

The role of creative practice in mine closure and transition

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Abstract

Mine closure, rehabilitation and community transitions are complex processes involving the input of a broad range of stakeholders, often over many decades. Creative practices and their economies can play a leading role in transitions such as these where effective communication, collaboration, innovation and imagination are essential to meet the often-competing priorities of communities, governments and corporate mine operators. In the Latrobe Valley, Australia, 3 brown coal mines are undergoing a staggered closure that in many ways is pioneering a new way to approach post-mining transition in this country. This paper explores the diverse ways in which creative practices are engaging directly with the Latrobe Valley's post-mining transition by reviewing the work of a group of local artists, producers and designers called Open Cut Collective. The group has worked collaboratively with mine operators, government agencies, research institutions and community advocacy groups across different types of media (including visual art, podcasts, films, events, educational experiences and more) to meaningfully engage communities in understanding and participating in their post-mining futures during key phases of decision-making. This paper provides an overview of key projects led by Open Cut Collective in the Latrobe Valley and argues for a greater role for creative practices and creative economies in contexts of mine closure, rehabilitation and post-mining community transitions occurring in Australia and beyond.

Keywords: post-mining transition, creative practice, landscape architecture, arts, community engagement

A note on terminology relating to First Nations Peoples and cultures

Throughout this paper we use 'First Nations' or 'Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander' when referring to First Nations Peoples or cultures. In some cases, we use 'Aboriginal' where the discussion relates specifically to Australian Aboriginal people. When referring to the Gunaikurnai People and their Country and culture, we use the 'Gunaikurnai' spelling as opposed to other common spellings including 'Gunai', 'Kurnai' or 'GunaiKurnai.' All use of generalised terminology relating to First Nations Peoples and cultures follows the Australians Together (2024) *Language & Terminology Guide*, unless included as a direct quote from an external source. All use of terminology specific to Gunaikurnai Country follows its use in the Gippsland Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) *Gunaikurnai Whole-of-Country Plan* (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2015).

1 Introduction

The life cycles of mines of all types are affected by intersecting economic, cultural and technical pressures. As the world aims to decarbonise, fossil fuel mines in particular are subject to increasing pressures related to climatic, economic and political volatility. As the brown coal mines of the Latrobe Valley, Victoria (Australia), approach closure, questions about the safety, stability, sustainability and possible uses of post-mining

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landscapes are extremely complex and, like all mine rehabilitation projects, are codified in a wide range of published standards, principles and guides (Australian Government 2016; Cole 2019; Commonwealth of Australia Senate 2019; Department of Industry and Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade 2016; Gann et al. 2019; McDonald et al. 2016). In processes of mine closure and post-mining transition, the complexity increases when such sites exist in close proximity to human settlements (as the Latrobe Valley's mines do), as often there are long-standing cultural associations with the physical mining landscapes and the labour practices which have created them (Berger & Alexander 2020; Tenfelde 1992, 1985). Creative practices of all kinds can play a pivotal role in such transitions before, during and after they take place, providing innovative and well-tested methods to enable inclusive processes of interpretation, narration, imagination, implementation and evaluation.

This paper begins with a contextual overview of how creative practices relate to processes of mine closure and transition, summarising notable international and Australian examples of post-mining transitions underpinned by various cultural traditions and creative practices. Following a brief discussion about the Latrobe Valley as a coal mining region undergoing an energy transition, this paper introduces Open Cut Collective. As a group of creative practitioners from various disciplines, each member of the Collective has independently delivered several projects focused on meaningful engagement with the complexities and specificities of post-mining transition in the Latrobe Valley. A selection of these key projects is then discussed in detail to profile the work of the Collective, providing a suite of examples of how such practices and projects can contribute powerfully to processes of mine closure and transition in the Latrobe Valley and beyond.

