

# Collingwood Housing Estate



In October 2003, a thousand people came to the opening of a photographic exhibition in a cavernous underground former car park at the Collingwood housing estate. During the following week, an estimated nine thousand visitors trooped through the space.

The idea of a Homeless Gallery originated with a group of academics in Poland and was taken up by The Free Radicals here. The Poles were frustrated by the difficulties their photographic students encountered in finding exhibition spaces. So they went looking for accessible unused spaces available for free. They found one, and announced this would be un-curated exhibition open to all, with the exhibitors themselves cataloguing, setting up, maintaining and finally dismantling the exhibition. There would be no gallery fees. People who wanted to purchase a photograph could deal directly with the photographer. The idea took off like wild fire. Thousands turned up, just like they have here. There's now been, in Poland, ten Homeless Galleries. We're the eleventh, the first in Australia.

**Ros Girvan**, Collingwood housing estate artsworker, interview

Mounted on walls and free-standing panels were the images of three hundred and seventy photographers, some ten per cent of whom were estate residents.

The variety of subject matter was reflected in fine art and abstract streetscapes; the work of commercial photographers and wedding specialists; professional and amateur portraits; the photo-shopped album covers of The Beatles with the faces of the Fab Four replaced by the faces of the photographer's children; a crime scene; a tram accident; the interiors of estate flats: and more, much more.

This unconventional exhibition, entitled *The Homeless Gallery*, was organised by the Collingwood Housing Estate Arts Committee, the Collingwood Neighbourhood House, the Melbourne Fringe Festival and a group of photographers called The Free Radicals.

The 2003 *Homeless Gallery* was unconventional in at least two ways. No single individual or group curated or chose what was exhibited. The second factor was the space itself, the huge underground car park. The Collingwood housing estate comprises three high rise tower blocks with three hundred adjacent walk-up flats. The approximately 2,400 residents use an above-ground car park but

CHEAC began soon after it was first suggested that the underground car-space might become an arts-space. Initially an ad hoc committee, CHEAC from the beginning contained a cross-section of residents as well as representatives of the Tenants Association, local arts and community organisations. One of the most fascinating groups was the BEEM artists of indigenous Australian artists. BEEM kicked off when one of them, Eugene, was having his hair cut by Ivan, the local barber. Eugene realised he'd always been having his hair cut by Ivan while Eugene sat staring at a blank wall in the mirror of the barber shop. So Eugene told Ivan: that wall needs a mural! Then he went off, spoke to his friends and they painted a brilliant mural on the wall. Since then they've done murals for the police, local businesses, the Collingwood Harvest Festival, lots of places. Sometimes they get more major projects than the core group can handle. So they bring in indigenous artists from interstate. They're amazing...

The driving force behind CHEAC though was always the need to coordinate all the arts projects on the estate, to put in place a long-term cultural development strategy and to provide a mechanism whereby the residents could play with ideas and know that other people weren't just listening but would help in making things happen. More specifically CHEAC sought funds from the beginning to give the underground a second life as an arts-space which could be used by outside organisations, artists and residents.



Some of the BEEM artists, Collingwood Housing Estate.

the underground space has only one entrance. Security and maintenance concerns resulted in its closure. It remained

derelict until 1999, when the Collingwood Housing Estate Arts Committee (CHEAC) was formed. Funding gained from the Victorian Health Promotion Foundation and the Department of Human Services allowed the rejuvenation of the car park to commence. The BEEM group of indigenous artists set about painting the entry ramp and a mural on a wall at the entrance. But CHEAC and agencies like the Collingwood Neighbourhood House had already facilitated small projects within the space: such as *Shelf Life* with sculptor Alex Jacks. Residents and Alex created shelves of mementos and objects on walls also adorned with paintings, stencils and textual contributions telling the history of the car park and the estate. Evidence of *Shelf Life* and other projects was deliberately left on view, providing a sense of continuity and progress, when the thousands of visitors trooped through the car park during the *Homeless Gallery* exhibition in 2003.

Amongst the thousands of images seen by the visitors was a photograph of a piece of street art by aerosol artist Ariel Palsis. A Collingwood public housing resident, he had been given a disposable camera by artworker Rochelle Rogers. She challenged Ariel to take a shot of something that mattered to him very deeply. Fortuitously he photographed his very first work. It had lasted for ten years. One week afterwards it was painted over. Yet Ariel still had the record, on display at the *Homeless Gallery*, of where and how he had begun his life as an artist.

Street art is vital to many who have no other means of self-expression.

A genuinely valid form of art, it is sometimes of astonishing complexity, though damned by those who think of it as *mere graffiti*. Ariel Palsis' visual ability is obvious in a different genre: he was camera-man and co-director of the video-film *Coods TV*. The title, suggested by Ariel, is an amalgam of *Collingwood Hoods*.

*Coods TV* was made after well-known Australian television personality Tracy Harvey came to Collingwood in late 2003 as a trainer to work with residents on a film about their lives. The on-camera presenter is Aiesha Dowd, the partner of Ariel Palsis. The visual footage, filmed by Ariel, includes shots of the Vietnamese lunches and exercise classes, the Men's Gym sessions and the Laughing Classes (where people gather to laugh and to feel much invigorated by doing so). *Coods TV* was broadcast by Channel 31 in April 2004.

The formal launch of *Coods TV* took place before its broadcast and was held in the car park during the 2004 Collingwood *Harvest Festival*. The celebration was accompanied by a performance by the Collingwood Cook Island Multicultural Dance Group. Founded in 2002 by Tangi Stickland, a



The mural by *BEEM artists*, Collingwood housing estate.

resident of the Collingwood estate and a former Cook Islander, the group had begun with three dancers. Inside six months, it expanded to more than twenty-five musicians and dancers from Cook Island, Samoan and Australian backgrounds. Their presentations at various festivals have included a remarkably vibrant performance in the The Famous Spiegeltent as part of the 2002 Melbourne International Festival of the Arts.

Poster and video stills from *Goods TV*, Collingwood housing estate.

