



**Eleanor Simpson** is not a dirty person but her flat stinks. She's not antisocial, either, but a note taped to her front door tells people that if she's not expecting them, there's not a chance she'll let them in. Eleanor Simpson is 67 years old and lives on the 15th floor of a Redfern apartment block. It could be heaven. "I see Botany Bay off the balcony, I see Darling Harbour to my right and on a clear day sometimes the mountains, the sunsets and the moon."

And look at the phrases real-estate agents use to describe the area: "superb locale", "prime city-fringe location", "enviable lifestyle pocket". They're not phrases Simpson would use to describe her situation. She lives in a Housing NSW tower in a development that some '60s bureaucrat with a lousy sense of humour named Poets Corner, and here life can be hell. The stench: it has flooded twice in two years thanks to the 46-year-old block's dodgy plumbing, most recently in June. Touch her flat's carpet and it's still damp. Mould everywhere, rotting boards in her kitchen cupboards. "I open them, I could vomit; I've had bugs that I've never seen in me life before," says Simpson. Housing NSW hasn't rushed to fix things.

And the fear: druggies on every floor, encounters with the psychotic and the stoned in grim corridors and frightful lifts. Simpson, tiny and in terrible health, was bashed one afternoon downstairs near the Poets Corner shop. "They came from behind and knocked me down." Barbara, her elderly friend on the eighth floor, barely leaves her flat now. "God love her, she's so paranoid; she absolutely loathes having to leave her place for what she might come in contact with in the hallway and every five minutes she's checking her spy hole."

Once, Simpson's little one-bedroom flat with her crazy collection of frogs on every surface – ceramic, fur, knitted – was her castle. "I used to be as happy as the pig in the proverbial," she says. But for public-housing tenants such as Simpson,

things have changed around here. Over the past few years, they've been hit with a double whammy: a severe decline in the quality of their homes as Housing NSW properties have aged and maintenance has been neglected, and a massive increase in the number of bad neighbours.

Simpson's is not the only world to be changing: these days, when she tends the plants on her little balcony, the landscape she looks across is one transformed. In only a few years, one of Australia's most infamous areas has altered at an unprecedented pace. Today, it's a place of fat real-estate prices, hipsters and the affluent, cafes and small bars, artisanal bakeries selling \$7 loaves of bread, farmers' markets, chic apartment blocks, designer dogs and all the joys of gentrification, spreading from Waterloo south of Phillip Street, across to Redfern Station and beyond to Eveleigh and CarriageWorks.

But this is the story of two very different worlds. "Danks Street is absolutely brilliant; bloody expensive, mind, not for poor buggers like us," says Simpson of the strip of cafes and galleries a few minutes' walk from Poets Corner. Simpson didn't need any help from the cool vintage-furniture shops on Regent Street to achieve the retro feel in her kitchen. Indeed, it seems some sort of cruel dig that as the Redfern/Waterloo area has been prettied up, the circumstances of its estimated 6000 public-housing residents – about a quarter of the population – have become uglier.

Ugly, too, are the implied sneers from those who have moved into the neighbourhood: as when SBS newsreader and resident Ricardo Goncalves announced in April that he thought his part of Redfern – the eastern side of the suburb that includes the refined apartment development Moore Park Gardens – should be renamed South Dowling to remove it from the stigma still attached to Redfern. Or in the glib tags "Murder Mall" or "Methadone Mall", which some use to describe the shopping centre on the corner of Baptist and Cleveland streets. (Its name was changed from Redfern Mall to the more

salubrious Surry Hills Shopping Village in the early 1990s.) Or in the comments of pub entrepreneur Jaime Wirth, who took over Cleveland Street's Norfolk Hotel in late 2010, telling a website that he wanted to transform the "derro pokie pub" into one "full of friendly people eating a pint of prawns or soft-shell tacos and drinking Pimm's jugs".

It's all a lot to stomach for the old-timers but the change has barely started. The population has leapt since 2006 (in Waterloo it's up by 25 per cent) and it's estimated it will almost double again over the next two decades. The once-wretched Block is now an expanse of lawn that will become the Pemulwuy development, including a planned 62 apartments for Aboriginal families, accommodation for 154 students, and commercial and retail space. But Pemulwuy is a minnow: it's the state government's renewal plans for its Redfern/Waterloo property portfolio – estimated to be about a third of the area – that will drastically alter the two suburbs' physical shape and the fabric of their communities over the next 25 years.

