Ngā Pūtahitanga / Crossings

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Ngā Pūtahitanga / Crossings was a joint conference between SAHANZ and the Australasian Urban History Planning History Group. It was the 39th annual SAHANZ conference and the 16th AUHPH conference.

Andrew McCutcheon, Evan Walker & David Yencken: Tracing Cross-Disciplinary Understandings in Architecture in 1970s Melbourne

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Abstract

The 1970s in Melbourne was a period of political, social and cultural flux. In the midst of this period of change, three figures loom large: Andrew McCutcheon (1931-2017), Evan Walker (1935-2015) and David Yencken (1931-2019). Each had strong allegiances to architecture, as well as commitments to politics and diverse social causes, including heritage, planning and religion. This paper argues that these three are representative of how a cross-disciplinary understanding of architecture can nurture community values and embed these within the built fabric through heritage.

The paper draws on McCutcheon's, Walker's and Yencken's own recollections of this time and uses their memories and reflections to develop a narrative-based understanding of social concerns to broaden architectural conceptions. It examines overlaps between the figures themselves, their work and connection to design, politics and society, mapping the confluences of understandings and outcomes that emerged from the intersections of this knowledge.

The research highlights the importance of reading architecture as a discipline connected to, and crossing, both time and place. The fundamental raison d'etre of architecture was explored and questioned by each of the three protagonists – architecture is not simply designing bespoke buildings, but rather contributing to society (through better housing, protecting heritage, urban design), responding to this place (country, landscape and climate), understanding who we are (identity) and thus influencing policy and legislation. The paper teases out how new understandings and narratives of community values emerged through their cross-disciplinary interests and works.

Introduction

The scope of heritage and the responsibility of architecture shifted dramatically throughout the 1960s and 1970s across Australia, evolving beyond the preservation and construction of the built environment, and answering questions around social value and identities. Historian Graeme Davison notes that in the 1960s, the understanding of 'heritage' altered: "By the 1960s the two ideas – heritage as ideals, and heritage as things – were becoming more closely intertwined,"[1] and as a result a "boom" in preservation movements began, ensuring that by 1980 "even the most modest street-scape or environmental value has far more chance of survival than it would have done in the destructive 1960s, and progress from the position in earlier decades is, on the whole, overwhelming."[2] Architectural historian Joan Kerr captures the sentiments of this progress in the closing words of her 1988 paper "Churches – Our Australian Architectural Heritage":

> The architecture we keep, as well as the architecture we create, provide answers
> to the questions posed in the title of one of Paul Gauguin's most famous paintings:
> 'Where do we come from? Who are we? Where are we going?'[3]

By 1991, 'heritage' would be described by Davison as an extension of the idea of heirloom, connected to objects that linked family to a sense of identity. He writes that this idea was appropriated by young nations as they sought to solidify their own identity; heritage became a way of concreting a sense of nationalism.[4] In 1992, heritage practitioner Chris Johnson formally connected the social discussion around identity and heritage for the Australian Heritage Commission, introducing social value as an important concept in identifying heritage significance. Johnson argued that places recognised as having social value "provide an essential reference point in a community's identity or sense of itself (for historical grounding)."[5] More recently, urban historian James Lesh has argued that it was during this time that "social value embodied social history,"[6] pointing to the growing popularity of heritage agendas within community organisations as representative of this connection.[7]

The shift in the definition of heritage across these years is notable for the involvement of three figures, Andrew McCutcheon, Evan Walker and David Yencken, in the protection and preservation of different environments across local, metropolitan and national levels. Not only were their actions an expression of the changing heritage environment across Australia, but they also demonstrated an understanding of the social value of their own surrounding

neighbourhoods and cities, and more broadly their connection to the identity of the communities around them.

In exploring the evolution of heritage during this time, this paper reflects on the insights that oral histories can provide, beyond that of formally documented records, and engages with the contribution that memory can make in the broadening of historical understandings. It is through oral histories and memories that glimpses into sensory experiences,[8] emotions and friendships are gained, insights that cannot "be communicated by statistics... or lists of names."[9] Drawing on recorded conversations with McCutcheon, Walker and Yencken, the paper traces social connections and lines of influence that emerge in each conversation, teasing out links in the remembered narratives and tracing the evolution of heritage understandings as retold by these three key protagonists. The paper exposes how personal narratives can contribute to a wider historical understanding of community values through the recollections of the community members and leaders themselves.

