PACT

Songs *for* Phantom Dances

By Gail Priest & Amy Flannery

April 2023-March 2024

Ways to do the Walk

ONSITE WALK

You can experience the walk in person by scanning the QR Code at PACT or on the front cover. You will need a smartphone and headphones.

The walk uses the browser on your phone. While you don't need to download an extra app we do recommend you download the work (using the download button on bottom right of map) for a more streamlined experience.

VIRTUAL WALK

You can also experience the walk remotely through this link. Click on the figure of a person (on the bottom left of map) and move it to where you want to go.

Songs for Phantom Dances was commissioned by PACT Centre for Emerging Artists as part of *Sounding Out the Street* which was funded by the City of Sydney.

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Songs for Phantom Dances

Welcome to *Songs for Phantom Dances*, a soundwalk for the inner city suburb of Erskineville commissioned by PACT Centre for Emerging Artists. It has been created by Gail, who is of fifth generation English settler descent, and Amy, a Wiradjuri woman from central west NSW.

This soundwalk explores the layered history of the inner-city suburb of Erskineville, Sydney, encapsulating the energy of imagined dances—dances that have been, could have been, and may be in the future.
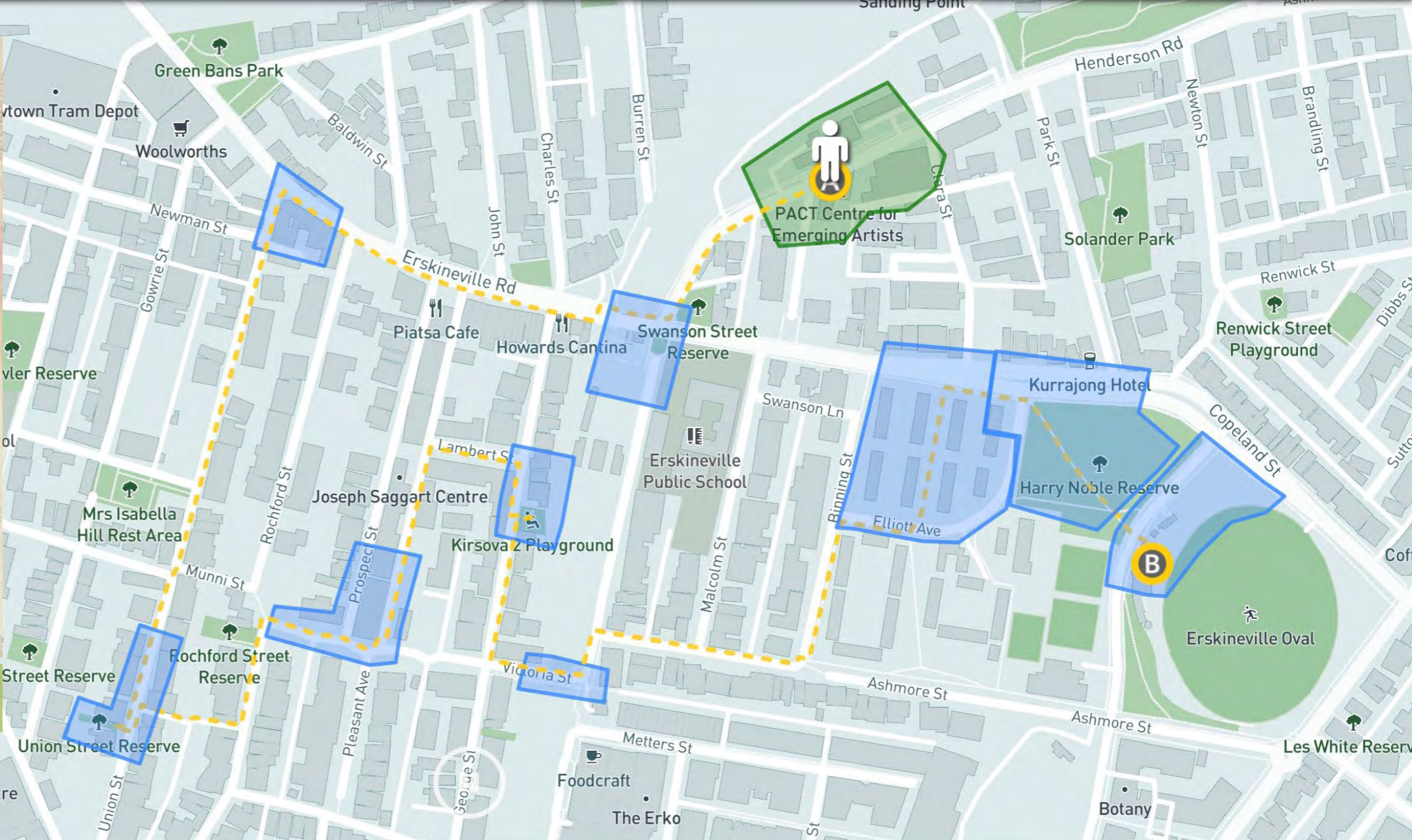
As we begin, we acknowledge that Erskineville, as it is now known, always was and always will be the land of the Gadigal. We pay our respects to elders, past and present and to all the First Nations people that call it home.

