

Dream Home (Land): Anxious Fantasies of Settlement in Home-improvement Television

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Introduction

Prime-time reality television in New Zealand is dominated by examples of real estate television, in which private homes are rebuilt, redecorated and/or resold. Locally produced property makeover shows *Changing Rooms* (TV One 1998-), *Ground Force* (TV One 1998-), *Dream Home* (TV2 1999-), *Location, Location, Location* (TV One 1999-) and *DIY Rescue* (TV3 2001-), running to numerous series since their inception and still in production, have become a ubiquitous feature of New Zealand's television landscape. Although many of these reality formats originated in the United Kingdom, their re-production in New Zealand is complicated by the context of colonial settlement. Here, the act of building, re-siting, redeveloping or selling-on private property inevitably recalls the (often iniquitous) processes by which first-generation European settlers established control over a new land. As Misha Kavka observes in her commentary on the preponderance of real estate formats on New Zealand television, "New Zealand was settled after Maori by those drawn here by the promise of land and a homestead. [Thus,] in this country the promise of owning a quarter acre and your own home still lingers as the felt basis of settlement, of cultural rootedness" (2004: 232). In this context, mundane domestic renovations take on the urgency and significance of settler claim-staking or, as Kavka puts it, "Real estate here *is* heightened reality – it is a dramatic enactment of identity and place" (232). The project of the domestic makeover thus assumes a pre-eminent place in the national imagination, as the ongoing busy work of building and maintaining property both masks and assuages settler anxieties as to the right to own and occupy the land at all. With reference to Arjun Appadurai's work on the "production of locality", (1996: 180) this article suggests that New Zealand's home-improvement television enacts the social and material settlement of a new land in ways which betray a certain insecurity of tenure.

“the production of locality”

As “a dramatic enactment of identity and place”, New Zealand’s real estate television bears out Appadurai’s theorising around the “production of locality” as both a social (identity-based) and spatial (place-based) concern. In *Modernity at Large: Cultural Dimensions of Globalization*, Appadurai offers an account of the “processes by which locality is materially produced” (180):

The building of houses, the organization of paths and passages, the making and remaking of fields and gardens, the mapping and negotiation of transhuman spaces and hunter-gatherer terrains is the incessant, often humdrum preoccupation of many small communities studied by anthropologists. These techniques for the *spatial* production of locality have been copiously documented. But they have not usually been viewed as instances of the production of locality, both as a general property of social life and as a particular valuation of that property. Broken down descriptively into technologies for house building, garden cultivation, and the like, the material outcomes have been taken as ends in themselves rather than as moments in a general technology (and teleology) of localization (180).

Appadurai argues for a reading of these “ritual processes” (the building and re-building of homes and gardens) as more than the mere “spatial” production of a community. Rather, these activities are taken as symptomatic of the primary impulse behind the formation of community – that is, “social life”. As “moments in the general technology (and teleology) of localization”, instances of home building and maintenance become part of the ineluctable formation of social, cultural and national identity. In the same way as Benedict Anderson’s “imagined community” is tethered to, and thus present in, manifestations of social organization in the material world (as indicated by the well-known allegory of the morning papers)(1991: 35), the production of locality as a social discourse is read by Appadurai through the production of local communities in material terms (ie, as a collection of dwellings).

If the activities of home building represented on screen in New Zealand’s many examples of property shows are similarly “viewed as instances of the production of locality”, then the material construction of homes and gardens may be read as an allegory for the ongoing social formation and re-formation of this place called New Zealand. Certainly these programmes, and the activities they represent, testify to a

national preoccupation with questions of home-building, home improvement and property ownership. For Appadurai, such instances of domestic settlement and the strategies of articulation, organisation and maintenance which accompany them, “are substantially records of the myriad ways in which small-scale societies do not and cannot take locality as a given”.

Rather, they seem to assume that locality is ephemeral unless hard and regular work is undertaken to produce and maintain its materiality. Yet this very materiality is sometimes mistaken for the terminus of such work, thus obscuring the more abstract effects of this work on the production of locality as a structure of feeling (180-1).