Lustre

In 2007, after Graeme Gunn received the 25-year award for Outstanding Architecture for his "spectacular"[10] Plumbers and Gasfitters Building, architects Des Smith, Bruce Allen and Jonathon Gardiner agreed that the works, words and thoughts of the generation of architects who came before the current school needed to be recorded. Gardiner remembers:

> What was interesting about our observation of the audience was that most of them didn't understand it [Plumbers and Gasfitters Building] because they looked at it through today's lens... A lot of the people don't even understand that they're part of an outcome of a broader cultural movement, and some buildings shouldn't be assessed purely on 'do you like it or not'. It should be, what was it doing, why was it done, what was the context and culture in which it was done, that actually makes it able to now practice in the city.[11]

This observation led to the creation of the "Lustre Project," to capture the memories of a number of key architectural figures who belonged to a group of people "not done yet."[12] Bringing together colleagues and friends, Smith et al. recorded relaxed conversations with key architectural figures from the 1960s and 1970s in Melbourne, recalling their careers and the development of architecture in Melbourne at this time. The conversations are long, often over two hours, and sometimes rambling. However, in this format, they offer moments of insight, of serendipity, and an opportunity to find hidden connections that otherwise might not be known. These rich recollections are critical to seeing architecture as more than building, shedding

light on how politics, planning and social awareness are intertwined with the architectural fabric of Australia.

Of the many conversations recorded as part of the Lustre Project,[13] McCutcheon, Walker and Yencken each have interdisciplinary careers crossing design, social awareness and politics, gathering diverse experiences and social and political awareness as they progressed. The conversations with these figures reveal intersections and crossovers in their careers, highlighting the influence that the actions and values of one figure can have on others and revealing a new way of perceiving the importance of interdisciplinary intersections. The paper looks not only at the individual careers and actions of each figure, but also how they have affected each other, and contributed to heritage preservation narratives across communities at local, suburban, metropolitan and national levels.

Melbourne in the 1970s

Donald Horne creates a picture for us:

> Cranes nested on city skylines; premixed concrete trucks stood in building sites, patiently churning. Around the building sites the developers' hoardings were display areas of progress: on their official credit boards they listed the names of all the people, from architects and quantity surveyors to electricians and pavers, who were putting this edifice together; but also on the boards of the barricades were the posters advertising the protest meetings of those who challenged the very idea of development.[14]

The 1960s and 1970s saw widespread development across metropolitan Melbourne. Urban sprawl and urban consolidation affected businesses and residential buildings, dramatically changing the urban fabric of the city itself. The desire to modernise spurred the rapid update of inner-city buildings and the construction of high-rise housing solutions that embodied "Modernist design principles" with "economic frameworks" that guided aesthetic decisions.[15] As a result large tracts of existing buildings were demolished, from notable nineteenth-century buildings in the city centre, to suburban terrace housing in inner-city suburbs such as Fitzroy and Carlton.[16] However, the physical changes to the city were also accompanied by significant social shifts. Once dominated by industrial manufacturing, the inner-city suburbs lost business to an international market and as a result the population and demographic of the neighbourhoods changed, providing cheaper housing opportunities for young intellectuals.[17] Renate Howe, Graeme Davison and David Nichols note in their history of the inner Melbourne suburbs, *Trendyville*, that the 1960s and 1970s saw "the most profound generation[al] change

in twentieth century history."[18] They note that within this profound societal change "was a belief in the city as a social ideal, and in urban planning as a way of realising it."[19] The manifestation of these ideals in grassroots movements across the inner-city suburbs in Melbourne was particularly palpable. Residential action groups in inner suburbs were spawned to protect neighbourhoods from the proposed construction of high-rise towers[20] and National Trust groups emerged to protect significant heritage buildings.[21] This would eventually culminate in the introduction of federal legislation under the Whitlam Government in 1972 through the design and implementation of the Australian Heritage Commission and the Register of the National Estate. Lesh observes that "The idea of the national estate responded to growing perceptions that state and local authorities had shunned their urban responsibilities, and so nationwide action was required."[22] Whitlam would draw on the enthusiasm and input of experts from across disciplines to develop this idea into legislation. It is within this context that we find Andrew McCutcheon, Evan Walker and David Yencken immersed in grassroots movements. They translated ideas and skills across disciplines, recognising the values of the communities they served and worked to preserve these values through their actions.