1.1 Contextualising creative practice in mine closure and transition

The relationship between creativity, creative practices and the processes involved in societal and landscape transitions is intrinsic, given that almost all transitions involve a shift from the known to the unknown. At a basic level, creative practice, including the various arts and design disciplines, is concerned with developing methods for exploring the question 'what if...?'. As a means of making sense of individual and collective experiences, viewing and portraying them in new and evocative ways, and imagining possibilities not yet thought of, creative practice is an inseparable part of what it means to be human. In this sense, mine closure and post-mining transitions can be understood as both environmental and human processes, representing complex transformations of landscapes, economies and socio-cultural structures which require many forms of creativity.

In the best cases mine closure and transition projects represent visionary explorations of what is possible across these multiple domains of landscape, economy and culture. The necessary and multifaceted transformations that take place in these sites are driven through the focused imperatives of industrial life cycles. Selected international and Australian examples are discussed in the following section to demonstrate the scope of imagination made possible through creative practice approaches in such sites. Importantly, the link between creative cultural practices and processes of landscape transformation (including mining) are well established in the continuing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures connected to the Australian continent. A brief overview of these Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander traditions and the concepts underpinning them further contextualise the long-standing lineages within which contemporary Australian mine closure and transition processes take place.

1.1.1 *Creative practices in post-mining transition: international and Australian examples*

In Australia, like the rest of the world, the post-mining transition challenge is immense; Australia has somewhere between 50,000 and 80,000 abandoned mines (Roche & Judd 2016; Werner et al. 2020), with 550,000 identified in the USA, 10,000 in Canada, and insufficient data in most other countries (Hufty 2019). Internationally, there are many examples of the integration of creative practices such as the arts, various spatial design disciplines (including landscape architecture and others), multimedia storytelling, and music in processes of mine closure and transition planning. In practical ways, creative practices such as these have driven the realisation of emblematic examples of post-mining transition. Although the integration of creative practices in post-mining transition is still emerging in Australia, the approach and character of these examples

follow and build upon long-established traditions in international contexts. Successful examples, discussed below, respond sensitively to local conditions and communities, yielding unique, place-based formats and outcomes; however, there are common threads in the deployment of the range of creative practices listed above.

Matt Baida, an Australian landscape architect, has advocated for the landscape architectural profession to take a leading role in post-mining landscape transitions as the discipline brings tools and methods for ‘analysis, design and prototyping that include considerations for aesthetics, social function and cultural issues’ (Baida 2014 p. 2). For over a century the landscape architectural discipline has pioneered innovative approaches to landscape restoration in post-mining landscapes among others, including Parc de Buttes Chaumont in Paris, Pardisan Environment Park in Tehran, and Freshkills Park in New York City (Bush & Wolff 2024). The influence of a broader range of creative practices (such as fine arts, community arts, public art and performance) embedded in post-mining transitions from recent decades include examples such as the United Kingdom’s Eden Project (now an umbrella initiative for many international projects) (Eden Project 2026), the German Internationale Bauausstellung (IBA) Emscher Park and Lausitz projects (<https://www.internationale-bauausstellungen.de/en/>), and the North American AMD+Art initiative (<https://amdandart.info/>), among others. Each of these examples, in their own way, responds to the perceived challenges of mine closure and transition experimentally, reframing them as opportunities for interdisciplinary creative collaborations to create exceptional and unique landscapes and social conditions.

