

This Is Not a Pipe: The Treacheries of Indigenous Housing

Tess Lea and Paul Pholeros

There was an important moment in surrealist art when the Belgian painter René Magritte pointed out the simple truth that his painting of a smoker's pipe was not a pipe (see fig. 1). Today there is still a small shock to be had in recognizing the layers of automaticity embedded in our conventions of viewing. We react immediately. Of course, Magritte's painting is not itself a physical device that one can fill with fragrant tobacco, ignite, and inhale, allowing smoke to curl and linger on lip and in lung, but an image, complete with corrective text that refers to its literal status: *Ceci n'est pas une pipe*. Then a belated realization hits: the tag "This is not a pipe," while a subtle calligram, is itself also figure, seemingly factual script, which we "read" only to be doubly deceived. Enticing us to elucidate meaning, the referential text deflects attention away from its own status as also, like the pipe, painted image. It is a reflection of text, brushstrokes on a surface fashioned into the shape of an explanatory legend. The text that seems to reveal also masks, a form of trickery that is best captured by the painting's title, *La trahison des images* (*The Treachery of Images*).

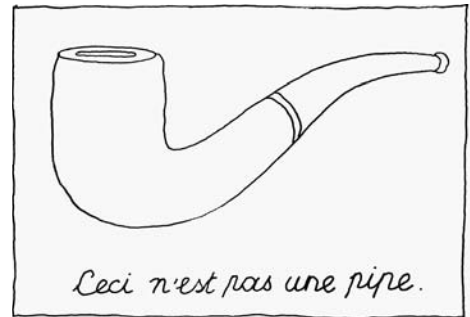


Figure 1 Words and images, with apologies to René Magritte. Image by Paul Pholeros

This article draws both on long-term Healthabitat data and program efforts led by directors Paul Pholeros, Paul Torzillo, and Stephan Rainow and on wider anthropological fieldwork conducted by Tess Lea. Lea's anthropological fieldwork began in 2005 under a scoping grant from the Charles Darwin University Research Innovation Panel. Fieldwork between 2007 and 2009 was made possible by an Australian Research Council Industry Linkage Grant. Our thanks go to Caz Comino, Gillian Cowlshaw, Elizabeth A. Povinelli, Shane Thamm, and Paul Torzillo for useful comments on earlier drafts.

Public Culture

By interrupting culturally engrained habits of viewing and interpretation, Magritte's work draws attention to how perception and analysis are subtly directed through habituated modes of viewing and classification. As Michel Foucault put it, in an essay on exactly this painting, there is a long-standing habit in Western interpretation of suspending further thought when faced with a figure that resembles another object or figure. When an image exerts this hold, a "what you see is *that*" effect kicks in: "Resemblance and affirmation cannot be dissociated" (Foucault 1983: 34). Writes Foucault (1983: 37), "*Ceci n'est pas une pipe* exemplifies the penetration of discourse into the form of things." Or as Magritte puts it, "A thing which is present can be invisible, hidden by what it shows" (quoted in Gablik 1976: 12).

It might seem odd to begin an essay on the contentious politics of indigenous housing in Australia with a leading surrealist painter. After all, a house is not a painting. But then neither are indigenous houses, houses. They might look like houses, most especially when they are newly constructed or refurbished. But the appearance of new "affordable" houses, buttressed by scripted policy announcements about dollars spent and program achievements, misdirect our interpretation away from what is literally in front of us: a cheap, partly complete steel shed or copy of a house of bare utility, which looks like, but is not, a house. It is a *non-house* (fig. 2).

The supply and maintenance of affordable housing and infrastructure remains one of the most vexed issues confronting indigenous public policy. Many per-



Figure 2 Looks like a house. Photograph by Paul Pholeros

manent indigenous dwellings are in need of major repair or replacement; are overcrowded; and lack sufficient water supplies, washing facilities, or sewage infrastructure. The scale of the poor housing situation for indigenous Australians is subject to highly fallible calculations; but drawing on information from the Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW 2005), the high dependency on government supply for indigenous accommodation becomes clear. Of the estimated 165,700 indigenous households in Australia, two-thirds are rental situations, of which nearly 60 percent are public housing (AIHW 2005: 1). Across Australia, more than one-third, or 58,100, of the permanent houses accommodating indigenous households have structural problems, a proportion that grows to 44 percent of all houses occupied by indigenous people in the Northern Territory (AIHW 2005: 94).

Diagnoses of why indigenous housing remains so poor despite seemingly vast program expenditures may alternately blame the racist state (e.g., Morgan 2006) or point to inadequate consultation processes (e.g., Lee and Morris 2005). But by far the most common tendency is to attribute much of the cause to the incapacities of the Aboriginal householders (e.g., Hughes 2007). Whether hard-line or empathetic, aired in policy backrooms or as eyewitness accounts on talk radio and Internet postings, there is a dominant mode of interpreting damaged houses that places indigenous values and behaviors at the center of the housing problem, an interpretive syndrome that tends to bounce off the seeming look of things into well-worn grooves of explanation and remediation. The prevailing theory is that houses become structurally compromised in swift time frames more or less because of the way householders tend the house.

For the beginnings of a counternarrative, we ask that you hold in mind the following: endemic overcrowding (or high-use load) contributes to rapid wear and tear, and since much Aboriginal housing is cheaply constructed, repair and maintenance issues quickly become a problem. This has a series of material effects. On the one hand, intermittent maintenance exacerbates degradation of housing stock. On the other, it swiftly creates a visual image of mess and decrepitude that, like the portrait of a pipe, invokes an interpretive automaticity for the remediating viewer. The unkempt house represents a lack of householder pride that becomes the portmanteau explanation for the substandard nature of indigenous housing stock. The visual blight is the shaman's material object: a stone found in the gut that is responsible for all other afflictions.

For some commentators, Aborigines neglect their houses out of ineptitude, indolence, and financial incompetence, borne of too many years of passive welfare. "I dunno, Tess," a maintenance officer working in an indigenous housing

organization put it. “A lot of what outsiders say happens, really does. My sister took photos of a house on Groote Eylandt. It was like watching white ants eat the tree—one day a door missing, the next a window; in six months there was nothing but a brick shell. I don’t blame whitefellas for getting cross. We have created expectations. Now it’s too far gone.” For anthropologists and other well-meaning commentators, a curiously analogous theory dominates. When the topic of Aboriginal housing moves into conversation, anthropologists have a pious lesson in cultural evolution ready to hand (see, e.g., Sutton 2007). They will recall that Aboriginal people were and are hunter-gatherers, who roamed in small family bands and cooked and fed outside. In customary times, thick social relations and a demand sharing economy were automanaged via sensitivity to nuance and close monitoring of the emotional tenor of everyday events. Domiciles were not permanently composed but could be split up to avoid conflict, with a strategic parting of company being the principal dispute resolution mechanism. A makeshift camp could be destroyed in a fit of rage or in an outpouring of monumental grief, with little lasting damage. With no fixed property to be owned, neither the disciplines of domestic hygiene nor the coveting of fixed assets needed to be recognized.