Andrew McCutcheon

Andrew McCutcheon's recollections of his life, from the influence of his father, significant Melbourne architect Osborn McCutcheon, to his cross-disciplinary career through architectural studies at the University of Melbourne, theology and religious ordination, and local and state government politics, reflected an awareness of the social value of the built environment and an intense knowledge of the place and people around his home in the inner Melbourne city suburb of Collingwood.[23] In particular, McCutcheon was able to influence the development of future building solutions and protect "social structures of the community… [where] everybody knows everybody else, and everybody helps everybody else"[24] through the documentation of the physical environment and the social narratives of the neighbourhood.

Early in his career as a Methodist minister, McCutcheon made the decision to move his family to the Dight St Housing Commission Estate in the inner-city suburb of Collingwood, to minister to the local people. This move embedded him within the social fabric of the neighbourhood, whilst also providing him with insights into "how people [were] living on that estate, and what they need[ed] in the way of mutual and other forms of support to help bring up children."[25] He observed first-hand the lack of understanding displayed by the Victorian Housing Commission (VHC) in the design of their housing solutions, their disinterest in the lives of the people they were designing for and the effects that their housing solutions would have. McCutcheon argues that this was further exacerbated when the VHC developed high-rise towers as a proposed solution to the 'slum' conditions and urban sprawl.[26] He stated that these towers had

"no sense of space that was controlled and safe."[27] His understanding of how a community functions, cultivated through his roles as religious minister and local councillor, generated a response to the proposed 20-storey tower that critiqued how a high-rise built environment would ultimately change the way social networks were maintained and forged within local inner-city communities.

> But, now … if you take Collingwood it's a very low-income, working class community. It's becoming more and more mixed with ethnic groups, but basically the social structures of the community are the way that everybody knows everybody else, and everybody helps everybody else, and minds kids, and when they are sick and all that stuff … it was just a network … that's all destroyed by that activity.[28]

Spurred on by these issues McCutcheon became a pivotal member of residential action group, the Fitzroy Residents Association.[29] His involvement bridged disciplines, enabling him to combine his social awareness of Fitzroy and Collingwood with his architectural understandings that provided the "ability to imagine that this is all possible."[30] Fellow Residents Association member Barry Pullen notes:

> Now other people were very influential in different ways. Andrew McCutcheon could see that these houses could be repaired, and he had seen these sort of things happening. He was providing that architectural kind of backbone that it didn't have to be done this way, you could do it as a mixture perhaps.[31]

McCutcheon's various role on the local council, in the Residents Association, and as a part of the Victorian Chapter of the Australian Institute of Architects provided a platform where he was able to introduce architectural methods of documentation and analysis to the protest movement against the VHC towers. He was part of an independent examination and report on the housing conditions, separate to that of the VHC.[32] McCutcheon's involvement in this reporting was twofold: as an architect he was able to provide architectural evidence of the housing conditions, and as a trusted resident, religious minister and councillor he was able to document the narratives and social connections within the community, creating a record of social values within Fitzroy. McCutcheon recalls:

> [The VHC] were looking at [the] physical building, and you know … "these are rotten physical buildings and we'll put some good ones there, and everyone should

be applauding us" … No one had the task or the responsibility to look at the social fabric, and the way the things worked.[33]

… We did work very hard at trying to develop a consultative process … So there was a whole inner-city thing of trying to help people participate more and understand that they could have an influence on their own environment.[34]

The fight in Fitzroy against the VHC highlighted a need for alternative methods of providing and designing housing, particularly within inner-city suburbs with growing populations, that respected and acknowledged the existing identity of place. As such, the resulting battle, coupled with the interdisciplinary approach developed by McCutcheon, protected the social values of the community, while simultaneously strengthening the suburb's unique identity founded on the narratives of place. As summarised by Howe, "It has not been a history either of progress or of great local pride, but it has been a history where a strong sense of place has survived."[35] The battle in Fitzroy to protect the built environment of the neighbourhood is reflective of a strong social awareness of the importance of place, and how it contributes to the narrative of the suburb's and community's identity.