In Macquarie Street offices, ministers and bureaucrats are poring over blueprints that will add 3500 new units of housing – a 60:40 mix of private and public (now called "social" housing) – to Housing NSW estates in Redfern, Waterloo and Eveleigh. The government says the plans will result in a more balanced mix of social, private and affordable housing and a more sustainable community. Some, though, predict that the area's diversity and character will be replaced by a panorama of cookie-cutter apartment complexes for yuppies. Others fear the plans will widen the already stark division between the new and the old worlds, the haves and the have-nots.

"It's an absolute disaster," says local resident Ross Smith, 68, who has lived in a low-rise Waterloo walk-up since he could get a beer at his local for ninepence. "[It will be] an entirely different landscape. You'll see high-density residential property in which the existing [public housing] community will have a very diminished or non-existent role. It's the end of the community of this area."

Photography/Stephanie Wood

**Once a byword for social decay, Redfern is now hip, thanks to gentrification and redevelopment. But while that has attracted cool cafes and the upwardly mobile, the area's many public housing residents are feeling increasingly downtrodden, as Stephanie Wood discovers.**

# THERE GOES THE NEIGHBOURHOOD







**Ben Fordham**  
TV presenter

**"I've completely fallen in love with Redfern ... I just love its attitude; I reckon you can walk 500 metres to Surry Hills and notice the difference - people actually say 'hello' to you in Redfern."**



**Millie Ingram**  
Wyanga Community  
Aged Care Program

**Millie Ingram** remembers seeing Elvis Presley in *Loving You* at the Lawson Theatre in Botany Road. She also remembers the nearby Palms milk bar, which was run by a lovely old Greek bloke and had a jukebox. "We weren't allowed in hotels," says Ingram, a feisty Wiradjuri woman who heads Wyanga Aboriginal Community Aged Care Program.

In the late '50s, Ingram came from Cowra to the city for work. In an area full of factories, including the massive Eveleigh locomotive and carriage workshop, she found that easily enough — at a local chocolate factory. As an Aborigine, though, finding somewhere to live was harder. "We finally got a squalid little attic room, my sister and I, just opposite Redfern Park." With the factories had come the tenements housing thousands: the unemployed and the alcoholic, labourers and factory workers. Violence and crime, ragged, neglected children.

A decade or so before Ingram arrived in Redfern, the local council had declared its intentions to turn its "blighted drabness" into a "model suburb". It would be "the Mayfair of Sydney", boasted a *Sydney Morning Herald* article in August 1949, which was accompanied by an illustration pointing out where the suburb's opera house and national theatre would go.

The first bulldozers moved into slums off Cleveland Street late in 1947; two years later, work started on the first of the Housing Commission's new walk-up apartments. The area's first tower block, the McKell building, started to go up in 1963.

When the Housing Commission announced in 1972 that it would resume Waterloo homes in a new round of slum clearances, the area's era as a battleground started. Locals reacted with fury. They wanted rehabilitation, not demolition and displacement of their community. There were protests and picket lines, green bans, forced evictions and arrests.

Battles in Redfern and Waterloo have not always been so overt. Resident Geoff Turnbull, who for years has been a key member of the REDWatch community group, tells the story of

a long-standing community centre that owns several properties in one street. As the area gentrified, some residents of the street started to fret about the effect the centre and the Aboriginal children who used it were having on their property prices. "They basically infiltrated and took control of the organisation and, in 2004, tried to sell it off," says Turnbull, who paid \$26,920 for his Lawson Street terrace in 1978.

Ingram describes Redfern as "our Anzac Cove". "We lost a lot of warriors there," she says. To ill-health, stress-related conditions resulting from "the struggle", alcohol and drugs. It's "the blackfellas' graveyard", says Mick Mundine, the head of the Aboriginal Housing Company. The area's history as a national focal point for the Aboriginal struggle is well known: the "sad affair" of the Block. The night of rioting in 2004 after the death of Thomas "TJ" Hickey, who died when he came off his bike and was impaled on a fence; the youth was, some believe, peddling to escape police. Mundine's own tour of duty has lasted 30 years; he's seen off countless foes, including some within the Aboriginal community who opposed the demolition of the Block. (It might be appropriate that the Pemulwuy development is named for an Aboriginal warrior but Mundine's campaign for \$70 million in funds and planning approval still has a way to run.)