In a small-scale, post-colonial nation such as New Zealand, with its attendant insecurities as to size, remoteness and cultural identity, the busywork of maintaining properties and ministering to the governance of the immediate terrain anchors such ephemeral concerns to a material, demonstrable reality. Reality television formats which feature property makeover, maintenance and marketing document this “hard and regular work”: showing, over and over, communities of workers (often centred around a particular family) scraping, sanding and painting, hoeing, weeding and planting, fencing, roofing and renewing. The laborious and repetitious effort required of home owners is thus the constant refrain of these property formats. However, as Appadurai attests, an emphasis on the material progress of the properties in question (underscored by the iconographic ‘before and after’ photographs) should not be “mistaken for the terminus of such work”, nor is it taken as one by the television productions themselves. In fact, these shows invariably signal an appreciation of home-building as allegory and run a parallel narrative about the social production of locality as they work in stories about the property’s occupants.

“a structure of feeling”

As one of the earliest property makeover formats to become a staple of the New Zealand reality programming genre, *Changing Rooms* exemplifies the parallel construction of locality as both social (ie. imaginary) and spatial (ie. material). To this extent it bears out Appadurai’s specific interest in the concept of “neighbourhood” as a site which offers up “actually existing social forms in which locality, as a dimension or value, is variably realized” (179). A light-hearted format in which neighbours briefly swap houses (for the purpose of a quick-fire room redecoration), *Changing Rooms*

exhibits a self-conscious reckoning of both neighbourhood space and neighbourly relations. The physical proximity of the two domestic properties selected for the makeover challenge (often, but not always, side-by-side) invites an iconographic representation of neighbourhood space. The exterior, establishing shot which introduces the two households locates both properties within a single frame. This set up graphically illustrates the distance between the two homes, in ways which seem to take the measure of locality as a spatial concern, assaying the negative space between two properties and the grass verges, the picket fences and the native shrubs which blur them together. From this point in, the literal measurement of concrete things (how high is the paling fence? how wide the gravel drive?) blurs into sentimental estimations of the meaning and value of neighbourliness (how permeable is the boundary line? how far outstretched the helping hand?). The narrative arc of this particular format establishes the two sets of neighbours as the best of friends at the outset, and then introduces the makeover team as a threat to this special relationship. It concludes by reuniting the two households in a closing scene, in which they laugh, embrace and forgive each other with glasses of bubbly in hand. This closing scene is as much a celebration of the strength of the neighbourly bond as it is a triumph of makeover magic. In Appadurai's terms, the parallel narratives of redecorated real estate and social bonding might represent the duality of "locality as a phenomenological property of social life, a structure of feeling that is produced by particular forms of intentional activity and that yields particular sorts of material effects" (182). In this way, *Changing Rooms* represents "local subjects" engaged in the production, both material and social, of their particular neighbourhood, and domestic DIY "yields" an affective "social life" in which viewers may comfortably participate.

Thus, as emphasized by Appadurai, it would be a mistake to dismiss the "very materiality" of the redecorated room, the completed home, the landscaped garden, as the "terminus of such work", in property formats such as those discussed here. Through their double narrative of social and spatial "home improvement", these formats signal an investment in the manifestation of neighbourhood, community and nation as both a "structure of feeling" and a material concern. The display of emotion (tears, relief, joy, frustration, exhaustion, disappointment) which characterises the property makeover narrative makes manifest the range of feelings which accompany the formation of community as both intimate relationships (social) and a collection of neighbouring dwellings (spatial). In tandem with this, the representation on screen of New Zealanders engaging in the formation of neighbourhoods enacts in microcosm

the production of a neighbourhood of viewers which is (to cite Appadurai again) both “spatial [and] virtual” (179) as it operates in the collective imaginary whilst being grounded in the experience of a shared geographic location.