In *Creating Worlds Otherwise: Art, Collective Action, and (Post)Extractivism*, Paula Serafini (2022) extends on this pattern, examining how a range of South American creative practitioners have been effective in generating powerful narratives for transition in mining communities and their landscapes. She argues that the true potential of creative practices lies in their capacity to imagine and enact new visions for what a good life looks like for post-mining communities (Serafini 2022 p. 19). Australia is also now home to some inspiring examples of creative practices leading post-industrial and post-mining transitions in regional communities. Liddell Works is a creative program engaging with the closure and transformation of the Liddell power station (<https://liddell.works/>), while Cementa is a regional arts festival driving a decades-long evolution of an industrial town into a cultural hub, both of which are in the state of New South Wales. The Unconformity contemporary art festival in Lutriwita/Tasmania offers a clear ambition to integrate creativity with an established regional identity to imagine and enact a future vision for remote Queenstown (<https://theunconformity.com.au/>). Together this selection of examples demonstrates that creativity is a foundation for innovation in post-mining transitions, reinforcing the late Rolf Kuhn’s¹ suggestion that ‘when we turn to the re-use and redesign of previously destroyed landscapes we may find surprising, sometimes unimagined possibilities emerging’ (Internationale Bauausstellung Fürst-Pückler-Land 2012 p. 6).

1.1.2 Creativity, culture and mining: a long connection in Australia

In many First Nations cultures, including in present-day Australia, Canada and USA, what we now call creative practices have long been a feature of processes of cultural, economic and environmental change (Muñoz 2025; Wildcat & De Leon 2020; Wrightson 2020). In Australia, they are intrinsic dimensions of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices (Cameron 2015; Sunderland et al. 2022). The continent today known as ‘Australia’ is home to the longest continuous culture on Earth, with some estimates suggesting Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander populations have existed here for over 70,000 years (Page & Memmott 2021). The long-term link between creativity, culture and mining in the Australasian region is reinforced by archaeological and anthropological research that continues to investigate First Nations mines and quarries and their connection to socio-symbolic practices and cosmological beliefs (Brumm 2010). For example in Victoria, Australia, studies of the Mount William Quarry (on the Country of the Kulin language group, 70 km north of present-day Melbourne) have suggested that greenstone from this site had greater cultural significance than similar stone from nearby quarries (Brumm 2010), and that ‘in mapping changes in the

¹ Rolf Kuhn was ‘...the founder and managing director of the International Building Exhibition (IBA) Fürst-Pückler-Land in Lower Lusatia’ (Engler 2024).

distribution arrays of stone from the various major quarries we may... be mapping changes in the social relationships these distributions reflect' (McBryde 2011 p. 151).

In the Latrobe Valley, an energy and post-mining transition is underway with significant implications for the Country² of the Gunaikurnai People. The 5 clans of the Gunai or Kurnai (known today as the Gunaikurnai) – Brayakaulung, Brabralung, Krauatungalung, Brataualung and Tatungalung – maintain shared understandings of their Country through story, song and ceremony. Gunaikurnai stories reflect broader patterns in Aboriginal knowledges relating to the formation of Country and the responsibilities bestowed upon the people of that Country to care for it. Gunaikurnai stories underpin local knowledge about how their Country came into being, how it will be in the future, and how it must be cared for over time. In recent years, the Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation (GLaWAC) identified that coal mine closure and remediation in the Latrobe Valley represents 'a historic opportunity: to heal not only landscapes, but relationships; to embed Gunaikurnai cultural knowledge and practices into future work on Wurruk (land); [and] to realise economic independence for our communities' (Gunaikurnai Land and Waters Aboriginal Corporation 2025 p. 1).

1.2 Mine closure and transition in the Latrobe Valley

The Latrobe Valley region is home to 3 brown coal mines and adjacent power stations, which until 2008 met 85% of the electricity demand for the state of Victoria (Giurco 2009). With the Hazelwood mine and power station decommissioned in 2017, and the other 2 (Yallourn and Loy Yang) planning for closure, the Latrobe Valley's coal mining operations are due to cease by 2035 (Latrobe Valley Authority 2023). Following the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire³ and the significant political pressure this event generated, the Victorian State Government responded in comprehensive and creative ways to meet the challenges of mine closure and transition. Implementing the recommendations of the *Hazelwood Mine Fire Inquiry* in full (Inspector General for Emergency Management 2017), the state government established the Mine Land Rehabilitation Authority (MLRA), the Latrobe Valley Authority (LVA), the Latrobe Health Assembly, and the Latrobe Health Advocate, each with a mandate to engage the Latrobe Valley community in innovative ways and approach energy transition holistically and systemically (Department of Premier and Cabinet, State of Victoria 2016; Latrobe Valley Authority 2023). Unfortunately, between 2024 and 2026 these agencies were all defunded and discontinued, leaving the status of a range of projects, working relationships and the strategic planning of Latrobe Valley's mine closure and transition uncertain. Against this backdrop, Open Cut Collective is a newly formed group of creative practitioners with the aim of 'embedding arts and culture within Gippsland's energy transition by fostering creative economies for our post-mining identity' (<https://opencutcollective.com/>).

