

## **21 Blackwood Park Road**

Geoff Newman

West Space

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Reviewed by Sandy Gibbs

The swimming pool: suburban object of longing, furtive voyeurism, and flirtatious water-filled danger. As a symbol connecting architecture with desire, there is surely none more potent than that of the swimming pool. And in choosing to reconstruct a swimming pool in an art gallery, Geoff Newman coolly repackages these notions of desire into an objective discussion located within the framework of suburban housing developments. In doing so, Newman challenges us to consider relationships between (suburban) architectural ideology and the value systems embedded within late-capitalist Western society.<sup>1</sup>

With his installation *21 Blackwood Park Road*, Newman has responded to the growing trend towards building and marketing self-contained housing developments as desirable communities. A cursory glance through the real estate section of any metropolitan newspaper reveals page after page of full colour ads extolling the virtues of friendliness, community, quality, value and the appeals of what is described as 'contemporary living'. Newman cites the examples of Koolamara Waters and Edgewater estates which come 'fully optioned' with luxury features such as fountains, columns and gates. He says: "Within these estates, each with its own brand new waterway, each house appears to compete with its neighbour for prestige". But the sense of community is veneer-thin, presented but not sustained: "Despite striving for grandeur, these empires end at their front and back fences, stretching only far enough to claim the car in the driveway and the swimming pool in the backyard" (Newman 2006).

As an institution, suburbia inherited an enduring legacy from the 60s and 70s; that of mediocrity, of comfortable suburban houses and the banality of a mindless consumer utopia. But underlying the quotidian was also a menacing desire for superiority and social distance: suburbia, as a measure of success, was built on ideas of separation and exclusion. Robert Fishman defined suburbia 'even more narrowly as an exclusive and leafy residential enclave of male-headed upper-class and upper-middle-class families, a "bourgeois utopia," primarily Protestant and white' (Hayden 2003:16). Surprisingly camp-like in its exclusivity, embedded within this version of utopia was also the lure of security and success for those who fitted. Gated communities and self-contained housing developments are the inevitable outcome of this exclusive suburban ideology.

*If you live within these gates, you can consider yourself a success* (Duany et al 2000:43).

According to Setha Low, a 'desire for safety, security, community, and 'niceness,' as well as wanting to live near people like themselves because of a fear of 'others' and of crime are the reasons expressed by most residents living in gated communities' (Low 2003:9,10). Safe and hermetically sealed, they offer up a cookie cutter existence where like-minded inhabitants coexist within fragmented clusters of privatised spaces. In a reversal of the panoptic state, these gated utopias exclude themselves from the city, the 'outside', the urban jungle:

'In a reversal that would be laughable if it were not so sad, these are no longer promoted as measures to secure the community outside from the inmate... High walls, closed circuit video cameras, security guards and the like can now be reframed and represented as measures that keep threat out rather than keep it in...' (Rose 1999:248-9)

Unsurprisingly, residents' behaviour within the walls is controlled. Often they will be required to sign covenants and agree to strict codes of behaviour and regulations - imposed, not by local authorities, but by private organisations. 'According to a [Celebration<sup>2</sup>] board member, "I'm convinced these controls are actually liberating to people. It makes them feel their investment is safe." However, this 'liberation', or the illusion of safety comes with a high price. The perceived pressures and threats from the outside are translated into a demand for conformity on the inside' (Diken et al 2005:93).

*'...the price to pay is high: the return of discipline, the burrow becomes a trap' (ibid 73).*

This willingness to conform is underpinned by a drive to keep investments safe. When this is considered alongside tendencies toward exclusivity and secession<sup>3</sup>, it becomes apparent these enclaves are less about developing local communities, and more about localising power and discipline within a framework of financial investment. Attempts at actively developing local communities are cynically exposed as being manufactured by-products of the sales and marketing process. Gone is the kind of enduring spirit where a whole community might raise money themselves in order to build the local community pool.

Instead, Newman's work highlights the disconnect between a manufactured community spirit and the disciplined reality of a conformist and controlled society.<sup>4</sup> *21 Blackwood Park Road* is a representation of a scaled-down, old-style community municipal pool. But its proportions have been altered, deliberately making it unusable so that it is too small to swim in. As well, it only has a few centimetres of water barely covering the bottom of the pool. With these two strategies, Newman has rendered it useless - twice. This municipal pool cruelly offers up the spectacle of a trusted and familiar 'community', knowing only too well that its offer - like the pool itself - is empty.



And yet it is enticing and seductive. The sparkling white of the outer structure heightens the intense blue of the pool.<sup>5</sup> The coolness of the metal hand rails, engineered to perfection, are like fine markers inviting the viewer to ascend the steps and lower themselves into the pool. Memories of summer at the local pool are rekindled: distant echoes of splashing water and laughter, hot sun playing on the water's surface, and a kind of lazy half-veiled voyeuristic longing. Desire is embedded into the architecture, into the water, and into the swimmers themselves. In fact, it becomes difficult to think about swimming pools without considering the swimmers:

'The pool is the architectural outcome of man's desire to become one with the elements of water, privately and free of danger. A swim in the pool is a complex and curious activity, one that oscillates between joy and fear, between domination and submission, for the swimmer delivers himself with controlled abandonment to the forces of gravity, resulting in sensations of weight- and timelessness' (van Leeuwen 1998:2).