“deliberate, risky, even violent action”

More troublingly, however, these apparently benign activities may be read differently, as a foil to the collective trauma of colonial settlement. As Appadurai extrapolates:

The production of a neighborhood is inherently colonizing, in the sense that it involves the assertion of socially (often ritually) organized power over places and settings that are viewed as potentially chaotic or rebellious. The anxiety that attends many rituals of habitation, occupation, or settlement is a recognition of the implicit violence of all such acts of colonization (183-184).

Cast in this light, the playful redecoration of domestic space enacted by *Changing Rooms* resonates with a darker history of forced acquisitions and battles for sovereignty. In each home, the makeover team (which is autocratically managed by the show’s ‘expert’ designer) makes an aggressive claim on someone else’s domestic arena, clearing away clutter, stripping walls and over-ruling resistant property owners. Thus, even the most frivolous of room makeovers on *Changing Rooms* is accompanied by a certain amount of chaos and rebellion – both material and social – which is ultimately repressed. The satisfactions (for both viewer and homeowner) attendant upon the revelation of the completed project are those of the domestic vanquisher, as the finished room makes manifest the “assertion of socially [...] organized power over places and settings”. In this way, *Changing Rooms* enacts the ritual production of neighbourhood locality, as a “phenomenological property of social life”, through allegories of struggle, violence and repression.

Allegories of aggressive settlement, power and resistance are played out with considerably greater force in the high-stakes competitive renovation show *Dream Home*. Unlike *Changing Rooms*, which originated in the United Kingdom, and is produced in New Zealand under license, *Dream Home* is a peculiarly New World format, which acts out a pioneering narrative of claim-staking, home-building and neighbourhood warfare. In this show, young families are pitted against each other, supplied with limited resources within a restricted time frame, and required to site, re-build, decorate and furnish a house which could become their own home. The series

begins by allocating contestants newly-surveyed sections, acquired cheaply in the margins of rural townships (New Plymouth, Wanganui, Nelson, Greymouth). Each family is then provided with a dilapidated wooden house, which is relocated onto the section prior to an extensive process of deconstruction and renovation. The house is eventually reworked as a home, complete with furnishings and photographs of each family, before viewer voting determines which family will be awarded the freehold title to their 'dream home'. Thus, the suburban landscape laid out by *Dream Home* is one which enacts narratives of habitation, occupation and settlement within a milieu of strenuous competition. Here, "the assertion of socially (often ritually) organized power over places and settings" disciplines land, buildings and families into new formations of home.

The particular social and spatial formations of home enacted by the *Dream Home* settlement narrative betray, however, a certain insecurity of tenure. As the critical act of occupation rendered by the show, the relocation of the two wooden houses at the outset of the production is, to use Appadurai's terms, both anxious and aggressive as it "requires deliberate, risky, even violent action" (183) in respect to the land. The trucks, cranes and earth moving machinery which preside over this re-siting grind like tanks over the newly acquired sections, crushing fence-posts, tearing tree branches and entangling power lines. Alongside, the homeowners-to-be, together with various passers by who have gathered for the spectacle, anxiously survey the damage being done to both house and section as the two are violently reconciled. The wooden houses, uplifted in one piece and carried cross-country in a pre-dawn cavalcade, seem to suggest, in themselves, the insecurity of settler purchase. Perched above the ground on wooden poles, the newly settled houses seem only temporarily committed to the land beneath them. Or rather, given the seismic and volcanic activity to which the country is prone, fearful that it may yet buck them off. Moreover, the contestant families featured by the programme are defined by their status of tenancy rather than ownership. As low-income families trapped in a rent cycle, the 'dream' of the 'home', within this scenario, is simply to own one at all. During the course of the production, these families continue to live in rented accommodation while investing hundreds of hours of labour in a property for which they are yet to acquire the deeds. The anxiety generated by the format ("will they finish the kitchen on time?", "will they win enough votes to get through this round?") is thereby predicated upon the ambiguity of their status as inhabitants of a site for which they cannot claim ownership. When read as an allegory for European fantasies of national settlement, this insecurity of tenure translates as settler anxiety. Here, the 'dream' of

the 'home-land' at stake for New Zealand audiences is one in which the status of long-term tenancy is displaced by one of ratified ownership. Appadurai's suggestion that the "anxiety that attends many rituals of habitation, occupation, or settlement is a recognition of the implicit violence of all such acts of colonization" is therefore truly apposite to a reading of television programming about home-building in a post-colonial nation.