The Gadigal lived and thrived across this country until the arrival of the British Colonisers in 1788, when the lands were stolen from them. With the invasion of the First Fleet, the Gadigal were forced off their country which was systematically developed into a Western Settlement, disturbing and polluting the waterways and introducing European diseases which took a terrible toll. But the Gadigal are resilient and resourceful. Moving inland from the coast, they sought physical and spiritual sustenance from the natural water sources—the creeks and swamplands that surround Erskineville.

Amy and I have wandered around today's Erskineville, listening to its current sounds. We have created songs and ditties for imagined dances that draw on the history of settlement in the area—this history tells of ways in which the land has continually been claimed, contested and redeveloped. As visitors on this land, these are the stories that Amy and I feel are appropriate for us to tell. But as we explore these more recent histories, we remember that we are always walking and dancing, on the lands of the Gadigal.

Erskineville
Parish of Petersham.

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NEWTOWN
REDFERN
NORTH WARD
MIDDLE WARD
SOUTH WARD
NEWTOWN
MACDONALDTOWN
PARK

Parish of Petersham, lithographed & published by Higinbotham & Robinson, 1888; courtesy the Mitchell Library

Beach Burrito Company
Delhi O Delhi
Sanding Point
Henderson Rd
Green Bans Park
Baldwin St
Burren St
Park St
Newton St
Brandling St
Newtown Tram Depot
Woolworths
Charles St
PACT Centre for Emerging Artists
Utara St
Solander Park
Newman St
John St
Erskineville Rd
Renwick St
Gowrie St
Piatsa Cafe
Howards Cantina
Swanson Street Reserve
Renwick Street Playground
Dibbs St
...vler Reserve
Kurrajong Hotel
Swanson Ln
Lambert St
Erskineville Public School
Binning St
Copeland St
Joseph Saggart Centre
Harry Noble Reserve
Mrs Isabella Hill Rest Area
Rochford St
Kirsova 2 Playground
Malcolm St
Elliott Ave
B
Munni St
Prospect St
Chez...
...re Rd
...ban N...
Rochford Street Reserve
Pleasant Ave
Victoria St
Erskineville Oval
Coff...
Ashmore St
Ashmore St
Union Street Reserve
Restaurant
Gowrie Street Reserve
Union St
George St
Metters St
Les White Reserv...
Matt Hogan Reserve
Alice St
New Theatre
Foodcraft
The Erko
Botany

Click on this figure to do the walk remotely

Click on this to download

Site 1: Pact Centre for Emerging Artists

107 Railway Pde, Erskineville

Here at PACT Gail first made sounds over 20 years ago. Amy is part of the current generation of emerging artists making sounds and dances here.

PACT as an organisation has nurtured generations of artists since it was founded in 1964 as an artist collective, initially based in Sussex St, Sydney. Since 1988 this converted warehouse has been the home of PACT as it morphed into a youth theatre and now back to a form that reflects its collective curatorial roots. Spend a moment here and listen for the phantom sounds of performances past, present and perhaps future.

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This soundwalk highlights 10 sites of historical or contemporary interest around Erskineville. We recorded the sounds of these sites and then turned them into songs that you might feel compelled to move to, exploring a sense of time and land as an ongoing tango. At the end of each dance, you will be returned to the sounds of the real world to let you know that you can move on, but feel free to spend more time in each place. The track will loop until you leave the zone. From here can wander to sites in any order but we suggest you leave the oval until last. But if prefer guidance we have provided a walking route which you can see on the map.

Between the sites we encourage you to listen to the sounds around you. And we caution you to walk on the footpaths and watch out for hazards—cars, bikes, pedestrians and uneven surfaces. We hope that along this journey you feel free to safely skip, tap, chassé and prance around this place of layered stories. But if you're feeling a little shy you're always welcome to dance on the inside.

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Site 2: Erskineville Railway Bridge

Erskineville Rd, Erskineville

You are now approaching the Erskineville rail bridge. We suggest you stand on the side opposite the station. A trainspotter's dream the Erskineville rail bridge offers a stunning vista of the city skyline and of travelers heading north to south. Erskineville got its first train station in 1884, accommodating the steam trains servicing the Hurstville line. With the opening of the Eveleigh Railyards in 1875 many of Erskineville's residents were employed in the construction of this new technology.