McCutcheon's work is an example of how understanding place and community through an interdisciplinary lens can ultimately create a more encompassing built environment. Through a combination of understanding built material and local culture, his actions marked a significant shift towards maintaining and repairing existing housing, ultimately ensuring that the residents felt a sense of ownership over their neighbourhoods and an ability to strengthen their 'networks'. However, McCutcheon was not alone in protesting against the Brookes Crescent high-rise development. The involvement of the Institute of Architects reflects the wider mind-set of the Melbourne architectural community. Fellow architect Graeme Gunn recalls his own involvement in the Brookes Crescent protest whilst a member of the Institute Council.[36] Evan Walker recalls how the actions that occurred at Brookes Crescent created an atmosphere of action amongst the community, ultimately "multiply[ing] [the Collins Street Defence Movement] into a pretty big membership."[37] Ideas about the social value of the urban fabric were able to cross from a small suburban context to a wider metropolitan setting, protecting identity narratives of increasing scale across the city. Walker was a key part of the expansion of the emerging heritage preservation movement in inner-city Melbourne, instigating the Collins Street Defence Movement and enabling the residents of Melbourne to vocalise their values.

Evan Walker

Evan Walker, like Andrew McCutcheon, had a richly layered career beginning in architecture and then venturing into urban design and politics. Educated at RMIT and the University of Melbourne, Walker completed his Master of Architecture on student housing at the University of Toronto in Canada. In conversation with Des Smith, Bruce Allen, Jonathon Gardiner and Graeme Gunn, Evan and his Canadian wife Judy recall those formative years in Toronto, meeting each other, getting married and making the decision to return to Australia. They remark how during those six years that Evan Walker spent overseas from 1963 to 1969, significant shifts in the urban fabric in Melbourne emerged.[38] Shifts in technology and the need for better housing forced the government into the reclamation and demolition of large tracts of inner-city building, at the same time as inner-city developers were shifting to similar high-rise solutions. On the family's return, Walker was able to combine his architectural knowledge with social observations to leave a heritage legacy within the city, and to provide valuable connections between the built heritage of inner-city Melbourne and the identity of the community there.

Davison, in his *Use and Abuse of Australian History*, states that "heritage is essentially a political idea."[39] Davison argues that the notion of heritage enables a public interest in what otherwise might be deemed a private matter. To further his argument, he turns to the words of Evan Walker, "Heritage belongs to the people, not to the owners."[40] Davison states that Walker:

> Did not mean that because a building or place was part "of the heritage" its owner ceased to have legal right to it. Rather he was insisting that the public retained a right to ensure its preservation that overrode the owner's right to alter or destroy it.[41]

Davison's argument here highlights the link between the public and private ideals embedded within the built environment, inserting a political layer into the way architecture and its histories can be read.

The Walkers' instigation of the Collins Street Defence Movement was instrumental in increasing public interest in the National Trust's actions to preserve and protect the nineteenth-century buildings of inner-city Melbourne. Coming from Toronto, where much of its colonial past had been erased,[42] Walker was able to see how a rising social consciousness in Melbourne and the preservation of the inner-city buildings were connected, a synergy that ultimately helped articulate the narrative of the people and place of Melbourne.[43] One of the

buildings that was threatened was the National Bank on Collins Street. The National Trust recorded that "In 1976 the bank proposed to demolish the building and many around it and replace it with a tower block."[44] This threat spurred Walker to place an advertisement into the paper, reading "Anybody interested in saving Collins Street … Come to Hilda Crescent."[45] Walker describes the response as "overflowing," his wife Judy recalling:

> They were flowing out the door. I mean the dining room and the living room, you know, and we didn't have a back room at that point. It was just full of wet people 'cause it was a pouring night. All shapes and sizes. All political colours, whatever, and they were all there because they loved Collins Street. They loved their city.[46]

The large gathering of people hosted by the Walkers demonstrated an overwhelming appreciation for Melbourne's historic built environment, and the connection that the community had with it. The Walkers' actions exemplify how heritage had the potential to become a political idea, followed by action. Evan Walker's ability to combine his understanding of the significance of the built environment with his growing political skills created a movement that became known as the Collins Street Defence Movement.[47]