"territorial writing machines"

The extent to which television may naturalise darker narratives and histories within seemingly benign, even light-hearted, scenarios may be understood as an effect of its "quotidian flow". (Smith, 2006) Reality television, in particular, exemplifies the medium's propensity for banal, trivial, quotidian content, a status which makes it an unlikely conduit for interrogations of complex political and historical debates. Yet the very ubiquity of reality television, its easy alignment with mainstream, populist narratives, and its dominant position in prime-time schedules, afford it a critical mass which inevitably reveals traces of collective fantasies and fears, traces which may be specific to a particular cultural identity and history. In her work on the significance of an indigenous broadcasting service in Aotearoa/New Zealand, Jo Smith articulates the relationship between media technologies and settler identity;

As a settler society founded on a history of colonisation, a dominant tendency of mainstream television is to naturalise settler-subject in the landscape and to assert an instrumental relationship over the land via this settler-subject. The repetition of such tropes helps to secure European dominion over a territory previously inhabited by other people. Settler identity, based as it is upon the violence of colonisation, is a precarious identity that must be constantly secured through claims to a sense of "oneness" with the occupied territory, and assertion of settler "indigeneity" that displaces other claims to indigeneity (in this case, the prior claims of tangata whenua) (29).

In various ways, mainstream television shows about the management and marketing of domestic property act out such "claims to a sense of 'oneness' with the occupied territory". From marking boundary lines to choosing paint finishes, real estate programming is all about asserting authority over the very material properties of land and homestead, in ways which appear to secure dominion. The activities of home-building represented by these programmes, in which enthusiastic land-owners often

literally rub their hands in the soil, seem to perform 'belonging' as a facet of fiscal ownership. Thus, through the repetition of seemingly banal or superficial activities in relation to land and property, reality television works to validate western conceptions of ownership as it foregrounds images of pakeha families securing their private domains.

The processes by which land may be annexed, occupied and owned are, thus, explicitly articulated by New Zealand's reality programming. Following on from Robert Young, Smith deploys the concept of "territorial writing machines" to suggest that the narratives produced by mainstream television are "continually active in coding, decoding and recoding social spaces so as to secure a meaningful relationship to the territory and resource at stake". (29) In the case of the state-funded documentary series discussed by Smith, a historical re-enactment narrative about British cartographers in Aotearoa/New Zealand during the early 19th century, the map-making activities of European settlers may be readily understood as positivist enactments of such institutionalised "territorial writing". Reality programming about the buying and selling of land, or the maintenance and renovation of buildings, similarly reveals processes of "territorial writing" in a variety of forms. In *Dream Home* alone, newly surveyed sections are marked with fluorescent spray paint, churned up by earth moving machinery, pinioned by mechanical post-hole diggers. The brutality of such forced "territorial writing" bespeaks the initial violence of colonisation, even as this history is disavowed. Rather than reading these activities of marking, mapping and marketing the land in the context of a historicised 'discovery' and settlement narrative, however, the "territorial writing machines" at work in mainstream reality television make land settlement an ongoing and critically contemporary encounter. As Smith suggests, "*Explorers* explicitly repeats a history of European occupation that secures present-time settlement". (31) What is interesting about contemporary home-renovation formats is that they similarly repeat "a history of European occupation that secures present-time settlement" without any reference to issues of colonial identity or history. Thus, the "writing machines" at work in reality programming effectively disengage from New Zealand's colonial past, marking out territorial gains as if on virgin ground.