The transition to a sedentary, settled lifestyle has unraveled these underpinnings. Three-bedroom houses groan under the strain of untenable numbers as extended family transition in and out. Aggravations between household members across gender, age, and family lines are exacerbated either by the close proximity of houses that are arranged to mimic urban subdivisions or by the lack of traditional spatial separation, leading to stress, vandalism, disillusionment, and abandonment. Only now, when houses get damaged, they are on permanent display, and kin live cheek by jowl in the mess. The mattresses, camp beds, and outside cooking fires to be found in sparsely grassed yards are pointed to as further proof that suburban-style houses conflict with the different cultural desires and social histories of indigenous people. Continuing the cultural discontinuity reasoning, anthropologists join sympathetic interpreters in explaining that toilets are ruined and stoves broken because they remain foreign impositions. Statistics concerning their higher-than-average breakdown simply confirm for the omniscient anthropologist the poor lay understanding of indigenous living preferences, the preferences of a nonaccumulative people who to get by really do not need much more than secure storage space for the odd artifact and a shedlike shelter for rainy periods.

Contrasting with these accounts, which, using a cultural teleology, still pin housing dysfunction to householder attributes, this essay argues for a new material literalism to demonstrate the surreal nature of indigenous nonhousing in Austra-

lia. Drawing on ethnographic material, housing data, and a visual archive spanning the previous two decades, we hope to suggest how pulling the aesthetic logic of discourses out of indigenous habits and habitats pulls the housing from the house. Indigenous houses are composite deceptions. They are material non sequiturs, the penetrative effect of discourse in things, figures that produce an aesthetic response with material consequences. But whereas Magritte's painting intends to unsettle the lock between representational orders, to disrupt the governance of expectations by ideas, the aesthetic order this essay examines firmly tethers image to meaning. The surreal nature of indigenous housing construction becomes the real moral deficit of indigenous people. While hardware breakdowns are more the result of poor initial construction and material choice, inadequate maintenance, and high levels of wear and tear, the residents themselves are routinely considered the main reason houses (and the items that make houses habitable) are in poor condition.

In this discursive environment a new level of literalism, a dirty literalism about materiality, is needed to reintroduce for the interpreter the surreal nature of indigenous dwellings, to show how moral orders of responsibility and culpability are socially directed. For this reason we assert that a level of functionality is required before the objects of Aboriginal housing policy should be considered materially real, before a house is deemed a house. If a pipe is not a pipe if it cannot be smoked, a length of polyvinyl chloride tubing is not a pipe when, as is the case with much indigenous housing in Australia, it might be materially and three-dimensionally present, but it does not connect the toilet to an effluent disposal system. That is, it is literally not a pipe—defined as a hollow cylinder for transporting fluids—when it stops a meter from the house, buried under dirt, without deliberate connection to a subterranean plumbing network, unable to float detritus away (see fig. 3). The sign of the material house is an illusion when no system of institutionalized expectation is in place to connect the physical structure (house) and the range of functions it is assumed to be able to provide to the resident: safety, security, and health benefit (which might then deserve the title “public housing”).

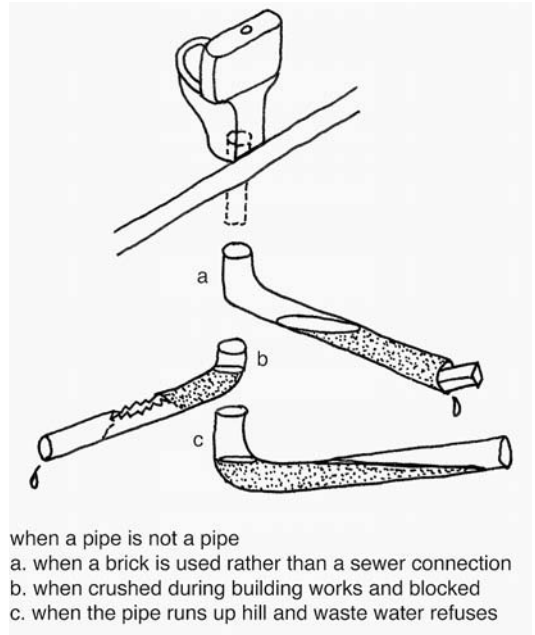


Figure 3 When is a pipe not a pipe?
 Image by Paul Pholeros

Seeing Is Believing

Houses-that-are-not-housing are endemic across indigenous Australia. Specializing in driving improvements in Aboriginal housing function, Healthabitat Pty Ltd has generated independent data on housing function in more than five thousand dwellings across Australia from 1999 to the present.¹ Run by directors Paul Pholeros, Paul Torzillo, and Stephan Rainow since 1985, Healthabitat developed an approach for surveying and fixing what they call “health hardware” in Aboriginal allotments, via a methodology that is now known as the “Housing for Health” approach.² The program is complex but is based on the straightforward yet strangely contentious premise that householders’ ability to practice specific healthy living practices is dependent on their means—the health hardware—to do so. Using standard, repeatable measurement of housing performance in terms of safety and the basic requirements for healthy living (such as a working shower, a working toilet and wastewater system, a safe electrical system, and a kitchen where food can be stored, prepared, and cooked), Healthabitat surveys show repeatedly that the condition of Aboriginal houses is extraordinarily poor. We report here on data collected from projects performed in 132 communities surveyed between January 1999 and November 2006 (see Torzillo et al. 2008; also SGS Economics 2006). Of some 71,869 items assessed as requiring repair or replacement, 65 percent of the problems were due to maintenance (or the lack thereof), 25 percent to faulty installation or equipment, and only 10 percent to householder damage or misuse.³

1. The Housing for Health method conducts a survey on each house to determine whether the health hardware and other features of that house are functioning (Survey Fix 1). In each case, a visual check alone is insufficient. Each outlet has to be tested, temperatures taken, flow rates physically measured, buttons pressed, and toilets flushed with wads of paper. The nonfunctioning elements of the house are then fixed, either on the spot or shortly after the initial survey and, for larger jobs, over a six- to twelve-month period. Houses are then surveyed again (Survey Fix 2) to assess the functioning of all items and whether the urgent items commissioned to licensed trades have indeed been fixed. Over the years Healthabitat has collected a large amount of detailed information on the functionality of houses before and after repairs are completed. For more details, see Pholeros et al. 1993, 2000, 2004; Lea 2008b; Torzillo et al. 2008; and also www.healthabitat.com.