The Collins Street Defence Movement exemplified the potency of social value in the wider community's involvement in heritage protection. Judy Walker recalled the snowballing effect of this initial meeting as momentum grew and vast numbers of people got involved:

> We got something like – I don't know how many thousands of signatures. People up and down Collins Street came and signed. And then we/Evan organised the march, and we made these huge, wonderful sticks that we all marched with, you know, "Save our Collins Street", and we had big banners and we marched them down Collins Street. I mean looking back it was a very naive thing to do, but it was ... it attracted a lot of attention.[48]

The Collins Street Defence Movement was able to articulate and represent the social history of the city in a physical way. As Evan Walker remembers, the movement "clearly represented something that the public wanted dearly. The ad that we put in the newspaper had an electric effect."[49] Lesh notes that this "energetic"[50] group developed an "all or nothing"[51] approach to heritage conservation, aiming to protect the overall environment of Collins Street, its "elegance, graces, charm and atmosphere."[52] It is notable that the flyer listing the aims of the Defence Movement does not specifically point to the buildings themselves, but the wider context, including the atmosphere and charms, terms more commonly associated with social

values, and the "sense of place."[53] Ultimately it presented the idea that "great numbers of people can influence the city council non-planners."[54]

This period in Melbourne was reflective of a social awareness of the heritage narrative of the built environment, and its legacy. As highlighted by architect Norman Day at the time, groups such as the Collins Street Defence Movement were able to promote that "basic judgment values must centre around people"[55] and in turn curb the "hellish"[56] "social consequences of the disasters that [architects] help to perpetuate"[57] through a lack of care and attention to the people in their developmental designs. Evan Walker's ability to influence the community and the urban environment of Melbourne was felt through his desire to preserve and save a place embedded in the social fabric of Melbourne. Walker describes this time in architectural practice as representative of the wider range of what architecture could be: "To do what we were doing, in the context of what Daryl [Jackson] was doing [designing], we parted company a little. Although he agreed with me that the full spectrum of what we were doing was legitimate architecture."[58]

This movement became typical of Evan Walker's work and his view on the interdisciplinary aspect of architectural practice, a view that would develop further and result in his leaving the Jackson Walker partnership to move into politics. Walker's and McCutcheon's actions during this time were part of a consciousness around how the built environment could embody identity values and how design decisions could reflect the needs of people in these places. David Yencken would similarly see the importance of protecting places, buildings and even landscapes that embodied identity values of communities across the nation.

David Yencken
Unlike Andrew McCutcheon and Evan Walker, David Yencken never formally trained as an architect or urban designer. However, through his robust exploration and understanding of planning and architecture in his work founding project housing company Merchant Builders and planning and landscape firm TRACT, he was able to contribute to a national heritage strategy intertwined with emerging ideas about identity. Yencken's career progressed across the disciplines of art, design and politics. Bringing together Whitlam's 'New Nationalism' and the connections that communities had to smaller monuments, buildings and landscapes that embraced individual historical narratives, Yencken reflects on the broadening of heritage preservation through the Register of the National Estate (1974-2007):

> Our surroundings are more than their physical form and their history. Places can
> be the embodiment of our ideas and our ideals. We attach meaning to places –

meanings known to individuals and meanings shared by communities. This is the essence of Social Value. It is about the special meanings attached to places by groups of people (rather than by individuals) and how we can take account of these values in our heritage assessment processes…[59]

Yencken's reflections on the embodiment of social values in the creation of the Register of the National Estate reveal how the heritage preservation process had developed over the course of the 1970s. As noted by Davison, the Register of the National Estate was reflective of significant shifts in legislated heritage preservation, and the limits by which this might be understood.[60] Davison notes that the word "heritage" was used sparingly, instead the committee "prefer[ed] more precise and neutral terms such as 'built environment', 'cultural resources' and 'historic buildings'."[61] Davison's observations highlight the importance of this shift, and the opportunities that this offered a government that was looking to cultivate a 'New Nationalism'. This idea is captured in the introduction to the Report of the National Estate:

> This growing sense of national values will certainly be confirmed and increased as the concept of the National Estate takes shape in the acquisition, protection and enjoyment of items of the National Estate itself. Properly chosen, managed and presented, we suggest that these will become a focus not just for the pride of material possession, but for something less tangible but far more valuable, the sense of pride in being Australian.[62]