But perhaps the most vicious battles in the area now are those the drug-affected and addicted wage on themselves and their community. Since the Block's demise, the drug problem, increasingly ice, has slithered into the public-housing areas. Eleanor Simpson encounters the screaming, the raging, the tormented every time she leaves her tower flat. "The druggies all stick together and there's not one floor that's exempt," she says. "Nobody'll come and visit me any more because they hate getting into the lifts and being accosted."



**D**ry Land Bar in Redfern Street does a cheeseburger with a whole pickle at the side and house-made pork scratchings. In Regent Street, where retro furniture shops sell \$5500 mid-century modern chairs, the new Milk Bar by Cafe Ish has a lolly counter, a jukebox and serves "Ai's freaking awesome chicken wings". At the Norfolk Hotel in Cleveland Street, old tin cans serve as cutlery holders, tacos take top billing on the menu and there's a portrait of the Virgin Mary in the bathroom. Redfern the hipster playground delights in its irreverent, ironic sense of humour; the eccentric, the whimsical. In Redfern Park, where Paul Keating delivered his famous

1992 speech ("We simply cannot sweep injustice aside"), there's often a pet pig on a leash. His name is James. His owner, local student Anna Furlong, walks him or her dad, Patrick, does. "He's like a politician — he doesn't do much and grunts a lot," says Patrick Furlong.

On Redfern Street, there's a giraffe. The giraffe came from Melbourne Zoo (after apparently dying of natural causes) and has a price tag of \$35,000. "Every day, ad nauseam," says Ken Wallis of the questions customers ask about the taxidermied torso, which sits on the counter of Seasonal Concepts, his florist/vintage store. (Look for Wallis's taxidermy props in Baz Luhrmann's *The Great Gatsby*.) "Divine, stunning, divine," says a customer as she strolls around the crammed-to-the-rafters shop one Saturday morning. She chooses some flowers, then remembers, "I want something little for the powder room as well."

In 2006, attracted by the "virgin ground", Wallis spent \$570,000 on 122 Redfern Street. He knew it was a risk. Dozens of Redfern shops were empty and, after hours, the steel shutters banged down. But his investment soon started to look like a smart move: the Eveleigh Farmers' Market started at CarriageWorks, the Roll-Up Redfern campaign was launched to persuade shop owners to ditch the shutters, the last terrible houses on the Block were demolished, and Redfern Park got a \$32-million makeover. In 2011, film producers moved in, turning the Block into Darlinghurst circa 1927 for scenes in *Underbelly: Razor*. (This year, film crews for *Redfern Now*, Blackfella Films' television series for the ABC about urban indigenous life, and the feature film *Around the Block*, starring Hollywood actor Christina Ricci, have rubbed elbows in the area.)

Then there are the property prices. Australian Property Monitors statistics show the median price for a house in Redfern is \$830,000 with a long-term annual growth rate of about 6.55 per cent compared to 5.54 per cent for the region. But David Servi, director of Crown Street agent Spencer & Servi, says the statistics don't tell the full story as large homes in Redfern rarely go on the market. People simply don't want to leave. "People just love the sense of community," Servi, who in August sold a four-bedroom terrace at 101 Great Buckingham Street for \$1.2 million, is blunt when clients say they don't want Redfern. "I say, 'Well, you obviously haven't been there then.'"

In 2010, *Today* show presenter Ben Fordham spent \$1 million-plus on a contemporary terrace in Wells Street with timber floors recycled from a bowling alley and a built-in garden bed on his balcony where he grows beetroot, carrots and rocket. "I've completely fallen in love with Redfern," says Fordham. "My wife isn't convinced but I've said to her, 'Look, I think we're here for life now.' I just love its attitude; I reckon you can walk 500 metres to Surry Hills and notice the difference — people actually say 'hello' to you in Redfern."

For those with income or a property foothold in the suburb, the area's gentrification is something to celebrate. With her architect husband, Peter, Lord Mayor Clover Moore moved into "the dearest little house" at 817 Bourke Street in 1976 and later bought a property across the back lane in Kepos Street. Since her days as a young mother pushing a pram around the "bleak" streets of Redfern and collecting signatures for a petition about speeding traffic, Moore has been a cheerleader for the area. "The Redfern story is a very joyful story," she says. "Cafe life, street life, is terrific. It makes it much safer and builds community."