2. “Health hardware” was a phrase introduced by Fred Hollows to describe the physical equipment necessary for disease-free living in fixed domiciles: “In a water supply system, for example, health hardware includes both the bore and the basin plug, as well as the shower rose [showerhead], taps and drain” (DFCSIA 2007: 9). Hollows is also responsible for the mantra “No survey without service” incorporated in the Housing for Health process.

3. Under the Housing for Health methodology, 250 items are checked in total in each house and living area. Through such detailed empiricism in more than five thousand houses—including many that *look* to all intents and purposes as if they *should* work—a functioning shower was available in

There is, then, a different picture available to be seen. Poor construction by contracted building firms, coupled with lack of supervision from the contracting body and associated funders, leads to houses that break down, are poorly maintained, and do not function. Yet, conventionally, it is rare to see poorly supervised public infrastructure programs and the micropractices of policy makers, regulators, tradesmen, and manufacturers placed in the explanatory frame for failing housing stock. Beginning with the former conservative Liberal government and showing no signs of abatement under the current Labor government, the prevailing policy argument is that Aboriginal people display shallow regard for the dependency-causing gifts of welfare (e.g., public housing) and, further, that this nonvaluing will be realigned only when the tenant learns to value the poorly functioning asset via the motivations of home ownership and forms of indebtedness through mortgage arrangements.⁴ Like most interventions in the indigenous domain, it is an ill-considered or ersatz “free market” on offer: mortgages will be brokered by the government, and houses will be paid for through subsidized bank loans rather than subsidized rents. Why and for whom it is better to buy a small and poorly functioning house than to rent public housing for the same amount are rarely debated questions. But the dream itself is simple: the disproportionately high levels of rental arrears, the poor maintenance, and the antisocial behavior that observers associate with publicly funded indigenous housing will vanish with the psychological possession that comes with home ownership, which will manifest itself as houses that are treated with more respect.

In his influential blueprint for remote community reform, the indigenous reformer Noel Pearson develops this argument explicitly. His central recommendation “is to shift from the current system of exclusively public provision of housing to a system based on private property markets” to counter “the passive welfare problems of the public housing model” (Cape York Institute 2007: 108). However, the approach has to be comprehensively managed:

only 35 percent of them. The criteria for functioning nutritional hardware included storage space for food, preparation space, a working stove, and a sink. Only 6 percent of houses met these criteria at the initial assessment. One-quarter of identified plumbing and electrical shortcomings were due to faulty installation, the fitting of wrong parts or components, or the absence of an essential item from the house (Torzillo et al. 2008: 8). For more on the functionality of essential hardware in indigenous houses assessed as part of Healthabitat’s work, see Australian Institute of Health and Welfare datacubes at www.aihw.gov.au/indigenous/datacubes/index.cfm.

4. It is interesting that this push toward the creation of private home ownership has abated in the current context, where the former cultural habit in American banking of providing unlimited credit expansion for private housing purchases regardless of one’s ability to pay has helped bring the global financial system to its knees.

Families' legal ownership of their own homes is a necessary condition for responsibility, but in and of itself may not be sufficient. Simply transferring the title and converting rent into mortgage repayments may not work. [It] will not necessarily cause individuals or families to become more engaged in, and committed to, the maintenance and protection of their homes over the longer term. The experience of the "Katter leases" in Cape York in the 1980s supports this view. *These houses were gifted in poor condition* and nearing the end of their lifespan; the families were not required to make any financial or other commitments; and no education programs were provided to inform people about their responsibilities as home owners and how to fulfil them. As a result, the families' sense of responsibility and ownership remained unchanged and the houses continued to deteriorate. (Cape York Institute 2007: 109; emphasis added. See also Hughes 2005, 2007.)

As these excerpts illustrate, despite the opportunity to consider the active role played by houses that are "gifted in poor condition" to later deterioration, even to possible devaluing, the dominant interpretation concerns a suspected irreverence for the idea of the house itself, a failing that stands in need of comprehensive forms of correction.

Of concern to us here is the way portraits of substandard housing are automatically correlated with presumptions about deliberate householder damage and the need to remediate, with the combined effect that evidence of poor practice in house construction and the impact of irregular maintenance glides past the collective eyeball. Aiding this elision are the serial images of damaged houses that outsiders either see for themselves or access via media spectacle. The apparent squalor of indigenous housing allotments plays a key aesthetic role in provoking the compulsion to have a ready-made answer. In the more remote parts of northern and central Australia, broken toys, hardware, and appliances litter unkempt yards, together with soiled disposable diapers, car bodies, and general junk. Discarded dishes, cemented with food remains, might lie tossed with casual abandon amid piled laundry and stained mattresses. Holes are punched into walls in drug-addled fits of rage. People might sleep in dilapidated lounge rooms and on kitchen floors, using bedrooms for visiting family members, refrigerators, or food storage. Importantly, while this description does not hold for the majority of indigenous households across Australia, these images of dereliction operate as proxy for the dire nature of indigenous living conditions across the country. That is, without necessary understanding of the diverse realities of indigenous households, a gestalt image invokes a ritualistic round of causal explanations and declarations of

more resolved intervention, a view that is reinforced by the sage advice of anthropologists offering reified cultural history to explain the situation, paradoxically reasserting an indigenous terminus point for the onus of responsibility.

Whether compassionate or hostile, the “rubrics of public safety and social pathogenesis” (Feldman 2001: 60) that are correspondingly debated in policy and research forums on the problem of indigenous housing share a key uniting feature: they free policy makers, departments, designers, and builders of much of the responsibility for the poor performance of what is there now. And what is there now, whatever else can be said of indigenous living conditions, is also the end product of an entire genealogy of previous expenditure, design, and implementation decisions. Of great significance, but seldom regarded in images of the indigenous housing problem, is what Primo Levi (2000: 129) calls the “frightening anesthetic power of company papers.” It needs remembering that the pipe that is not a pipe, since it is unconnected to an effluent disposal system, exists *despite* techniques of regulation, audit, and administration that themselves support the ambiguous, contradictory, and nonrepresentational relationship between words and things. Well-crafted, thoughtful guidelines do exist that specify what and how things should be installed to ensure safety and function under the harsh mix of pressures that indigenous housing can be subject to (see DFCSIA 2007). For example, drains with inadequate slopes are more likely to become blocked by heavy use; thus, ensuring that national standards exist and that they are met for indigenous housing are important technical interventions.⁵