Yencken recounts the process for this intention, and the desire to ensure that the wider sense of what it was to be Australian was captured in a comprehensive, varied list of the "things you keep." He points to the international influences that were collected and then adapted to better fit the National Estate of Australia, and the breadth of this idea:

> I happened to be going to Europe at the time, I was on the Committee of Enquiry, and because I was doing that, I decided to go to North America to see if there was anything interesting happening there because North America has a system of government that is more akin to ours than that of the United Kingdom. I went to Heritage Canada, and they sent me down to visit a body in Washington, and that body was a very impressive one. And I met the guy who ran it, and I thought there was something very interesting there. So, I carried that idea back to Australia, and we, in the drafting of the Heritage Commissions Act… we borrowed from that and we borrowed from some other provisions in the Act in the Environment Protection Act, United States. But we did something that none of these people had done in

that we included in the program, and in the legislation, not just historic areas and historic structures as in the United States, but natural and prehistoric and everything as well. So, it was … absolutely comprehensive…[63]

Lesh argues that this process and "comprehensive" approach to the Register made it notable as "one of Australia's most significant and unique heritage ideas."[64] He states that the Register reflected Whitlam's intention to "debunk the notion 'that conservation is a "middle-class" issue or exclusive 'reserve of the privileged','"[65] further increasing the presence of the social values of the wider community. The democratic process of listing a place on the register of the National Estate enabled everyone to contribute their own cultural heritage to this cumulative list of Australia's historic places, and therefore ensure that their own history was documented and part of the cultural identity of Australia.

Of particular importance to Yencken was the desire to ensure that the natural and precolonial areas were also protected in national legislation by the Register of the National Estate. This drive reveals his awareness of the potency of the Australian landscape, and the connection that this has to identity, particularly for himself, as he reflects:

And as I went through this landscape I knew there was something incredibly significant about it. Something I really loved about it, and I wasn't ready to admit it for quite some years. Quite some time really... it was just the whole experience of that drive over a couple of days, and progressively going into the landscape. I did know that it was familiar and well loved. So that was very powerful. And then, yes, it had to do with opportunity. You see things that are very interesting. I was really interested in paintings. That was important. But the painting in turn drew me really powerfully into Australian culture because it was illustrating ... relating to and reflecting Australian culture in ways that were unique to Australia. So that was very important, and the people were extremely important.[66]

Yencken's actions were reflective of how the landscape offered another dimension to understanding identity in Australia and what its contributing cultural factors might be. Through an interdisciplinary approach, combining professions, narratives and international legislation, he was able to structure a new system specific for Australian conditions. Acknowledging social values meant allowing communities with narratives connected to the landscape to also acknowledge their heritage. Yencken contributed to the shift in heritage preservation that McCutcheon and Walker were part of, nationalising a system for communities to have the built environments of their own heritage narratives formally recognised.

Conclusion

The conversations by Des Smith, Bruce Allen and Jonathon Gardiner in 2010 and 2011 as part of the Lustre Project have provided valuable glimpses into the broad rich social awareness across the careers of McCutcheon, Walker and Yencken. All three were able to see the importance of promoting the values of people and the role that the built environment, and environment more generally, played in acknowledging heritage, from within smaller communities, to metropolitan areas and finally nationwide. The importance of the intersections of disciplines and social value was acknowledged in the Report on the National Estate, making clear that to achieve a positive outcome for all communities, all disciplines should be acknowledged:

> Planning for conservation of such areas cannot be separated from these wider considerations, and this highlights the pleas that have been made to us for research and training facilities both in the identification and management of the National Estate. This should clearly be interdisciplinary training, involving planners, economists, biologists, architects, engineers and sociologists, as well as administrators at all levels, if the National Estate is to be made to serve all the objectives to which it can be relevant.[67]

McCutcheon, Walker and Yencken are representative of the accomplishments that interdisciplinary training can achieve, particularly within heritage movements. They reveal how layering architectural education and design awareness with political and social knowledge can lead to a greater understanding of neighbourhood values, and ultimately curate heritage such that it is reflective of local and national identity. The conversations with these figures elicit reflections and memories of this period which capture key shifts in the understanding of architecture in the 1970s and reveal the critical role diverse narratives have in realising preservation and protection strategies that encompass wider community values.

Endnotes

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