The "production of locality" is thus shifted from a defining moment in history, to an open-ended period in the present, a re-formation illustrative of the genre principles which define reality programming as a tele-visual mode. For, where *Explorers* screened as a one-off documentary "special", suggesting, perhaps, that once

mapped, New Zealand need not be mapped again, the many seasons of *Dream Home*, *Changing Rooms* and others, suggest that settlement is a project which will never be complete. As has been discussed elsewhere, (Kavka and West, 2004) reality programming adheres to a temporal principle of immediacy which relies on a cyclic narrative of repetition, as each new episode or series returns to the format's original point of departure. In home-ownership television, the point of departure is always the broken-down home in need of restoration, the vacant lot awaiting occupation, the "For Sale" sign on another family home. Because reality programming is defined by its cyclic relationship to time and narrative, the various acts of ownership and settlement which they offer up can never be understood as final. For every garden cleared of debris, for every kitchen re-wired, for every domestic sale ratified, another section lies neglected, another kitchen awaits a plumber, yet another family joins the queue of home-seekers. In this way, and contrary to the sometimes aggressive assertion of ownership and occupation discussed above, reality shows about the management of private property continually reassert the *impossibility* of final settlement.

Thus, the "territorial writing" at work in reality programming does not hold. Rather, the ongoing activities of home-building and claim-staking reveal settler anxieties as to the insecurity of colonial tenure, and the impermanence of markings made on the land. Where the parchment maps and journals of early European explorers, reverently preserved by national archivists and deployed by the documentary series as evidential matter in a sober rendering of a public history, imply a certain fixity of both land and history, the ongoing busywork of homeowners in reality programming formats attests to the difficulty of keeping property fixed in its place. In these stories of habitation and settlement, the land is shifty: weeds creep across newly turned soil, weatherboard exteriors splinter in the sun, neighbourhoods rotate through cycles of gentrification and neglect, the real estate market peaks and troughs. In this landscape, programme participants, the 'ordinary' home-owners or would-be homeowners standing in for the mainstream audience, often seem dismayed or disoriented by the enormity and futility of the project of settlement, a disenchantment suggestive of more fundamental insecurities in relation to land and property. In this way, a curious symbiosis may be discerned between the nagging narrative of settler anxiety at play in New Zealand's real estate television shows and the generic principles of reality programming, as both bespeak the impossibility of final closure.

Conclusion

As has been suggested here, programmes about the acquisition and maintenance of private homes provide ideal samplers for considerations of locality, community and nationality in a post-colonial nation. By focusing on houses, but all the while telling stories about the people who live in them, these programmes register the production of locality as both a material concern and a manifestation of social life. By illustrating and articulating the anxious busywork of home maintenance, domestic DIY formats bespeak a national preoccupation with habitation and settlement. However, as Appadurai suggests that the “production of locality” may be understood as “inherently colonising”, allegories of settlement incorporate repressed narratives of violence, risk and coercion, which might be animated by the actual history of a post-colonial nation such as New Zealand. In this light, tele-visual glimpses of pakeha families feverishly scratching away at the land, hammering nails into new homes, fencing sections and signing deeds of ownership seem to underscore a settler narrative in which European dominion is continuously and actively being reasserted.

Understood collectively, as a document which speaks to and of contemporary pakeha relationships with the land of New Zealand/Aotearoa, real estate and home makeover television supplied by mainstream broadcasters is both anxious and aggressive in its attempts to secure dominion in a contested land. Even as narratives of home-building seek to claim, in Smith’s terms, “a sense of ‘oneness’ with the occupied territory” through the infinite repetition of activities of habitation and occupation, these formats betray the insecurity of post-colonial tenure. This occurs both because the activities on display are frequently risky, violent and coercive, and because the generic principles of reality programming produce cyclic narratives which forestall resolution or completion. Thus, just as they may appear to naturalise European settlement in a land formerly under the sovereignty of Maori, reality television formats about habitation and home-building in New Zealand in fact bespeak the impossibility of finalising such settlement.

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