Some might also use the word "joyful" to describe the strides the local Aboriginal community has taken, especially since the opening of the gleaming National Centre of Indigenous Excellence in George Street.

Three mornings a week at 6am up to 70 people pull on boxing gloves for a training session in the centre's gym. Among them, Superintendent Luke Freudenstein, commander of the Redfern Local Area Command, Aboriginal leader Shane Phillips, police officers, Caucasian locals and Aboriginal kids who have been in trouble or are at risk of it. For an hour they're hard at it: boxing combinations, push-ups, sprints. Afterwards, some of the kids might go to chat with Freudenstein in his office at Redfern station. "They're my guests," says the superintendent, who talks to them about footy, boxing, what's happening at home. "I want the police to see they're welcome."

It's all part of a court-recognised program designed to bring discipline and routine to the lives of the kids. Since it started in



2009, robbery rates in the area are down and optimism is up. Freudenstein has become an unlikely local hero. Jacob Saunders, a 19-year-old Aboriginal man who has seen some trouble in his life and who now mentors his younger brothers, adores him. "His generosity to us is unbelievable," says Saunders, who was born in Taree and came to the Block with his mum when he was six weeks old.

It hasn't been an easy life for the young man, seeing things that kids shouldn't see, the hardship, the violence. "We all have our battle scars," Saunders says. But things are different in Redfern now. No one treats him as though they're too good for him, he can walk into shops without feeling shopkeepers are watching him, and he wants everyone to feel welcome, to know that Redfern's not the place they might think it is. "I can walk through Redfern with my head high because that's where I'm from, that's my dirt, that's my land, that's a part of my heart."



**Eleanor Simpson** moved into public housing after her health collapsed. She'd been a nanny, worked in Double Bay and Darling Point. Then, in 1986, she was diagnosed with breast cancer. Doctors told her she might not make it. Two years later they told her she had uterine cancer. "I couldn't afford to pay rent, health insurance, I had to hock my jewellery; oh, what I had to do," says Simpson, who now gets a pension of about \$375 a week, about \$85 of which goes on rent.

She's a diabetic and has diverticulitis – "I've been fighting for three years to keep my colon." Since the floods in her flat she's had chest infections and, in 2011, spent two days in hospital after what she describes as a "total stress attack". "In three years, five people have jumped off balconies here," she says.

A Housing NSW spokesperson told *the(sydney)magazine* that, after both floods, water had been extracted from the flat and work to replace her kitchen bench-top and cupboards is scheduled for September.

"Increasingly, disadvantage in Redfern-Waterloo is confined to what happens in the public-housing estates," says REDWatch's Geoff Turnbull. It's the result, he says, of the NSW government's lack of investment in property and maintenance over a long period of time and of a shortage in public housing.

Public-housing tenant and canny observer Ross Smith recalls when people were proud to live in the public housing. "It was socially mixed, civilised, a functioning community; it wasn't a leper colony," says Smith, who was a travelling carnival worker when he moved into Waterloo in the early 1960s. He says that, since 2005, the only new tenants to move into the area's public housing have been those with high needs – the unstable mentally ill straight out of psychiatric institutions who forget to take their pills, troublemakers out of jail – and they're not getting the support they need to be functional residents. "It's gone past the tipping point; now the tenant body is predominantly high needs."

According to a Housing NSW spokesperson, a number of measures, including block concierges and organised social activities for the over 50s, have been put in place to deal

with the increasing number of tenants with complex needs.

For activist residents such as Ross Smith, even as they grapple with such pressing issues, it's impossible not to see the future through the prism of the government's urban-renewal plans for the area. For a month in early 2011, locals got a glimpse of the Draft Redfern-Waterloo Built Environment Plan Stage 2 (BEP2) and were able to comment. It's likely that before the end of the year the new "planning controls" will be finalised and exhibited before being formally gazetted.

For residents, many of whom are elderly and vulnerable, there'll be enormous disruption and displacement – under the plans, 700 units of public housing will be lost from the area and relocated to other parts of the City of Sydney. Submissions from organisations such as Shelter NSW have raised concerns including whether the relocation of so many tenancies is even possible given the scarcity of public land in the inner city.