1.2.1 Creative practices in the Latrobe Valley's energy transition: Open Cut Collective

Open Cut Collective has a core membership of 4 creative practitioners: Josie Hess, PollyannaR, Stephanie Sabrinskas and Kyle Bush. The Collective builds on a rich lineage of creative practice traditions in the Latrobe Valley and Gippsland regions. These include, but are not limited to millennia of Gunaikurnai cultural practices of art, song and storytelling; the radical educational approach of the Gippsland Art School founded in 1971 attracting influential international and Australian artists, many with an artistic focus on social, political and environmental issues;⁴ ARC Yinnar as one of the longest running artist-run initiatives in Australia (established in 1982) (<https://www.arcyinnar.org/>); ReActivate Latrobe Valley which tested creative spatial and economic development projects for a region in transition between 2011 and 2018;⁵ and Hartmut Veit who in recent

² Deborah Bird Rose (1996 p. 8) describes Country as 'multi-dimensional – it consists of people, animals, plants, Dreamings; underground, earth, soils, minerals and waters, surface water, and air. ... [and] has origins and a future; it exists both in and through time.'

³ The Hazelwood mine fire has been described as one of the worst industrial disasters in Australian history, burning for a period of 45 days between February and March of 2014 (Teague et al. 2014).

⁴ The Gippsland art School counts the likes of John Wolsely, Robin Wallace-Crabbe, Nigel Lendon, Colin Sugget, Amanda Thompson, Irene Probsting, Barry Brown and Tony Hanningto among its alumni and staff (Gippsland Art Gallery 2023).

⁵ The award winning *Get Sunflowered* project was one of ReActivate Latrobe Valley's flagship projects (Bullpit 2016).

years developed a ‘socially-engaged art enquiry into the politics of coal, space and place’ in the Latrobe Valley (Veit 2017). While Open Cut Collective was officially formed in 2025, its members have been actively involved in creative practice approaches to the Latrobe Valley’s mine closure and transition for over a decade.

Selected projects involving members of Open Cut Collective exemplify a suite of creative practice approaches to mine closure and transition: participatory art, multimedia, events and pedagogies. These examples, discussed in the next section, may provide prompts and guidance on how creative practices and creative practitioners can contribute in innovative, meaningful and practical ways to the various phases of mine closure and transition as they unfold.

2 Creative practice approaches to navigating transition – case studies from Open Cut Collective

For many years the members of Open Cut Collective have been involved in a range of creative practice projects engaging directly with the Latrobe Valley’s mine closure and transition processes. These are classified here under 4 distinct creative practice approaches:

- participatory arts approaches to interpreting challenges and reforming shared identities
- multimedia approaches to sharing knowledge and documenting change
- event-based approaches to building shared experiences and modelling possibilities
- pedagogical approaches to finding meaning and imagining futures.

Each of these creative practice approaches is discussed through specific case study projects in which members of the Collective were either leaders or major contributors.

