

# Sites of Memory

*Mandy Doherty, Andrew Smith, Amareswar Galla and Benita Tunks presenting 'Reconciliation Place', Canberra, a site of diverse public installations representing people and their stories about reconciliation across Australia*



Photo: Barbara Paulson

We all share memories of special places that are important to us. Such places can include sacred and historic sites, places of birth and death, and even places that we disagree about. These sites of memory help us to define ourselves. But what is memory, how is it important to us, and why is it so often contested?

On Friday 28 August, a gathering of people at the National Museum of Australia discussed these questions at a day-long forum called Sites of Memory. The Museum, and Acton Peninsula upon which it is built, is itself a site of memory, so it seemed a fitting place to hold the forum.

Memory studies are an emerging cross-disciplinary field of research. Scientists might look at memory one way, and historians in another, but getting people together from different fields to look at the issue in a broader way can reveal new angles. At Sites of Memory we brought together representatives from sciences, arts, humanities and government.

The keynote speaker was Professor Amar Galla, a museums expert from the University of Queensland. Amar gave us an international perspective on how important sites are being managed in new and inclusive ways.

In the first session, 'What is a memory?', psychologist Dr Judith Slee gave us a scientist's view of the how our memories can sometimes be misleading. Our own Dr Mike Pickering talked about the importance of scale in defining and understanding the stories of places. Then Professor Paul Pickering (no relation), from the ANU Humanities Research Centre, discussed 'cultural amnesia' and the politics of memory. From this session we learned that memories can be fallible, contested and manipulated — however they are also central to our cultural stories of place.

The second session, 'Memorials and sacred sites', introduced ways in which land and spirit are inseparable. Dr Peter Stanley from the Museum's Centre for Historical Research (CHR) told the moving

story of a grieving father's quest to find the exact spot where his son was killed in a First World War battle. Associate Professor Claire Smith, president of the World Archaeological Congress, talked about her time with the Barunga community in the Northern Territory, and their powerful spiritual connection with Country.

The final session was 'Layers of significance: local sites'. We started with a conversation about Canberra's Reconciliation Place, between Andrew Smith of the National Capital Authority, Benita Tunks of Liquid Creative Projects, and Mandy Doherty from the Department of Families, Housing, Community Services and Indigenous Affairs. Reconciliation Place is a national symbol of reconciliation that is located in a contrived setting, yet it has come about through real people with important stories to tell.

Paul House, a Ngambri traditional owner, then shared his own family history in the Canberra region, reminding us that the land we were sitting on has been a site of memory for thousands of years. It was then interesting to hear Anne Faris from the CHR talk about the same site through other eyes, focusing on the old Royal Canberra Hospital and its associated buildings. Finally I shared some stories about the Museum itself, and the spirits that are said to walk the site: powerful reminders of the history of the building and collections.

The day was an exploration of memory and places, with the focus changing from big international sites to the very room we were sitting in. It was great to hear from people with such varied backgrounds. There were some emotional moments, a lot of stories to share, a few laughs and even a few chills. Keep an eye out on the Museum's audio on demand website ([www.nma.gov.au/audio](http://www.nma.gov.au/audio)), where we will be publishing the talks from the day.

**Leanne Dempsey**, *Coordinator, Audience Development and Public Programs*

*Anne Faris, Benita Tunks, Peter Stanley, Clair Smith, Amareswar Galla, Paul House. Leanne Dempsey and Margo Neale*



Photo: Barbara Paulson