business owners and councillors muse on the sulphates, the heavy metals, and the traces of cyanide that continue to seep from the site's contaminated soils.³

Figure 4. The Neighbourhood (revisited) – Panel #6A.
Mixed media digital print, 420 × 297mm.



4.

In technical terms, ash can be described as the inchoate mixture of organic and other oxidizable residues: the end-product of an incomplete combustion.⁴ I learnt this not long after hearing that my old neighbourhood—the entire area covering a hill—had once been cordoned off and duly set ablaze, burning bush and whatever else happened to be there. A few photos of this clearance practice can still be found filed away in museums and archives throughout the country. They offer glimpses into an activity that saw areas of forest and scrubland quickly transformed into landscapes of billowing smoke. For decades now scientists, academics, and graduate students have been trying to retrace this history of fire and destruction—searching through the country’s swamps, rivers, and lake sediments for evidence of once-living and now-petrified matter. Currently it is estimated that 6.7 million hectares of forest had been set alight by Māori, while a further 8 million hectares has been burnt away by participants in the country’s more recent colonial enterprise.⁵ Numbers, diagrams, old images of charred trees—what can be done with these remains?

Figure 5. The Neighbourhood (revisited) – Panel #7A.
Mixed media digital print, 420 × 297mm.

AUTHOR'S NOTE

The images and texts above come from a large and long-term artwork. Titled *The Neighbourhood*, this artwork puts forward a wide variety of images related to Ōtepoti/Dunedin. Mixing personal accounts with more general public histories, the work maps out a somewhat idiosyncratic vision of a geographically and historically specific place and time. Themes and sub-themes developed within this work include art and memory, urbanism and dwelling, along with industrial development, family, territory, non-human co-inhabitants, and legacies of settler-colonial expansion.

Mark Baskett currently lives in Whakatū/Nelson, where he works as an Arts and Media teacher at NMIT. Trained in the field of visual arts, his more recent work explores how selected social histories can be presented using imagery and text. Current topics arising from this approach include 'Neighbourhood', 'The Neighbour', 'Animals as Analogies', and 'Emergent Pākehā Masculine Subjectivity' in the 1980's, in Ōtepoti, Dunedin.

- 1 For further information, see Barbara A Newton, *Our St Clair: A Resident's History* (Dunedin: Kenmore Productions, 2003), 42-4; and Lily Lee and Ruth Lam, *Sons of the Soil: Chinese Market Gardeners in New Zealand* (Pukekohe: Dominion Federation of New Zealand Chinese Commercial Growers Inc, 2012).
- 2 For a more detailed historical account of the Dunedin Gasworks, see Karen Astwood, *IPENZ Engineering Heritage Register Report*, Engineering Heritage New Zealand, 2014, https://d2rjvl4n5h2b6l.cloudfront.net/media/documents/dunedin_gasworks_register_report.pdf. For general information about the Dunedin City Gasworks, see <https://www.gasworksmuseum.org.nz/> (accessed 2 March 2024).
- 3 Articles discussing the ongoing legacy of the Dunedin Gasworks continue to appear in Dunedin's daily newspaper, the *Otago Daily Times*. For an example that covers some of the issues pertinent to this site, see Bruce Munro, "What Lies Beneath," *Otago Daily Times*, 22 September 2014, <https://www.odt.co.nz/lifestyle/magazine/what-lies-beneath> (accessed 2 March 2024).
- 4 https://www.oed.com/dictionary/ash_n2?tl=true&tab=meaning_and_use (accessed 2 March 2024).
- 5 For a general summary of Aotearoa New Zealand's conifer-broadleaf forests, see <https://teara.govt.nz/en/conifer-broadleaf-forests> (accessed 2 March 2024). For more detailed information, see Robert B Allen et al., *New Zealand's Indigenous Forests and Shrublands, Manaaki Whenua – Landcare Research*, https://www.landcareresearch.co.nz/assets/Publications/Ecosystem-services-in-New-Zealand/1_2_Allen.pdf (accessed 2 March 2024).