But even the most exacting specifications are undermined by a raft of local conditions, from challenges experienced by materials themselves in climatically harsh environments (think rust, rats, and calcification), to the inability to rely on competent tradesmen to complete assigned jobs, to substandard work that is rou-

5. In other words, we are not claiming here that good design and detailed specifications are irrelevant to the performance of houses. Indeed, the robustness of the house’s fittings, hot water system, and waste system in response to overcrowding and water that is often aggressive (corrosive through salt, alkalinity, acidity, etc.) in indigenous communities should be considered. Areas needing better design and careful specification and detailing include wastewater systems able to cope with large numbers of people; hot water systems that take into account water quality, running costs, and house population; bathroom layouts and floor drainage to cope with large numbers of people; showerheads manufactured with water quality in mind; light fixtures and energy-saving bulbs or tubes resistant to insects, vapor, and vermin; doors and hardware, particularly locks; efficient windows and new ways of insect screening; stove tops and ovens that survive high-use load; kitchen-counter backsplashes; kitchen storage units; solutions to keeping food cool and pest-free; usable yard areas with cooking, sleeping, and storage potential; and thermal performance equivalent to sitting outside the house under a tree.

tinely approved as complete.⁶ In the laissez-faire administrative fiefdoms that often “govern” indigenous communities, being insensitive to the letter of standards, guidelines, and certification requirements is a tactic of organizational survival, while being punctilious about who is hired and the quality of what they deliver represents the path of most conflict. So it is that contracts for indigenous housing repair and maintenance, for example, to fix repeatedly identified problems with the plumbing, will be signed as done when a tradesman has only half completed the job, having attended to the quickest-effort, highest-charge items over unrewarding, longer-standing, and more complex repairs. Deliveries of ordered parts, whether used or not, complete the appearance of fulfilled action to any casual scrutinizer. This first approval of a contract delivered on triggers others, as reliance on the look of function shifts from the original certification site to desks and in-boxes in linked administrative tributaries, with various types of paperwork snowballing the assertion “This is no longer a problem.” Eventually, at the top of the policy and program food chain, ministers can report against aggregate program expenditure on indigenous housing, maintenance, and governance efforts as the penultimate sign of discharged pastoral responsibility.⁷

6. For all that, regulatory frameworks and guidelines are necessary but not sufficient ingredients for functionality; the biography of indigenous housing guidelines is itself a story of struggle and contest. After the Building Code of Australia and the Australian Standards, the National Indigenous Housing Guide (DFCSIA 2007), ostensibly endorsed by all states, territories, and the Commonwealth government in Australia, is the nationally accepted guide. It stresses safety and health and is compiled from the collective practice wisdom of the trades, field officers, community residents, engineers, and architects. While innocent enough in appearance, and containing suggested rather than legislated codes, the most recent edition, volume 3, was released only after threats of litigation from the ensemble editors against the Commonwealth of Australia.

7. Much is glossed over in this condensed description of the conspiracy of effects that create substandard housing—for instance, reliable tradesmen. Indigenous infrastructure is hot, thirsty work that sometimes attracts men who are as interested in the trade opportunities offered by the informal sex and cash economies characteristic of high-poverty environments the world over as they are in the tasks at hand. One answer to such conundrums is to build housing off-site and truck it in for installation, to reduce not only costs but also reliance on potentially rough external labor. Such efforts attract criticism for limiting the full-time employment of local indigenous workers in the total project. At various times in the history of government responses to these systemic issues, there have been attempts to make indigenous infrastructure work more attractive to larger, established firms via composite contracts, with extra inducements for the time and financial inconvenience of involving indigenous employees. In all this, the dirty little jobs that require relentless levels of inspection at low profit-to-time-required ratios are at risk of being avoided. An answer to this, as pioneered by Healthabitat, is to insist on highly regulated programs of assessment and repair. But then the additional supervision costs required for quality assurance are routinely held in policy dispute in efforts to reduce the price of infrastructure programs, which gives the cycle of argument and (compromised) solution another spin of the wheel.

Chances are that at this stage of the cycle a new survey will be called for, because while effort has been made and program dollars announced and allocated, a backlog will still remain. A new survey will enable government to better understand the nature of the problem and researchers to better establish a connection between housing supply and indigenous health (fig. 4).

This issue of endless surveying as a reflex policy response requires separate treatment (but see Lea 2008a: chap. 9). For now, let us quickly note that as part of the fieldwork conducted for the larger study from which this essay is drawn, seven distinct survey teams examining the condition of the housing and compositional densities appeared and disappeared over a twelve-month period in one community alone. These surveys not only create the look of action in policy defenses, but also rely on the cursory glance for their completion: simply poke your face into the house and look for a wall socket to answer the question “Access to power?” (fig. 5).

Even the survey forms achieve the initial appearance of instructive matrices but, on closer inspection, often turn out to be simulations deserving the tag “This is not a survey.” They might have all the serious fidelity of a data grid yet invite annotations that cannot be used to correct any particular faults in the hardware (see fig. 6). After all, what is anyone meant to make of a cell with “yes” scripted in response to three possible questions and no standardized rating system for defining the answer?

Meanwhile, when—after all that assessment and accumulated institutional response—the “health hardware” defaults to a predictable dysfunctional state, a handy culprit to explain the visibly spoiled interior is the unhygienic and undisciplined indigenous tenant who needs further tutelage in the arts of living in a house (being so new to the concept of sedentary living and all).

It is this wider chain of interconnected acts of translation and interpretation (and not simply some kind of vaguely assigned societal prejudice) that has to be apprehended if we are to explain the grip of the single most common explanation offered for the poor performance

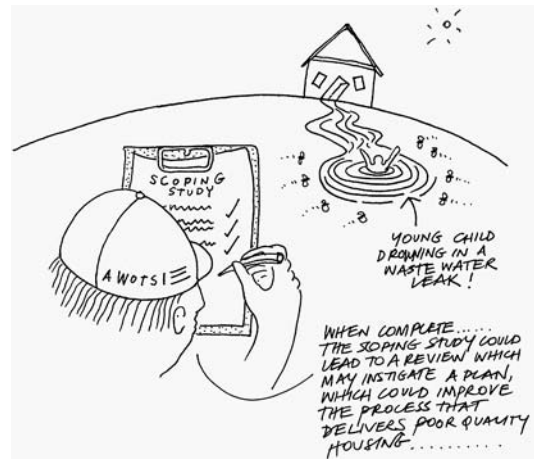


Figure 4 We need more data. Image by Paul Pholeros



Figure 5 Hint... it might not be the old or ugly one. Image by Paul Pholeros

House Condition Referral List from Australian Government
Child Health Checks

Community [REDACTED] Date of Visit [REDACTED]

