Narratives that are constructed of traumatic events have potentially significant political and material consequences for individuals, communities and nations. They are sites of both cultural healing and cultural contestation and involve significant investments of monetary, political and emotional capital. 

International scholars, most notably, Erikson, Brison and Alexander, have differentiated individual and collective trauma, seeing collective trauma as primarily a cultural process, mediated through various forms of representation and argue that meanings and not events, are what produces the effects of cultural trauma. Here cultural trauma is understood as being transmitted through cultural agents which define the nature of the trauma, its relationship with members of the society (who may only have experienced it indirectly) and assign responsibility.

As leading international scholars in the field of trauma studies such as Caruth have noted, the key issue in relation to traumatic experience is the notion of unclaimed experience. When survivors speak of traumatic experiences, they are bearing witness to events and acknowledging their own suffering. To bear witness to trauma is a process that includes the listener, involving the externalisation of the event, the process of articulation and transfer of the event to another outside oneself and a return to oneself. Processes of memorialization in the built environment are a bearing of witness to traumatic events.

This presentation will investigate the social and cultural agency of memorial spaces through an examination of the memorialization processes and artefacts of the commemorative landscape of Anzac Parade and Kings Park, Canberra. The presentation will focus on in the way in which narratives of trauma are negotiated and constructed to meet the emotional needs of their audiences and how these commemorative spaces bear witness to trauma at the scale of both the national and the personal.

Russell Rodrigo is an architect and academic with an interest in the architecture and philosophy of memory and place. His research is focussed on the spatialization of memory in the built environment, specifically the relationship between cultural memory, trauma and public space and its relationship with interiority at the scale of the both the public and the private.

Russell is designer of a number of memorial projects including the NSW Police Memorial and Gay and Lesbian Memorial in Sydney and has recently completed a research-through-design PhD in the spatialization of memory. He has published through international journals and conferences and his research has been recognised internationally, including the awarding of the British Council’s Design Research Award in 2009.

Presented by
Research School of
Humanities & the Arts
ANU College of
Arts & Social Sciences

Convenors: Alastair MacLachlan & Ken Taylor
All welcome

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