But there is to be no swimming in this pool, no abandonment, no Freudian-return-to-the-womb, no flirting with the sensuousness of water-as-nature-as-female. Instead Newman offers up a parody of a pool which toys with our senses; and in the process, he highlights all that is lacking. We hover expectantly at the water's edge, 'the marginal territory between the wet and the dry... it is a no-man's land where the security of the uneventful

metamorphoses into the adventurous insecurity of the wet...' (ibid:159). But in this pool, Newman has cleverly calculated a kind of Narcissitic<sup>6</sup> disappointment where the shallowness of the water catches us by surprise. In this pool there is not enough water to be adventurous: the wild and poetic romanticism of swimming has been domesticated and made puritanical.<sup>7</sup> In the same way that the bathing cap has been described as being 'the condom of aquatic freedom'<sup>8</sup> Newman presents us with a swimming pool that has been suitably neutered and robbed of its sexuality and power.

Only too well, Hollywood has long understood the sexual potency and symbolism of the swimming pool. Filled with water, a swimming pool delivers the Hollywood promise of manufactured dreams, of sexual tension and provocation - whilst also offering a safe, healthy and hygienic setting within which to legitimise mass-voyeurism:

'Since voyeuristic lust is universal and since America, including Hollywood, is emphatically puritanical and therefore hypocritical, the introduction of the swimming pool as a pretext to show nude or seminude bodies was a spectacular opportunity. Eros could be shown in an athletic and hygienic context, providing legal as well as tasteful entertainment for the voyeur as family man' (van Leeuwen 1998:159).

And so the fetish of the swimming pool entered the middle class family home - as an object of desire, but also as a suburban status symbol for framing wealth and higher social achievement. Swimming pools 'turned into family pools, absorbed, together with the station wagon and the barbeque, into the family values complex and the virtuous bourgeois... the privilege once reserved for the millionaire and the movie star has become the right of the middle class: the private pool became the family pool' (van Leeuwen 1998:179,180).

Newman is interested in these changing codes, and the shifts that exist between wealth and recreation, contextualised within suburban housing environments. He challenges us to reconsider our assumptions about suburbia, and the forces that influence us into making decisions about the communities we choose to live in. And then, if you think about it, *21 Blackwood Park Road* drives a wedge between it all.

## Notes

1. 'The development and distribution of the private bath and pool house is an intricate part of the social transition from public to private and from ancien régime to capitalist society' (van Leeuwen 1999:52).
2. In the 1990s the Walt Disney Corporation, previously known for building theme parks advertised as 'the happiest place on earth', marketed its own real estate development, 'Celebration'. Established in 1994 near Orlando, Florida, Celebration has been described as 'theme park meets enclave' in its attempts to recreate pre-1940s Southern small-town living. 'According to the Disney Foundation, the target is to make the town feel like it has a tradition, even though it doesn't' (Diken et al 2005:92). Underpinning this sickly nostalgia is a neo-traditionalist desire to recreate an idealistic place in time that never existed - except of course in Disney movies. 'Detailed plans and strict rules govern all aspects of this 'perfect' micro-society, including the colour of curtains in the home, what can be planted in the yards and where cars can be parked' (Hayden 2003:214).
3. 'Celebration epitomises the contemporary dilemmas cities face... dilemmas of citizenship, of the public realm and of attachment to the city... Marketing not only property but also 'access' to a securitised lifestyle, most gated communities have literally no public spaces; indeed they are spaces in which some basic citizenship rights such as freedom of movement are denied outright. Threatening the idea of the common good and violating the rights based on citizenship, such communities often act in opposition to the interests of the wider community... With their technologies of pre-emptive social filtering, inward-looking architectural design, biased premium infrastructure links (e.g. special transportation and virtual networks excluding others) and privatised governance regimes, gated communities constitute a new type of localisation essentially different from what is traditionally understood by 'city'; they demonstrate, rather, how the 'city' is splintered today' (Diken et al 2005:93, 94).
4. '... the symbolic content of swimming pools has always been interesting: a pool is misapprehended as a trapping of affluence, real or pretended, and of a kind of hedonistic attention to the body. Actually a pool is, for many of us in the West, a symbol not of affluence but of order, of control over the uncontrollable' (Sprawson 1992:274).
5. In an interview with Geoff Newman he talked about how important it was for the blue colour to be at its most intense. He had this colour mixed especially so that it was at its saturation point, in order to be more artificially intense than the blue typically used in swimming pools. For Newman, this distinction is crucial to the success of the work.
6. [Of the word 'swim'] 'The word suggests a state of suspension, a trance-like condition. There is [also] the strange adverb 'swimmingly' that implies unimpeded progress. Like Narcissus many swimmers suffered from a form of autism, a self encapsulation in an isolated world, a morbid self-admiration, an absorption in fantasy' (Sprawson 1992:134).
7. 'For Paul Valéry, as for Shelley, Swinburne and Flaubert, swimming was in his own phrase a '*fornication avec l'onde*'. His journal describes: 'My sole pastime, my only sport, was the purest of all: swimming. It seems to me that I discover and recognise myself when I return to this element. My body becomes the direct instrument of my mind, the author of its ideas. To plunge into water, to move one's whole body, from head to toe, in its wild and graceful beauty; to twist about in its pure depths, this is for me a delight only compared to love' (Sprawson 1992:101).
8. '... for the bathing cap is the condom of aquatic freedom. By restraining its free flow, the cap has robbed the hair of its mythical expression of sexuality' (van Leeuwen 1999:179).

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