2.1 Participatory approaches to interpreting challenges and re-forming shared identities

Participatory creative approaches are those in which an artistic process or output (for example the collective creation of a painting) is engaged with and produced by members of a specific group or community, often guided by an experienced creative practitioner (for example an artist or designer). Often participatory approaches are used in socially or politically engaged artistic or design practices in which part of the goal is the democratisation of information, ideas and/or decision-making (Kester 2011; Simonsen & Robertson, 2013; Thompson 2012). The *Coal Hole* arts project (PollyannaR 2020) was an example of a participatory arts program focused on enabling the Latrobe Valley community to interpret and engage with the complexity of mine rehabilitation in the region’s 3 brown coal mines, while working directly with the undercurrents of historical, existing and potential future regional identities during a period of post-mining transition.

2.1.1 *Coal Hole*

Coal Hole was led by Latrobe Valley artists PollyannaR, Mark Hooper, Esther Lloyd and Grace Ware in partnership with the MLRA. Through various participatory art projects between 2019 and 2020, the group aimed to innovatively translate the unique scientific and social complexities of mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley’s 3 coal mines for the local community to engage with meaningfully. The intention behind *Coal Hole* was to not only inform the public about the processes involved in mine rehabilitation, but to engage them directly in creating art with meaning, related to the layered histories and potential futures of these local landscapes. To make the project possible, the group made an unsolicited pitch to the MLRA for funding to bring the project to life. What began as a large-scale sculpture project, transformed into a wide range of smaller projects connecting with different communities of practice through diverse artistic media. Projects included a surreal photoshoot in Yallourn coal mine (Figure 1), zine making workshops repurposing MLRA technical publications on mine rehabilitation, garment making workshops transforming used high-vis workwear into experimental clothing and accessories, live improvisational musical performances incorporating industrial sounds recorded in the Latrobe Valleys mines and power stations, and more.



Figure 1 *Coal Hole's 'Lake Life' photo series in Yallourn coal mine (image credit: PollyannaR)*

2.2 Multimedia approaches to sharing knowledge and documenting change

Digital and multimedia creative approaches are those in which the interpretation and sharing of information, ideas and knowledge is achieved through the production and distribution of a multimedia artifact such as a film, an audio piece, an interactive digital interface or a graphic, among others. These approaches can be critical in supporting civic engagement by demystifying political processes and by providing a means for communities to find and exercise a voice in such processes (Couldry 2010; Dahlgren 2009; Lambert 2013). The *Coal Face* podcast is an example of an audio project focused on sharing knowledge about mine closure, rehabilitation and transition from a range of voices including community members, experts, and government and industry representatives. Additionally, the *Ashes to Aftermath: 10 Years on from the Hazelwood Mine Fire* documentary (Environment Victoria 2024) is an example of how the various social, economic and environmental changes that come with mine closure and transition can be captured and narrated through film.

2.2.1 *Coal Face* podcast

The *Coal Face* podcast is a re-tell format, interview podcast with episodes created between 2022 and 2026. The hosts, Josie Hess and Stephanie Sabrinskas, speak with experts, academics and community members to discuss multiple perspectives on the Latrobe Valley's coal mining industry and the potential future for the region's landscapes and communities. Figure 2 shows the title card for season 2 of the podcast. The episodes have covered topics including the technical aspects of mine rehabilitation, the impacts of the catastrophic 2014 Hazelwood mine fire, the threats to regional water security posed by the current approach to mine rehabilitation in the Latrobe Valley's 3 mines, a deep time history of the Latrobe Valley, the economic geography of the region, and more. The intention behind the *Coal Face* podcast was to explore a range of different aspects of mine closure, rehabilitation and transition in the Latrobe Valley by providing a platform for a diverse range of knowledge holders, advocates and decision-makers to share their perspectives with a public audience, in an accessible, entertaining format. To make the podcast possible, the hosts pitched the concept to various professional, philanthropic and institutional audiences to eventually secure funding through Morwell Innovation Centre, Federation University and the Victorian State Government. Then through a combination of community outreach and targeted approaches via local personal and professional networks, invited guests (including, in season 2, award-winning academic and author, Professor Erik Eklund, and economic geographer, Sally Weller) are initially asked about their connection to the land of the Latrobe Valley before expanding the discussion to their specific areas of expertise or experience.