Child's Name	Who does the child live with	House no. of bedrooms	Occupancy: how many people live in the house	Electrical - access to power -Exposed wires -Broken light switches	Wet areas - blocked toilets - taps working - leaking taps	Washing clothes and bedding - shower bath - washing machine	Removal of waste : Leaking pipes or puddles of water outside house
[REDACTED]	PARENTS & OTHERS	4	11 ADULTS & 4 KIDS	YES	YES 2 TOILETS FOR 11 PEOPLE	YES SHOWER NO W/MACH	YES
[REDACTED]	FAMILY & OTHERS	4	11 ADULTS & 4 KIDS	YES	1 TOILET FOR 11 PEOPLE	YES.	NOT SURE
[REDACTED]	PARENTS & OTHERS	4	8 1 BABY & 7 ADULTS	YES NO COOK/STOVE NO FRIDGE	1 TOILET FOR 8 PEOPLE	YES.	NOT KNOWN
[REDACTED]	PARENTS & OTHERS	7	9+ 5 CHILDREN & 3 ADULTS	YES	YES	YES.	YES

Health Assessment Team: Please fax to: Community CEO
Community Council forward copies to:

- Department of Local Government, Housing & Sport Territory Housing CA
- DH&CS, Environmental Health Central Australia

Fax no. 08 8951 5534
Fax no. 08 8955 6122

Page No. 1

Figure 6 This is not a “Housing Condition” form. Image by Northern Territory Department of Health and Families. Reproduced by Paul Pholeros

of houses: namely, that it is due to tenant damage, misuse, or misunderstanding of how to use the house.⁸

To illustrate a similar interplay among surface appearances, “company papers,” and conventions of interpretation, we offer a short case study of the life of a recent “new idea.” In this story, a big company wanting to help the situation offers up affordable houses, to be built by local people, with the aim of yielding a new national housing model deserving of the title “This is a house.”

8. In addition to the relatively low incidence of vandalism, there is little evidence that poor functionality is due to householder ignorance. This speaks to another long-standing “ethnologism” in Australia, where the idea that indigenous people are mystified by modern Western houses—in particular, appliances such as refrigerators and stoves—exerts a stranglehold on bureaucratic and public imagination. A related and equally disputable commonplace is that education campaigns are required to reduce household wear and tear. Interestingly, a recent study of the effects of mass sanitation in Salvador, Brazil, represents an unusual contemporary instance in which the health impact of mass investment in connected neighborhood sewers could be isolated. This work showed no connection between “hygiene behaviour” and reductions in diarrhea prevalence (Barreto et al. 2007: 1623). Rather than education programs, it was the provision of more than two thousand kilometers of sewer pipes for more than three hundred thousand homes in linked neighborhoods that caused diarrhea to drop by 22 percent citywide—and by 43 percent in districts with the highest diarrheal prevalence before the intervention (see also Cohen 2008).

One hot day in December 2006, a group substantially composed of middle-aged white men, organizational intermediaries representing assorted “stakeholder” groups, traveled by bus to a remote community located in the tropical savannah country southeast of Darwin in the Northern Territory of Australia. Their excursion was organized around the unveiling of a cost-effective solution to the endemic problem of indigenous housing: namely, an affordable kit house system. The prototypes up for inspection that day had been designed by a private industry manufacturer, were economically trucked in to the remote area, and had used the labor of unskilled indigenous locals to frame and complete external wall cladding on-site, providing much-needed community employment. The intent of the prototype is that structurally superficial design changes will be easily accommodated within a limited number of overall housing designs, thus ensuring customization and cost effectiveness at the same time. While it constituted a speculative project, at this point, we join the men at the peak of a collectively shared enthusiasm for the ideal solution. That is, attendees are predisposed to reading surface appearances to see a greater materiality, a “total housing project,” their interpretive gaze pre-directed by a company briefing paper proclaiming the hard-to-dispute worthy aims of the project.

What do they see, after their long and thankfully air-conditioned bus ride? The prototype gleamed in the hot tropical sunlight (recall fig. 2), displaying enough of the look of a house with framing and external wall sheet materials in place to allow a gallery of photos to be taken of pleased company men, locals, and visitors standing side by side, with a sponsorship banner spanning the veranda posts providing a photogenic backdrop (fig. 7).

But as we alight from the bus for a closer inspection, while the majority of the visitors complete business card exchanges, hand out gifts of footballs to the eager local children, and linger for chitchat over cups of tea and iced bun, the image of the house disassembles to become—like the pipe—a simulation. Inside the structure, there is as yet no electrical wiring, apart from wall-socket mounting brackets. That is okay: this is ordinarily the time when the space between the studs, floor joists, ceiling joists, and every other nook and cranny is most easily accessed and redone, should an inspection against electrical code requirements necessitate rewiring. But no, there is no rough installation of the electrical wiring, boxes, breaker panel, and subpanels to speak of. Nor have any pipelines or outside yard works (trenches and footings, drainage or site leveling) to connect the house to mains services commenced. Most of the internal linings have yet to be completed, the reflective foil sarking being no substitute for cladding (fig. 8).



Figure 7 Pleased with the product. Photograph by Paul Pholeros

The type, location, and power draw of the hot water system are not decided. Ceiling fans, essential in the melting tropical heat, are apparently intended, but where and when has not been documented. There is no meter box, circuit breaker, or grounding rod, placing a question mark around future electrical safety (see DFCSIA 2007: 25); in the case of fire, the security-screened bedroom windows have no internal emergency release openings. The external veranda and breeze-way floor have no slope to drain water away from the building, and well before any resident is in place, the sheet flooring material for the veranda (marked “for internal use only”) is already showing signs of wear at the edges.

Inside the most important area for health gain (and the part most prone to failure in much indigenous public housing), the steel wall frames of the bathroom sit directly on the flooring, foretelling a story of future corrosion, if the as-yet-uninstalled waterproofing membranes fail and the (inevitably cheap) faucets, also yet to arrive on-site, leak in the wall cavity.

So what *is* there to see? Certainly no one was on the lookout for such prophecies of serious failure points. The company with the good intentions was focused on selling a material product that could be beneficial to the final goal of “indigenous housing.” The adult excursion was therefore timed to inspect and sign off on a “completed” material product, a house, creating a photo opportunity and a good news story that soon would become a fast-circulating factoid in stories of solutions to the holy grail of cheap yet sturdy



Figure 8 Still not housing. Photograph by Paul Pholeros

housing for remote areas. But without the significant additional work of supervised plumbers and electricians (not part of the “offered package”), the nonhouse before us will quickly dissolve into an unsightly shelter, and nearby householders will be held to account for their failure to tend it, this being the treachery of images, texts, and meanings in indigenous public housing.