The current station you can see was built in 1912. A curious feature of Erskineville Station is its ghost platforms at which no train stops, hinting at grander plans for lines and networks no longer in action. If you stand here for a short while you can tune into the metal machine music of the trains, the turn of wheel on steel making its own noisy orchestra. So stay here a while… we offer you the space, tune into the pace, tune into the place.

Site 3: The Imperial Hotel

35-37 Erskineville Road, Erskineville

What better place to celebrate dance than this establishment of anti-establishment. This site has been a public house of some form since 1881. The Imperial, as it is currently known, began operation in 1983, which coincidentally makes it the venue's 40th birthday. While some know the Imperial for its drag queen cameo in *The Adventures of Priscilla Queen of the Desert*, many locals and the Queer community know it as their own, as home.

Here you are free to be, particularly at three in morning. It's never too late or too early to move, to let yourself go with beat, and heat and bodies. Resistance and resilience comes in many forms, in this place as dance. So try it. We offer you a groove, and we approve your moves.

Site 4: Union St Reserve

135-137 Union St, Newtown NSW 2042

We are now on Union St, that forms the border between Erskineville and Newtown. The street was presciently named because on June 19, 1931 it was the site of a violent conflict between the Unemployed Workers Union and the local Police. The majority of this area was home to working class families who rented their homes. The high unemployment of the Great Depression led to mass evictions leaving houses empty. Many families were forced to move to makeshift shanty towns on the city's outskirts.

But the Unemployed Workers Union were organised and fought back. At noon on June 19, they occupied a house, slated for eviction, ready to meet the police head on. The *Sun* newspaper reports that "A mighty shout echoed along the rows of terrace houses, as, swerving down from King-street, a huge passenger bus, laden with police, appeared on the scene. In their wake came patrol cars and motorcycles, and in a twinkling a fusillade of bricks and stones met them."

The protesters defended the building with bricks and stones, the police with batons and bullets. The protesters, it was reported were ready for a long fight, with an upstairs chest, laden with "pies, scones and other provisions", but the bloody battle was over in under an hour with fourteen anti-evictionists and twelve police injured.

This is but one story of one eviction, of which this land has seen many. The greedy grab for land is an ugly refrain first sung as ships landed in 1788. Land as cash and cachet, land divided and developed, titles traded and fought over. But consider the perspective in which the land can never be owned, and it in fact owns us. Plant your feet on this land, feel for its permission to walk here, to dance here.

Resumed properties, Erskineville, 1937, courtesy Mitchell Library,
State Library of New South Wales

Sun, Friday 19 June, 1931 (page 1), courtesy Trove

Site 5: The Shoe Factory

Cnr of Prospect St, Morrissey Rd and Victoria St

We are now coming up to the corner of Prospect St, Morrissey Rd and Victoria St and a building that echoes with the tap tap of dancing shoes. It is an old shoe warehouse and factory that has stood since 1923. Built in the inter-war Chicago-esque style it first housed the Cleveland Shoe Company and later, in the 1950s Selby Shoes. Today it is a creative office space where the tap tap tap is most probably from typing fingers.

Let's take a moment to think of the other rhythmic labours of the factories of Erskineville. Early industry focused on brickworks and tanning. Later there were metal works, hosiers and even a vinyl record manufacture. But industry polluted the local waterways and baked the land hard so that our well-heeled shoes resonate loudly.

As we listen to these dancing feet, that remind us of both labour and the weekend release of entertainment, let us also remember bare feet walking on earth, the snap of twigs and the rustle of grasses, and of the people who walked and danced on this land softly and instep with its spirit for millennia before us.

Selby Shoe Factory, 1954, Prospect Street, Erskineville, photo Jack Hickson, courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Site 6: Kirsova Park 2

136-140 George St, Erskineville

We are approaching Kirsova Park 2. There is another, Kirsova 1, tucked away next to the Railway line down on MacDonald St.

It is the story behind these parks that got our toes tapping. Hélène Kirsova born Ellen Elisabeth Kirsten Wittrup in Copengagen in 1910, was a ballet dancer in Ballets Russes de Monte-Carlo. When the company toured Australia from 1936-37, she fell in love not just with Australian audiences but the Danish Vice Consul, whom she married in 1938.

While based in Australia during the years of Second World War she founded the Kirsova Ballet School and a ballet company that toured the nation. Eventually she returned to Europe but not before she bequeathed these two small plots of land to the children of Erskineville, hoping to provide the then industrial working-class suburb with some much needed green space.

So take some time here to twirl under the soft song of the she-oak and the eucalypt and jetée across the little wooden stages, accompanied by the industrial orchestra of rail and construction, and consider how, like Hélène Kirsova, dancing allows us to traverse time place and space.

Site 7: Secret Tunnel

Victoria St, Erskineville

Trains run around the borders and through the heart of Erskineville. The railway's kerchunk, kerclank, kerboom is an industrial lullaby rocking generations to sleep each night. Punctuating its pretty tree-lined streets are reverberant tunnels amplifying the journeys of people from the city to the south and enabling the passage from East to West.