Figure 2 Title card for the *Coal Face* podcast season 2 (image credit: Josie Hess)

2.2.2 *Ashes to Aftermath* documentary

The *Ashes to Aftermath* documentary is a 2024 film produced by Josie Hess and Stephanie Sabrinskas, tracing the stories of 6 the Latrobe Valley residents as they lived through the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire. Figure 3 shows a still from the documentary. It also reflects on the outcomes from this event 10 years on, including the community networks that were strengthened, the skillsets that were developed by local people to advocate for their community, and the political reform that was triggered as a result. The intention behind the film was to document and narrate a significant historical period for the Latrobe Valley, and to create opportunities for participants and audiences to reflect on and make sense of a shared traumatic experience. A diverse and under-represented set of voices was assembled to fill gaps left by other media representations of the Hazelwood mine fire and its social and environmental aftermath. To make the film possible, the producers leveraged their previous work with Environment Victoria to secure funding and connect with community volunteer networks as the 10-year anniversary of the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire approached. Through collaboration with NSW and additional Bank Australia funding support the documentary engaged participants, ensuring an ethical approach to storytelling with vulnerable and marginalised groups (including rolling consent).



Figure 3 *Ashes to Aftermath* screenshot showing the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire (image credit: Josie Hess courtesy of Environment Victoria)

2.3 Event-based approaches to building shared experiences and modelling possibilities

Event-based approaches are those in which a temporary gathering, such as a festival, workshop or exhibition make it possible for groups of people to collaborate, find entertainment, share ideas and experiences, and make decisions, among other things. Events can create temporary public environments through which participants build social capital, skills and capacity, form opinions, learn from others, and in some cases embody and practice alternative ways of being (Bennett et al. 2016; Jepson & Clarke 2015; Stevenson et al. 2010). *Hazelwood 10 Years On* (Morwell Innovation Centre 2024) was a community event centred around the collective processing and commemoration of a traumatic shared experience (the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire), while *Get Cheffed* (Bush 2018) was a public event that celebrated the non-mining regional industries related to food and modelled the cultural possibilities of their prevalence in a post-mining future.

2.3.1 *Hazelwood 10 Years On*

Hazelwood 10 Years On was a 2024 community event and impact campaign led by Josie Hess and Stephanie Sabrinskas commemorating the 10-year anniversary of the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire. Figure 4 shows a panel discussion from the event, which over the course of a day brought together a range of speakers, performances and artworks, local groups and businesses, and various government and industry representatives. Participants reflected on the ongoing processes of mine closure, rehabilitation and transition that have in many ways been shaped in response to the 2014 Hazelwood mine fire and its legacies. The intention behind the event was to create a temporary space for shared reflection on a significant collective experience and to invite discussion on the progress made in the various aspects of post-mining transition in the Latrobe Valley. To make this event possible, the event leaders built upon the success of their short film, *After the Smoke* (Hess 2023) to secure funding, initially through Doc Society's Climate Impact Fund but extended through over 100 partnerships across various sectors. The scale and diversity of the group of investors and collaborators meant complex relationships and differing positions were key factors to manage with care, influencing the strategic curatorial decision to frame the event as a mix of honest reflection and hopeful looking forward.