The Nonhouse: A Repeating Cycle

The issue of indigenous community housing in remote Australia and on the fringes of outback towns ebbs in and out of view on the tides of national attention. To take a recent example, in February 2008 the Australian Broadcasting Commission’s (ABC) Radio National Program *PM* featured an interview with Paul Torzillo, lead author of a scientific journal article describing Healthabitat’s historical data on the poor functionality of indigenous houses (Torzillo et al. 2008). To recap: the data show that vandalism is a cause of breakdown in 10 percent of cases, while poor choice of initial materials, poor construction, inadequate maintenance, and normal wear and tear account for the rest. Four hours and fourteen minutes after

the interview transcript had appeared on the ABC Web site, seventy-eight comments were posted, forcing the editor to block further reactions.⁹

“I just love this quote,” sneered “John Connor,” the first person out of the comment box at 9:40 a.m., February 18, 2008: “‘Professor Torzillo says contrary to popular myth, the vast majority of problems were not due to damage, but rather faulty construction and a lack of maintenance.’ So the houses just smashed their own windows, ripped off their own doors, broke their own toilets? This is concerning if buildings are becoming sentient and choosing to kill themselves???”

“Tim” countered at midday: “But why would they want to throw bottles through windows, why do some indigenous people carry such a lack of respect . . . ? It’s easy just to blame them, but much more difficult to look into reality. . . . In short these people have been neglected and oppressed by the white powers that be for far to [*sic*] long. Now we have an obligation to right the wrong.”

Finishing the frenzy, and echoing Pearson’s analysis of why early attempts at gifting also failed, “Rob” asserted the most popular verdict of all:

The fact is that new houses in communities are not only continually damaged but basic cleaning is not done at all. Even where all the facilities are working, kids are not washed or showered regularly and the house often becomes a disgusting, filthy mess in a few months — toilets, kitchens, etc. are never cleaned as the occupants are too busy sitting around drinking and gambling. Then in a few years the government does a “refurbishment” and the cycle continues. Before the Federal Government puts more millions into housing, there has to be some programs to ensure that they [indigenous householders] look after them properly[:] otherwise it’s good money after bad.

During these recurrent discoveries of “the problem of indigenous housing,” concern about the vast sums of money that will have to be procured if state governments are to meet the quantum required tends to dominate agitated public discourse and policy ruminations alike.¹⁰ The huge price tag associated with the “unmet housing need” has the effect of transforming the ideal of adequate hous-

9. Australian Broadcasting Commission, www/abc.net.au/pm/content/2008/s2163237.htm (accessed February 19, 2008).

10. A report of the Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute estimates a backlog requirement of \$705 million, or \$141 million annually for five years, in indigenous housing (Hall and Berry 2004: iv). But citing figures in this way implies an accuracy uncharacteristic of indigenous housing. Uncanny costs are part of the aesthetics of failure feeding the loop of diagnosis and suggested remedy that enables the recurrence of shoddy housing. It would be just as accurate and just as arbitrary to add two zeroes to the figures every few years.

ing into a different kind of pipe dream. At first, the issue is simply that of rationing. According to policy orthodoxy, scarce government resources have to be spent efficiently. But as Bruno Latour (2002: 32) reminds us, “No technological project is technological first and foremost,” and certainly, the moral discourse embedded in indigenous program considerations adds a distorting ingredient to otherwise normative budgetary talk in the public sector.

The inability of abjectly poor householders to pay rent to tenancy managers (whether these are banks, government agencies, or that beleaguered invention of indigenous social policy, the Indigenous Community Housing Organization) at the levels that would be required to restore inadequately designed and badly installed houses is at the center of the recurrence of nonhousing in indigenous Australia. But when the costs for a robustly designed house nudge above and beyond what is (equally inadequately) spent on mainstream public housing, bureaucratic concern about the public “look” of expensive public housing for indigenous people kicks in. This concern soon leads to broad suggestions for reducing the costs of administering and delivering housing programs, a discussion that just as quickly narrows to ideas for reducing the size or specification of the house. That is, before a program of indigenous housing works is decided, the cost of a well-fitted and durable house is disputed in the backrooms of policy, with the result that details of houses that would ensure their function, performance, or ongoing maintenance (the very attributes that would transform the image and words about a house into actual housing) are among the first corners to be cut. With the specter of disorderly householders as backdrop and, lately, accusations of molestation and pedophilia behind closed doors in indigenous communities,¹¹ clear and compelling policy notions such as “affordable,” “cost-effective,” “sustainable,” and “tenant responsibility” percolate in endlessly variable combination in policy debates. These helpful logics redirect attention from what are straightforward cost-cutting agendas in welfare spending based on expediency (fig. 9).

Importantly, the pressure to have more and therefore cheaper houses has multiple sources: from politicians who need to announce numbers by way of answer to accusations about the continuing dire state of indigenous living conditions, to indigenous community leaders who desperately need houses to meet the very real problems of overcrowding. But reducing the cost of new houses to build more

11. Citing child sexual abuse and rampant violence against women as cause, in June 2007 the former Australian government announced that the condition of indigenous people in the Northern Territory constituted a national emergency and warranted intervention. For an account of these initiatives at the time of their unfurling, see Altman and Hinkson 2007; also Toohey 2008.