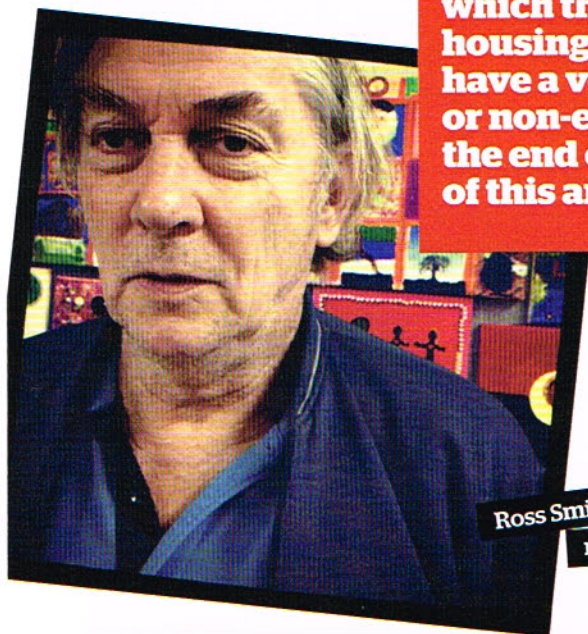
BEP2 also proposes that buildings of up to 12 storeys could replace the current public-housing walk-ups dotted around the suburbs. Some, including Geoff Turnbull, believe the walk-ups will be demolished to make way for developers to build apartments for the private housing market. He speculates that, in the worst-case scenario, all the area's public housing could be confined to the existing towers, which will be retained, and in proposed "infill" developments around their bases – where there is open space and car parking – exacerbating the ghetto effect.

Many have suspicions about the NSW government's underlying agenda. "It's about the government trying to get the best return that it can from its landholding," says Turnbull. Clover Moore, whose council has no remit over the renewal, says social problems and drug dealing were the original reason the Carr Labor government created the place management authority, the Redfern-Waterloo Authority (subsumed into the Sydney Metropolitan Development Authority [SMDA] in 2010). "What happened ... they then looked at the area and thought ... 'Ooo, we own quite a lot of property here, perhaps this is potential development.' I feel very disillusioned about it because it was really meant to be about addressing the social issues."

Moore's concerns will not be allayed by the SMDA's response to two direct questions from *the(sydney)magazine* about the future of the walk-ups and the government's agenda for the area: "One of the SMDA's priorities [is] working with all stakeholders to deal with a range of issues and facilitating improvement. Significant progress has been made ... in dealing with a number of social and development issues in the area," an SMDA spokesperson said.

And it seems some would like to sweep the public-housing community under the carpet. When the Roll Up Redfern group commissioned "ideas studio" Frost Design to develop a Redfern brand, its 61-page presentation document directly mentioned the area's public-housing presence only once – as one of the negative perceptions of the area.

Others, though, are keen to emphasise that public-housing residents are part of the broader community. "People in public housing can use all the same facilities that people in private housing use," says Clover Moore. Seasonal



Ross Smith  
resident

**"You'll see high-density residential property in which the existing [public housing] community will have a very diminished or non-existent role. It's the end of the community of this area."**

Concepts' Ken Wallis objects to what he thinks is an artificial division in the area; the perception of welfare and non-welfare. "I don't like the imposition of the 'us and them'; it implies this sense of conflict. On the street I don't get any sense of that at all. It's almost like it's applied from outside." Wallis, who walks his Great Danes in the park twice a day, says the way locals mix is exemplified by dog owners in the park. "They're out of the towers, they're out of various degrees of wealth ... They're all utilising the facility and getting on."

Rosa Meza doesn't have a dog and can't afford to go to cafes. Since 1989 she has lived in a three-storey walk-up on Elizabeth Street. "There is a little bit of a divide, I think, because I'm only engaged with people who live in the housing," says Meza, an elegant 50-year-old who applied for housing after she split with her partner and spent four years moving with her little girl between rented rooms and friends' couches. She's nervous about the future – she thinks she's in denial about what the renewal might mean for her – and shakes her head at how her community has changed. "Sometimes you see young people wearing, like, cool clothes [like street people] ... It's a bit bizarre ... You have one lot of people spending hundreds of dollars to get a particular look and they're living among people who have that look anyway." A visit to a cafe is a luxury for Meza, who earns about \$500 a week teaching English to migrants; \$145 of that goes to Housing NSW for rent. At Baffi & Mo cafe in Redfern Street, she looks at the menu and remarks, "It's a bit expensive."