Figure 4 A panel discussion at the *Hazelwood 10 Years On* event (image credit: Life After Coal)

2.3.2 *Get Cheffed*

Get Cheffed was a one-day live competitive cooking event in 2018, celebrating local Gippsland food producers and chefs, led by Kyle Bush, Joh Lyons, Emma Lewis, Lizi Maskiel and Jane Darling Sloyan of the ReActivate Latrobe Valley social enterprise. The event included educational cooking workshops, a local produce market, and 2 rounds of a live ‘cook-off’ featuring some of Gippsland’s best chefs, shown in Figure 5. The intention behind the event was to showcase the rich food culture of Gippsland and to position the Latrobe Valley as the geographical heart of the Gippsland region. The broader strategic goals of the event were to connect the Latrobe Valley community with the broader communities of Gippsland and greater Melbourne through the food industry, advocating for this as one possible alternative to the coal extraction industry that has long defined the region. To make this event possible, ReActivate Latrobe Valley partnered with Vic Health (a Victorian State Government health promotion organisation), Bank Australia, the LVA and others, in addition to raising funds through a crowdfunding campaign. As a ticketed event registered in the National Sustainability Festival (<https://sustainabilityfestival.au/>) program, *Get Cheffed* attracted over 300 people to Morwell for the day, including many from Melbourne.



Figure 5 ReActivate Latrobe Valley's live cooking event, *Get Cheffed* (image credit: Gippslandia)

2.4 Pedagogical approaches to finding meaning and imagining futures

Pedagogical approaches are those that use educational curriculum and activities as a means for students to engage directly with specific communities on live issues and spatial changes that will impact them. Learning environments, and particularly 'design studios'⁶ in tertiary educational contexts, can act as safe spaces for participatory experimentation and support the visualisation of and deliberation over spatial decision-making processes. *The Void* (Bush 2023) studio was an example of a pedagogical approach which focused on community engagement and field trip-based learning in the Latrobe Valley, and the development of speculative design proposals for a public lookout in 2 out of the 3 coal mines in the region.

2.4.1 'The Void' Bachelor of Landscape Architectural Design studio course

The Void was a series of 3 design studios included within RMIT University's Bachelor of Landscape Architectural Design, led by Kyle Bush between 2022 and 2024 in partnership with the MLRA, Engie Australia and Energy Australia. In each iteration of the studio, students were invited to develop design proposals for a lookout on the edge of one of the Latrobe Valley's brown coal mines to act as a public infrastructure during the imminent processes of mine closure, rehabilitation and land-use transition. The intention behind the studios was to bring together a range of industry, government and community voices to articulate what makes the Latrobe Valley special and how this could be the foundation for anything that comes next in the region's coal mining landscapes. Students were invited to bring 'fresh eyes' to the complexities of both the cultural processes (political, economic and social) and material processes (hydrological, geological and biological) of the region and design a built infrastructure that would make these processes visible for lookout visitors. The pedagogy was also a vehicle to provide students with an unforgettable learning experience, connecting them to a regional area that is so integral to their lived experience of life in the city of Melbourne through its provision of electricity over the past 125 years. To make this possible initially, a partnership agreement was established between RMIT University, the MLRA and the relevant mine operator (Engie Australia or Energy Australia), brokered by the studio leader, Kyle Bush. Each design studio ran for a 3-month

⁶ Design studios are a core pedagogical model used for teaching and learning design disciplines such as landscape architecture, architecture and interior design (Bush et al. 2020). They are treated as 'active sites where students are engaged intellectually and socially, shifting between analytic, synthetic and evaluative modes of thinking in different sets of activities [such as] drawing, conversing [and] model-making' (Dutton 1987 p. 16).

period (one university semester) during which students visited the Latrobe Valley to speak with a range of community, industry and government stakeholders, and visit a range of mining-related sites guided by the MLRA and the relevant mine operator, as shown in Figure 6. Those same partners participated in the students' end of semester presentations, and student work has since been featured in local publications and exhibitions, generating reflection and discussion among community members.