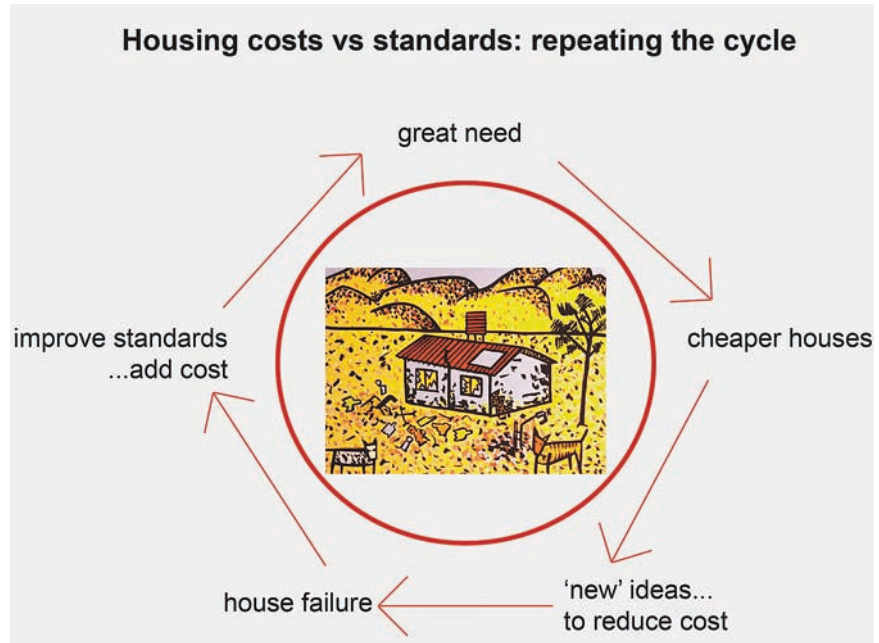


Figure 9 Houses to nonhouses. Image by Paul Pholeros

houses within strict budgets often reduces the money spent on items necessary for long-term house function. Counterintuitively, at least at first blush, increasing house numbers but not housing function makes little overall difference to overcrowding, for people have the inexplicable habit of “crowding” into the house that has functioning electricity, water, and effluent disposal.¹²

As we have seen, common reductions (for houses that authorities know from their repeated surveys will have to accommodate more people than “the Australian average”) include little or no insulation; smaller and lower-capital-cost hot water systems; lower-quality faucets and reduced door and window quality; fewer and lower-quality light fixtures; fewer electrical outlets; no landscaping,

12. This pattern of moving to the functioning house should put to rest the insistence of cultural literalists that remote indigenous people might not want houses. Yes, there are culturally distinctive uses of domiciliary space, which typically involve “diurnal/nocturnal behavior patterns for different seasonal periods . . . external orientation and sensory communication between domicile, sleeping behavior, cooking behavior and use of hearths” (Memmott 2004: 46), but these different sociospatial patterns do not exclude a desire for functional hardware. That is, people can cook and sleep outside and still desire a secure shelter, a stove that works, a toilet that flushes, walls that stay up, and floors that do not fray.

site drainage, or fencing; smaller verandas; and, perhaps most critically, fewer inspections of the works during construction. Each of these abridgments has serial entailments, including housing hardware failure. The expedient solution of smaller hot water systems, for instance, not only promotes less frequent showers and a consequent reduction of health benefit, facilitating the spread of infectious and parasitic diseases (Baillie 2006). It also entails higher running costs for a hot water supply in extended households, the greater likelihood that a poor family cannot pay the ensuing electricity charges, and the related likelihood that the power will be disconnected. In other words, when data on failure rates of inadequate hot water systems are linked to forms of householder stress, the burden of cost shifting sharpens into focus.¹³

End-of-financial-year dollars that need to be quickly spent add other distortions (fig. 10).

Even the ostensibly reasonable proposition that new houses are the answer to the overcrowding and immiseration replayed in scandalizing images of indigenous housing invokes the premise that new houses perform better than old houses, which in turn implies that newness equates with quality design, a (nonvalidated) belief as visual as it is commonsensical. Yet while much indigenous housing is old and cruddy, there is no clear evidence that new housing performs better than old. Nor is it necessarily the case that more or better-informed consultation at the design stage will improve the performance of the houses, another popular catch cry. While this noble idea might be argued for on other grounds,¹⁴ it is not an explanation for housing breakdown (see also Dovey 2000). The houses do not necessarily fail simply

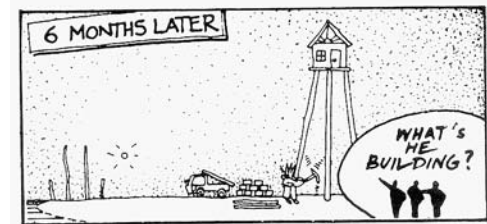


Figure 10 Being strategic, efficient, and coordinated. Image by Paul Pholeros

13. For a related case analysis of the impact of “utility stress” in indigenous Australia—that is, the hardship that accrues when the radically poor are unable to pay electricity, telephone, water, gas, or other utility charges—see Willis et al. 2006.

14. While “more or better-informed consultation at the design stage” does not necessarily lead to better performance, the residents are blamed for poor performance and have no forum in which

because they fail forms of cultural distinction. They most often fail because of poor initial construction and lack of routine maintenance, a dirty materialism that seems the hardest of things to see.

Conclusion

As Magritte's work reminds us, seeing is an act, "in the course of which it can happen that a subject escapes our attention" (Gablik 1976: 13). So it is that pipes may be laid but not connected, while policy words reassert that indigenous housing is the nation's foremost national priority, and other words remind us who is really to blame. There is a different kind of deception involved in a pipe that does not function, of relevance to this essay. Magritte's image does not reveal whether his model for the pipe had a cavity through the stem to the bowl, or, more exactly, no mouth. Yet for the original shock to have effect, function needs to be imaginatively imputed to an original material form. This implicit contrast subtends the reference to the trickery of the image. The image of indigenous housing also conjures an imaginary referent, and similarly, the functionality of the original material form is presumed. The aesthetic orientation carries with it a heavily loaded set of responses concerning the meaningfulness of social life itself. It is a morality that apprehends a certain unruliness in indigenous domiciles and seeks either to *describe* the values of the imagined cultural alterity, with its seeming rejection of the middle-class house fetish (as liberally inclined anthropologists might), or to *amend* that imputed social world (as policy makers might). Either way, these habits of association at work in the verdicts surrounding indigenous housing neglect as much as they act on the material problems at hand.

The newly demoted opposition spokesman for indigenous affairs, Tony Abbot, responding to the Rudd government's calls for bipartisan action on the scandal of indigenous housing, reasserts the loop simply: "There is no doubt that indigenous housing is very poor quality, but there's also no doubt that there's many indigenous people who don't respect the housing they have" (Karvelas and Kearney 2008: 7). Abbot is referring, of course, to those bad householders who do not deserve or even need well-constructed shelters because of their myriad shortcomings. These include the relativizing anthropologized verdict that indigenous mobs were once hunter-gatherers who not so long ago roamed and slept in small kin groups and thus have not evolved the right cultural norms to habitually manage

to defend themselves. House images (which conjure householder images) are powerful, easily transmuted, and autoproduced; they also function out of context and are voiceless. While images are always a factor of concealment, householder voices might tell a truth that even data cannot.

new material forms. We have argued that a different regime of cultural expectations and habits of mind is at stake and that while it lies adjacent to, it is not reducible to, indigeneity. Put simply, the habitual and entrenched insistence on the centrality of (imagined or actual) Aboriginal habits to the endemic housing problems in indigenous Australia, whether manifest as nostalgia for notions of culturally appropriate design, justification for a national intervention, or anger at what appears a rejected public benefit, obeys a “what you see is *that*” effect.