Cafe society gone mad: "Salon and cafe coming soon," says a sign on the window of an old barbershop on Cleveland Street, a couple of old barbers' chairs inside amid building rubble; the Bourke Street corner store, where a kindly Egyptian woman once served,

now a cafe; another barbershop on Redfern Street, a cafe; the Lebanese pastry shop on Cooper Street that sold semolina cakes and date-filled pastries, empty, a-cafe-in-waiting.

"One of the fears of public tenants is that there'll be lots of places to buy \$7 cups of coffee but there won't be places to be able to get your cheap services," says Geoff Turnbull. "Look at Roger the shoe-repair guy. He basically charges people what he thinks that they can afford. He owns the place and when he goes, no one else is going to be able to do that. It's going to become another cafe."

And what about the people? The real people who live here. Like Russ, an old guy who's the only one drinking in the public bar of the Norfolk one afternoon as hipsters charge past to the beer garden. He's boring the barmaid to tears. "Same conversation as yesterday, exactly the same," she moans to a co-worker after he leaves. Or Norrie, the androgynous anarchist who lives in a run-down terrace near the Block with the word "Love" on the balcony and rides a push bike with a machine on the back that blows out bubbles. Or Mary, the intellectually disabled woman who has a chocolate milkshake every day at Redfern Street's Purple Goanna cafe where there's roo, croc, emu and barra on the menu and everybody feels welcome.

And what about housing tenants like Eleanor Simpson, who is shrinking in on herself, into her damp, smelly flat. Sometimes she'll venture out for a walk. "I'll leave here and I'll walk all the way down to Danks and further ... and the developments ... oh my godfather, and we're just left out of it. You know, we are really left out of it."

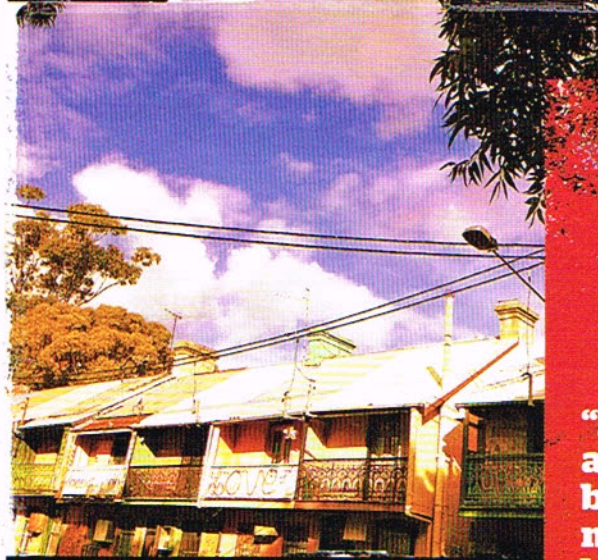
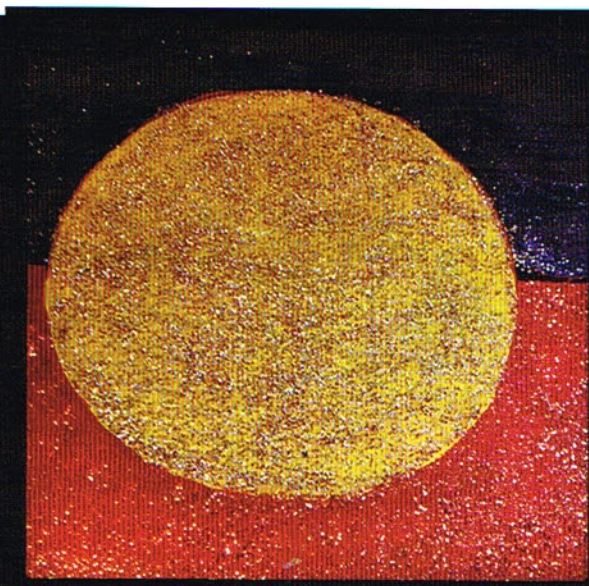
For her birthday last year, Eleanor Simpson and six of her friends went to the Norfolk Hotel for lunch. "I mean it was okay," she says, "but it's lost its character. (s)"