Figure 6 Site visit to Hazelwood coal mine as part of *The Void* design studio (image credit: Nathan Gardiner)

3 Discussion

The case studies discussed here demonstrate how decision-makers in mine closure and transition processes (including governments and mine operators) can enrich and diversify efforts to authentically engage industry, government, and community stakeholders to not only secure, but sustainably enhance social, economic and environmental outcomes. In contexts such as the Latrobe Valley, decision-makers, funding bodies and industrial stakeholders can legitimise their efforts toward the declared objectives of mine rehabilitation (i.e. 'safe, stable and sustainable for the beneficial use of future generations') (<https://www.mineland.vic.gov.au/>) by actively including, resourcing and centring creative practice approaches driven by established and locally embedded creative practitioners. In the Latrobe Valley the core members of Open Cut Collective have demonstrated the possibilities of doing so, through a range of interdisciplinary and collaborative projects over recent years, encompassing participatory approaches, multimedia approaches, event-based approaches and pedagogical approaches.

Importantly, the place-based and emergent nature of each of these case study projects should not be overlooked. The projects, involving Open Cut Collective members and discussed in this paper, do not constitute a catalogue of reproducible templates that can be deployed anywhere at any time. Each has emerged from within existing communities of practice embedded in the Latrobe Valley's ongoing post-mining transition and has been developed in response to specific conditions that were present at key moments in time. There is also an iterative and cumulative quality to how each project emerged in relationship to the others, and how this distributed but networked set of projects has culminated in the formation of Open Cut Collective in 2025. For example, the lead artist of *Coal Hole* (PollyannaR) met and worked with the hosts of *Coal Face* podcast and producers of the *Ashes to Aftermath* documentary (Josie Hess and Stephanie Sabrinskas) during a *Coal Hole* zine workshop and recommended they film a student and community forum facilitated by the lead of *The Void* design studios (Kyle Bush). These relationships converged at the *Hazelwood 10 Years On* event in which all Open Cut Collective members participated in various ways (prior to the formation of the Collective).

To assume these projects or approaches can be easily reproduced, for example by a well-meaning mine operator or government agency in another location, would be to risk producing superficial outcomes and disenfranchising (at best) or harming (at worst) local communities facing post-mining transition (Bishop 2022; Kothari & Cooke 2001). Instead, this set of case study projects serves to illustrate a range of formats, processes, partnerships and outputs that could be explored if creative practices are afforded a central role in planning and decision-making processes that determine the outcomes of mine closure and transition. While the form of specific projects must be situated and responsive to local concerns, skillsets and objectives, the role of creative practices can be multifaceted and bring multiple forms of value to these complex and sensitive processes; it can at once enable a responsible form of community engagement, nurture authentically reciprocal working relationships between various stakeholders, and create grounded collective processes of imagining future possibilities and how to make them a reality. Prioritising these as drivers in the planning and delivery of mine closure and transition would arguably contribute in unique and significant ways to sustainably achieving the declared objectives of such mine closure and transition projects.

4 Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated the importance of embedding creative practice approaches in processes of mine closure and transition by providing an overview of key projects completed by Open Cut Collective in the Latrobe Valley's coal mining landscapes and communities. Building on a range of international and Australian examples in which creative practice is integral to post-mining transition, the work of the Collective is contextualised in the Latrobe Valley by the long history of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultural practices associated with cultural and landscape transformations, and more recent regional creative practice lineages. As the Latrobe Valley moves through the staggered closure of its 3 brown coal mines, and with shifting frameworks for resourcing and governance, the Collective has formed to advance a creative practice agenda for these complex and volatile processes that seeks processes and outcomes that are just, inclusive and visionary.

The range of case study projects discussed demonstrate 4 key creative practice approaches that, in the context of the Latrobe Valley, have worked to communicate, collaborate, innovate and imagine in inclusive and experimental ways: participatory approaches, multimedia approaches, event-based approaches and pedagogical approaches. Rather than offering a template to follow, this range of approaches illustrates the diverse forms of value that creative practices can bring to the complex and challenging processes of mine closure and transition. By illustrating this, the case study projects discussed in this paper aim to advocate for a central role for locally embedded creative practices in the planning and decision-making processes of mine closure and transition in the Latrobe Valley and beyond.

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Use of artificial intelligence disclosure statement

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