In these human-made caverns are sometimes the scrawlings of poets and the outlines of masterpieces—that is until the next council paint job. There's a theory in sound-based archaeology, that the artwork in caves was placed in relation to the space's reverberance to create audiovisual experiences, encouraging contemplation of things greater than us. So perhaps linger here a while and listen for passing footsteps echoing, and the echoes of footsteps past, and ponder the sounds of future feet on their way from here to there.

Site 8: Bird Boxes

Erskineville Housing Scheme, Elliot St to Swanson St

Let us use Erskineville as a test-case to consider how the land was transformed from its natural state. Stolen, divided and subdivided, it was turned from sprawling bushland to industrial estates and small workers cottages in a mere 200 years.

The first settler to claim the land, displacing the Gadigal, was Nicholas Devine an Irish prison official and superintendent of convicts. He was granted 120 acres in 1794 and another 90 acres in 1799. On his death, this was parceled off, some say stolen again, and sold to various leading settler figures. This second land heist was eventually contested by a distant relative of Devine's becoming a landmark legal battle lasting 10 years. The Gadigal, at this stage classed as flora and fauna, had no such legal recourse or, to this day, resolution.

In 1872 the area was granted the name Macdonald Town after the property subdivision acquired by Stephen Macdonald but was renamed in 1893, after Erskine Villa that stood at 61 Erskineville Rd–that has recently been the Kuki Tanuki Restaurant.

Where we are standing now is the Erskineville Housing Scheme built in 1938, on a section of Erskine Park. It was developed as an exemplary social housing model, initiated as part of the NSW Housing Act that was attempting to clear the slums that had developed through the depression era.

The design by Richardson & Herman is significant in its consideration of improved habitation. The buildings were built from quality material and fixtures. There is ample space between blocks. With only 8 flats in each court, they are positioned to oversee green space and receive light and air. There was even room in the entry wells for pram parking.

Looking at photos of when this housing as built, what is remarkable is the wonderful greenery that has grown around it in those 90 years, with the tall gums providing a welcoming habitat for native birds. Look up and you will see that many of the trees are adorned with bird boxes, making a little housing complex for them as well.

What you are hearing now, are the peeps of rosellas, the shrieks of noisy mynas, and the insistent cry of a baby cockatoo demanding its dinner. These sounds wrap around place and thread through time. In this dance we sway with the breeze through the trees and skip, softly, lightly, like birds in flight.

Listen here a while and then walk on down to Harry Noble Park.

Erskineville Housing Scheme, 1938, *Hood Collection part I : Sydney streets, buildings, people, activities and events, ca. 1925-1957*, courtesy Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

Site 9: Harry Noble Reserve

Swanson St, Erskineville

We are now entering Harry Nobel Reserve. On one of the days when we were planning this walk, we entered the park and heard hungry peeps from a noisy baby myna in a nest that hung low over the footpath. The parents had evidently decided the bird boxes up the road were not for them—a fitting parable perhaps as to how development, no matter how well intentioned, is not always what everybody desires or needs.

Before we continue on to the oval where we will end this encounter, we suggest you linger here a while. There are benches nearby where you can sit for a minute. We'll give your ears a bit of "you" time so you can maybe find your own park song to dance to.

Site 10: Erskineville Oval

Swanson St, Erskineville

We are now approaching the Erskineville Oval. It is built on the land that was part of Erskine Park—left vacant due to the ongoing legal disputes around the twice stolen Devine settlement. The first oval opened in 1885 located a little further west from here. It was moved to this current location in 1937 due to the land re-allotment involved in the Erskineville Housing Development Project.

The oval was home to the Newtown Football Club from 1903 until 1986 and it saw multiple Sydney AFL grand finals played to crowds of over 8000 spectators. The day we did our reccie here, we were treated to the fancy footwork of a training session of a rugby club. So let's head on up to the grandstand. Sit back and imagine the fleet feet, arching arms, and slam sliding bodies of a match in play.

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So we're almost done here but we invite you to maybe sit a while longer and think of how far we've come and also what we've lost. Erskineville, is just a small suburb, only 1.6 km^2 but its small scale helps us focus on things we often block out because they feel too big to handle or account for.

While we have kept our metaphors light, footloose and fancy free, we hope we have also imparted the impact of settlement, colonisation and dispossession not just on this small patch of land, but across this country. Finally, we thank you for joining us as our dancing partner and helping us to explore Erskineville as place, era, story, allegory and phantom dance hall.

Interstate tramways Australian Rules Football Carnival, 1934, *Hood Collection part I : Sydney streets, buildings, people, activities and events, ca. 1925-1957*, Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales

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