Superintendent  
Luke Freudenstein

Shane Phillips  
Aboriginal leader



**"Danks Street is  
absolutely brilliant;  
bloody expensive,  
mind, not for poor  
buggers like us."**



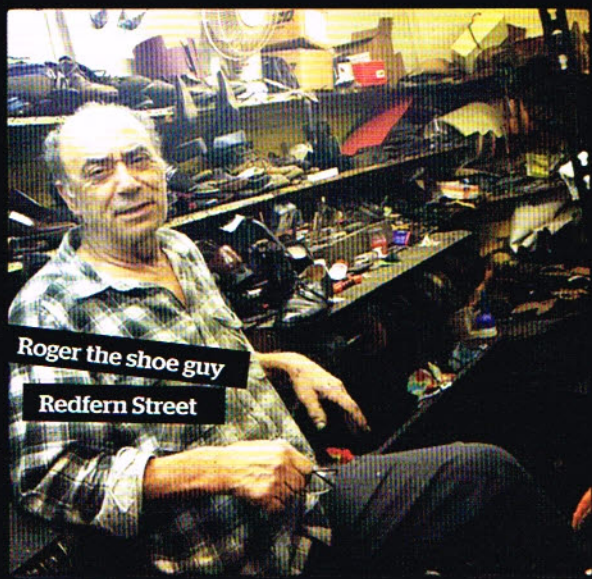
Eleanor Simpson  
resident



James the pig  
and owner Anna Furlong







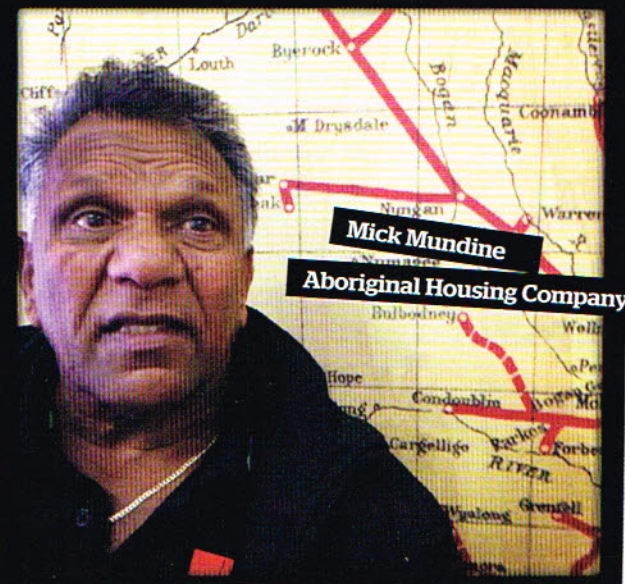
Roger the shoe guy  
Redfern Street



beautifully presented terrace  
an immaculate renovation showcases original features and natural light over three generous levels, while an enormous north-facing master retreat offers private city skyline views.  
• separate formal living & dining room  
• charming recycled Oregon kitchen  
• kauri pine floors, cellar/storage area  
• 3 x fireplaces, office, air to courtyard  
for sale  
view as advertised or by appointment  
9037 9379  
belle PROPERTY  
0414 535 516  
0422 344 485

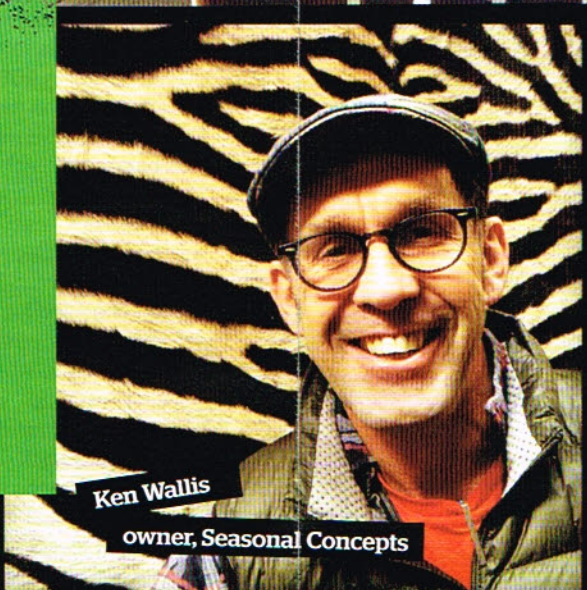


Purple Goanna cafe



Mick Mundine  
Aboriginal Housing Company

"One of the fears of public tenants is that there'll be lots of places to buy \$7 cups of coffee but there won't be places to get your cheap services."



Ken Wallis  
owner, Seasonal Concepts



Geoff and Lyn Turnbull  
REDWatch community group



The \$35,000 giraffe