

THE WHEEL TURNS FOR HOMELESS INDIGENOUS PEOPLE IN DARWIN, 1967 – 2007

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Slim Dusty described the City of Darwin as ‘the big heart of the country.’ For the thirsty traveller from the south passing through isolated towns along the highway, Darwin rises out of the haze like a New Jerusalem, proclaiming, ‘I am making everything new.’ As the Book of Revelation continues, ‘Those who overcome will inherit all this...’ Although the streets are not quite paved with gold, Darwin is indeed the ‘Arafura pearl’ of song, a multiracial city growing upwards and outwards as never before in its history. As the city spreads, the term ‘long grasser’ to describe the homeless is becoming redundant – there is scarcely any long grass in which to hide.

Beside the wharf where the final scenes of the epic new film, ‘Australia,’ were recently filmed, a gleaming new ‘world class’ convention centre is rising amongst excavations for a harbour-side complex to include an aquatic centre with wave pool, restaurants, hotels and apartments. These excesses contrast so dramatically with the plight of the city’s homeless people that it has been argued by Canberra politicians that federal subsidies meant for the Aboriginal housing crisis have been redirected towards this international showpiece. At the very least the wharf development is an indication of the NT Government’s priorities.



Above: The construction of the Darwin waterfront precinct

In an earlier boom time, in the 1970s, Darwin's urban environment included the ubiquitous camps where Aboriginal people sheltered in self-made humpies of scrap iron. In those days there was little concept that these fringe dwellers were homeless and their scattered communities were tolerated as examples of those who had failed to grasp the opportunities offered by assimilation, with no land, no facilities and no future. Progress was inevitable, and the camps had no part in it.

At this time of prosperity for some, the accepted idea of progress in the stratified society of old Darwin was soon challenged by the 'hippies' who migrated north to establish their own open-air camps on a narrow beach at the foot of jungle clad cliffs near the city centre. With million dollar views of the Darwin harbour and enough work for all, the lifestyle of these sons and daughters of middle Australia questioned the concept of homelessness. Reassured by the good times, empowered by their communal lifestyle, the hippies demonstrated that shelter was optional under the tropical dry season skies.



Above: Protest in Darwin at Waterfront Precinct on March 31st, 2010. Photo: Bill Day.

Meanwhile, to the administration and the developers' surprise, the Aboriginal camps around Darwin resisted the bulldozers assigned to clear urban bush land for new subdivisions. In keeping with the worldwide demand for human rights, the campers refused to be moved and against all odds staked out their land claims - with little hope of success. Fortunately, a change of government opened a narrow window of opportunity, so that after a long struggle the Aboriginal campers in Darwin and

Alice Springs were granted leases to their sites – to be known officially as ‘town camps.’ When the Minister for Lands and Housing of a newly self-governing Northern Territory granted a 5-hectare lease to the inner suburban community of One Mile Dam he stated, ‘The people can now move to make improvements to their surroundings confident they have secure title to the area.’

Fed by federal subsidies, Darwin grew from a shanty town to an international gateway, while Aboriginal people continued to challenge the concept of homelessness. Despite their poverty, they believed that the earth had been their bed and the sky their roof from time immemorial. Although feeling ‘at home’ in urban bushland or on beaches, this publicly visible group were indisputably ‘unhoused’ and without the basic facilities needed for urban living. (In a further attempt to deter the homeless, public ablution blocks were demolished or locked in most Darwin public spaces.) For the increasing number of settlers who call Darwin ‘home’, the Aboriginal people living in public spaces are intruders, a ‘problem’ who are referred to disparagingly in the media as ‘itinerants’ or ‘long grassers’.

Numerous NT elections have been fought on the promise to rid the town of ‘itinerants.’ As a result, sleeping without a roof over one’s head has become a criminal offence in Darwin. Alternatively, homeless Aboriginal people have been rounded up and moved into the town camps alongside the original residents or their descendants who now live as tenants of an ‘umbrella’ organization. They can only watch as their communities become a dumping ground for ‘itinerants,’ crowded into unfurnished open tin sheds built as emergency accommodation decades ago.



Darwin Protest Against NT Emergency Response Act (‘The Intervention’), 2007. Photo: Bill Day.

Symbolising the out-of-sight-out-of-mind mentality of the Northern Territory Government, one impoverished town camp that is surrounded by a residential suburb is hidden behind a high sheet-metal fence, in turn disguised by flowering shrubbery. At One Mile Dam the community has been notified through the media of their inevitable eviction to make way for parkland when surrounding multi storied apartments are completed.

In a battle fought and lost a century ago in southern capitals, the conflict over land in Darwin has become blatant, politicising Aboriginal homelessness into the first line of resistance. Indicated by the various outbreaks of homeless people's protests over the years, these contradictions would inevitably have ended either in international condemnation, social unrest or federal intervention. In an election year, it was to be the latter that highlighted the plight of displaced Aboriginal people living in the bounded estates for the homeless or in concealed bush camps.

As the media heralds a shift from a 'rights agenda' in Aboriginal affairs, Aboriginal people are migrating to the city in an enforced search for 'real jobs,' only to live with relatives in overcrowded houses in the suburbs or to find refuge of sorts in designated town camps. Meanwhile officials employed to enforce the federal intervention have announced that the hard-won urban blocks will become integrated into 'normal' suburbs.

In Darwin's earliest surviving Aboriginal community, established in 1938, where the housing is more substantial, the residents have been summarily informed that their 22-hectare block will be given to a developer as freehold land for a housing estate. However, under this scheme present tenants will have the opportunity to buy their own houses, provided they can finance a debt of up to \$50,000 for improvements. With more than ten people per household this option is always a possibility. Tenants who continue renting will make their payments to the Northern Territory Housing authority instead of the present Aboriginal controlled housing corporation, guaranteeing that rents will rise substantially.

What can be the end result of this dramatic shift? If people from remote communities must come to the city for 'real jobs' with land in the towns that service them becoming a commodity for development and their income quarantined, while at the same time the Darwin town camps become 'normal' suburbs, then there will be no subtleties remaining in the definition of homelessness. In desperation the homeless must logically live in shanty towns around the cities as occurs in other countries where the free market reigns. If this is to be the end result of the federal intervention, then the wheel has turned a full circle for Darwin's homeless Aboriginal people.



Above: A bed in a homeless person's camp, Darwin 2007. Photo: Bill Day.