Our recourse to surrealism hints at the confounding principles that need to be reckoned with. The service world inhabited by indigenous householders is one that operates in defiance of rational analysis. A Kafkaesque universe of mad happenings and unbearable logics is being brought to bear on fundamentally old-fashioned issues of inequality, poverty, and race, with a dollop of policy ineptitude for good measure. As sewer pipes struggle to carry away wastewater as a result of poor design, indifferent (or no) inspection, and allowed shoddy construction, the pipeline or conduit for myths, rumors, and shock from indigenous Australia to the mainstream population flows without even the coarsest filter of critical assessment or hard evidence. There may well be no, some, or many unruly indigenous householders, but this is beside the point. When the technocratic solutions are in fact the original form of delinquency, we might turn to surrealism’s concern with reaching beyond registrations of the real to resee what is directly in front of us (see fig. 11).

References

- Altman, Jon, and Melinda Hinkson, eds. 2007. *Coercive reconciliation: Stabilise, normalise, exit Aboriginal Australia*. Sydney: Arena Publications.
- Australian Institute of Health and Welfare (AIHW). 2005. *Indigenous housing needs 2005: A multimeasure needs model*. AIHW catalog no. HOU 129. Canberra: Australian Institute of Health and Welfare.
- Bailie, Ross. 2006. Housing and health in indigenous communities: Key issues for housing and health improvement in remote Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities. *Australian Journal of Rural Health* 14: 178.
- Barreto, Mauricio, Bernd Genser, Agostino Strina, Maria Gloria Teixeira, Ana MarluCIA Assis, Rita F. Rego, Carlos A. Teles, Matildes S. Prado, Sheila M. A. Matos, Darci N. Santos, Lenaldo A. dos Santos, and Sandy Cairncross. 2007. Effect of city-wide sanitation programme on reduction in rate of childhood diarrhoea in northeast Brazil. *Lancet* 370: 1622–28.
- Cape York Institute for Policy and Leadership, and Cape York Partnerships Proj-

This Is Not a Pipe



Figure 11 With further apologies to Magritte. Image by Paul Pholeros

- ects. 2007. *From hand out to hand up: Cape York Welfare Reform Project; Aurukun, Coen, Hope Vale, Mossman Gorge; Design recommendations*, www.cyi.org.au/WEBSITE%20uploads/Welfare%20Reform%20Attachments/From%20Hand%20Out%20to%20Hand%20Up_Welfare%20Reform%20Report.pdf (accessed October 11, 2009).
- Cohen, Jon. 2008. Pipe dreams come true. *Science*, no. 319: 745–46.
- Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs (DFCSIA). 2007. *National indigenous housing guide: Improving the living environment for safety, health, and sustainability*. Vol. 3. Canberra: Australian Government Printer.
- Dovey, Kim. 2000. Myth and media: Constructing Aboriginal architecture. *Journal of Architectural Education* 54: 2–6.
- Feldman, Allen. 2001. Philoctetes revisited: White public space and the political geography of public safety. *Social Text*, no. 68: 57–89.
- Foucault, Michel. 1983. *This is not a pipe*, edited and translated by James Harkness. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Gablik, Suzi. 1976. *Magritte*. Boston: New York Graphic Society.
- Hall, Jon, and Mike Berry. 2004. *Indigenous housing: Assessing the long-term costs and the optimal balance between recurrent and capital expenditure*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Royal Melbourne Institute of Technology–National Centre for Social and Economic Modelling Research Centre. Final Report no. 93.
- Hughes, Helen. 2005. Policies entrench poverty. *Australian*, September 23.
- . 2007. *Lands of shame: Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander “homelands” in transition*. Sydney: Federation Press.
- Karvelas, Patricia, and Simon Kearney. 2008. Division hits “war cabinet.” *Australian*, February 15.
- Latour, Bruno. 2002. *ARAMIS; or, The love of technology*, translated by Catherine Porter. Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press.
- Lea, Tess. 2008a. *Bureaucrats and bleeding hearts: Indigenous health in Northern Australia*. Sydney: University of New South Wales Press.
- . 2008b. Housing for Health in indigenous Australia: Driving change when research and policy are part of the problem. *Human Organization* 67: 77–85.
- Lee, Gina, and David Morris. 2005. *Best practice models for effective consultation: Towards improving built environment outcomes for remote indigenous communities*. Australian Housing and Urban Research Institute, Southern Research Centre, April. Final Report no. 76.

- Levi, Primo. 2000. *The periodic table*, translated by Raymond Rosenthal. London: Penguin.
- Memmott, Paul. 2004. Aboriginal housing: Has the state of the art improved? *Architecture Australia* 93: 46–48.
- Morgan, George. 2006. *Unsettled places: Aboriginal people and urbanisation in New South Wales*. Kent Town, South Australia: Wakefield.
- Pholeros, Paul, Stephan Rainow, and Paul Torzillo. 1993. *Housing for health: Towards a healthy living environment for Aboriginal Australia*. Newport Beach, Sydney: Healthabitat.
- Pholeros, Paul, Paul Torzillo, and Stephan Rainow. 2000. Housing for Health: Principles and projects, South Australia, Northern Territory, and Queensland, 1985–97. In *Settlement: A history of Australian indigenous housing*, edited by Peter Read. Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press.
- . 2004. *Healthabitat: A brief history*. Newport Beach, Sydney: Healthabitat, www.healthabitat.com.
- SGS Economics and Planning and Tallegalla Consultants Pty Ltd. 2006. *Evaluation of fixing houses for better health projects 2, 3 and 4*. Australian Government Department of Families, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs Occasional Paper no. 14.
- Sutton, Peter. 2007. Mainstreaming: Equal opportunity or discrimination? Paper presented at the Royal Australian Institute of Architects conference “Which Way? Directions in Indigenous Housing,” Alice Springs, Northern Territory, Australia, October 26–27.
- Toohy, Paul. 2008. Last drinks: The impact of the Northern Territory intervention. *Quarterly Essay* 30: 1–97.
- Torzillo, Paul, Paul Pholeros, Stephan Rainow, Geoffrey Barker, Andrew Irvine, Tim Short, and Tim Sowerbutts. 2008. The state of health hardware in aboriginal communities in rural and remote Australia. *Australian and New Zealand Journal of Public Health* 32: 7–11.
- Willis, Eileen, Meryl Pearce, Carmel McCarthy, Tom Jenkin, and Fiona Ryan. 2006. Utility stress as a social determinant of health: Exploring the links in a remote Aboriginal community. *Health Promotion Journal of Australia* 17: 255–59.

